

Dedicated To the memory of my mother, Mrs. Wilhelmina Vineswho taught me how to live love and be Beautiful in every Moment.

PREFACE

There are times in our lives when everything seems to level out. You reach a point where you're essentially cruising through existence while all systems are switched on auto pilot. You even convince yourself that you're coasting right into the sunset.

Don't get me wrong that life is easy. You've just worked hard to pay your dues and then some. You know the ropes to the point where you're starting to experience inner peace. You have a lot on your plate from jobs to relationships. You're setting the rules.

At this precise moment is when change charges into your life, unplanned and seemingly unconcerned about you. I'm talking about forceful change where you absolutely have no choice. It's like a devastating tornado ripping the roof off life as you know it, which leaves you furious, disheveled and bewildered.

Truth comes to us in an infinite array of disguises, parables and mixed signals and sometimes such "gimmies" or gifts can only be unwrapped with experiences with meanings that are cloaked in a shroud. It is then that the storm clouds seem to cast our skies in a never-ending blanket of grey, and it is then that you've got to fight to remember a sense of determined courage (despite the odds). You must keep all your darting, numbing senses sharp on the lookout for the barely perceptible signals and voices that bombard us like white noise, yet which once those blocks of buzzing harsh noise are broken down into their correct frequencies revelations will occur. An almost divine clarity offering dialogues and messages that could possibly lead us to some sort of higher truth, if not the greater "truth" that we were unaware existed.

That last little bit is what the following story speaks to. Imagine diving headfirst into uncharted ontological waters and coming out on the shores of the other side a few steps closer to that person that you always thought you were before those growling challenges presented themselves. Blessed is not too strong of a description either: endowed with divine favor and protection, as the dictionary puts it. Blessed! And all the more enriched on a cosmic level, for all that your travails have taught you about yourself. Then again, while each of us thinks he or she lives on a totally separate trajectory than everyone around us, there are some experiences that we will all face in some form, at some point, no matter who we are or what we do.

Truth be said while each of us lives a totally separate course in his or her life, there are some things that we will each face in some form without a doubt. I can't think of many things that can be as difficult or profoundly saddening as standing watch, day after awful day on end, watching

someone you love with all of your being die slowly and painfully. An indescribable, suffocating helplessness haunts the whole experience, even dominating every thought. I can certainly testify to this as I witnessed what happened first hand watching my mother live out the last three months of her life, while she slowly slipped away and eventually succumbed to Breast cancer. It was the single, most agonizing time of my life!

In the time since then, when I look back on what I went through, I've come to realize that it was during the cruel chain of events that my ailing mother's ordeal brought about was a spiritual cleansing of sorts. I felt suddenly rejuvenated, reborn and anointed with the peculiar salve of understanding ushering out, ironically, out of the acceptance of one of my greatest fears, her passing away. What was burned on my brain, as if by laser was this: don't be afraid of the inevitable or the unknowable whenever you find yourself facing either. When these moments arise, and surely they will, you'll find yourself surrounded by looming shadows of doubt, but don't stubbornly question what you instinctually know. Look around the umbrage and face the cold facts that foreboding episodes await, yet never let your heart be deceived by the heavy darkness. Moments of ecstatic light and sheer joy will certainly unfold. Embrace the whole of it. Cry those salty tears and keep swimming across those darkened waves. Feel yourself growing within.

This lesson doesn't come easily if you're a young man. Our culture doesn't really prepare men to do the emotional heavy lifting of this sort, instead we are inculcated with the hubris of machismo or images of chest-beating Brando tough guys; strong-willed Shaft-like cool game masters who are always in control. I'm talking about those BADASSES in every sphere of being, whether in the bedroom, boardroom or the excitement of the sports field where the ultimate sin is vulnerability. As always, as ever you have to suck up the splinters and the spontaneous whirlpools of pain leaving you emotionally stunted, distanced from the hurt, if you like. Just take it like a man -- but, as the writer Michael Baisden once put it, men too cry...in the dark.

As to when these conflicting lessons in manhood ensure this awful behavior is simultaneously obvious yet difficult to pinpoint. The most awful question is why. For some it begins with a bark in the ear from a coach, with others its a drill instructor in military boot camp or maybe a tough-as-nails teacher, possibly its a draconian professor who puts you on notice that "you're acting like a sissy" and should "stop your whining"-- that showing emotion is "soft" and "not what a real man" would do, etc. So, when the time comes for a young man to really face his feelings in a trying situation, like the one I found myself in while sitting with my mother on her deathbed, he's clueless and he stumbles through it all while fighting to negotiate the gauntlet that is the tidal flood of thoughts and the sensory overload he could have never anticipated-- at least based on what he'd been taught what "really being a man" meant in this ADD/ADHD culture called America that will never seemingly make sense.

It's a lonely, hellish place to find yourself but that particular valley of decision doesn't have to be a place that you stumble into...at least without a map. My hope is that my story will make the path for those who might have to go through similar circumstances a little less tricky and steep. To be certain, we all have our own unique crosses to bear while making our way through this life. But having said all of that, the fact that we must get through them is a bond that we all share because there is no cure-all or panacea. The only way to get to that proverbial "other side" is in a

straight line and there's not alternate route. They all come to each of us, each and every one...

CHAPTER ONE

It was another endless, steamy, Saturday afternoon inside the little church called St. Stephens Seventh day Adventist Church just off Route 52 in St. Stephens, South Carolina where the very air seemed on fire with the "Oh help me, Jee-sus!" kind of heat that makes you contemplate cutting a deal with Beelzebub himself, were he to suddenly materialize in a bang of brimstone and slither up next to your pew and offer a little A/C action. I was wearing my standard issue kiddy church gear (or was it wearing me?). The Sunday best uniform was a blue polyester suit from Sears and a clip on tie that choked whenever you looked in any direction that was not straight ahead.

Nanoseconds after suiting up, rivulets of sweat began to pour from my forehead non-stop, despite my best efforts to keep cool with the paper fan my grandmother would hand over to me. The exertion alone caused more perspiration than abating it. There I sat trapped in that little box-shaped church, fidgety and hating life. As time wore slowly on and on, the preacher seemed to get more fervently absorbed in his sermonizing...like Jack Johnson, slugging it out in the 15th round of a title fight. The preacher's excitement and unrelenting passion did little for my miserable dilemma. Still to this day, I'm amazed that people could sit in that hot box attentively, singing praises, dripping wet in the humidity and smiling while the very skin on their backs clung to their stuffy shirts. Maybe someone thought the congregation could just sweat all the sin out!

Don't get me wrong, I loved going to church services with my southern relatives because it was so much more exciting and fun than anything going on during the services held back home in Washington, D.C. The preachers who came through South Carolina were energized with the Word as they went through a marathon jumping up and down, while invoking sinister tales of fire and brimstone raining down from the throne of The Most High in the Heavens down onto the rooftops of the unfaithful. Tirelessly, they'd spread the Gospel truth. Occasionally, the only respite for him or us was a few intermittent moments of calm when the preacher's hand rested gracefully on the edge of the pulpit. Like a domino effect, the whole room dabbed at the froth on their foreheads with impeccably white handkerchiefs. Theatrical, yes, but it sure kept your mind off the sweltering furnace for a room. Small enclosures packed with people wearing polyester never works out for the better.

When one of the preachers got the Holy Spirit, it was really show time! They certainly didn't perform like that in my reserved, buttoned-up congregation back up in D.C., that's for sure. Hours later, after the marathon of homilies were brought to a close, the flock received their

reward for their endurance on the pews, in the form of a time-honored tradition. That is, we all were honored with a post-service pot luck meal comprised of mouth-watering, down-home delicacies that were common in every Southern kitchen worth its salt.

As meals go, the after service feast was a gourmand's heaven on earth as it offered a veritable cornucopia of succulent, signature dishes, concocted from recipes passed down from generations past by each household's matriarch who had her signature dish among the parishioners. I can still see them all, wearing their Sunday's finest, slowly parading out to the picnic area while carrying iron skillets, crock pots, sauce pans and bread pans filled with Southern staples like golden fried chicken, macaroni and cheese (made with Meuller's noodles, milk, butter, real cheese and love, not that instant variety). Too, there were always string beans with cut up wedges of white potatoes, yams (candied or baked or both), mountains of fluffy cornbread, biscuits, turnip greens, dinner rolls, collard greens, mashed potatoes, kale, corn on the cob, fried lake trout, mackerel cakes, oxtail stew, pot roast, pork chops submerged in gravy that still bubbled with heat.

After all of the previous was consumed, dessert pies made from preserved ingredients like apples, blueberries, peaches and strawberries were proffered. Sometimes the menu got switched up and instead of pies, ceramic dishes of cobbler were uncovered and although cookies were rare, they weren't out of the question, neither were blueberry muffins, Lemon Chess pie or chocolate pudding. It was almost impossible for we children to sit still while all these appetizing aromas swirled around in our nostrils and washed over us. This weekly exercise of sensory restraint would erase all memory of the heat that had our skin leaking inside the church during the imagined fin de siecle that we'd sweated through just moments earlier-- once that first taste of home cooking kissed your taste buds, you knew that the wait was worth it. This happened every week and still, as satisfying as rolling up my sleeves and whetting my appetite buffet-style was, there was yet one more aspect of the post-sermon celebration that I lived for: the music!

The last half hour of every one of those picnic meals was brought to a close on a high note with song. This was when everyone would reconvene inside the little church house (which seemed twenty degrees cooler when the sun went down) and began to sing hymns and sweet, snappy Gospel music. The air would be electrified with anticipation once the organ began to chug and those same women, who had cooked for hours in their hot kitchens before leaving home that morning, began to swing to the rhythm as their voices rose simultaneously joyous and simultaneously solemn in pitch. That's another difference I caught on to at an early age. Back at home in the capital, the songs were droned, rather than sung. I found this boring after experiencing what music was capable of doing. Music was a physical series of experience that seemed to transcend the boundaries of the world!

Down in South Carolina, the life beat was kept right out front and emotions which oozed from every verse, were far from buttoned up. We'd clap our hands, stomp our feet on the wooden clapboard floors as heads would roll and hands waved in jubilation. Once that walking bom-bomp-bom-bom-bom-bomp bass-line strode in, you knew it was time to get happy because

the Lord was in the house. The earth would shake and the vibe in the room would egress into what can only be defined as a spiritual high. The power of The Spirit that the preachers were pouring out hours earlier in that awful mid-day heat, returned to us all bigger than life itself.

I was only ten or so at the time but I can clearly recall being drawn to play music by the sounds that would emanate from my grandfather's old, weather-beaten guitar while he played it. Housed in a dirty wooden body, he'd make that guitar sing with a mellifluously warm sound that could "make the big toe shoot up in your boot" as Little Richard might put it. He'd purchased it decades before I was born, ordered it from a Sears and Roebuck mail order catalogue. It wasn't anything too fancy but it served him well. The town of St. Stephens was called the willywags or the sticks as it was located miles away from larger cities like Charleston over on the bustling coast. There were no malls. You made due with what you could get which means it wasn't in the general store or in the Sears book, then it couldn't be had. That's just how things were done back then. If you wanted to learn something as far-flung as playing on a musical instrument, well, once you got your hands on one, you sat down with it and taught yourself how to play it. That's how my grandfather did it because that's how it was done.

My grandfather had a feel that you'll find in recordings by bluesmen like Lightnin Hopkins or early John Lee Hooker, even approaching Bo Diddley's raw effective simplicity! His playing was melodic, percussive and full of feeling. His chording was understated as it revealed just enough to get the idea across which was just like how he carried himself as a man. At that young age, to see him sit, pick and work his big hands over the fret board with fluid ease was to witness pure magic. This was absolutely one of my favorite things about coming down South. Everything there was imbued with a musicality, even the land itself-- more than once I've been lulled to sleep by the rhythmic rattle of huge rain drops on my grandparent's tin roof, the distant wail of freight train's steam whistle or pulsing cricket song so loud, they sounded like numbered in the millions and they probably did now that I look way back

By this time, other pop sensations of the day like Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, Al Green and Stevie Wonder (to name a few) had already made the jump from religious-themed and moved on toward secular sounds-- even Pops Staples and his offspring who comprised the Staples Singers had scored a hit or two by then. I don't know if it's because the recordings they cut retained a smattering of their Gospel roots between the grooves on which the stylus needle followed or no. I do know that those sounds clearly demonstrated what a musician who's really feeling the proverbial "it" should strive for when dealing with his muse in real time action. It is absolutely imperative that he or she search for those sometimes hidden juicy moments that occur when vocal chords are used or a guitar axe is strummed. I am eternally grateful for that proverbial "it." Those moments are the lightning bolts striking of love itself. It's the emotional sound of the cosmos thundering themselves! This is the why that has defined who I am as a man and as a musician, but I'm getting a little ahead of myself...

As little ones, my older brother Jimmy and I spent our summers with our mom's folks down on their farm in South Carolina. It was our ritual, the normal out of school circumstance; part ritual, part labor camp. Since my grandparents maintained a huge, working farm in the low country St. Stephens County (about 30 miles southwest of Charleston). It was a smallish affair where those

who lived in the area called "41", one of those tiny specks on the map where everyone spoke to everyone they saw (be it walking or driving, you waved at 'em) and everyone knew everyone else's family in some way. The old African adage "it takes a village to raise a child" was still in use and there was always someone around in your age bracket to get into mischief with-- people would smile at you as they passed by in pickups. There was no pavement, so you could safely run around barefoot and that's just what we did.

No matter what my brother and I got into on those seemingly endless summer days, even though we were children, both of us were still expected to be out in the fields with the adults before the sun rose in the mornings, whether picking the fluffy, white orbs of cotton or jade-skinned cucumbers (the smallest used for pickles, I still remember). We had four free hands that could be used for field work. It wasn't an easy row to hoe, but it wasn't like we were waifs in fingerless gloves toiling in some Dickensian sweatshop for orphans, either. We happened to be just the right height and size to fit into the rows of plants that needed seasonal harvesting. The funny thing is we always happened to be down visiting when this work was needed. It was a bit of fun for us, at least during those first few hours or so and while I did as I was told. I had the habit of daydreaming about what I'd get into later (deviltry, my grandmother called it).

Overall, it was an overwhelming, mysterious new world that fell onto me that, unlike my urban home up above the Mason Dixon Line. Out in the thick woods just behind my grandparent's farmhouse or out in the fields that lie beyond the crops, I'd see sights that a chubby city boy would never encounter in the grid like asphalt jungles that make up Washington D.C. I came across the weirdness of nature, that is snakes, birds, ant hills, cows, goats and horse while empty barns loomed in the distance. On more than one occasion, I got chased by bees, horned goats and countless dogs off neighboring farms! Once I was alone on a bridge, which was one of those country ones you can fish off. I was around 12 years old at the time. Out of the blue, I hooked a granddaddy of a bass and reeled it all the way up the side rails, only to see it wiggle right off the hook with one last powerful kick of its tail! We also took day trips to placid fishing holes over by the Santee River Dam, where the still waters sat like a dark jade sheet of glass over beneath the shade of willow trees.

Also, twice a month we would take a day of repose from the fields and also out of necessity. Me and my grandfather would cram in his Ford pickup, which was heavily loaded with produce that was to be hauled over to the market where farmers would converge to sell and exchange their goods with all of their neighbors. In those days you had very different social rules, a lot unspoken. This was one of the rare times that whites and blacks crossed paths-- that's just how things were.

Again, hindsight 20/20 hits my brain, its easy to see that there was a Vivaldi symphonic feel, like his *Four Seasons* symphony, to the way even the quotidian transpired down in the lowlands on a daily basis. Perhaps it was the damp, loamy richness of the humus soil that nourished everything green and made it easy for the fertile seed of musicianship to take root and germinate inside me. You could actually smell the new life budding all around.

My very first "performances" for an audience took place in the little box church deep in the

country that I just spoke about. It wasn't my grandfather who prodded me into playing an instrument. Instead, my grandmother tenderly nudged and encouraged me and my brother to stand up and sing during the singing portion of church services down in St. Stephens, SC -- if you didn't sing, you'd hear about how you had "shamed her" sometime later, which meant more than likely in a mortifying manner around the dinner table when esteemed guests were around. That only happened to me once or twice as I was a natural ham, and I didn't really need a heap of prodding to get on with it.

There were just so many naturally talented people on every side of me. I was swimming in a river of creativity where the current pulled and pushed wondrously fierce. Almost by instinct, it just felt apropos to go strut my stuff. Everyone was involved in some form of creativity which made the very air spark and crackle. I got the bug, by osmosis, some would say. Though many early influences left a deep mark through living within the St. Stephens postal code, a few from beyond this peculiar corner of "41" called my name, so to speak.

I was deep in profound musical education. Every once in a while, members of our congregation would attend joint music services with churches from other parishes in the general lowland area. Here, I had exposure to other stylistic textures on a daily basis in a setting akin to a battle of the bands contests that I would witness later in life. The level of musicianship was kicked up several notches at these fast paced gatherings, and it was here that my uncle Charlie would shine as one of the brightest talent beacons in a field of stars.

In addition to following in his father's footsteps and developing his own uncanny feel for the guitar at an early age, Uncle Charlie grew into a seriously talented instrumentalist in his own right. Charles was always plucking on his axe somewhere and he could play anything he'd heard once with a smile and style. He was a prodigy of sorts for he was the golden child in the family. His father, who was my grand daddy, plucked at his notes in a bare-bones style, while Charlie developed a way of making a guitar, be it electric or acoustic, talk similar in the same way that artists like Jimi Hendrix or Johnny "Guitar" Watson would decades ahead.

Whenever grandma was out of the house, or earshot, he'd switch that big black box radio in the kitchen off the all-Gospel-all-day station and play along with whomever was on. He was playing along with The Temptations, Roy Clark, Nat King Cole and even bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe. Genres didn't matter to him as good music and good playing were exactly what they were. This open minded approach inevitably gave him a rich musical bag to pull from whenever he sat down cross-legged to have his own transcendent communion with his muse.

Musically, I'd become intimately familiar with Charlie's lesson plan in my late teens. Watching him absorb what he heard while simultaneously making little adjustments to whatever he was doing, taught me how not to just hear but to also listen to everything going on in a tune. Charlie's approach encouraged you to look for how the instruments interacted locking in and out and also the textures.

He also demonstrated a few things that can't be bought in software programs, the local music store or taught in a music hall. Simply put, the most important is FEELING! I learned ways on

how to search for the soul of a song, while also latching in nice and tight on whatever your life experience which can bring your own personal energy to the tune. He taught me to compress all of that into bars of sound until it became a part of who you are. But his influence didn't stop there, I learned the importance of learning the real way to get to Carnegie Hall (practice, practice, practice), that the level of musicianship that I wanted to reach was totally dependent on my drive for perfection and he also taught me how to always have a plan B-- he'd never forget to switch that box radio back to whatever religious network that granny had left it on when he finished his impromptu jam sessions.

Certainly, Charlie was no fool, and he wasn't a slouch either. He had good reason that he practiced his fretting and fingering for countless hours on end. He really wanted to get out of St. Stephens and see more than "the back of the plow mule's ass" as he put it, whenever the older folks weren't around. He had plans for himself as any person who radiated so much talent should. Everyone just knew some day he would make it big, come hell or high water. Seeing him eventually do so was a bittersweet joy, but there were a few more lessons I'd be tangentially taught by Uncle Charlie. One is that there's a price to pay for having hope and two, no dream worth imagining ever comes easily. It must be fought for and earned. You got to put a debt in and then some. As sure as you were born, even when the dream appears to be just within grasp, no guarantees exist that it will at all be fulfilled, not if those who love you have anything to say about it.

We were raised to believe that music was something spiritual. Simply, music is a HOLY GIFT, not to be squandered, that's shared while extolling praises to The Lord. Music is a means to an end as it is used to uplift those who come in earshot and experience those notes. So if you were a musician, a God fearing one at least, you'd better be spreading His Word whenever you plugged in. You are to serve as a vehicle for the Holy Spirit! It was always frowned upon to play music for pay. That was deemed sacrilege and flew right in the face of everything my grandparents believed concerning the music front.

