THE ADVENTUROUS LIFE

By Jerry Guindon

PROLOGUE

Please bear with me, dear reader, as I try, through the use of a poetic license while scanning through the prism of many varied experiences, to describe life in terms of the sheer adventures ascribed to every person ever born. I believe that humans are so harried by everyday existence and the accompanying ennui that they fail to look at the ‘forest for the trees’, to borrow a trite expression. It’s not that a narrowed focus on everyday concerns is unimportant; indeed, survival is dependent upon it. But at the same time, it’s important to also view one’s outlook on living as a tremendous opportunity afforded to no other living creature! As I explain in the following stories, that despite some setbacks, life is indeed a terrific adventure! It is my hope, as you peruse the following tales, that you review the really wonderful life you have with a fresh lens which may give you a better perspective of your life!

Consider the words of Michael Cunliffe, who wrote the following:

*This is your life, your story, your tale to tell,*

*These are your steps upon a journey through this world,*

*Your experience of being human.*

*You are the main character in this story.*

*Every chapter you have written in your story is unique,*

*Every chapter is an element of you,*

*As intrinsic as it is inescapable.*

*Every chapter gives voice to one piece of the story of you.*

*Yet as with all stories and all journeys*

*An end will come, so while you can,*

*Embrace your unique myriad of chapters;*

*The chapters of regret, and of heartbreak-*

*The chapters when you stumbled and fell-*

*The chapters when you climbed back to your feet-*

*The chapters when you gritted your teeth and forged ahead-*

*The chapters of joy, and of success, and of love-*

*For all of these chapters play their part in telling the greatest tale*

*That you will ever know,*

*The story of you.*

Now read on, dear reader, and vicariously relive your experience through the tales of others. However, be prepared for the, shall we say, unusual setting in which our stories begin. You might just exclaim, “What on earth?”

CHAPTER 1

My name is Samuel Gannon and I DIED A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO! Yeah, I know how odd it must seem to you readers. Let me try to explain. I was really slowing down during my last couple years. I found that my casual walking became more laborious, my arthritis even more painful, and my everyday self-care more difficult. It’s not that I gave up. I believed in that old Shakespearian maxim, ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’. Right up to when I kicked that proverbial bucket, I read profusely, my latest crime novel was by my favorite author, Michael Connelly’s ‘The Black Echo’, completed the daily crossword puzzle from our daily newspaper, and except for a few times, solved many of the daily Wordle puzzle from the NY Times on my iPad. Also, not only did I play at least 9 holes or more of golf every weekday morning during good weather in my late eighties, but I also hit the gym at Planet Fitness for one to two hours on cold or rainy days. At the gym I used the treadmill for a mile, exercise bike for 3-5 miles, rowing machine for 10 minutes and, finally on my least favorite elliptical machine for 15 minutes. I once heard on a TV show a physician who espoused the notion that when any person exercises, the body recognizes that it needs to restore the small torn cells that break down during a workout. If you’re older, your body may actually replace more than the original cell losses! This suggests that my increased activity level in my aging years may actually have benefitted my longevity. So, remember that all of you seniors out there. Get off that couch! You know what I really came to enjoy in my later life though? A 15 minute-power nap that at times ran a little longer!

I always used to walk a full round of golf while carrying my bag. I decided to ride a golf cart in my later years as I kept running out of breath. It was kind of scary, though, when the iWatch I wore kept warning me about high BPs. By the way, how do you like these new techie contraptions? I didn’t mind when my iWatch told me it was time to get up and stand, tell me how far the next golf hole was, or check my pulse. But I did mind when it asked me if I wanted to have my menstrual cycles measured! I’m not a female, last time I checked.

But, on a golf note, I think I finally learned the secret of hitting that little white sphere. Unfortunately, I was already almost 90 with so little lifetime left with which to continue to improve. For any golfer who’s reading this right now, you’ve got to swing around your body using mostly your torso, maintaining a fairly straight left arm, aiming your left shoulder down toward the ball, loosening your shoulders from your body, and freely attacking the ball from the inside. I added at least 25 yards to my drive, mostly because I loosened my through-swing ensuring I wasn’t body-bound. From then on, I always shot below my age, and I once broke 80! I hope this helps you as it did me. If you find that it helps you get more distance, and your partner asks you how you did it, tell him the tip was from a ghost! Heh, heh!

I also owe a debt to my cardiologist who prescribed plenty of meds to keep me going. This included all the latest for blood pressure, cardiac insufficiency, and blood thinners for my atrial fibrillation. Because of those meds, my annual exams were quite good, a little weight gain but good overall. My height kept falling, though, I used to be 5’10”, then they measured me at 5’7”! I was shrinking everywhere-yes, there too! My medicine cabinet used to look like a pharmacy, for heaven’s sake! Still, I knew I was on borrowed time and the exercise I practiced and the pills I took could only keep me going for just so long! My body finally gave out.

I beat the odds by having reached the ripe old age of 90! I was around the 95th percentile in aging, I believe. I don’t know how many times I told my wife how happy I was when I didn’t read my name on the obituary page of our daily paper when I was alive. Now I just read my obits in today’s paper, after I floated over to my driveway, while it was still at my garage door. I guess that makes it official now.