Eventually, as these things tend to happen, Charlie was approached at one of those joint parish functions and offered a gig playing at the front of a Gospel act that was getting all sorts of wide acclaim in church houses all over the black south, which has since become known as the chitlin' circuit. Following a bit of rather circuitous sleuthing with folks they knew around town, the lead singer and also manager of this gospel group found my grandparents' farmhouse. That's the way things were done back then.

I looked out of my window and saw this long ride pass the access road to my grandparents' spread, stop about half a mile and then reverse back to the entrance, shift gears and slide off the pavement onto the red tire grooves worn by years of wagons and tractors going to and from my grandpa's barn. I watched the white ragtop roof as it wound through the green sea of corn and pulled up to the front porch and hook around pointing back the way it had just came-- I ran downstairs to see who was in it. I remember seeing that chrome fender bounce up and down as the automobile swerved to a halt. Four well-dressed, sepia-toned frames eased out of all four doors in unison and slammed the doors likewise-- that shiny, Royal Blue Buick looked like it stretched a mile if it was a foot to my young eyes. Hindsight 20:20, I think that was the desired

effect.

Although their ploy might've worked on me and my brother, who watched everything that went on from the peripheral vista of childhood, it was a different set of circumstances all together with my grandmother. Sitting in her high-backed chair in the living room with her eyes closed while listening to Mahalia Jackson sing a dirge, she saw them coming before we'd ever even laid eyes on them. She saw them before they merged off the asphalt and onto the dirt road that led to her doorstep. She was in direct touch with an almost mystical grapevine, full of gossip like grapes, that wound around St. Stephens that seemed to rival any other mode of communication available to the masses at the time.

After explaining their intentions over punch and slices of pound cake to my grandparents, while my Uncle Charlie beamed his exuberance. A half hour later, the dew began to dry on the lily as he realized that his parents were just being polite which my grandmother soon proved to be true, much to his horror. "I thank you kindly, " she began with a tone and preamble that everyone in the family knew meant that her mind was made up, "but we don't much cotton to that sort of thing 'round here. And I suspect all of your parents feel the same way, " -- from the edge of the staircase, my brother and I watched as each band member looked down at their shoe strings when she said that last bit. No deal.

Charlie was never considered what a Southerner would call "hard-headed", he always did as he was told. But, to his credit, after a lifetime of obeying his parents' strictures, it appears now that he was just biding his time-- he had an itch that couldn't be scratched in St. Stephens, so, through musician friends and unwitting of the depth and breadth of his mother's connections around town. He maintained a tangential line of contact with that gospel group and began to learn their repertoire on the sly as he argued his case with grandma and grandpa for what seemed like weeks-- after a while he had his approach down to a science and made it so that all conversations would inevitably circle around to why it would be a good idea for him to play music with that gospel group. He was equally relentless and tenacious and, eventually, he wore them down.

The night that they finally acquiesced to my uncle's strategically placed pleas occurred at the dinner table on a humid summer evening, I can still hear the whoop of joy in Charlie's voice as he bolted up from the table and started hugging everybody in his delight- it is one of those moments in life that I'll never forget because it showed me that persistence pays off. Charlie was so amped that he didn't bother to finish his plate, he ran upstairs and immediately began to pack his clothes and other effects into grandpa's hand-me-down WWI foot locker. The long and shiny Buick with the white roof returned the very next evening just before dinner, Charlie threw his wares in the car's huge trunk, slammed it down and got inside with the mile-wide grin, of a man taking his first steps toward a life he'd only imagined-- I'll never forget the look on his face as we all waved him off while the chickens scratched around us in a flock, oblivious to the emotions that permeated the air-- before the dust had settled in the driveway, I missed him already...

Looking back, I'd say that my salad days; my destiny in music was set in motion on the night that my uncle left to follow his star, sitting there grinning between those gospel folks. Life on the

farm began to feel exceedingly drab, within days I missed Charlie's peppy, can-do personality. I missed sitting at the edge of his bed while he played air-guitar and harmonized the notes vocally, "I need to get Jimi's touch", he'd look up from his eyeing his fretboard fingering and say in a far off trance-like voice. Charlie was always draped in a cloak of cool, that laid-back yet exuberant élan that comes naturally to a handful of people who are destined to be in a circumstance far removed from the one that they were in. He always appeared to be at ease on the exterior but his heart was a restless one. Like the calico scaled Shubunkin goldfish, he knew he'd never grow to meet his full potential unless he could get out of the confines of St. Stephens and into the larger pond that is the outside world, otherwise his talent would cease to grow; he wouldn't go into that darkness, at least not quietly-- it was another lesson burned onto my brain and ushered in my fondness for the funky.

As I grew into adolescence and into my teens during the late 60s, I began to spend the summer months at home in the sweltering surroundings of Chocolate City, Washington D.C.-- I was getting old enough to take care of myself, after all. It was then that I found the funk while listening to the bass lines of William "Bootsy" Collins who, as a Ohio teenager playing in a garage band called The Pacesetters, had just gotten hand picked, along with his guitarist brother, to join the ranks of JB's, the super-tight band that backed the Godfather of soul, himself, James Brown-- it was Bootsy's style and tone while he played behind Brown and later supporting George Clinton's Parliament Funkadelic, that expedited what would become my life long love affair with the bass guitar, of this there is no question.

Although my first stabs at exercising my muse began with the violin and a stint of piano lessons, I really feel what I was playing until I picked up a Hohner and learned to keep the bottom in the pocket by emulating Collins' strokes on the fat-strings which consequently made me the first dyed-in-the-wool bassist in the family. Having stated all of the latter, I can honestly say that if it weren't for my Grandfather, then my Uncle Charlie and later still my Uncle Eugene, I don't think I would've dove in as exuberantly as I did. As I grew into a gangly teen, my body caught up with my instrument of choice and I fanatically tried to absorb nugget of information I could, for hours at a stretch; my thirst was insatiable and, luckily for me, my Uncle Gene was nearby with a glass of cool water from fresh out of the well.

Like Charlie, my Uncle Gene, who'd married Emily, my mother's youngest sister and possessed the vocals of a beautifully plumed songbird which would have made it easy for him to pull a Sam Cooke and refine his sound for the Saturday night secular crowd but he chose not to. He followed the gospel path, an ethos I started to see in a lot of gifted musicians who had acquiesced to the stern, non-secular strictures of what my grandparents attempted to instill in Charlie but never took hold. And, as the saying goes, a stumble might prevent a fall-- in order for me to move forward, I had to take a few steps back to where it all began for me.

It was during a visit to South Carolina while watching Gene sing a heart-wrenching dirge on Sunday evening at that old box church, during the closing services, that I got the zap on my head. I don't even remember the song, but the feeling of what he sang was palpable. The sadness that he evoked during that song haunted me. I still get chills thinking about that day. As it stood,

I was in my late teens and began to get a sense of myself, like a young lion, not old enough to leave the pride but still old enough to hunt and my nostrils were wide open, as they used to say, once upon a time.

After struggling with the old-school attitudes within the ranks of the church-going crowd that seemed to stifle my creative urges, I felt an unbearable need to break free, so I gave up on the whole scene. It seemed counter-intuitive to be proficient enough to play more than the handful of progressions that encapsulated practically all of the churchified fare-- I wanted to explore, take some chances. Further, I grew bored with being chastised as being "too rock 'n roll" by church bandleaders whenever I tried to sneak in a Bootsy-like funk run during up-tempo segments. I wanted to play what I was feeling on the inside when I was feeling it, not bottle it up in tight-collared contrition and talk about what I "coulda-shoulda-woulda" done later when the moment of truth had passed and there was nobody around-- I wanted to share it.

I've yet to find a sensation that parallels what Spaniards might call the *pelizco del duende*, that infinitesimal moment between the notes when inspiration slides into whatever groove you're playing. It can't be seen, but it's definitely real! If you've ever performed on a stage, you know exactly what I'm talking about. I didn't know it, but that is what I felt while I sat in the white washed pews of that box church in rural South Carolina, "the little gnome" came forth and danced a little jig while the congregation clapped their hands and sang praises to The Most High. During those moments, some of the very same people who looked down on my "rock 'n roll" style worked themselves up into an eyes-rolled-over-white froth as they felt what we call "the Holy Spirit," that is those holy rollers got caught up in a semi-subconscious spiritual state that hearkened back to the mud huts of the Motherland! This too, showed me up close that there was a power in music and I wanted to tap into it as often as I possibly could...as long as I could.

CHAPTER 2

"What's taking you so long with those exposures of Mrs. Murphy's ankle fracture?" the angry, heavily-accented croak on the other end of the phone angrily slurred when I picked up the X-ray room extension. How can any person spend so much time endless amounts of energy from endless reservoirs angry and frantic, I wondered? I guess it's sometimes better not to ask.

It was Dr. Nessouli, a Lebanese expatriate who had, I discovered during a conversation at a Christmas party, decided not to flee with the rest of his family to the placid shores of Brazil (which holds the world's largest Lebanese populations and a lot of his relatives) when civil war broke out in his homeland in 1982.

Instead, he sent his Christian wife and son with his brothers and parents to South America while he, himself took a hard right and fled solo toward the red clay of the Peach State, of all places, to get his medical credentials in order to practice in the US which he thought would be a wiser move. "I have them in my hand, right here, hot off the presses," I retorted, in a vain attempt to

read his mind and stay ahead of the endless list of outpatients who came through our sliding doors to get pictures of their innards taken with pulses of electromagnetic waves.

Today as usual, I was still learning the tricky art of mind reading. Yes sir, another morning of thrills and spills had begun at the orthopedic clinic where I worked as an X-ray Tech. The building was smack, dab in the middle of Buckhead, which is often thought of as "the" upscale Atlanta neighborhood located a few blocks north from the Museum of Fine Arts on Peachtree Street

"Well what are you waiting for, a stamped invitation?" Nessouli barked back at me without missing a beat. Now don't get me wrong, the good doctor Nessouli was a sweet, avuncular kind of fellow when he turned the charmers on. He was an old school cat with a rhythm that told you that he was from beyond American borders before he opened his mouth, while he could also slide into the uptight boss character so quickly, that he'd bring a smile to Stella Adler's face. He fell into one of his Stanislavski mood swings a little too well, sometimes but he fit in well with the mixed bowl of nuts that worked in my department.

There was Dr. Boswell who was a laid back young brother with the creased imprint left by his graduation mortarboard still etched onto his forehead. He was driven in that frenetic manner that only newly christened attending doctors can be, which is cool, but a staunch perfectionist who never suffered excuses and needed everything handed back to him with some heat on it, like yesterday. He also reminded me of a black Mr. Magoo! I knew he'd find his pace sooner or later and his constant need for speed, requests for re-shots (of practically everything I handed to him) forced me to become a better tech and for that I thank him.

Also, I worked with a really sweet crew of ladies, well they were sweet MOST of the time but they had their moments. There was "Vebra," the ultrasound tech, who came across as a cool, passionate hippy. (HOORAY FOR HIPPIES!!) Her partner in ultrasound "Patty", nice, my mother figure, newly remarried full of sweetness and sometimes surprising sass! Full of a graceful gravitational pull, she prefaced all greetings with a gentle smile. Then there was Crystal, THE COOL SISTER IN CHARGE! She was super stylish, smart with the gift of gab... and didn't take no stuff. Last but not least rounding out our group was the gorgeous Miss Ann. You could say she was, "Chica muy caliente." Easily she was one of my favorite bosses of all time, and a total hottie with an amazing energy that would just flood the room when she walked in. She just buzzed you with some knockout energy!

I was very comfortable in my position and excelled. It was a great job as x-ray jobs go. For one thing it was not in a hospital environment, so I didn't work with really sick patients, which was a major plus! I was lucky.

Being the only guy in the office had its ups and downs. I of course wound up doing most of the lifting, ha, ha, plus there was always 'a ton of food around. But I learned so much about "how women think. And what NOT to do when dealing with them. It truly made me much more "aware", like having a house full of sisters, each with totally different dispositions (the fights were GREAT!!) It was a pretty good life. I was healing inside. Day by day I climbed what

almost seemed an impossible mountain, yet I was outgrowing the scars of my divorce from Shawny, even though the pacing of healing was taking a lot of time. She was my "beautiful, Brazilian bombshell" You could even say she was my electrifying dream girl or perfect soul mate. We spent three crazily passionate, happy years together, but my constant travels with the band took their toll bringing on our split up. I felt constantly haunted in the aftermath; after all this was a lovely woman who I thought surely had to be my partner for ever! I was left broken and more than a little confused so it was a difficult, time there for a while, some days it seemed like the pain burned my insides with a fire that I couldn't put out. Time marched as it does as sure as a clock ticks. I could feel happiness and confidence slowly surging back into my life subtly reinvigorating my very essence. I had already lost Christa, my true muse and Soul mate, she was beautiful, captivating and vivacious, foolishly I let her slip out of my grasp while chasing my dreams out on the road, and now this loss!

Soon I met Carly, she was super smart, and best of all she really seemed to dig me, dumb jokes and all. I could be myself instead having to prove and explain my life all the time. It's funny after all of the emotional heartbreak that I went thru with 'losing' my wife, and Christa, Carly seemed to be more fantastic and captivatingly exceptional. This was love like I never knew existed and all naturally effortless No one was 'in control' then. She had a certain luminosity, and bounce about her. I drank in each moment in her presence, like a horse in the desert!

With such spontaneous lightning between us, It didn't take long for infatuation to fall head over heels a couple of flips into the wild throes of love. This was one of those times in life, that you wish you really had somehow figured a way to freeze the very essence of time. I was and still am a major romantic. I loved this part of falling in love, when it was still new shining rapturously. I got such joy from doing as many 'acts of sweetness' as possible. This is what can make falling in love so much more fun and mind blowing intense.

Life itself had seemed like it had come to some kind of turning point, as if I had risen up to some new strange, exciting plateau. There was my musical life also. after migrating to Atlanta with a band back in 1995, I'd quit and gotten of the road trying to get my health back together mentally as well as physically, as all theses years on the road had taken their toll, between the all niter parties, and many long tedious miles of overnight driving, loading heavy equipment in and out of clubs, etc, I'd decided to just settle down, get a job and lick all of my wounds for a while.

Before long I had hooked up with the members of a really cool, defiantly good vibe "urban soul" band, called SEEK. The music was great, laid back, funky, and beautiful. The kind of stuff that I could lose myself in, and things were rolling again, even better. The leader of the band Freddy was not only a rising club owner, but also one of the up and coming promoters in town, which opened the door for us to play with folks who went on to be giants in the "neo-soul" movement like India Irie and Donnie. Also, as well you had as Tuck and Patty, Shawn Mullins and Vinx.

These were sweet days as the whole 'URBAN SOUL MOVEMENT' was being born all around me, though unknown to me at the time. I did sense magic crackling in the air. We were getting good local as well as national airplay. Our first CD sold well enough at Tower Records to get the attention of a few major record labels. My dream of find success through music was the

whole reason that I'd come to Atlanta in the first place. I was also starting to make inroads with a few cats in the studio scene also.

I guess you're beginning to get the whole picture, life was pretty sweet even having the quality of a corny movie where all falls cleverly into place. I should have looked at that as a warning sign. Hindsight is 20/20 should've been my mantra. Dark Clouds were slowly obscuring the endless freedom of the horizon line.

Slowly slicing my way through gridlock of fading rat race traffic, I took my time coming home from work. Weirdly I felt calm and at ease, which is unusual if you consider the ugly effects Atlanta traffic can have on a person, even back then.

I was cutting through midtown where I lived. The neighborhood was colorful, eccentric and diverse. You had everybody from young professionals, bums, young gays, druggies, artists, business owners and old timers. The whole area was the very definition of ultra hip. It's a shame that the area has become so commercially centered instead of culturally. Back then I would put out a lawn chair on Monroe and watch the pride parade or the beautiful madness of Freakneak.

With Midtown, you felt submerged in a diversified, uniquely special culture. This was the antithesis of the haughty "I'm better than you" attitude suffocating the sometimes snotty Buckhead. You at least saw or ran into lots of young professionals lounging with sure fire cocky attitude in gliding sports cars, and a ton of bars seemed to line up one after the other. An air of cold cool energized everyone. You always seemed to find something or someone to catch your eyes as you sat in the convoluted energy of traffic.

A few early night birds jogged thru Piedmont Park as I rolled down the hill on Tenth Street. Carefree, I drove past Grady high and finally home to my little bungalow which I had nicknamed affectionately the KUDZU PALACE. The strange name earned the name because my apartment was on Monroe Avenue right next to the Highlander (a local pub), and the kudzu grew to the point that it would cover everything back there which created an ambience of unusual cool! Nature seems to never give up even in the sprawling confines of "HOTLANTA."

As usual my routine flowed with non expectant laidback ease. I pulled into the driveway, bounded up the stairs, and whoosh I was home! I quickly put my work heavy mind to sleep. Quickly like Superman, off came my work place clothes. I turned the TV on see what was happening with this particular day's bewildering headlines of fear, terror and worry. Oddly, such awful things relaxed my mind. Maybe it's because you feel like you're part of a bigger picture being connected on the world's fast paced events and non events. My mind drifted to possible evening activities. This was my fun time! Maybe I'd go for a walk or go get a drink at one of my favorite bars with some cat musician friends.

After drifting and unwinding a little more, my eyes turned to my phone. I thought about who might have called today, so I took a seat and pressed the answering machine to see who I missed. That's when everything got slippery and reality itself became a fairground hall of

mirrors full of twisting distorted mirrors. Reality as I knew had flown.

Surprisingly though not out of character Angie had called. She was my baby sister and the one I was the closest in my family too besides my mom. I even stayed in touch with Angie when I touring the road.

Something was wrong like a puzzle with pieces missing. She had left a shaken voicemail telling me to call home as soon as possible. In a shaky voice, she said mom was really sick in a tone of a voice I was not familiar with when thinking of my baby sister. Her voice had knowledge of a disastrous, impermeable authority.

My heart froze in my chest then acted as if it was going to bounce right out of my body. I took a deep breath. Feelings were sinking in that I did not like. It was like the air being knocked out of you in slow motion. I started feeling angry and confused as if I was sucker punched by some dumb fool.

Plunging moments like these truly leave an indelible and even indecipherable mark. It's a mark that comes from what you choose at the crossroads. Either because of the searing, singular pain of that moment burns a life long scar into us, or because you're actually living out your most feared nightmare, of hearing that someone super important (your own mother) was gravely ill, someone who you always thought would just 'kind of be there ' forever...

I knew it was serious as I detected weird, uneasy electricity in my little sister's voice. I procrastinated as long as I could to stall the sudden slamming head on crushing impact of this situation. All of sudden there were a ton of things I needed to do before I made this call! I was locked into a spider web and anxiously worried who the spider was.

Finally, with enough nerve (and superhuman denial!), I picked up the phone palms all sweaty. I nervously called home. At this moment, it seemed like everything in me kind of went numb. I remember listening, but I wasn't all there. My mind was running marathons thru what seemed to be billions of thoughts at one time. It's funny how your mind works in situations like this. It's like you become a scared animal hunted or like a computer have built in defense circuits that are automatic and kick in when we need an escape route to defensible safety. In a house of mirrors it seemed as if I had 2 or 3 different doors to choose from! With backup courage out of nowhere, I stayed as focused as I could on what Angie was revealing about mom's condition. The message summed up to one awful, central fact. Mom's cancer had come back!

This time things were looking as if they might be terminal. This was especially difficult for me because I always fought relentlessly to take a positive stance with my mom's recurring illness for a staunch, stubborn hopeful attitude can turn out to be half the battle. I found myself mentally carving each word apart, looking for some way to make this all not be so serious, and so damn real! If only there was some way that I could make this all just go away! And it stayed that way. From the time I hung up the phone to each time I awoke from sleep it was as if I was caught in a dark dream that just wouldn't go away! There's a certain, peculiar HEAVINESS that goes with the knowledge that your mom is going to die. No kind of words can really get to that despair.

You find yourself lost in a calculating, confrontationally oblique strangeness. Suddenly, it's like you've been plunged in a long and dark endless night stranded on some awful shore of a lake called despair where a Loch Ness type of monster looms over all of you about to devour you! It's as if pair of psychedelic granny glasses was suddenly fitted on you, though the colors they blinded your eyes with were a new color called absolute pain. It paints everything that you see, each thought that you think or think you think. Such depressing derangement can make you think you're even losing grips on things. Doubts swarm in as if you were lost alone treading water in shark infested waters!

It was a whole new world and I was shaken down to a nervous wreck! Soon, you find that sleep is your only refuge even when that sleep is fitful and the nightmares hit hard. At least hear, you can almost forget or not be aware at least. The only peace, the one cave that you can run away and hide in was a hazy safety net stretching somewhere in the circus of my unconscious.

Some realities are so overwhelming that they can be way too much to carry inside. This could be why you see people freak out and do crazy things after a major emotional trauma, from acts of violence, to habits that slowly destroy you from the inside out (self hate, drugs & booze)..... After taking it all in I hung up the phone and proceeded to have the first of what be many crying sessions, and began to make all the necessary plans to go home and see for myself what was going on with mama.

CHAPTER 3

As I flew into Washington D.C.'s Dulles Airport, I noticed it was a bright spring afternoon, nice and warm. The airport bristled with activity, small kids playing anxiously at their parent's feet. Business men lost in the wall street journal. Lovers grasping each other, trying their best to hold back time, saying goodbye. There were thousands of people all in a hurry to be somewhere else and I was one of them.

As I scanned the airport folks were busy going about the business of the day whatever it happened to be. Security guards scowled as we rushed thru the metal detectors. Compared to Hartsfield back in Atlanta, Dulles had a strange heavy presence of security guards. Skycaps hustled bags to and fro'. Somehow it seemed cold and cruel to me that 'life was going' regardless of my mom being so sick, and my world crashing around me.

I made my way towards the car rental area and waited in yet another joyous line. I was bored and slightly on edge. The car was just your typical rental (midsized) but turned out much nicer than the Toyota Corolla (1986 four door) that I had left D.C. way back when I left town looking for fame and fortune.

Soon I was on my way up RTE 66 towards Washington D.C. The drive is really dull, especially the first ten miles consisting of endless access roads. It feels mindlessly dull because all the

buildings look the same, kinda like north point mall in the metro Atlanta area. The scenery improves when you get to Rosslyn Va, which is near the Potomac River and the Georgetown riverfront.

It was always so incredibly beautiful this time of the year with the beautiful cherry blossoms exploding all around accenting the ever present shades of leafy green trees against a background of bright, angelic blue skies. It was a living work of art. Such beautiful scenery only felt slightly comforting and distressingly ironic.

It's funny when you're going thru something so heavy you somehow think that the whole world should be feeling it with you, sharing in your pain. But nothing could be further from the truth! This in itself is a painful lesson. I guess it must have been just my feeling but this sadness forcing dark frame of mind seemed to color the way everything looked. Everywhere I slowly darted my eyes, the looks on people's faces appeared angry, sour somehow. I felt weird as if I was dragging my feet like a little boy who had been summoned to the principal's office.

It seemed like ages ago. In 1989, I had left first moving to Richmond, VA to join a band that was doing really well meeting with some success. I missed a lot of very important dates when I could have made it home to see mom including Christmases and Thanksgivings. I would always choose to work when the band took off for the holidays, trying to make-up for the cash I was not making on the road. This is something I would heavily regret as I watched mom that summer. I did call her every now and then but I was not super close!

Honestly like many others, I had a hard time when my folks divorced, which definitely led to me not involving mom in my life for a good three to four years. These months leading up to her passing would close that gap more than I could imagine.

I drove on anxiously cutting a swath through downtown Washington while taking note of the changes that have occurred over the years all around me somewhat subconsciously. I was all the while dreading the meeting that had been set up between family members and a team of doctors at the hospital. I finally arrived at the hospital campus which just happened to be on the grounds of my old x-ray school at the Washington hospital center, for a second I drifted back to the carefree days of x-ray school.

Looking back at those days, I felt pulling nostalgia. It was a fun new world of modern medicine. Mom and dad were relieved that I was back into 'some' kind of school instead of just working and just playing in bands. It looked like I'd have SOME sort of profession at least.

...So there I was, enrolled on the Washington Hospital Center School of Radiology, beginning a new chapter in life at the biggest hospital in the city. Little did I know at that time just how important the training that I would get would be to all of us 20 years later.

As I looked around at the campus things had changed quite a bit, as they had added another hospital to the campus, which already was home to VA Hospital, Children's Hospital as well the National Rehabilitation Hospital, which was my destination this day.

I somehow found my way thru the parking lot maze found a space to park in and began making my way into the building. Something struck me as very odd as I got closer and closer to the front. It was a spiffy bright new building, with lots of new red paint and flowers and glimmering chrome all around, but it seemed to be colored even more by the air of quiet sadness that hung so heavily, maybe it was just me again, or perhaps it was the vibe flowing from the young brothers that seemed to be all over the front porch, grabbing sunshine while either laying on stretcher or propped up in a wheelchair. They all appeared to be under thirty and all seemed to share certain hopelessness....

The last time I had been down this way had been right around 1985 when I had begun x-ray schooling here on this campus. Punk and new wave were being broken into the mainstream of radio, MC hammer was the king of the charts, parachute pants and Jeri curls were all the rage which also happened to be the beginning of the “crack wars” in D.C. For the next few years, our nation’s capital became a bloody, tragic battle ground.

Young brothers from 13 on up were mowing each other down like it was a new sport! With the relative ease of obtaining a gun and the money that they stood took to make, things got way out of hand! Ten years later we had young cats' by the dozens living life from the hard comforts of wheel chairs, partially or totally paralyzed, some even wearing colostomies or worse. They were veterans of a senseless war!

In many cases guys that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. There were some things about home that I truly didn't miss! I lost a young cousin who was murdered with her boyfriend prior to her 12Th grade year. I guess she just happened to be with him at the wrong fateful time! Also, a couple of my cousins got caught in its seductive grasp. Like birds caught in a tornado the two went round and round till one was hung in jail by the cops! They said it was suicide, but the fact was never accounted for his superhuman ability to climb the 20 feet up it would have taken to hang himself in that particular jail. He was a jailbird who had spent a majority of his 25 years in prisons, so no one really cared enough to really look into his case! His older bro was in and out of jail also and caught in the crack game till his 50's. Now he says he's addicted to women! I guess everyone goes from some addiction to another, though this can be positive.

By now all of my foot dragging had made me pretty late for the appointment. I made my way upstairs and was greeted by my cousin Jerome warmly. As I walked into the meeting room everyone looked up at me as if I had caused a major interruption. I felt like a stranger.

Here I was at last face to face with two doctors and a social worker. They were the center of everyone’s attention, everyone being family that was there. This included my mom’s two closest sisters, Emily and Rebecca, my uncle Joe and my sister Angie. Jimmy, my older brother, was also present.

At the end of the table sat momma. I almost didn't recognize her. The change was too hard to

believe. She showed no visible emotion but at the same time I could sense an inkling of the fathoms of her sadness sitting ever so motionless in the wheelchair and responding so flatly to her environment.

Her skin had a paleness to it that made her appear almost transparent under the harsh bright lights in the room. She already seemed a ghost staring mysteriously cryptic and lost straight ahead. She only barely acknowledging that I had walked in. Her body appeared so stiff so that she sat perfectly rigid as if she had been frozen in that uncomfortable pose for a long while. It was an absolute shock to see her that way. I almost stumbled backwards. Sadly, she reminded me of the way I had seen thousands of neglected old folks in nursing homes and hospitals over the years. She the look that came from feeling that no one cares! I'm all alone! Even though I knew it was mom in that chair I think for a moment I was hoping that I'd made my way to the wrong room by mistake. Almost awkwardly, I found a seat and listened in on what was being discussed with consuming trepidation.

I thought to myself "how odd to be on this side of the coin after all these years. Now begins my turn on the wheel of fortune and where it lands is certain uncertainty. The doctors explained that mom was in the late stages of terminal breast cancer. She had battled with breast cancer before, a few years past, and it had gone luckily into remission. She had a bout with it prior to that awful summer of 97. She had told me that she thought that it returned as a result of an elevator accident she had in the early 90's. Looking back that doesn't make much sense. The medications definitely have strange side effects, even detrimental.

Did she only gain her health to have it return with a vengeance! Life certainly throws some hard cruel blows. It had now spread all over from her breasts, both hips and even her shoulders. Now they estimated that she would live only another 6 to 8 months. What was even worse was her emotional state was failing apart and continuing to do so from all those years of neglect!

The neglect was on the part of us kids!! I was out of touch and my siblings just ignored what was going on. I didn't really know how sick she was till arriving.

Concerning her home, she kept on refinancing till her death, and with her feeling that there was no one to care for her it had a definite negative effect on her demeanor, she barely spoke when I 1st went home—about his mom

She had fallen into a listless apathy about everything running the gamut from her finances her appearance, even her own health. she had been so sick that she had been unable to take care of things for a while and , apparently no one had been looking in on her and caring for her, my sister had moved with her two daughters down into mom's basement apt. she had recently separated from her husband, but she had found it increasingly difficult to even go up the stairs and check on mom on certain days , due to a combination of her being so incredibly stressed by her impending divorce, the challenges of raising two feisty little girls on her own.

In hindsight, just the fear and pain of seeing mom grow sicker, and not knowing how to handle it, were all too much for Angie to handle. She was the youngest of us three kids as well as

'daddy's little girl for sure and nothing she had learned in prep school where she was an A+ student could have equipped her to handle seeing mom's health deteriorate little by little daily. She was the closest to mom and had moved out with her when my folks split so she had seen each stage of mom's decline, for me it was all new and a bit of a slam in the head for me.

I spoke to mom on the phone a good bit, but definitely not enough Now I knew for sure that seeing her in person would have made all the difference. It was hard to believe that this could happen to mom and the whole family. It can be hard to digest.

When you have a relatively easy life coming up facts may point out that you're comfortably middle class. You do what you're supposed to like church and school half of your life. You never have serious want of anything. Big family get togethers are always on the calendar as well as church functions (some more fun than others). In other words, lots of yellow cake and happy days go around.

Mom and dad had made certain of that. They busted their ass even working two jobs each at times just to make sure we never had want of anything!! Mostly each had one profession. At one time mom was a nurse, so she worked constantly as a lot of them do because the money made can be sick!! Dad meanwhile worked for the military as a civilian.

You're all the more unprepared to deal when things come along that blow your mind like this. Bluntly, it put me in some sort of suspended shock where anything could happen. I was nervous. Finding out just how neglected she had become put some heavy weight on me. I felt all the more guilty for not being in touch more, and for letting mom fall into this situation.

As I sat there my mind drifted off to a time when we were just simple kids. My Uncle Bobby lived with us then, and all three of us had come down with the flu. It was one of the biggest epidemics to hit the D.C. area ever! Even with working two time consuming jobs, she still made the time and effort to be there. She made the rounds feeding each of us, bringing us juice, love and medicine that we needed. She was a super mom nursing us all back to health. Now was the time to return the favor.

As we filed out I began to have a chance to speak with my relatives, most of whom I hadn't seen in years for different reasons. They were nice to me, but I felt dismissed, kind of cast aside, as if I wasn't part of what was going on, and didn't matter., I know that I had been away for a while chasing my 'rock star dreams, but this cold reception hurt a lot! I mean hey she was my mom! I was determined to make this right! As it turned out I would have my definite chance.

Family reception was a lot better at my Dad's house. It was always nice to come back to the home that I grew up in. Even with dad having remarried after my folks divorce, things were very cool!

Terea, my step mom, turned out to be a complete angel, so sweet and full of love that when I walked in the love glowing off of her towards me was strangely palpable. This was a welcome

oasis from the almost madhouse emotional suffocation of the hospital. This was tangible shelter from the engulfing hurt of mom's painful reality!

It always had seemed sort of weird to me, that even though he was very happily remarried he was always asking about mom!!! Especially now that old monster cancer was back in the proverbial house! It was to be the beginning of my lesson in the fact that love lasts forever. It's a lesson that I'm learning still!

It seems that when you truly love someone, you love them without condition and in some form forever no matter how the circumstances of the relationship may change. True love will always last, through pain, distance, health and the ravages of times. My heart found it hard to fathom becoming perplexed when he would always ask about her. The awful fact remains after all she had cheated on him for whatever reason. I try to chalk it up to human nature, though that still leaves lingering questions. Impulsively, she had moved out and left dad and I with an empty sad house that still echoed with her then tenacious presence.

Years went by and he remarried to his college sweetheart this time. He became a new man with a new spring in every step. He found profound happiness. One conclusion I've come to is happiness and love are not the same thing. Love can turn into an ugly beast that knows no mercy or kindness. Often, the two will battle each other to the point of destructiveness. Overall, no matter what occurs a person has the right to find that transcendent happiness that can be found in a love that is "right" and not "wrong." I guess once you have a family you never really let go of that uplifting vision in your heart.

The next few days were filled with lots of tense thoughts and sleepless nights, despite the entire great home cooked meals I readily devoured. I had been away from my "family circle" for a while so I tried to visit with as many folks as possible, which invariably led to questions and long discussions on mom and her situation, there were long discussions on how everything should be handled, after a while, you kind of want to run and hide from reality of it all. Just not to have to think about it, just for a little while, sleep is your only escape!!

Everyone was trying to figure out what to do next. After a few days I returned to Atlanta, and broke the news to band mates and friends as well as Carly and made an attempt to get on with life. Washington D.C. was soon demanding me back. The ties of blood have no bounds sometimes!

Soon I found that mom would be having surgery again this time on her left hip. Once again I flew up to o.k. to see her as well as consult with the family. This time she had been placed in a nursing home just across the Potomac River in Virginia, "Woodbine" I knew it well from my first job in x-ray as a mobile x-ray tech.

The scene was all too familiar as I walked in talk about surreal! There was the old familiar huge chandelier as you walked in, I remember wondering what would happen if it ever crashed down on a bunch of poor elders, like in the titanic. Now here I was again ten years later. And that unmistakable smell, I remembered well from all those days I spent going from nursing home to

nursing home. I'll just call it the 'smell of the aged, you can use your imagination. There were still old folks doing their thing. Passing time, making the most of every moment.

I had driven over with my sister Angie. Slowly we made our way back to mom's room and entered to find my brother Jimmy there as well. I could tell immediately that he was very uncomfortable being there, it was all over his face. I had never seen him so look so scared, and it got to me too. We were both holding back the tears. I bent over to kiss momma, who looked very pleased that all of her kids were there at once, and we sat around her bed and spoke for a few minutes, before my brother left to take his son Julius home.

Seeing mom lying in a hospital bed like that hit hard! It was like bricks falling from the sky. We had missed out on so much time already, now this! I found myself sitting there like a big puppy resting my head on the bed rail doing my best to fight back the tears; it crushed something inside me to see her so helpless HOW COULD THIS BE? Where had all the time gone? How did we get to this sad moment arriving bereaved and tangled up?

We soon said good bye and Angie and I drove through the cool night air in a dead silence that seemed to scream with the pain I was feeling. This pain seemed to almost exist outside of me. As time went on, the family met and discussed what needed to be done. Mom would be coming home after this her most recent surgery. The cancer had eaten away at both hips until the pain was too much to bear, which led to the replacements,

This had left her with almost no ability to get around on her own Now, she needed someone to be at home with her full time. It seemed that everyone who lived in town was so busy with work, and families of their own.

It came down to one of two choices we would have to either hire an in home nurse or one of the family members would be there with her full-time!!! Soon enough the list whittled down to me! I don't think that I was the most popular choice but I was the most logical. I was the only one of us kids with any medical experience. I was single with no kids and no home of my own to worry about. So that's what it would be. Washington D.C. would have to be home again. I had come full circle or so it seemed.

Chapter 4

By the time I arrived on the scene at mom's house her health had deteriorated to the point that she had already been assigned a hospice nurse, Mrs. Zimmerman (a nurse who made house calls). She was one of the most amazing people that I've met so far in my life! Some people have a vibe, a certain feeling, and a magnetic power, call it what you want, that separates them from us. They transcend us; they do the same to circumstances that stop most of us in our tracks. All with the grace of a kung fu master.

I still recall my surprise at meeting her the 1st time. She wasn't at all what I expected. She was

small and pale with a 'Woody Allen' kind of vibe. She projected a quiet strength that transcended her small white lab coat and thick glasses.

"Hello Mr. Vines, nice to meet you sir." It was weird for me to have her address me in this way but I tried just to focus on what she was saying to me. She must have sensed that I was feeling overwhelmed and uptight about all of my new responsibilities, because she seemed to speak to my fear in a way that not only calmed me; she made me see that I could handle all of this. Like YODA in a lab coat she pumped me up, giving me a shot of much needed confidence. I guess I was kind of freaked out about this entire new world of ultimate responsibility that I had entered. I mean hey, my mom was terminally ill, and I was to be the one trusted to be with her night and day.

In my agitated emotional shellshock, Mrs. Zimmerman threw me a much needed curve by pointing out the good in the circumstances which I was too blind to see. She brought up the fact that this was a unique situation because of my 15 years of medical experience, which would prove to be invaluable just as she said. In simply knowing how to pick mom up and already having a good idea of how to deal with patients and their mental as well as physical needs I had a definite advantage in this situation which seemed bigger than I could ever handle.

Slowly, I began to feel a little better about the whole situation with all its darting possible implications. Unlike some of the other doctors I've encountered, Zimmerman knew how to communicate warmly and empathetic. She had the knack to remind to come back to earth and be in the moment through absolute kindness.

We talked for a few minutes then she began to explain all about the various medications and about things to expect and look out for in the coming weeks as mom's health was expected to decline slowly. She said that sure signs to look for would be any change in mom's eating habits, appearance and especially her breathing patterns it wasn't something that I looked forward to watching, but I needed to be there for mom.

If there had ever been a time when I wanted to run and not have to face something, this was definitely it! It was hard enough just walking into mom's room and seeing her there helpless and unable to get up. Like a pro, I learned to hold back the rush of tears that would always suddenly try and force their way out when I went in to see her.

Mrs. Zimmerman was direct with all of her advice and direction, while her Zen like manner calmed me. After that very first day when she came thru, I looked forward to her visits as one of my few moments of light when I was 'fed' emotionally instead of drained from my surroundings. She would come by once a week, checking mom's regression, listening to her heart and lungs to observe her breathing pattern and all of her basic bodily functions.

Also, she closely monitored my mental outlook as I progressed thru this dark hazy experience, perhaps to ensure that I was not cracking under the pressure that this kind of situation obviously brings. For the life of me, I could not imagine what it must be like to be Mrs. Zimmerman. Her life dealt with stressed out caretakers and family like myself, while also experiencing he

suffering of super sick people everyday. You must have to have one tough constitution! This truly must be a special calling. This was not a job career you did just for the money! You did this for the essence of human beings!

You must have a major desire to love and care for others, specifically something that comes from some other place beyond the limitations and frustrations of this world. This unassuming woman had to wade in and out of through crowds of the deathly ill each day like she was an American Mother Teresa. Bringing comfort and peace to all that you encounter obviously isn't everyone's calling. What kind of person possesses that kind of love? I wondered why more of those of us who call ourselves Christians didn't truly live this way? What amount of pure devotion which pushes them to 'pour themselves out' each day for others, whatever her source, it could change the world, or at least make it a much better place to live in. Think about it! Being around a driving love like this made me want that kind of grace and peace. It's a lot like seeing somebody that had the secret to eternal joy! How can you not want to be filled with energy so radiant, bright, and beautiful?

This kind of love pulls you in like a silent all-powerful hurricane sucks everything in its path into its vortex. Love in its pure form cannot be stopped! Perhaps a better visual would be love as a large wave of lava melting all that it comes in contact with. You get the idea.

This school of thought became a permanent part of me as I returned to Atlanta and my job later on. Working all became more of a mission of love each day. Not just another droll 8 hrs just for pay. This seems to be the major poison in the veins of so many folks in our society. We work just for the money and this can make you forget you're even human. You may end up sleepwalking thru everyday, hating each sad moment all for some kind restless pursuit of the mighty dollar.

Of course, not all of us are blessed to do what we love for a living each day, I read somewhere about a Rabbi who spoke a sermon on doing what God made you best at. Each of us must surely have a special gift. The tricky thing is to figure out what it is and it usually happens when you're not expecting it. This experience with mom taught me that that my true purpose was not just to take good x-rays each day, but to "BE LOVE". One should be kindness in each moment. One should be a blessing to everyone and in each situation no matter what that person's personality may be saying or doing. This has become my true purpose!

I'm talking about living love everyday as much as possible instead of putting an act on through just going to church on the weekends and talking about it like so many folks. I had grown up around tons of well meaning church members who were simply caught up in the ritual of going to church each week, but you would never know it by the way they lived. They sadly seemed to be just as mean and messed up in the head as everyone else.

This whole summer had begun to teach me some valuable, transformative life lessons. I was being forced to walk through a hall of cleansing mystical light. Suddenly, I was learning the acute brevity of life, which made it take a shade of holiness and reverence. I learned the importance of being that love and inner beauty that you wished to see in the world. I was becoming a conduit for the essence of love and wonder and letting this flow into others.

Chapter Five

All of a sudden, flying seemed to figure prominently in my life. Quickly, I went from a kid who had never flown much to a frequent flyer jetting through endless skies. This trip home was different, because I knew that everything in my life had just changed and who knew for how long? I had given up my apartment back in Atlanta and left everything behind. I mean everything and that includes my band, my friends, and a sweet girl that I had just begun to fall madly in love with. My whole life had been put on hold, or so I thought. It's as if I was stepping into some kind of dark dream world, one colored by the sad facts surrounding mom's health, everything was kind of a grey, greenish color now. The kind you see in TV shows.

It's funny how everything in life is tangled and entwined, especially emotions. When a loved one gets cancer, everyone who loves that person is severely affected. I can't really describe it with a justice. It was as if all my energy was sucked out leaving a shell. Now, any and all the doings of everyday life took twice the effort to do like being under water. For example, just climbing the stairs or walking thru the airport seemed to get me winded now. Everything seemed like it was in slow motion.

Just concentrating was a chore now as all of my thoughts felt heavy. On Some days, it felt like I was day dreaming the whole time as my mind would drift off into my own little tense world like clockwork every few minutes. I don't even remember where I went in my head! It was an awful frustrating world where my mind jumped like a crazed vampire from one jittery jostling thought to another. Funny thing, I was the only one losing blood with each new thought, each fresh bite!

So here I was waiting for dad to pick me up that day at Dulles Airport, looking around at the colorful swath of people flowing nonstop all around me. This was such a fun place to people watch, that is, if I was under very different circumstances! I was so far inside my own head that I took in little of it. The crowds all seemed a loud and disjointed cacophony.

It was raining and grey, atypical, for summer in Washington D.C. We should have been bathing in sunshine and the glow of the cherry blossoms on a day like this. I felt perhaps this added to my feelings of weakness and doleful weirdness. I hadn't been sleeping much since I had found out about mom's having the big "C". With so much preparation for my big move, as well as the huge burden of missing Carly, the sudden rush of events sucked quite a bit out of me. Sleep just seemed impossible now. I was so tired, I could not sleep. My mind was constantly spinning into absolute confusion. It seemed as if there were no bright spots in my life at this point, but this day I was feeling extra weird.

I asked myself the same question over and over. Was it that I had no idea of what the next few weeks would bring? I was at a place I'd never been to in my life, what seemed to be a "dark crossroads," between the unknown and what for sure seemed to be a story with a sad ending. Soon dad arrived to pick me up. It was good to see him despite all of what was going on. He was growing a bit grayer with the years, but he was still the same caring, sweet guy.

We had a slow, uneasy ride around the beltway as we headed home. I was not an eager, lively passenger for the road. He seemed to want to talk a little too much to me about things I really wasn't ready to discuss yet. I'd never thought about it, but it was really difficult for him to handle this all as well, he always seemed to look back so wistfully on the days of his little family. I guess at the time it was the happiest point of his life and he held on to it as long as he possibly could, even now he still asks me why mom left! But his wanting to talk on this level was just far too much for me right now.

I just pretended (very hard!) that I was just too tired to converse from all the traveling, and closed my eyes as if to rest. To my relief this worked. We finally made it home and I was able to escape that uncomfortable situation and enjoy a quiet evening with him and Terea my step mom. After a delicious meal he drove me over to moms, I hadn't spent much time there, just a few visits with girlfriends since she and I had 'made up from the time she and dad had split up. Not yet old enough to understand that, with time people just grow apart. I had blamed her for their divorce, and we didn't speak for 3 1/2 years. Now here I was here at her door, having come home after all these years to care for her.

Aunt Rebecca greeted me at the door, smiling and opening her arms for a great big hug. The hug calmed my jolted and roughed up nerves. She was such a pure, sweet god fearing lady, small but very powerful inside. A nurse just like all of her sisters, we spoke on small talk for a few minutes, catching up some. I forgot just how long I'd been out of the whole 'family loop'.

I looked around the house. It was still all typical mom, which meant the house was decorated with an emphasis on understatement, which means classy and smooth. A large white L-shaped couch took up one corner of the living room, which was bright with sunlight. It seemed the sun had decided to join us now that we were at moms! With all of the sunlight bouncing off of the white paint and the sofa, it was like stepping into the Vatican, I imagined.

After speaking with Aunt Rebecca for a few minutes it soon became time to go see mom. I stood for a while gathering myself and taking a long slow breath. I felt strong fear and uncertainty yet with resolve I walked down the dark hallway towards the light of her bedroom. To say I was nervous does not justice to that real dark feeling. I felt as dark as that hallway!

There she was, sitting up in bed. She had the worn appearance of being very weak, but nether less her face late up when she saw my familiar figure. She greeted me with a familiar "HEY BO!!" It was so great to see her looking ten times healthier and happier so suddenly. I guess having been back at home and getting a constant dose of tender love-filled care had done wonders for her. She was radiant in spite of her wear and tear of the sickness. As she smiled up at me now, I would have never known that she was so incredibly sick! This was something I would see a lot of in the next three months, which is her wondrous ability to call up strength from odd, unseen places when ever she had visitors so they would leave feeling inspired, instead of walking away with despair and pity for her.

As I spoke with her it became apparent to me just how relieved she was, that I had come home to

be with her. Maybe she didn't really believe that I was coming or perhaps she had given up, with me having been gone so long, and my being out of touch. Perhaps it was that my siblings had done so very little for her, while being so near by, anyway I got the feeling that she didn't really believe that I was actually going to move home and take care of her.

Here I was sitting on the edge of the bed feeling awkward, while my mind and emotions were trying to a way thru this weird new world where I would become the parent and she the child. And so I began a strange new chapter of my life. It was hard enough just being back in D.C. after all those years on the road. I guess that I had been away so long that it was sadly an odd feeling to even be at home with my family.

On top of that was the strangeness of being handed this awesome responsibility of caring for mom. Talk about a homecoming! I jumped right into setting up shop and running the house, since mom had been bedridden for a while, things had gotten slightly out of hand. It felt good just to be busy doing something useful. Most of my work was in the kitchen. I could tell that she had not been up and around the house for a while. Dishes were strewn haphazardly about the cabinets and drawers were in total cornucopia of confusion.

Mom would have gone bananas if she'd seen this. So it was a nice feeling to wheel her into the kitchen when I was done, just to see the happiness role across her face. It was like experiencing my own sunrise inside my spirit. Each little act, no matter how small the deed seemed to have the effect of elevating her energy level at least 50 %. I could hear the change in her voice as well as see her beginning to beam with energy now. This all helped lift my thoughts out of the heavy but invisible cloud that seemed to hang over life now.

Beautiful spring weather shone brightly outside with the sweet songs of birds and brilliant blooming flowers. The outside beauty somehow balanced out the dark disorder of how I felt on the inside. We began to talk a lot. It felt nice to be able to get to know her and also to allow her to get to know me as an adult, a finished product, hers! I had broken off communications after mom and dad's separation. So there was much to catch up on, not only on my side but hers as well. She seemed more intent on talking about my life, I noticed with a little bewilderment. Perhaps, she was just directing the attention away from her situation.

I enjoyed telling her stories of my travels; she especially loved to hear about the crazy colorful characters that I had run across over the years. She found it hard to believe that people could be so nutty. Obviously she had not spent a lot of time around musicians! She also wanted to hear about my relationships. Mom was always so cool and open minded about whom I dated and was cool enough not to give 'dating advice' unless it was asked for. Even more I loved the fact that she never made a big deal about me sleeping with my girlfriends when we did visit her. She knew that we lived together so she made no fuss about it when we would visit. It was so cool to share my dating history with her. She had met most of my girlfriends, and it was really neat hearing her thoughts on each situation.

This is a large part of what I missed during those years of us not talking, all the sharing between mother and son. Man I sure could have used her advice on women the first time around! I'm sure

that I could have saved a couple of my relationships with her wonderful slant on things. This kind of close bond we never had a chance to share. Who knows how much heartache she could have saved me?

Either way, this time was too short and bittersweet for me. It's weird, you kind of want it to be over because of the obvious pain of the matter, but at the same time you never want to say goodbye! I guess that I let the regrets flood my mind too much to enjoy the moments as much as I wanted to.

I had to check myself making mental notes, something we can all do too often sometimes. I reminded myself to be happy and enjoy moments to the fullest. These are the moments I can share with her now! I had to stop kicking myself for the past. There was no way to bring back any of that time it was all gone. These were my mantras. I was learning to let go of regrets and what could have been.

Time melts like a cube of ice slowly and for good, yet like ice turning into water, life changes into something else, for better or worse.

Chapter Six

The first thing each day I'd go in and check on mom. As I sat there on her bed, I looked at her closely. Her face was somewhat puffy, perhaps due from the small arsenal of medications that she was required to take daily. There must have been 10-15 pill assorted bottles on her dresser top. Orange bottles with fine print that held various painkillers to sleeping aids that fought the frustrations of insomnia. There were also pills to help her digest food. She had a pill for anything and every symptom. They were pills that would do anything, except ONE CRUEL EXCEPTION! NO PILL IN EXISTENCE CAN CURE THAT DAMN CANCER ON THE WARPATH!!

She maintained that sweet smile none the less, despite what must have been a disorienting blend of medicine brew. During a long sickness, body language reveals the truth, no matter how stoic and stubborn the personality in that tested body. I had my perceptions down to a fine, discerning art. I could tell by her facial expressions when her pain would worsen or if something wasn't right. I told myself at least the pills allowed relief from the nausea and pain so she could still have those hours of being her old self.

We passed lots of our time talking and getting acquainted again over the next few days. It had been a while, that is a 3 ½ year time span, for a long overdue reconciliation. I had come back home coughing up blood like a deranged Ozzy Osborne from having contracted pneumonia when I went overboard over touring only a year and a half prior. A rambling life on the road taxes your physical health besides making your mental life chaotic.

Though we got lost plenty in conversation, what we had not done was spend any quality time really talking. Intensely, I felt she didn't know who I was that is the man, the grown up Kevin Vines. I'd been away, perhaps due in retrospect to running away from our fractured family home

life. Now I desperately wanted her to see who I was emotionally and mentally. I wanted her to see the true me! I wanted her to see the kind of man that she'd raised and maybe she could feel a little proud. I wanted her to realize I was not the crazy boy who was 'wasting his life playing music' or the chubby little boy who always ran to her when things went wrong. I was a man now! I was here for her and very capable of taking of her. Inside, this was all overshadowed by wanting OUR TIME together and time was running out! I felt forced to have patience in a situation where patience seemed a liability or severe disadvantage.

I set up shop in the guest room which is right across the hall from her, so I could keep a close eye watching vigilantly. I wanted to hear her if she called for help or stubbornly restless tried to climb out of bed. This was a must as mom had a serious streak of independence and wasn't one to be waited on or take orders, especially if it meant slowing her down. Now, with her coming off a second hip surgery, she had no choice, but to stay put in bed for a while and allow things to mend. To say the least, she was not cool with this. I worried she may feel agitated slowing down even more our reconnection.

This difficult situation would in the coming weeks lead to a strange change of roles for both of us where I became parent and her the child. This meant scolding her be it the hallway or beside the bed due to a failed attempt to get out of bed and walk to the kitchen. This also meant having to reprimand her when ever she tried to get up out of bed for any reason or pick her up off of the floor from where ever she had fallen. I had to choose my words carefully and steadfastly not react to any passing moments of mean spiritedness on her part.

Eventually we got a baby monitor which would allow me to hear her when she needed help or when she was being stubborn and tries to climb out of bed, so taking care of her and serving meals and medications became my new daily duties, which I enjoyed quite a bit as it had always been fun to cook for friends or dates. These simple duties of mere enjoyment took on a deeper shade of serious meaning as I realized just how incredibly grateful she was for every little act or detail that I did solely for her. This also felt weird to me like if an emotion could become dizzy. She spoke words of thanks, but more than anything, I witnessed it in her eyes. From those tired eyes I could feel the true weight of her quiet thanks. Disarmingly, her graceful eyes shone a light of sincere gratitude that words could never capture.

The illness made it hard for her to even speak at times, but I knew what her eyes were telling me. Things were not fair for mom. I know for a fact that she had felt shunned and alone with no one to look in on her before suddenly the family had jumped in and taken control. It took her a while to get used to the idea that I had really come home to be with her. It was a reaction we seldom see in society's disparate, selfishly disordered state these days. Most positions of service seem to automatically qualify as thankless endeavors. it made me realize how much we take for granted the kindness of others today. Kindness is nothing short of sacred.

Also with each meal, each little deed I did for her brought tough realizations of how much time had passed. and once again just how strange it was, now that our roles had been forever reversed, with her not being able to get around and do things on her own as she'd been doing all of her life

up till 6 months ago. Roughly, It took its toll on mom as well....I quickly took over all the household duties trying to bring back a sense of a normal, clean, functional household. This I knew would bring her comfort and a little more peace of mind. Peace of mind was nothing to be spared in these difficult days.

It was all very strange being there in this unfamiliar house with mom. The house did have her 'feel' and her sense of style, so I was feeling at home in no time. Next, I began to do daily workouts to help diffuse all of the stress I was under. The fact I knew that she was going to die was a heavy weight to carry, and super draining on my bruised heart and mind. Almost with darting wide eyes, I felt constantly on red alert. My nervous system was always wound up tight like a rubber band. It got so bad at times that I eventually broke out into a rash one week.

My temper had begun to flair at the drop of a hat, another sure sign that the stress was getting to me.

One day that I recall, I was driving my nieces from mom's house over to see Dad and Terea, my sweet step mom. As we got close to the house, we came up on a trash truck that was blocking the road; to make things worse they were taking their sweet time about moving, then making the mistake of looking back at me scornfully. Most days I would have been pretty patient with this sort of thing, but as we sat and sat I realized that they were just talking bullshit and goofing off on the job, probably to make a dull day go by faster. They did not care that we had to sit in a hot car in a hot sun waiting for their slow asses to move.

Before I knew it, I had flown out the car and ready for action. The world looked red through my beyond 'I've had it' eyes. I felt like Dirty Harry! Like a Doctor Jekyll who had suddenly turned into the vengeful Mr. Hyde, I held the baseball bat. that I kept into the car for protection, pointing it at those two while cussing them up, down and sideways. Deep inside me, I was begging them to come at me so I could release some of the pain that had built up uncontrollably the past few weeks. Sometimes I forget how big I am, (6' 4" 245 lbs.) I guess I must have been looked like a "real nut case" because they jumped in that truck and moved out of the way like I was Satan - in-the - flesh! Looking back, I laugh because it was like a cartoon. As I calmed down riding up the street, I looked in the rearview mirror to see both nieces silent both with their mouths open in awe! Needless to say, they behaved 100% better around Uncle Kevin the rest of the summer.

Though not as intense, I had another ugly incident where the stress got the better of me. This time it involved my sister. Having a night off from taking care of mom was rare. An old friend of mine happened to be a booking agent who got me some super cool tickets to see classic seventies rock wild man Ted Nugent! My sister skipped out without a sound through the garage door, so I wouldn't know she had dipped on me. I was pretty pissed and felt like I could have almost choked her like Wayne Brady!!

Right then I knew just how much this whole family grief had all pulled me apart, though being in D.C. also gave me a much needed break from the busy life that I had in Atlanta including full

time work, non stop band practice and dating Carly. My life was beyond full. Now I had time to just think and sort thru my thoughts more, which meant a demand for more outlets to sort these feelings.

I had brought my recording equipment along so I started to do quite a bit of songwriting. It was very 'good for the soul', time out of my mind kind of, I don't know why, but going through hard times has a way of squeezing unexpected works of art out of creative types. I began to write and record material that was intense, surprising, transcendently mind blowing amazing. Oddly, what was different from past creations was it seemed to flow without any effort on my part. I was a stranger in a stranger land that was allowing the absurd grief to flow out of me into something positive! Songs written around this depressing time or later inspired from its deafening echoes would serve well through future musician days (and still do).

One song in particular, 'Dancing in the rain' is an all-time favorite of mine. The words of the chorus "I am dancing/ I am singing/ I am laughing/ I am all alone in the rain / I am falling up this mountain/ called "forever" / yes, I 'm all alone in the rain?", " speak of a time when I had rounded a corner of great understanding. I had accepted the fact of mom's impending death. I had seen myself wade thru darkness and pain that was unimaginable, yet I had come out on the other side. Now I was held blessed with a perceptible growing of knowledge and understanding of life as well as death that that no one can achieve without paying experience's heavy toiling. The song explores life's brevity, fate's randomness and sense of glimpsing the timelessness of being. I began to consider things on a totally deeper level. Knowledge makes life bittersweet as you begin to savor it more just as reality's heavy handed dealings of sadness and sorrow will also do. I began to reflect on my life more as I was watching mom work harder to stay alive each day.

It made me think about what was truly important in the way you decide to live your life. Life's endless choices are easily taken for granted, yet have tremendous, endless repercussions. One choice always leads to another set of possible choices! You could live for the moment, or live a safe, staid, risk free path as most mindlessly seem to do. I'm talking about those anybodies working each day of their lives away while seldom stopping to truly taste life by chasing and living their dreams! So many individuals follow the typical path towards kids, career and a house inside the so called real world. Which did provide a sense of security? Did those who chose the safe path even realize they had a choice in the matter? Where did I fit among these two extremes? Such reflecting brought trouble to my mind, though I sensed in the long run this trouble of conscious would set me free to my own special path. Should I stay on the 'music road' which had left me broke but happy after 15 or so years, or should I slow down get off the road and try a more conventional road just working the nine to five work week. All that I was seeing and feeling made TIME seem like the most precious thing that we own, or are allowed to taste ever so briefly. It continually drove home the thought "HEY, I'M GONNA DIE ONE DAY TOO, DON'T WASTE TIME! Fully understanding the mortality of this place called life knocked the air out of me. I would never be the same.

I had always leaned towards this school of thought, but now I accepted this as gospel. The pain of the whole experience drove this 'truth' deep into me like a stake into a vampire's heart, and

I've never forgotten that lesson.... Having so much contact with my family was sweet, I realized then just how much I had sacrificed to go out and do what I loved, missing out on time with people who are my blood, the ones that I loved more than anyone in the world, opportunities to make new memories, all gone past now. Now, I had only these few sad days. It really gave me a lot of food for thought. At least I had this time of the continuing moment, and that became my mantra. Over and over I said 'live the moment', what else do we truly have?

I spent the better part of 15 years in hospitals watching folks in a miserable never ending flow of human suffering inflicted with TOTALLY UNEXPECTED TRAUMA TO THEIR BODY, that irrevocably changed lives forever? ! Though these experiences were an occupational hazard emotionally, the experiences also reinforced my pledge to live for the moment, for tomorrow may not even be mine! Any person can meet death at anytime. How else could I look at life with what I was seeing? I didn't know if it was fear or wisdom at that point. Sometimes I feel fear or wisdom are possibly the same thing in those strange, lucid moments of profound clarity. I had lost too many people in too short of a time span and this had left very deep scars on me. Carly, especially, had a 'hard time' understanding because she had never had direct experience with death in her lifetime. Such difficulties surprisingly reinforced by inner strength for my new resolve towards living. I was blessed to see with new eyes how sweet life really is and again how precious our time was. It's something that most people in life never taste until the autumn of their lives when they're old and mostly too late to do anything about such regrets!

There is something about knowing that you don't have much time, which makes us wake up to how truly special each moment is! Sometimes pain is your greatest teacher. This has helped me not take so much for granted, which I often did before this awful testing ground of grief and emotional stamina. It's crazy how much time we waste in our life times. Time will slip you away if you don't take a personal stand. You would think that we're all immortal the way we take our time for granted forever waiting to do those things that we've always wanted. Things we have dreamt of since we were children.

For example, in my case I foolishly wasted time putting off special times with my loved ones. I paid dearly in tears of regret and struggled in a bottomless pool of grief for such super chill, unaware callousness. As the saying goes, 'Hindsight is always 20/20.' Everything that happens seems to make more sense after the fact, as then all seemingly possible if and butts get their almost infinite day of what if. Through personally experiencing these frontiers of emotional extremes, especially the many moods of our ideas of love, I also realize each of us is our own worst critic. Grief may go hand in hand with regret and then consume you ravenously, yet the ferocity of dark stormy times always gives way light's illuminating clarity. Storms always come with torrential rains and unbelievable winds so hold on strong. Still waters run deep. I must say a Hard lesson learned, one of a lifetime, yet wisdom fairly earned.

CHAPTER 7

Our days together flowed simple and quiet. It felt as if we were on vacation, except for the underlying knowledge of how seriousness her condition was. This unavoidable, disruptive and disquieting thought hung over me like a steel eyed prison guard emotionless. I would check in on

mom every few minutes, be it pill time, meals or whatever that she might need.

A recurring theme held sway in my mind. This was how much this life traveled and made a self completing circle. The daily grind of everyday blends into the endless rotation of the seasons that come and go adding up to a sum of years lived. Each of us becomes a mirror. The question is, what are we reflecting? The child becomes the caregiver. It seems the way forward is also the way back. Life travels a path where bitter and sweet are the traveling companions. In the deep darkness when nothing makes sense, when heart and mind are blinded, many blessings are born.

One really heavy time that sticks out in my mind was the first time that I had to bath mom. This would not be the 1st time I'd bathed another adult, as I'd done that as part of my profession for the past 15 years. Let's just say when it's your own mom, it feels a lot stranger! Even as a man in my 30's, I still had vivid memories of mom bathing 'me' as a young one. Decades later, I was about to return the favor. It was quite a mind trip wheeling her to the bathroom. The room was done up in lovely black and pink contrasts, lovingly expressing my mother's creative flair and uniqueness, while also being luxuriously spacious. Saying the space was almost big enough for a small car was no goofy exaggeration. The room's size and layout came in really handy now.

"You should wait until Aunt Emily comes this evening so you'll have help," she said looking up perplexed and expressing emotional shadows of uncertainty. It felt like she was questioning whether or not I was up to the task at hand. Her voice registered a nerve biting tonality revealing a scolding parent and a fearing child simultaneously. I assumed she was also having visions of ending up on the floor with me underneath her.

"Nonsense momma, I've been moving folks bigger than you for years at work" Speaking reassurance in any situation around momma, I tried to sound as confident as possible more for her peace of mind than anything. I had good reason to feel confident. Through my profession, I had been lifting people big as elephants for years, so I felt confident that I could easily handle her. I had learned how to pick people up out of wheelchairs from my work experience, but never realized just how handy my experience would turn out to be in these odd circumstances among these defiantly difficult days.

Even though mom had put on a little weight because of being bed-ridden for so long, I naively assumed (and with a dash of pride) she was still in my lifting range. I continued small talk to make sure she was not too afraid for me to pick her up. I bent over slowly, bracing my knees against hers, while reaching underneath her arms and cupping my hands together behind her back so that I could handle the entire weight of her body. Momma was ready to trust me and wrapped her hands around my neck while letting out a loud breath. I counted to three and slowly picked her up out of the wheelchair.

She was heavier than I expected, but there was absolutely no way I was ever going to drop her! I gathered myself steady without letting on. I pulled her up and spun her gently around towards the shower stall, all in one smooth swift movement! With a swoosh, she landed on the shower stall bath chair. I felt an immediate sense of relief. Surprisingly catching me off guard in my seriousness of the moment, she softly chuckled, "You sure do have a way with the ladies boy." I

almost got knocked out tumbling over laughing so damn hard. I knew mom was funny, but I never knew that it was so keenly sharp and witty. It's funny the things you don't realize about your folks growing up.

As we proceeded with the bath, my mind drifted and lulled back to a certain night in South Carolina's steamy low-country. We were at grandma's place, and momma was doing her best to console a screaming little boy who had gotten soap in his eyes while being bathed. It burned like crazy! I remember so distinctly because the distinct 'ivory fresh' smell lingered for a long time afterwards making that traumatic event all the more memorable! I also recall not WHAT she said, but how calmly she spoke to me. Whatever she said, it eased my frantic young mind more than the perfectly warm water as she gently rinsed that 'old demon soap' out of my eyes. When we're kids in times like this, I think that it's the way that adults talk to us and not necessarily what's being said that touches us. Something special in her voice let me know 'that it was all under control.' I slowly eased off my whining and huffing. Motherly love transcends all moments. With disheveled emotion, I looked up to see mother smiling warmly.

Even as a child, I knew what it was at that moment, to be cared for completely. I knew with my limited understanding that this woman loved me totally and as long as she was around I would never have to fear. All that I had to do was bring up that sad face and those salty but magically powerful tears and boom she was there!

As I think back she was always there for me. From the many days that she put band aids on and kissed away the pain of my many falls, to the times that I was 'sick- to- the-bone', and she slowly nursed me back to health. I think back to the first time that I had my heart truly broken by marriage, and mom wrote me a tender, powerful letter offering the potential and valid ways to heal. I still have this letter today. Even though physically, she is gone, she still lives on in her wisdom and unselfish love still reverberating.

In the long run, what lesson seems all too important is love under the influence of tender kindness is given at the very beginning, so the same will be returned to the giver when roles are reversed. What a beautiful cycle is created! Knowing that you're loved in this way is a wonderful knowledge that stays within us always. It's such a simple, beautiful cycle, but it's all too important: if love, and tender kindness are given at the beginning to a child, so the same will be returned to the giver when roles are reversed a "perfect circle". As I gaze hard and thoughtful around at people, I think it's easy to tell who was loved in this way and who wasn't. Lack of love in childhood seems to leave a tell-tale life long scar upon those unfortunates. Somehow we are incomplete without a steady diet of real love in childhood.

We would talk on various subjects. Since I had been away so long, I wanted badly for her to truly know me, and what kind of man she had raised. Wow, talk about a flood of emotion! I tried to share as much about where I had been, and the things I'd done such as my travels and my life back in restless Atlanta. I talked about everything so scattered and yet seemingly all at once that my life's ways really came to haunt me in those sharing moments! Talk about feeling like a fool! I guess it was during this time that I learned some hard, hard, lessons about the importance of time spent 'with your family' and opportunities lost!

This simple daily routine took on an unexpected, yet deeply emotional significance that I found wondrously welcoming and comforting. We'd use our 'shower time' to talk on various subjects, she'd ask about places I had been the last 15 years of traveling, and sites I'd seen. It was as if I'd been away at war or something. She would often ask me lots of questions some that I didn't really wish to answer...

I did my best to make excuses for a while, but of course she always knew better. It's just a fact that most of us kid's turn away from their folks as we grow older, shuttling them off to nursing homes without giving much thought to the whole process. It was out of sight and out of mind, so that we can get on, all the much poor for it, with our so-called lives.'

In our bombastically self centered culture, this is the rule of thumb (and one that should be cut off!). We were no different then most kids, unfortunately. It is a truly hard thing to accept and then deal with, perhaps because it forces us to look straight and narrow upon the unarguable hard facts of our own mortality. It's also a sad way of handling things that has become all too common in our society, but I was blessed again thru my work experience having spent a good amount of time talking to older folks and being blown away by just how much I benefited from hanging out with them .

There were some subjects that I didn't really wish to get into with her as such as "Why didn't my brother and sister come by here more often? I didn't have an answer for that one. It was a question that I asked myself!! it must hurt a great deal to raise kids and have them turn away when you need them, but she like all parents I think could forgive even this.(the amazing love of a mother!)

This being the case it made me feel all the better for making the decision to come home to be with her. Even though it was super difficult to face all of this mind-bending pain and the strain that it put me, there was no way I could NOT be there for her. Nothing else made sense. I was the child who became the caregiver.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The old swimming pool had mutated into a full fledged swamp! From the look of it, the pool behind mom's house had not been opened for a few years. The murky water was a lovely puke green drifting with turgid flotsam debris, moss and old, discolored leaves going aimlessly in circles over the cover that had gone submerged partially due to accumulating rain water. I imagined that all kinds of life thrived living quietly and peacefully in that strange haphazard eco system. It was a peaceful world from the microscopic life to its most formidable being who happened to be a big old bullfrog, that made his home somewhere under the generous piles of old branches and leaves on the on the pool's north end.

The pool brought memories back! It's weird as the family home seemed to be way out in the

suburbs back then, so I didn't have a whole lot of peeps to swim with which was a way out bumper. Over the years these simple suburbs became a part of D.C. We did have a lot of family barbeques back then. There were always lots of big burgers and dripping barbeque. My uncle Walter was always talking shit. He was really funny and always the chef coincidentally. I am actually named after him. My dad always bought those off brand sodas, like the Kroger brand that a case went 10 for 10 dollars. I recall my cousins chasing me around the pool and my leg slipping under the chain link fence. Lots of fun, though that fence sure did hurt, now I think about it!

I first noticed him one day when I venture out into the back yard to get some distance and if not peace at least some headspace from the continual sad drama inside. Our bullfrog in question was sitting slightly submerged with just the top of his head and eyes visible. He was without a doubt the king O' the pond just on size alone. He also was the owner of a solid belch as well. Somehow the way his deep songs cut thru the silence of the yard, gave me the feeling that he was a 'Royal grand daddy' of sorts, a very commanding sort of presence that you felt as soon as you entered the backyard. It was very similar to the feeling you when you enter the yard where a large dog is home. I would see or hear him almost everyday. We could definitely hear him at night, broadcasting whatever his message was loud and clear. He made it really hard to sleep when I first arrived in town. But we soon I welcomed his low call. He became a partner in my battle against sadness.

Eventually we became an odd pair of friends in these eccentric circumstances. The old frog, he seemed to be always there for me, waiting for me just to arrive and become one with the thriving stillness. There we'd commune silently .as the summer progressed I'd find myself in the backyard more and more. he was always someone I could count on to just listen and understand,(something I really never could find with people, who meant well ,but were always talking and never listening!) with all that was churning around inside of me, I truly needed an outlet, someone I could just 'talk to'.

Inside the ad hoc wonderful pastoral scenario of nature guided silence resonating, I felt astounding solace. This was my sanctuary away from that that heavy, dark terror of weightlessness called incurable fear. This ugly thing that clung to me like a funk or like the muggy, dank, late July air tinged with pollution (that all cities have) that seemed to want to strangle me whenever I ventured out.

The only time the bullfrog ran for cover was when I pursued my other meditative activity, which ironically was not quiet at all. When I rolled out and cranked the lawnmower my amphibian friend usually got scarce. I found cutting the grass had become an act of meditation for me after a while. The loud drone of the motor and the repetitious movement seemingly zoned me out to another dimension. It was a time when no one crowded me with demands or seeking me with troubling, anxious words. Irreconcilable fears, either mine or others, left my mind's center stage. Above all nothing went relentlessly demanding my attention that could drain my non renewable energy reserves. Sadness and fear kill you slowly,day by day, like a vampire who has no fear of the sun.

Mom had surrounded the pool with all sorts of wonderful plant life as well as a bird bath, which went to use frequently by the many winged visitors. One may see a red robin or a sparrow. This all added to the sweet Garden of Eden vibrations back there. Among the flowers were the bright hues of roses, daisies, evergreens and even more. The splendor and wondrous silence seem to crackle with loveliness. No matter how lightless I felt this scenery lifted me up out of the muddy ditch so to speak.

I remember being bummed out when it rained and I couldn't get out into my "sanctuary". It felt so strange and at odds considering my location. Whenever you were back there you would never guess that all this was in the big bad city of Washington D.C. where peaceful surroundings was no guarantee. I did a lot of praying and pleading with God there. I was desperately and emotionally disheveled asking him disarmingly directly, "Why my Momma? Why NOW?" I tried to name deals. You name it and I put it on the proverbial table for the divine force to ponder.

Eventually love, that all encompassing positive universal force, answered my prayers during the moments of more anxious silence. Why? I don't know. Then again, perhaps, it was a matter of spiritual progression to awareness. There is a quote by Rumi "There is a voice that doesn't use words...listen" Was I opening up so that I could hear the voice that had always been speaking to me? Either way, that still quiet voice that each of us hear with our inner ear and most of the time miss out on hearing because we're moving too damn fast out or stubbornly slow in the direction called avoidance. These follies of choice cause us to get out of touch with peace, and the beautiful, love energy that surrounds us constantly. One can do it so long and so well this becomes your natural state. You become deaf to that inner spiritual ear and blind to the energy. What is harnessed is the cannibalizing energy that self fulfills itself, that is till the cosmic plan throws a wild frightening beast in your path.

It was here in these quiet hours that I regained my connection with that wondrous power. It's something that I'd grown up with, but I had fool heartedly (and unintentionally like many of us) had drifted away from after I'd left home and gone my own difficult path. It's funny how we lose our connection to that quiet voice of spirit that we're so sweetly in tune with as children, but lose touch with as we 'grow up and go out to get beat up by life. We spend the rest of our lives trying to get back to that state of bliss when life felt weightless and sure.

In fact, growing up is much like a clean sheet of paper that gets written on, balled up and set on fire, as one gets hurled through the furious blinding blaze of time. That clean sheet is forever gone or at least not the same. Though one superficially gains independence, growing up makes you trade away that unspoiled state of childhood innocence. This innocence often holds a direct magical approach to understanding life. This childhood essence tends to fade all too quickly inside a tumultuous, ambiguous haze. When you're older experiencing those years farther along, one gains a sharper perspective on what those far away childhood years really involved. I always felt growing up in your mind involves a process, that is even as a man a person matures. Taking care of mom was pushing my very essence into a new state of being. By coming home and diving headfirst into the cold hard facts of unstoppable illness was becoming the be all zenith of my life's challenges.

“Mom, what are you trying to do in there? “ I knew something was not right.

Oh, nothing" she said, surprised that I knew that she was up to something. I had told her that she could just call for me whenever she needed anything because of the monitor next to her bed, but I guess the medications took their effect on her memory as well. She was so stubborn about the whole 'staying in bed rule'. There was just no way was that she going to just lay there and not get up and do what she wanted!!

At first, she made it really hard. We didn't want to 'restrain her, as we do at work with patients who are so far under that the pull out the very lines and tubes that are keeping them alive. But it scared and freaked me out to run into her room and find her sprawled out on the floor looking up at me sheepishly and ever so calm after a tumble out of bed. "What happened momma? Are you alright? "Oh I was just going to get myself a sandwich and I fell".

It was no big deal that she had fallen, at least to her. She's lucky she didn't seriously break anything complicating matters worse. At this point, she had already had two hip replacements. It must have been kind of fun for her in a way, a revenge of sorts perhaps for all those times that I surely raised her blood pressure thru the roof or caused her a gray hair or two... and the recurring theme in my mind seemed to be how much this life is a circle in many ways. Be it the daily grind of each day, or the sum of years lived, with the child becoming the caregiver at the end of another. It struck me as to how important it was that momma had raised me with the ideals that she had, surely I would not have been prepared to deal with all that this challenge presented if not for the start her teachings on life had given me.

Just a few years before I had returned home to her doorstep sick as a dog looking gaunt as some skin thrown over some bones due to losing 45 pounds! Over the last two grueling, tiresome years, this worn out living was explicitly due to a mean rough rock & roll life that seemed to be living me. I was never getting enough sleep or proper food. I spent a few day's I knew that I was gravely ill when in the emergency room I barely missed shitting on myself as I was unable to get up out of bed!

The good doctors diagnosed me with a bad case of pneumonia. I was spitting out a good deal of blood I had what they call a huge “Pneumothorax,” which is basically a hole in the lung. Since I worked at Piedmont Hospital, it was easy to get an X-Ray. The tech that did my chest x-ray gasped when he saw the results. The film showed a very large hole in my lungs. I cried, I had never been this kind of bad off. So far from home or any family.

Diagnosed, the doctors sent me sailing home to recuperate, yet by this time I had no home to go back to. My wife had returned to Brasil because I was on the road constantly. Her name was Shawny, She moved back to San Paulo, I was madly in love with Shawny, yet I was playing three weeks out of the month more or less with the band FULLSTOP out of James Madison University (Just imagine FUNKREGGAERAPROCKCRUNCH), but we were only playing weekends when I met here. That's what helped bring on our breakup I can still see how sad she looked she

would drop me off at the bus I knew it hurt her a lot.

I lay in a band mate's apartment for a few surreal days, sharing a room with his pet iguana. Days later I returned to work at Piedmont Hospital where I pushed myself through some hard earned shifts to raise money to get home. I pulled in a solid overworked week in what seemed like a solid state of delirium to make the cash to get back home.

The apartment I stayed in belonged to Chris and Steve He was the rapper from the band but he had been pushed out as changes came to the music direction. They had an apartment right on the circle in Little Five Points near where the old music venue The Point used to be (now a damn clothing store). Not only was Little Five Points Pizza nearby for some greasy relief hunger but also a police station. You'd feel safe yet watched all the time which made a strange mental combination. Steve was an eccentric when it came to pets. He kept a trippy looking lizard instead of a dog or cat. I recall vividly that crazy iguana staring me down while I was sick waking in and out of feverish cold chill sleep, it was like a strange demented movie.

I was stubbornly set to leave Atlanta in my dour, roughed up state. No one with any good sense was around to talk any sense into me taking such a long trip! On the good side, my condition had improved a little bit, which secured my false sense of confidence. I drove 12 hours from Atlanta to D.C. coughing, so hard sometimes that I had to pull over a few times to actually spit up blood. It wasn't just specks of blood! It was all blood which freaked me out, since I had seen folks go through the same painful shit and knew this was not a favorable situation. It was one of those trips I knew I had no choice but to make! It seriously crossed my mind that this could be the untimely end. It's weird it was just some kind of inner survivor instinct. I remember pulling over a lot to rest and once even to buy cold meds. This was not anyway fun dragging into a gas station you are sicker than hell. I recall this lady at one station looking at me with such pity. I must have been a fucking wreck, disheveled and delirious.

Momma welcomed me home with her usual quiet smile and day by day nursed me back to health, physically, as well as mentally, and spiritually And all this coming despite my not having spoken to her for 3 yrs. after my folks divorced. She never mentioned the past; she just showered me with love as if to wash away the darkness and pain of those wasted years.

LOVE HAS THAT POWER! It truly is supernatural power! I imagined that it must hurt a great deal to raise kids and have them turn away when you need them, but she like all parents I think could forgive even this. This being the case it made me feel all the better for making the decision to come home to be with her. since I had been the one who had been away from home for so many years it seemed fitting and poetic that I should be the one to come back to care for her. She'd ask me why I did this a lot when I first got home.

My response was "Hey, you're my mom, how could I not come back and take care of you, after all you gave me the life I have! Simply, I'm all that I am only because of you. It seems simple enough, the only right thing to do. "

I guess it would have been easy to tuck her away into a nursing home, perhaps that's what would

have happened to her had it not been so terribly expensive to do so, but the outcome for each of us that truly got involved in taking care of mom would have been supremely lacking. I would have missed out on the most powerful experience of my lifetime! There is something about giving; especially giving of yourself that blesses THE ONE WHO GIVES! Life's blessings that I have seen have come my way numerous and varied. These gifts have flowed into my life like a beautiful unseen breeze, always at just the perfect time. Surely my life would not have filled with such wonderful blessings otherwise.

It dawned on me the other day that hey, I'm blessed to have this story to tell as well, which I wouldn't have if not for going thru it all with mom. As here in the impenetrable darkness as well the illuminating light, I have been blessed. The fires that I had walked into had molded me into a new man. I felt as a real man that was blissfully reconnecting to the divine voice as well as his own. It was a slow process that seemed obscure at the time but, it was beautiful purging melding into healing.

Chapter 9

When we were kids, my brother Jimmy and I were what brothers were supposed to be like. We spent all of our time together, rough housing, playing doing all those wonderful, goofy things boys do as children. I looked up to him of course, as he was two years my senior. He taught me how to throw a ball, climb a tree, and I copied him at every turn I could. I was emulating him right up through my teens, though I was never quite the ladies man that he was (still can't pull that one off to this day!!). He had the gift of gab and was drunk on 'I'm good at everything naturally and I know it' talent! Though it may sound a cliché it rings true that he was the big man on campus at our high school, Takoma Academy. Jimmy was MVP of the basketball team two years in a row. He even made the All-City All Star Squad as a senior!

He was a hard act to follow, especially since it always seemed I stood dead center frustratingly so in his sprawling shadowing achievements. This did not help my teenage years at all! I still recall his parting words on my first day of school as he dropped me off in front of the school. The ride was intense with Kool and the Gang pumping loud thru the stereo while his AFRO was at Maximum Puff! I was thinking to myself how cool it was of him to take the time to drop me off, but as he pulled up to the school, he leaned over, tapped me on the shoulder and said with cock sure toughness, "Don't mess up my reputation." His voice was one of pure confidence delivering a hard line warning. So it's not as if there was pressure or anything (ha-ha), yet brothers giving each other a hard time in good spirit is how it's supposed to go down. There was love between us, even unspoken as it was. We watched out for each other.

When I look back to those days I can't help feel some heavy frustration. Macho America where a man from any age can't express his emotions like he should! This macho attitude was worse back then. There is something we'll call that 'invisible bond' between brothers that you grow up

thinking will ever break when you're ruff' housing together all those years, that is until one of your parents dies.

A death in the family, especially where a slow progressing terminal illness is involved, can make one feel like the very sky is raining down knives. Trouble and misery just keeps reinventing itself through a thousand and one questions. What is it about such an awful event that can tear apart families, brothers, sisters off the cuff? Is it the stress of losing one of the pillars of your shared existence? How does this loss knock a lifetime of love and friendship so totally out of whack?? Until you find yourselves fighting over meaningless material things as if they held the key to eternal life.

Its one of those scenarios that you hear about, but are unable to comprehend until you live the whole mess out. Having seen my uncles and aunts go at it as a child when my mom's dad died was my 1st glimpse at the massive ugly energy that wells up like a flood of darkness and descends upon the family, drowning all who are within reach of it.

A parent's death sure messes up family. There's the jealousy that creeps into the picture, that is when one or more siblings think that the other is favored for some reason. This happens either because one sibling receives more material goods as a result of the will or just a little lingering jealousy from childhood days long past rears it's ugly head out of the dreariness. It could be any other silly little thing chalked up to another side effect of too much 'pain on the brain.' Death is a solar eclipse

It's just NUTTY how people will fight over stupid things that will burn down or break a day. Perhaps subconsciously we are trying to take a piece of them with us. But we break into pieces relationships that had lasted a lifetime! The unbelievable drain of watching mom die made all three of us kids into different people that summer, kind of like that movie where the whole town is replaced by 'identical' aliens, except that things between us have never been the same since.

This is a crucial time for family members, your frame of mind can get so very bent out of shape because of the pain you are each struggling with, emotions can take the wheel, and before you know it you've done or said something that YOU CAN'T TAKE BACK!! I've heard of situations where one sibling actually kills another! Such an awful maniacal tragic situation could have easily been the case for me as I own a legendary temper within my family. Between lurking demons and all of the swelling anger and flood like emotional stress flowing thru us back then, it certainly was a hairy time.

Many situations come to mind. There was one occasion when I actually grabbed my sister by the throat, and began choking her because she snuck out of the garage door on a Saturday nite when I was supposed to have a nite off from caring for mom. Little did I know that she was dealing with her own sad situation, as her marriage was about to collapse she would tell me years later. Then there was the time that when I told my brother in no uncertain terms that, "if you cause dad to have a heart attack by continuing to disrespect him and causing him even more stress I'll drive up to D.C. and shoot you with a smile." Sadly, I knew that I meant it! This was a sad progressive giant leap as our only conflicts before mom's slow decline were in hindsight petty

childhood scuffling.

These were the lowdown, shameful low points. I was bent way, way out of shape by far too much negative thought coupled with uncontrollable dark emotion. In retrospect, this was the time for lots of love and support, and counseling. Ironically, this was something I thought that I could do without since I was a former theology major and all that. Besides I was the hero, the kid who'd come home to take care of mom. Surely, I would have nothing but smooth times from here on out. DUH! What a tremendous mistake! Had I gotten some kind of help back then, it would have CHANGED THE COURSE OF MY LIFE!

Instead I stumbled, and struggled thru the next 10 years dogged by difficulties. I lost my job due to my apathy about everything in life and eventually my relationship with Carly. She had no idea how to deal with my ever growing temper and the angry tirades that were always just around each corner. Things slid away slowly, dissipating and unraveling to the mean hollowness of nothing painfully year by year. Things in my life spiraled out of control slowly, just because I didn't know how to truly effectively to deal with unruly overwhelming pain. I did the best that I knew how with fragile inner resources. Back home Carly, being a lot younger than I, had never experienced death. Surprisingly, not even her mom had! Its impossible to explain to someone all of the anger, that peculiar jabbing jagged frustration of not being able to have a conversation with someone who was "just with you" a short time ago. This is a sense of loss that you can't put into remotely the right words because language cannot process the overwhelming experience and it's immense catastrophic reality. It's like hearing an echo of an echo. You can never quite put your finger on it. It's even harder if you carry it around inside day after day, year by year. Such unresolved conflicting emotions does a hit job chipping away your very happiness and your soul's essence. It's similar to fruit that was once sweet and ripe. What goes ripe naturally goes bad next. You become sour and absolutely bitter inside.

So, they could only look at me, not having a clue as to what I was going thru and the emotional depth and weight of it all. They were watching a suffering animal, where one can't tell if it's hurt and if then how badly. The death of such an important loved one has to be a 1st hand experience in order to truly grasp it. I can't say it enough. I could hardly talk about it without crying for a long while. Every sad thing you see and hear will move you to tears, FOR YEARS!!

I can recall being so mad sometimes, feeling cheated 'cause mom wasn't around, especially watching Carly and her mom as they had such a sweet, happy relationship, something I never had with my mom, and would never know. When I compared our two situations, it was downright backwards. Carly and her mom were not close in the early years, yet her mom made sure to make that up in the unfolding middle ground that had continued successful to the present. I was close to my mom in the early days, yet when I was older we grew steadily apart as she had to work so much to provide support. It made me more than a little envious. I seethed with anger so many times this feeling became just another 'brick in the wall' of things that began to push us apart.

I began to try to 'self-medicate' with more booze and drugs than I can remember. I was smoking ridiculous amounts of herb while popping tons of ephedrine (gas station trucker speed). Bourbon

was my liquor of choice. These escapes only numb you, waste your cash as they blur those painful thoughts and memories. Self medicating won't stop them or elevate you above them. They're just "expensive temporary band-aids for your mind." In a sense, they make things worse by distracting those painful memories. Believe me; they come back with a knock you down vengeance!

I found it funny and absurdly hilarious, as I slowly woke up from my binge years. I looked around at the folks around in my so-called excuse for a life and I realized that I had somehow surrounded myself with people just as hurt as I was. This is actually very common. You know the old saying that goes 'birds of a feather stick together.' Each person seemed broken and lonely in their own way. Its like we collectively made up 'the village of broken people' and everyone is the mayor! Though beaten with an ugly stick, hope never completely disappeared. Each of us was waiting for something or someone to free us from our merry-go-round of party life.

So much of this can be avoided! Maybe, I was simply too proud to get some kind of help. I mean help from any source be it preacher, shrink or even just a support group of people who have all felt this great loss. One needs a safe harbor so to speak. One needs a sanctuary from life's turbulent everyday nonsense. You need a haven where you can work through one's smashed up sense of self and all the darkness you feel. One needs a place to ask questions you'll never get answers to, as well as the ones you never got to ask before, those that have been churning deep inside! One thing is for sure, if you were to drown someone in love's deep waters, healing must soon follow! It's only a matter of how long it takes.

Small pieces of redemption seem to always just suddenly appear. When I was home for Fathers Day a few weekends ago, my sister Angie and I went out for dinner. Though the setting was your typical generic chain restaurant, the experience was richly rewarding. Dinner gave us valuable overdue time to catch up. She told me all about my nieces, Brittany, 16, and Brianna, 10. They're fast becoming tall, beautiful young ladies. She filled me in on the happenings and (good!) drama within the family that I'd missed out on. This was one of the major costs of living so far away from everyone else. I was way out of the loop!

It was also cool to sit right across from my baby sister and see the beautiful woman that she'd become over the years. She had always been the smartest of the three of us. She was not only book smart, but a smart mouth and quick witted mind. She still had plenty of struggles as she had to raise two daughters pretty much on her own. This cut short her own chance to further her education? All that seems beside the point when one sees how amazingly successful well adjusted she raised those two girls simultaneously. Angie knows the all empowering secret art to nurture. That simple dinner brought us closer together to this day. We talk more now than we ever have. Unfortunately, my brother is a different story. I still have little to no contact with my brother to this day.....8 years later.....

CHAPTER 10

Mom what are you trying to do in there? 'oh, nothing' she said, sounding surprised that I had gotten wind of her shenanigans. I had told her repeatedly that all

she had to do was ask..and like a Genie I would pop up and get whatever she needed.. Because of the monitor we had installed next to her bed I could hear her every move. She was so stubborn about the whole thing ! She wanted to do for herself! She hated the idea of not being able to get up and get what she wanted. After all she had always been self sufficient as the oldest child , now her world had been reduced to the four corners of her bed. We did not want to restrain her like we did patients at the hospital who were so out of it due to their medications that they would thrash about and pull their lines and tubes which were keeping them alive. But it scared and freaked me out to run into her room and find her sprawled out on the floor looking up at me sheepishly and ever so calmly after a tumble out of bed. What happened momma? Are you alright? “ oh I was just going to get myself a sandwich and I fell” It was no big deal to her that she had fallen, it must have been fun for her in a way, a revenge of sorts for all the times that I surely raised her blood pressure through the roof or caused her a gray hair or two! the recurring theme in my mind seemed to be how much of this life is a circle in many ways. Be it the daily grind of each day, or the sum of many years lived, with the child becoming the caregiver at the other end of the rainbow of life. It struck me how important it was that momma had raised me with the ideals that she had. Surely I would not have been prepared to deal with all that this challenge presented if not for the start that her teachings on life had given me. Also all of those hours of patient care instruction had come to bear fruit in my being able to care for her like a true pro! One really heavy time that sticks out in my mind was the 1st time that I had to bath her. It would not be the 1st time I had bathed another adult, I'd done that as a part of my profession. But when its your own mother its a lot weirder Even as a man in his 30's I still had vivid memories of mom bathing 'me'. And here 30 years later I was about to return the favor. So it was quite a mind trip as I wheeled her into the bathroom. It was done up in black and pink and luckily was large enough for a small car. I imagined that she had had it done this way for reasons of style, but the size and lay out came in really handy now! 'You should just wait until aunt Emily comes this evening so you will have help' she said to me questioning whether or not I was up to the task at hand. I assumed she was also having visions of ending up on the floor with me underneath her. Nonsense Momma, I've been moving people bigger than you for years at work. I tried to sound as confident as possible, more for her peace of mind than anything. I had learned how to pick people up out of wheelchairs years ago at a part time job I had briefly in high school. Caring for a wealthy man who had MS who lived in the Watergate Building.. I had no clue just how valuable that experience would be! Mom had picked up a little weight because of being bedridden for so long. But I knew she was still in my lifting range. I bent over slowly, bracing my knee against hers, while reaching underneath her arms and cupping my hands behind her back so I could handle the weight of her entire body. After a few minutes of patient coaxing Momma was ready to trust me and wrapped her hands around my neck while letting out a loud breath. I counted to 3 and slowly lifted momma up out of the wheelchair. she was heavier than I had thought! But there was no way I was gonna drop her I gathered myself, pulled her up and then swung her around into the shower chair in one swift movement. She landed with a swoosh and chuckled softly 'you sure do have a way with the ladies boy', I laughed I was knocked out 'cuz I never knew that mom had such a keen sense of humor. (funny the things you don't realize about your folks when you are growing up!) once in the chair she was able to manage pretty well on her own and as we proceeded with the bath. My mind drifted back to a night in the steamy low - country of South Carolina , we were at grandma's and momma was doing her

best to console a screaming little boy who had gotten soap in his eyes. It burned like crazy, I recall the distinct 'Ivory fresh' smell lingering for a long time afterwards in my nostrils, making that traumatic event all the more memorable. I also recall just how calmly she spoke to me. Whatever she said, it eased my frantic mind, as children its 'what's being said that touches us, its the vibe, the love or anger that we hear, something in her voice let me know that everything would be alright! I slowly eased off the TEAR MACHINE and looked up to see her smiling warmly down at me. Even as a child, I knew at that moment what it was to be surrounded by love! I knew with my limited understanding that this woman loved me TOTALLY, that she was there for me always! As long as she was in my life, there was nothing to fear...All I had to do was bring up that sad face and those salty but magically powerful tears and boom she was there like the U S ARMY! Knowing that you are so incredibly loved in this way is a wonderful knowledge that stay with us always...It's such a simple beautiful cycle, ..the most important of all! If love is given to the child at the beginning of life, so the same will be given to the giver when the roles are reversed, a PERFECT CIRCLE OF LOVE. If you look around.....its easy to see who was loved, and who was not....the lack of love seems to leave a life long scar on us! We are somehow incomplete without the steady diet of love in childhood. lacking beautiful balance that love brings to our souls. From then on we used our 'shower time' to talk about all kinds of things. It was fun to tell her stories of my travels, the crazy people I met, the captivating things I had seen. I had spent the bulk of my adult life away from her, she knew little of who I really was. It was as if I had been away at war...or on some other planet for the last 10 years... then again there were questions I wished she would never ask such as 'where were my brother and sister, and why didn't they come by? Questions I had no answer for! I did my best to make excuses for a while, but she knew better. We always think we can fool old people and those who are ill, but their sense of 'knowing is in reality much keener than ours. They sit and listen to the stories we tell them, but they know the truth full well...It's just a fact of our society our times, that people turn away from their parents as they age, all too busy to care for them or even spend time with the very ones that gave them life. We shuttle them off to nursing homes, out of sight and out of mind so that we can get along with our comfortable little lives! In our culture this is the rule of thumb! So in sad reality my siblings were just like most kids of this generation, running from the hard fact of their own mortality perhaps...once again I was blessed again by my work experience which had awakened me to the blessings of spending time with people who have seen so much of life. They are truly a wellspring of wisdom! I was blessed in each moment in their presence. the amount of love and grace that you can absorb is astounding! Simple words,,timeless energy! ...Years before I had driven home coughing up blood. After having contracted a bad case of pneumonia while I was living the hard life of a rising Rock and Roll musician. All the long nights of driving, sleeping on cold hard floors, or in the back of a van as it hurtled through the dark cold.. Day's of fast food breakfast's and dinners of gas station fare had finally caught up with me. I had returned home sick as a dog having lost 45 lbs.,...I knew that I was gravely ill when I was so sick I could not get myself up out of the bed and pooped on myself...a definite low point....they diagnosed me with a serious case of pneumonia and sent me home, which was significant since I no longer had a home, my wife had returned to Brazil for a while since I was on the road constantly...I lay healing up in an old band mates apt. for a few days to get well. then I pushed myself enough days to make enough money to drive home the 12 hours from Atlanta to Washington D.C, coughing up blood the whole way! It was a trip

I knew I had no choice but to make, I had no where else to go...I'll never forget the relief I felt as Momma welcomed me home with her usual quiet smile...day by day she nursed me back to health mentally physically and spiritually with warm meals and lots of TLC. And all of this despite me never having spoke to her for 3 years after she and dad had divorced... she never mentioned the past., she just showered me with love as if to wash away the darkness and pain of those wasted years. Love has that power! I imagined it must hurt quite a bit to raise kids and then just have then turn their backs on you when you need them! But she, like all parents could forgive even this! This made me feel all the better about my choice to come home and care for her now,she had done so much for me in every chapter of my life! There was no way I COULD NOT COME BACK...she had given me the very life I have, all that I am was because of her. It seems simple enough like the only thing to do. It would have be easy for us to tuck her away in a nursing home. But luckily for her , that was a terribly expensive option, so it was decided that she would come home. Looking back I see now how I would have missed out on this very heavy but very special once in a life time experience, without a doubt the most powerful of my lifetime! There is something about giving that blesses the giver. The cosmic goodness that I have seen flowing into my life since this is no accident! Love will repay you times ten if you stay true to its path. Blessings flow into my life like an unseen breeze unannounced on their on time. Without this wondrous experience I would not have this wonderful story to share...

CHAPTER 11

When we were kids, my big brother Jimmy and I were just like other brothers I guess. We spent all of our time together, rough housing, playing football, dong all the wonderfully goofy thing boys do as children. I looked up to him of course, he being two years my senior. He taught me how to throw a ball tie a tie, climb trees, what have you I copied him at every turn, emulating him right up to my teens. Though I was never quite the ladies man that he was, (I can't pull that off to this day!) He had the gift of gab like my dad. He was the big man on campus at our high school. MVP 3 years in a row! He even made all-city third team as a senior. He was a hard act to follow. I still recall his parting words on my 1st day of high school as he dropped me off in front of the school, Kool and The Gang was blasting from his stereo, his Afro at "Maximum Puff" I was thinking 'Wow, how cool of him to drop me off like this. the Lime Green Plymouth Duster slowed to a halt and he leaned over, tapped me on the shoulder, I looked at him expecting sweet brotherly advice or perhaps some awesome secrets about chicks..."Don't mess up my reputation he said and then motioned towards the door.... so its not like there was any pressure... I guess it was his way of showing love for me. but there was love between us unspoken in our macho culture. there is something of an invisible bond you grow up thinking will never be broken. That is until one of your parents dies. I guess its the stress of you all losing one of the pillars of your shared existence together, at the same time. this is unlike any other life experience you will have. Its powerful enough to totally destroy a lifetime of love between brothers. Leaving angry stressed and so out of whack that you find yourselves fighting over meaningless material possessions as if they held the key to eternal life. Having seen my Uncles and Aunts go through this as a child when my mom's Dad died was my first glimpse of the massive ugly energy that wells up like a tsunami of darkness swallowing the family drowning all who are within reach ..It's nutty how people fight

over stupid things that will burn or break one day Perhaps subconsciously we are trying to take a piece of them with us always But we break into pieces relationships that have been life long! The unbelievable drain of watching mom die made all three of kids into different people that summer. Kind of like a horror movie in which the townspeople all replaced by identical aliens, except that things have never been the same between my brother and I. this is a crucial time for family members, your frame of mind can get so very bent out of shape simply because of the pain you are dealing with. Emotions can take the wheel and before you know it you've done or said something that you can't take back. I've heard of situations where one sibling actually kills another. Such could have easily been the case with me. I have a legendary temper within my family. Between this lurking demon and all of the pent anger and stress it was a hairy time. there was one occasion when I actually grabbed my sister by the throat and began to choke her because she had snuck out the house and left me to care for mom on a Saturday nite that I was supposed to have 'off' to my self. The anger just took me over and before I knew it I had her pinned against the wall! another time that comes to mind was after mom's passing my brother was being a jerk to my dad, which was causing him a lot of stress and health problems which frightened me knowing that he was in any kind of health risk. I told my brother to his face that if he continued to disrespect dad I would drive up to D. C. and 'shoot him with a smile on my face'... which sadly I meant with all of my being! these were two of my low points, when my mind was twisted by my anger into sad blindness. In retrospect this was the time for lots of love and support, when we needed to be loving each other. But the overwhelming negative thought, the crushing weight of the pain of the situation seem to cripple common sense. I really thought I was so strong, with me being a theology major at one time. I lived with the illusion that I was OK and in control, when I was anything but! Besides I was the hero, the kid who had come home to take care of his mom! Surely I could handle anything. Nothing ahead but but smooth times. Duh! How wrong I was Had I gotten some help, some counseling, it would have changed the course of my life! Leading me to deal with all this dark, heaviness in healthier more positive ways. But, instead I slipped slowly in the numbing haze of mountains of cocaine, which I washed down with long tall glasses of Bourbon and ginger ale. It was a scene out of a frigging' movie...I walk into the bar, I'm friend's with everybody from the owners to the bartender's to the Dj's to the Door guys whom I would later sub for when they needed a day off. I spent countless blurry nights in the 'Village (which was a strip of bars up the road from my home. I Called it the village of Broken people, because that's mostly what I saw there once I became one of them. Sad shattered people. Running, trying to recover from the ugly disfiguring blows that life had slammed them with. the kind of blows that leave a scar on the inside. Where it sits inside you and burns, slowly at first like a small forest fire. Escalating little by little until the urge to 'Drown the pain leads you to do just that. TRY and drown the pain in liquor, drugs sex anything that will seemingly make the darkness go away! I lost my job due to apathy My relationship with Carly began to crumble, as I became an unhappy shell of the guy I once was. I was locked inside my own Little world. Stoned and sad! Unable to communicate the depth of what I was feeling I closed myself off from everyone. Even Carly. She did all she could to help me heal and find my way. But she had not tasted death at that early point in her life. So she had no clue as to how to reach inside the dark room my mind had become. My temper was getting worse by the week. things slide away between us slowly and painfully year by year, my entire life spiraled down until I moved out of the lovely home we had purchased together, and

found myself living on an beat up old futon in a 11 X 13 room at a good friends house.. By simply not knowing how to deal with all that I was feeling in a positive way I became a different person. One she could no longer live with. It's impossible to explain to some one , the anger, the frustration of all of a sudden not being able to have a simple conversation with the most important person in your life. Who was there not too long ago. Its a sense of loss you just can't put into words! You can't put your finger on it. You just carry it around inside you day after day, year after year until it eats away your soul. And you are an angry, sour bitter fool who thinks that it's the world that's changing when its you! So Carly could only watch as I twisted and shriveled into a dark sad shadow of myself .. Its one of those experiences you have to really live to grasp for real. For a while everything moved me to tears. I could barely talk about the whole experience for a long while. I was like a wounded animal, hurting but unable to communicate its pain. I remember being so incredibly angry, feeling cheated because my mom was gone 'too soon;.Especially watching Carly with her mom. They had such a warm close wonderfully happy relationship that I had never had time to develop with my mom and would now never know.It made me envious leaving me quietly seething with anger. this slowly became yet another 'brick in the wall' that was pushing us apart. I began to self medicate trying to heal my pain filled mind. No matter how much you soak yourself in booze and drugs it only blurs the ugliness. Expensive temporary Band aids for your mind! that's all they are. Leaving you with lots of wasted time and a lot less money! As I slowly began to awaken from my 'Binge years' I saw how in running with the party crowd, I had in reality surrounded myself with people just as hurt as I was. each slumped and broken in his or her own way I called it the "Village of broken People". Each of us waiting for something or someone to lift us off of the merry-go-round of empty party life. I was simply too proud to speak to some one be it a preacher, psychiatrist or anyone....just a friend. the death of your mom is not the easiest thing to work into conversation ,but you can't hold it inside. That's what destroys you! Trying to keep inside that which should be let free. I found myself feeling quite alone with my pain. When this was a time I needed to be drowning myself in love. As the years have passed my sister and I have drawn much closer which has been beautiful to watch her grow and mature into strong good mother of two girls that she raised single handed. Sadly my brother and I have no contact after 14 years.

CHAPTER 12

I spent many a day and night praying, begging and pleading with god to spare my mom and take this sickness away so I could have more time with her. I've never prayed as hard for something in my life! It began when I first became aware that she was sick and continued right up until my dad called me to let me know that she had passed. Even as I would watch her laying there labouring for each breath. I kept praying knowing in my heart that a miracle could happen. Seeing it on my heart. Knowing that god would make an exception and heal my sweet momma! When you have had prayers answered in the past . You 'know the power of god! So you know that anything is possible. Then on the other side of my brain there was the health care veteran on 11years who knew the reality that we all will take a 'dirt nap' at some point in time. Its just a natural fact of life. But when it's your mom, all rational thinking will fall away. You will do anything to keep her from death! Lot's of nights I was so caught up in praying that I would pass out , weak from crying. and begging with all of my might that god

would take this horrible blackest of realities away. More than once I woke up on my knees next to my bed haven fallen asleep as well. Then there were times when my faith would waver. then I would yell at the top of my voice ,lashing out at god and the world for allowing this to happen. Why, why, why? Why 'my' mom How could someone who had given so much as a loving career nurse end up suffering like this? No answers ever came. what did come was the wisdom to ' see as she saw' . through the eyes of acceptance. I began to come to grips with this cold reality and started to pray for less suffering as she progressed through this final stage of her life.. Watching her shudder in such body pain...I hurt for her. Between that and her increased problems breathing it became harder and harder to watch her go through this. At times like these your soul cries out just for some blanket of goodness to fall over the whole mess, and just cover it up! In retrospect I see how this experience taught me all about the phases of life, birth, living and our eventual death. Chapters of the book of our lives. Somewhere in the murky heat of that summer, I came upon a 'cosmic body of water.' swimming through those dark days of prayer, pain and unimaginable experience, I became a man. Somehow its the process of living with hard realities that transforms you. Now with the eyes of understanding I could step back and see how it had all worked out as beautifully as it could , with myself the one child who had been away for so many years being given the opportunity to come home and spend these last important months with momma! To able to be there and know for sure that she was given the best and most loving care possible. By having a family member care for her in her own home during this sickness she at least had more peace of mind and dignity in her last days. This is no small thing. I've seen the opposite scenario for people who spent their last days in a place much colder, sadder than home...in a lonely hospital bed taken for granted and forgotten at the end of a long hallway.

CHAPTER 13

I have a picture on my desk. It's mom holding me in her lap smiling, looking tired, peaceful and happy. I was less than a few days old according to the date on the picture. The clock behind here says 9:05. What's so funny is that I'm waving or at least I my Right hand is up. Something I never noticed till today' I also have a full head of hair, looking so tiny in her arms. I have wondered for years, what was going through her mind at that moment. Having giving birth to her second son, two years and 14 days behind my brother Jimmy. I was born around 3:30 in the morning. I am sure they kept us there at the hospital for a few days. So this may have bee my 1st morning home. With all that's happened in the 46 years since this picture was taken. It holds infinitely more meaning to me now. As I look at her face I see the joyful smile of a Young mother who had no idea of all the challenges of motherhood that awaited her in the years yet to unfold. I can't help but wonder. Would she have done it , if she knew what was coming? I only know that she raised me with tender but firm love. Investing her life in mine. That with time I would grow up and bloom like a flower into a wonderful person. Was I worth it ? I i have no answers for that I never go to ask her those questions. Now I can only live my life each day in a way that will make her proud as she looks down on me. To let my life be a living memorial to her, in everything I say and do. As I watch her lay there barely breathing, fighting to stay alive. I thought about all the sacrifices that parent make once they pop us into existence . They could have chosen another path besides having me. Or they could have given

me up for adoption which would have impacted my life in a zillion different ways. they could have just gone on their way with a totally free life. She chose instead to bring me into this world. To invest her time money her life to feed cloth and most of all educate us. I did not know it until was well into my forties that what she was giving me was a major head start a priceless advantage over children who did not have this loving push. So now many years later, what else is there to do but say THANK YOU with my life.

CHAPTER 14

My last weeks with Momma were especially hard. she had slowly lapsed into the kind of sleep that no one wakes up from, little by little right before my eyes. It was as if she just could not keep her eyes open to talk to me any more. I thought that it was just the drugs at first because it happened so slowly week by week. It had become harder for her to breathe, to the point that the doctors put her on oxygen. I tried to tell myself that this would just be for a little while. She'll snap out of it soon, but as the days anxiously passed I began to realize that this would never happen.

Essentially, she had been in a coma for a few weeks, drifting in and out of consciousness. It seemed to me that she was fighting off this Deep sleep which I could wake her up from only now and then. Little did I know she was slipping away from me....soon I kind of knew what was coming, just not when. Every attempt at self denial as a way of cope stopped working. This waiting period was when the truly unbearable helplessness really began to kick the walls of my mind .

Living with the fear that she may die soon is crazy thing to carry around inside you. As you sit and watch the slow process day by day. Sometimes I found myself staring into the mirror wondering how much I could take! Mom's hospice nurse came with less frequency now, which signaled the beginning of the spiral in my mind. They saw the obvious that I could not see...

I remember it rained that entire week.....long heavy soaking rains that set the tone for what was going on inside momma's house, as well as in my mind. It's as if there was no daytime at all! Most of my time was spent trying to an in home nurse to care for mom, now that my work leave had expired. There was not much I could do for momma at this point. That's what hurt me the most.....damn the helplessness that I felt! I would have made any deal with anyone in the universe to save her life. Now the hardest thing to do in the world was to walk into her room and see her laying there, eyes partially open, breathing with the help of of machine, slipping further away from me by the second...

Another thing that began to set in was the fact that I could no longer communicate with her. Slowly I realized that she wasn't coming back...things would never be the same again! I'd Never hear her little laugh or her calling my name or see her eyes meet mine....these thoughts start to pummel your brain without mercy. My only small comfort was that I had come home to

and spent this invaluable time with Mama. She had been allowed to get to know me as an adult. Hopefully she looked at me and felt that all of her years of investment were well spent. I also had been blessed to get to see her through adult eyes and be there when she needed me the most....which is the most fantastic event in my life! I know if I die tomorrow I've done something wonderfully worthwhile in my lifetime....

I spent most the rest of my time packing my stuff along with the few things I would inherit Such as a really beautiful black pearl side table. and all of the picture albums that contained pictures of Mom as well of us knuckleheads growing up (later split them up with Angie so that Brittany and Brianna could enjoy them later. With much gratitude I Also inherited Mom's old Lincoln Town Car which I drove for many years. Then there were good byes to say to folks. It was especially hard to say goodbye to Dad I had spent a lot of time with him this summer , we found a lot of 'lost time' got to be much closer. I was torn with having to leave because I knew there was a chance I would never see her alive again. On the other side of the coin, I was dying inside, disappearing more day by day. watching her lay there seemingly already gone.

Friday morning finally arrived. All of the arrangements had been made. My bags were packed and loaded into the car, while the rain continued its assault on us I was determined to leave by this time, it had all gotten too heavy for me. People were beginning to fight over who would get of her things already which only added to the stress. My brother was being an ass , whining about everything that came up! My aunts handled everything smoothly and gracefully

I finally said a tearful goodbye to mom's hospice nurse who had been an amazing angel, so loving and empathetic. Meeting her that summer Changed my life! Being inspired and lifted by the energy that came piping through this little woman with the Woody Allen Glasses was a blessing a lesson in how we can be graceful and pass on positive energy in the darkest of darkness. Lastly it was time to say goodbye to momma. This was the hardest goodbye I ever had to say....knowing that this could be the last time I ever see her alive. I held her hand and looked into her face....trying to take in as much of her as I possibly could. I stood there wishing I could somehow freeze these moments and take her with me in memory. Tears crept from my eyes ever so slowly one by one until my eyes were totally clouded out like a windshield without wipers. Finally I knew I could not take any more, so I bent down and kissing her face softly...one last time. I drank in one final glance at her face and ran for the car. The rain poured over the top of mom's car like a thousand sledgehammers ...each one pounding out it's own furious angry rhythm. the timing was such that it felt to me that mother nature was getting in on the emotion of the moment...doing it's best to crush the last of my will as I was frayed, and fatigued, a broken shell of who I used to be. I sat behind the wheel of the long Lincoln in the driveway allowing myself to unravel cried intensely for a few minutes. The noise of my wailing and sobbing drowned out by the patter of the rain. I turned the car through the now familiar streets of Temple Hills MD , glad to leaving the scene of the greatest darkest darkness that I had ever felt! I pointed the big White Lincoln towards the highway slicing my way through the walls of water surrounding me! I eased onto the highway numb but relieved ,

knowing that I no longer had to carry the crazy weight of watching mom die slowly. My mind seemed to unfurl and melt out slowly mile by mile as I got further away. Somewhere along the way the rain began to fade away.

It would be good to get back to Carly and my music. I really wanted with all of my being to get back to 'my life' again, whatever that was, it seemed a million miles away in memory. I had gained a new understanding of just how priceless each moment of each day was now. This was one of the major blessings of understanding I received from my time in D.C. It felt like a weird advantage over people my age, who sleepwalk through their days as if they have for ever. As I drove into sleepy downtown Atlanta that Saturday morning the sights were foggy but familiar. The big ride floated without effort off of route 78 and then into the silence of Carly's carefully manicured complex. She ran out to greet me with her familiar mischievous smile and a long hard hug. It was such an amazing high to see her face again. Just to look down into her eyes was amazing to me like in a dream. It was all new as well she had moved into a new place in the suburbs the change was weird being surrounded by people again after the summer of silence at mom's house. I returned to work that Monday with some nervousness mixed with relief. I had been gone from May till August. I wanted to get back to a normal life. I was warmly welcomed back by the ladies and the Drs. as well.

It felt good to jump back into the swing of things. I had given up my Apt when I went home, but I still had my sweet job. It was just a little more of a drive now. The week went by quickly as I slowly adjusted to the hustle and flow of the workplace again. Suddenly it was Friday. I remember I was stocking the film closet when Patty ultrasound called me to tell me I had a phone call. As I came around the corner the look on her face told me what I feared the most! Dad was on the phone and had news. He seemed calm (most likely trying to be as chill as possible for my benefit.) I recall going totally numb, and wanting to just be alone. I had only been in Atlanta for a week...expecting her to live on in a coma state for months....all I heard was Momma had passed away at 9am this morning and I needed to come back home.....

CHAPTER 15

I don't remember much of what was said after dad told me she had passed away....it was just one long painful, dreamlike blur! Everything I saw, tasted, or felt... was beaten, stomped and stabbed by the ugliness, the hopelessness that engulfed my being. It was like I was being eaten by the anger I felt...as the world laughed and danced all around me! I somehow drove home from work after calling Carly dazed...totally on cruise control. The dogs greeted me at the door as I turned the key and spun the door open. Somehow I know that they could sense my sadness as they buried their heads in my lap as if to comfort me. I sat rubbing their heads just trying to cope with this new reality. Carly got home eventually and we began to make plans for yet another trip to D.C. This time she would be coming with me. This trip would be different...it would be the last one for a while. It was a great comfort to have Carly by my side this time. Her love for me and her spiritual beauty soothed the crazy pain just enough for me to survive going through this experience. Arriving back in D.C. was sullen, Mom's house had a dark stillness about it now. My Aunts were now trying to deal with their own grief all while cleaning the

house and getting it prepared for all the visitors that would be flowing through in the days to come. I felt very much in the way. Not wanting to be there in the first place. The house had lost that lovely sense of peace that I had come to love over the summer. It's something that would never be the same.... The day came when we had to go to the funeral home to view mom's body and finalize the arrangements. I waited outside as long as possibly could, wanting to soak in as much of the sunlight that pierced the trees that I had parked under. I had yet to see mom's body since I had returned home and was in no hurry to do so. The weirdness of knowing that I was about to see mom's body was way more than overwhelming by now. I was really quite petrified at this point. I tried to hold back, but I ran into the men's room and broke down for a few minutes. Something I would become prone to do for the next few years. I am sure that Carly's view of me changed during this time. She surely must have felt that I was less of a man than I had been before all the events of that summer. The change in my temperament was profound. I went from being a sweet happy go-lucky honey bear to a perpetually sad moping giant! Carly tried to make me as happy as she knew how. But the pain was so deep that I could not even bring myself to speak about it! I had to write it down on paper... As I think back now this must be hard for her to digest. Watching her man crumble day by week by month into a sad shadow of the mellow soft spoken gentleman she had fallen in love with a just a few years ago. I'm sure it had to be painful to watch.... My sister Angie pulled her tiny sports car into the parking lot. I greeted her with a hug under a huge old Oak tree. For a second my mind drifted back to a sunny day in mid June in 1968...The day they brought Angie home for the 1st time. Jimmy and I both ran out to the car like it was Christmas day as they pulled up. Mom was sitting in the passenger seat with Angie on her lap wrapped in a bright yellow blanket. We beamed, at the arrival of our baby sister... As we were so eager to play the role of big brother. thirty years later here we were about to make arrangements for mom's funeral. She smiled, looking worn from the stress, the sleepless nights that had taken their toll on each of us this summer. We found our way inside greeting my aunts Rebecca, Emily and Ella Mae who looked the most like my mom. She had the same honey colored pear shaped face. They greeted me warmly. I thought back to that day 3 months ago when they made me feel so dismissed and not a part of the situation at all. Now in the wake of my having come home and taken care of business. I was no longer the 'Family Flake musician'. My stock had become a lot more valuable in their eyes. It gave me a sense of satisfaction knowing that my coming home had given mom a chance to see the finished product of all her years of investment. It was nice to see everyone again, even under these circumstances. We made small talk for a few minutes while waiting for Jimmy to arrive. It felt like we were at a stupid swank nightclub, waiting for our entire party to arrive before we were granted entrance to the viewing room. Finally we were ushered in. It was much darker, a little cooler as I expected. The room had an orange paint job which made it all the more surreal. This sad weird experience was truly a strange reality. Mom's body lay in a gold coffin at the far end of the room. Wow, talk about walking into your worst dream come true...a painful moment from which there is no escape! I pushed away my fear and slowly walked towards her. She seemed so tiny now. Her skin seemed so tight and dark. My eyes traced her body. As much of it as I could see. I felt a sensation I still can't put into words. So overpowering a deeper level of sadness than I had ever felt in my young life. It was the shock of seeing her body laying in this strange room. In a fancy box looking like 'familiar stranger. Much like an old old doll. Lifeless and dried up. It was as if all the life energy had been sucked out by some Cosmic Vampire Leaving behind a cold facsimile of my

mom. All the appearance, the form , but none of the ‘life’ . No laughter . no music in her voice. No life force, no light of spirit , no joy. Suddenly it dawned on me! It was no longer my mom in that coffin, it was just her body. The beauty., the life force, the laughter was somewhere else....

CHAPTER 16

The day that I awoke for mom’s funeral it was strangely bright outside. More so than any day I had seen while I was home that summer. I seemed as if the whole day had a strange glow to it. The sun had that kind of brightness you only see in the movies. Warm but not too hot despite my having to wear a suit and tie. I also noticed that it was strangely silent as I walked around outside mom’s house. None of the constant soundtrack of the city that had been present all summer- car horns sirens, the screams of happy kiddies playing in the yards nearby nothing but stillness. I was simply trying to get away from the crush of relatives and well wishers that were buzzing around inside. There seemed to be people in every square foot of that house. But the most amazing thing I recall about the entire day was the overwhelming feeling of peace that filled me! This felt really strange, I was expecting to be buried by super dark sadness and this was far from that. It was more of a unnerving acceptance and oneness with what was going on. It messed with my head so much that I asked my Aunt Rebecca about it. She smiled up at me, giving me a knowing look over her glasses and said ‘what you feel is blessing , a peace born of your coming home and doing everything you could for your mama in the time you had. From doing the right thing, for giving back the love that she poured into you as she raised you. This blessing is only the first of many that will flow into your life as you continue along life’s path. This is love's way of “kissing you back”. In the old testament of the Bible it says ‘Honor thy father and thy mother, that your days may be long upon the land Exodus 20:12. It says the exact same thing in the holy books of every religion . This law of love’s return seems to be universal. Just like my dad had said when I came home to care for mom, ‘son you will be blessed exponentially because of what you done’. It was great to have him keep repeating this mantra all summer. It made the crazy dark times that I swam through feel less desperate and hopeless. This blessing is something that has continued to wrap itself around my life through the years, right up to this moment sixteen years later. I have lived to see that all of this is powerfully true. Love’s blessing for me, like some kind of cosmic insurance policy always protecting, guiding, directing. I Can't explain it but know that it’s very real. Back inside mom’s house people were milling around preparing for the funeral. Uncle Jimmy my mom’s oldest brother was trying to pick out a tie in the back den. A gaggle of of laughing children playfully chased each other room to room. totally unaware of the heavy sorrow of the occasion that had brought them here today. How I envied their innocence. where had all the time gone gone since I was in their shoes? Just existing in the thoughts of the moment without a care. Why must it be ,that we lose this as we grow older? Meanwhile a trio of Aunts Emily, Rebecca, and Ella Mae were getting busy in the kitchen. The smells were wonderful as they slowly teased my nose, but painfully familiar. The dishes were all things mom fixed in our childhood. The sweet aroma of cornbread, the singular smell of crispy fried chicken, macaroni and cheese and sweet potatoes commanded the air. For a minute , I could see moma in the kitchen, smiling down at

me as a child. I for some reason had a stark memory of how at ease while cooking or whatever she was doing. Even with 5 pots boiling and the oven rolling while she washed dishes she handled her business with the grace and ease of a smooth secret agent. It seemed that most of my cousins had taken refuge in the back porch. It was lovely to see all of the different age groups all hanging out together. Everyone was there. Relatives I had not seen for years. Some I had never even met. With mom being the oldest child this was a really big deal in terms of its impact of my family, because she was the first of Martha Ravenel's children to die. The house was full of the smell of fresh flowers. This sticks out in my memory because so many people had been kind enough to send bouquets of every variety. So the place was alive with their wondrous aroma making the day all the more surreal. It brought to mind something Grandma used to say BRING ME MY FLOWERS WHILE I AM ALIVE. One nice thing about days like today was that it did bring family members together from far and wide. It was great to see so many relatives loving each other. Something we never have time to do in our everyday lives. It seemed so odd. Why don't we have time to love each other anymore? It's the most important thing. But we busy ourselves. Chasing chloroform and paper and various things. Another sweet thing I noticed was how I was introduced now to people I did not know. I was no longer just Kevin her second son. Now I was Willamina's youngest boy, the one who came home to take care of his mother! Despite the heaviness of the day these moments made it much easier to swallow. It made me feel really good. I thought back to that sad day at the Rehab hospital when I first learned of mom's illness and how not a part of the family they made me feel. It was good to finally have them see the real me and not be written off as the family flake musician any more. It seemed as if we were all smothering in grief, each suffering with their own thoughts. This is one of the hardest things about situations like this. Dealing with your mind. Trying to carry the weight of the pain and the brokenness. There was lots of small talk and banter with my Uncles cousins and Aunts. It was just as it was when we were children. There was a palpable bond of love in the air. Its funny, this love is always present. But so invisible in our lives most of the time. How ironic that we are too caught up in our lives to actually take time to love, experience, and enjoy. But today love as flowing on every plane lifting me even further up out of my grieving mind set I began to meditate on this feeling and try to hold its energy. I had been given the task of reading a small tribute from the kids. I had worked on what to say for a day and some and thought I had something worthwhile to say. Of course people tried to edit me but in a strange new twist of personality I resisted their ideas and stood firm the plane of reading whatever I felt. The old house had continued to fill until it was time for us to all load up into the limos that were now lined up in front of the house. Finally it was time to line everyone up for the procession to the church. As a child I used to wonder why no one drove their own cars at funerals. Was it that they were afraid that people would become so grief stricken that they would run their cars off of the road? I played out this fantasy this in my mind in amazing detail. But here we were in real living color stuffed into these limos like sardines grimly awaiting the time when we would be eaten. I imagine this whole start off at the house routine must have begun way back in the day's of horse and buggies and farms that were miles apart. People would come from great distances to be in the procession lined up in some sort of pecking order according to age and rank in the family. Old school customs for sure. The world appears so very different from inside a Limo while you are super sad in your mind. You become even more of an outside observer now watching the world from your dark cocoon. Traveling over the same roads that you grew up on as a child to the

church seemed all too bizarre and different. I felt as if I was seeing everything as well as everyone through new eyes now. The great amount of pain that I was holding inside seemed to have softened me somehow. Allowing me to tune in more to the world around me people, things as well. It was as though I could 'feel' them energywise. Which had the somehow natural effect of making me more loving and understanding. It's as if the pain flips us inside out and we become a blank canvas with the open love mind of a child. acceptance and embracing love replace the cynicism and isolation of your old mindset. I saw now the deeper truth of the connections between us all. Perhaps that's what this day was really all about, a refresher course in love! We weaved our way slowly through town Traveling over the same streets that I had grown up

on as a child my numb mind only partially engaged, memories flooded back with each block. The spot in front of the library where Jimmy and I had to fight these two knuckleheads from that neighbourhood, just cuz they wanted to fight! That lasted all of two seconds as they learned a valuable lesson in street etiquette as in, leave people alone if you don't know them. Little boys in church school can fight too. Then there was the bowling alley on Pennsylvania ave down in the basement where I heard Otis Redding for the first time. It was a Saturday night church event. I was captivated by sounds, the smell of perfume cigarettes, and hot dogs and shocked by the girls in Mini skirts. It was awesome! We slid onto Massachusetts Ave and into Dupont National park which the church was named for. It had always had an unrelenting stillness to it Which I welcomed today. We pulled up to the church and as I stepped out waves of yesterday blew by me, bringing a smile to my face. It had been many many years since I had graced this building. Due to careful planning on each trip home to always make sure my arrival was well after church to make sure I would never have to attend. From the outside it looked the same. Tidy and stately at the top of the hill. I climbed the stairs for the first time in twenty some years. I saw many familiar faces that I had not seen since I was a child as I entered the door. They had the same sweet smiles, but they were cloaked in grey hairs and wrinkles if time. That's when I felt all the years that had passed since my childhood, when I was in this building 6 to 7 days a week due to church, school or pathfinder meetings on Sundays. But here we were for a totally different reason, one I hoped I would never see. I could tell that many people were surprised to see me. I guess I had been long forgotten by most. It had been many many years since I saw some of these smiles. Faces full of warmth, love, and now healing wishes. Happily my best friend from high school Ennever was one of the first people I saw. We had met in Mrs' Smith's 10th grade English class in 1977. It meant a lot that he had come to support me. We spoke to a few more people and slid out of the church and down the hill into the safe quiet haven of the woods where I could collect myself. The overbearing weight of the sadness was heavy on me now. There's nothing like having an old friend around in a time like this His mom had passed away years before so he definitely understood my loss. How ironic I thought, it was Ennever's home I went to the night that I found out that my folks were getting a divorce. Carly was there by my side of course, but somehow she was in over her head. She had never experienced death so there was no way for her to relate to all the pain I felt. Even so She did her best to console me all the way through this dark parade. Ennever and I slowly made our way up the hill and proceeded inside the church. Once again they lined us up in family pecking order so that we could enter the sanctuary. The room was bright with sunlight as we walked in. The organist played a song that seemed familiar in the corner. Mom's body had been placed front and center directly under the pulpit. It was hard to believe that it was

really her there in that casket, face tight and lifeless. this is when the hard dark reality of all this slapped me down. All of the hopes of never seeing this day this past summer came back to me. Here I was, she was truly dead and gone! I felt like I had a damn inside of me that was gonna bust at any second. I knew that once I started crying I would never be able to stop. Carly looked up at me smiling and clasped my hand tightly. Her presence and strength did pull me through as if she had folded me up into a Lil' red wagon and was pulling me along as best she could. I thought back to all the sermons I listened to there. So many hours wanting to escape that place like Alcatraz. All the daydreams, the excursions to the bathroom. Now once again here I was wanting only to escape this place. I looked into the casket as I slid into my seat. They had caked on so much makeup it looked like a wax figure of her, not my real mom at all. I kept hoping that she would just walk in at the last moment and spare us this bad sad nightmare. But this was all too real. She was gone at least physically. Its funny how the mind holds on to hope until the last possible second, not wanting to accept the grim reality. Instead of being afraid to look at her body I found myself staring in disbelief. She was really gone! My mom was dead, Laying there so still it was hard to believe. It was as if her body had been no more than just a shell, a cocoon. I can't put into words how blinding, how crippling, the emotions I felt were. So much bleak mind shattering painful blackness. Darkness that you cannot escape. Every thought, every feeling. Smothering and suffocating you. It was the hardest most brutal truth exploding inside me. No place to run. No way to hide. Happily it was a quick ceremony. They had gotten Wintley Phipps a world famous baritone vocalist to sing. Mama must have been thrilled from her view in the sky. Soon came my time to read the tribute from us kids. The announced my name and to me the room went still for a few nanoseconds. My mouth was as dry as week old toast in Arizona as I stood to walk up to the pulpit. I was really concentrating on not falling more than anything. These darn dress shoes made me feel like I was on ice on this church carpet. The view from here was much different. It was daunting to see a sea of faces looking up at me waiting to see what the freak with the dreads had to say. I took a few seconds to take it all in. The rows and rows of flowers. the bright wood of the sanctuary. The church ladies in their hats. There had been quite a few drafts to the speech, but my heart settled on just giving mostly the original version, plus whatever I was feeling at the time. My voice cracked as I opened my mouth. But with each word I relaxed and a rhythm began to form. I began to tell the story of Wilhelmina Vines from my viewpoint. First as a child Being swathed in love surrounded by the soft beauty of two truly good educated parents dealing with the Jim Crow american south. They did their best to shield us from the stupidity and ignorance that still rules in some parts of the deep south even today. They transcended it all with smooth beautiful grace. Then as a young man in his teen years needing patient parental direction as I navigated the late 70's in Washington D.C. Those were turbulent times. Change was all around along with the temptations of a major american city. Their wisdom, embedded over the course of my life always pulled me through. Up and away from treacherous situations more than once. They gave me a timeless treasure = good judgement. I finished the tribute feeling satisfied that had done her justice. Knowing she was proud of me. Even my big headed brother nodded his approval as I returned to my seat relieved. Next up was my Uncle Joe Mom's second oldest brother. He had been a minister ever since he got out of the vietnam war. He was a powerful speaker. Very deliberate and dynamic in his flow. Like a boxer. A boy did he ever deliver the message. I can never forget his challenge to 'live a life worthy of all the sacrifice that was made to allow us to be who we are in this moment' Right then and there I

made an oath to myself and to mom that I live my life in a very different way. After being with her all summer, watching her suffer through all those days and nights I understood more about all that they had done by educating and clothing us spiritually as well as physically. There was no way I could let all of her sacrifice be wasted! The service finally ended after there was a viewing procession past the casket. What a sad strange parade this was watching people file slowly past her body and then out of the church. Soon came my chance to walk past. I squeezed Carly's hand like a vice as I looked down into the casket. After lifting, bathing and feeding her for the last three months of her life, it was all too painful to see her like this. Knowing that this was the last time. I drank in one long last long look. then broke down. Almost running up the burgundy carpet that lead outside.

CHAPTER 17

Life never seemed quite the same after that day. I was totally broken in spirit. Drained, zapped of all my energy. My will to be and get out and do things was gone. I went through the motions at work. It was made easier when they gave me a new assignment at an office close to our new home in the quiet Brookhaven area of town. I had my own office which allowed me a lot of time to be alone with my thoughts, something I truly needed at this point. I began to use my down time as my study time. My subject? Life, Death and the afterlife. The answer to that question I asked myself that evening that I first saw mom's body at the funeral home "where is her laugh, her spirit? The love, the light life force that once inhabited her body. where was that? I left no stone unturned. I studied every religion looking answers that rang true with my soul. It was my spiritual study lab. At home it was hard at times. My deep ever present sadness crushed the air out of our beautiful relationship slowly. The darkness in my mind was so great that I could not verbally say anything to Carly about my mom and the whole experience for months. Looking back, this was the time that I should have gotten some kind of help to help me deal with all of my pain. I would write it out on paper to tell her about what I was feeling. She did everything that she knew of to cheer me up! But nothing worked. I limped through life like this for a year or so. We purchased our first home in East Atlanta got a couple of lovely dogs and built a sweet family. She dove into her work and discovered a passion for rugby, quickly becoming the team president. I had purchased a home studio with some of the money from mom's life insurance and lost myself in recording my own music for the first time in my life. On the surface things were smooth. But under my skin I was on fire! It was a slow burning painful sadness that never went away. I began to try and put the flame out with cocaine and whiskey. It was not something that I chose like flipping a switch to turn a light on. It was more like walking backwards into quicksand. Into 'nightclub world', a whole new sub-culture of sad people looking to dull the pain night after night. There were all kinds of people there in what I began to call 'The Village of lonely people'. It was all bright lights, big times and glamour. Until the coke ran out and it was time to go home. I had two female friends who had also become single around the same time. We become coke buddies and began to hang out at our spot in the village 3-4 nights a week. Carly by this time had grown so unhappy with my shenanigans that she had taken a job which involved constant travel just to get away from me. which in itself was a killer.....She was my 'Dream Girl'! Beautiful, brilliant, super sexy and she was crazy in love with me ... at the beginning! After years of my coke binging, major temper

flare ups, nose bleeds at 6 am and my overall transformation from sweet strong caring Kevin into the weak minded sad freak I had become. I had slowly pushed a wedge in between us that would spell the beginning of the end for our dream. It's amazing how you can push away the person that you love more than anything. To the point that they break, and decide to hurt you back in the worse way possible. Eventually it all exploded. I moved in with my good friend Cousy not too far from where Carly and I had lived.. All of a sudden I was alone. Single again. Having lost everything I loved, Carly, our awesome home, my dogs Hanna and Sister. As well as my sweet woodlined studio where I recorded my very first album with Mary Delaney. Knowing that I was solely responsible for screwing up my dream life put an even heavier weight on my heart. One that broke me. I plunged head first even harder into the nightclub darkness. More coke, more booze, more herb to come down from the coke. Repeat! For a while I worked as the Doorman of a late night speakeasy that did not open until 3AM. I even got paid in 'Ice' one night, it was a super nasty version of crack cocaine. That's got to be the craziest thing about being a 'Coke Head' you still keep sucking in line after line even though your nose is on fire, even bleeding. Snorting ice is like inhaling gasoline on fire! But yet you keep on sucking on that dollar bill! Sad nights in smoke filled rooms. You could almost taste the hopelessness and regret in the air. It's a dark lost world of total delusion. No one is truly your friend. They are just coke vampires looking for the next line of coke, meaningless conversation and whatever else they could get. The party never stopped for some. It went 7 days a week. Until they died. It becomes your life! Everything you do gets tangled up in the web of cocaine. Everything becomes secondary, family, friends, you name it. That's when you know it's rock bottom. You realize life can only go up from there. It's a sad place to be. Hence all the attempts to numb yourself which lead to this downward spiral. Then there comes a moment if you are lucky when you just want up out of the darkness. It's a lot like coming up for air after a long deep dive underwater. Your soul cries out for more, for joy. For light. For happiness that lasts longer than the last buzz. This is when the universe answers our hearts deepest prayers. The unspoken ones that float to the top on some invisible wind of hope. Straight into an seeming express lane of blessings. This is when life seemed to take my hand and lift me into a new world. Perhaps it was the universe responding to my spirit's plea for help. For 5 years I had been wallowing in self pity. Which created a culture of self doubt, self hate. Of course physical illness followed my years of unhappy thoughts. This is when I began to be blessed in knowledge of the power of our own thoughts. How they are responsible for our 'being' in each moment. Our health, our happiness, everything. I realized that the situations which had made me so pathetically sad had long vanished. Only my mind kept the pain and the darkness alive. I re-invented it every day. I would manufacture a new reason to be angry at something or someone! It became a way of life. Since I never got the guidance and healing to clean up the car wreck of bent emotions and hurt that I held inside for years, my vision of the world became one of 'habitual negativity'. It starts slowly, but day by day becomes who we are. I became those ugly angry thoughts until the real Kevin disappeared! I began to brainwash myself back into positivity! I put up affirmations all over my world. On the walls of my apartment, in my truck, every place I could. Consciously filling my mind with new light! Rebuilding my thought process one day at a time. It was a slow steady climb out of my own self created carnival of darkness. I stumbled on a daily basis. But I soon learned that it's not about how many times we fall. What is truly important is that we get up and keep climbing. Which is what I did. I began to see the world in greater light. I began to awaken to the goodness and blessings that were

floating all around me. I can see now that they were always there, steadily flowing from the wonderful loving source which produces and provides endlessly. It was only my mind that stumbled in blindness. "The more light you allow within you, the Brighter the world you live in will be" -Shakti Gawain. I had spent years suffocating myself with dark negative thoughts. Just making myself sad with each unhappy breath. It was time to dig myself out of this hole. I was sick of myself! This yearning for light came from someplace unseen, unspoken. The days rolled into months and I slowly began to taste the sweetness of life again. To enjoy this fragile body of touch and taste. I began to grow inside, in thinking beautiful positive thoughts, I began to 'become' those thoughts. People began to notice my almost constant smile. New energy shot off of me now. My 'being' felt powerful joy which made me feel lighter in my body, younger. The world looked different somehow. There seemed to be more life in everything around me. I began to attract more positive beautiful moments into my life. I dedicated myself to creating joy, peace, and good for everyone that I come into contact with. This became my mantra. It became addictive. The happier my mind grew the more of this sweet feeling I wanted to taste and embrace. I read somewhere that 'it all starts with a beautiful mind'. I can tell you from experience that it is wonderfully true. Thus began my ascent back into real living without days of sad painful thought. It wasn't easy there were days when I felt as if I got kicked back down to the bottom of life's stairwell. But I fought my way back up. The pain of losing my mom remained for years. But now I had a new response for the voices of fear and darkness that creep back and forth across the threshold of your mind. I learned to always remember what my mom ultimately taught me, To be BEAUTIFUL IN EVERY MOMENT.