By the way, I finally got my dream car when I was in my 80s, a used Mercedes Benz 300SLK. I bought it with 3000 miles on it, and that little silver-gray two-seater hard-top convertible, with its red leather interior, drove beautifully. People always admired, what I call, my little puddle jumper, when driving around town, even though it had aged to around 10 years. As a matter of fact, I loved the car so much, I told my wife to bury me in it when I pass away. I thought it would be even better than a casket.

She replied, “But, honey, you might have some gas vapors still in it, and it might blow up and kill you!”

“OK, but wouldn’t I be already dead?”

That woman!

I know it’s hard to believe that I could write a story from the grave. Well, first of all, I’m not buried quite yet, so I’m not six feet under. I’m still in the funeral parlor, and I’m counting at least 80 people who have come to see the last of me. I didn’t know I knew so many people! I’m sure there also were some curious people who typically attend calling hours, as it’s usually called. I can’t understand why they attend services like mine considering they don’t even know the person!

My body’s lying there in an open casket with makeup making me look about 20 years younger. I look so good that I wish they would have done that to me before my body called it quits! But, you know, even though I’m buried, it’s just my old physical body, and I’m now free. You see, I’m what you call a ghost, and you might say, I might be the original ghost writer! This is my third novel, having written about ghosts in the attic in one novel when I was with the living, and the other a children’s story about two kids growing up on the island of Crete. But those stories were written in conventional form with the usual submission of manuscripts, editing, and final submission for publishing. I didn’t think my novels were that good, but I did sell a few copies, I was told. Unknown to them, I used the same publisher for my current story from beyond the living, using their computers for my manuscript. I know they’re scratching their heads about the newly discovered manuscript on their editor’s desk. I hope they don’t mind! They must have liked it because they published it for you to read. I thank you for buying it, and I hope it’s better than my last two novels!

Also, let me tell you that I do have a stereotypical white sheet over me, and I’m floating around the reception room seeing who showed up. Yeah, I also know that this is how people imagine ghosts, white sheets and all. Well, let me tell you that it is true. You’ll see someday. You know, I’ve always envied birds with their effortlessly flying, swooping peacefully upon the wind drafts, appearing so graceful and free; I can do that now as I flit back and forth over this crowd with my white sheet. When I first emerged from that coffin below me, I was initially stunned how I could go through solid walls, and people! I blinked really hard the first time I did it when I emerged from my coffin. It was really surreal, but then again, I am surreal, don’t you think?

Now, if you ask me what’s under the sheet, I can tell you that there’s absolutely nothing there. (Reminds me of my wife’s comments to me in my aging years!) I left all my aching, arthritic body in that casket. Why a white sheet, you may ask? Remember that, while my physical body may have crapped out, my spirit lives on forever, and it needs to have some visible cover to scare the living daylights out of you when you see me. If you don’t believe in ghosts, I just might just have to pay you a visit someday.

Some of those in attendance at my funeral may be happy that I’m gone, others I hope, may actually miss me. I’m listening to the eulogy being delivered by my pastor, Reverend Paul Ryan. My God, based on what he’s saying, I think they’re burying a saint! Other funerals you may have attended, dear reader, usually portray the deceased in such glowing terms, without even a giving a hint of past misdeeds. Well, I guess it’s not a time to dwell on past mistakes and only stress the decease’s good points. Makes sense to me, and I’m grateful that nobody’s bringing up my failures in life, and there have been many. I only hope that the good outweighed the bad! I like to think that it’s all part of being human and that not one person is perfect. Do you agree?

Still, the way Pastor bestows all these platitudes, I must be headed for the pearly gates and be admitted by St. Peter. By the way, I haven’t yet received any summons from Him, or the guy down below who wields a pitchfork. I wonder what he does with that pitchfork, anyway? I don’t think he’s moving hay like a farmer! Maybe he’s stirring up the coals. I’ll let you know of my destination when I hear, if I can. So far, I’m just cruising without a care and happy to be pain-free for the first time in at least 20 years. I highly recommend it to you folks when your time is up, not that you have any choice. I am already beginning to miss human contact, though. I’m sure I’ll eventually meet another soul up here, maybe a relative or friend that has passed away. I’ll also let you know about that.

There is one thought that has crossed my mind (yes, I can still think, how else can I write to you?). It’s that while we’re still alive, we are totally ignorant of what a blessing it is. Yes, a blessing, despite all the problems you may have, the pain you’re feeling, and the love you may have lost. You’re alive! I can’t say that. Can you imagine the good fortune we all have had to have been born, and to have therefore experienced all those adventures in life? Think back, all of you, back to when you were born, your youth, your first love, your education, your career, your children and, if old enough, your grandchildren. While some of your life may not have been totally rosy and ideal, you were alive and on an adventure that no other living creature on earth can ever experience. With all the problems that I had I will miss that.

As I peruse those in attendance from my lofty perch, I remember some of the adventures in life that they told me about themselves. Unlike me, their final chapters are not yet written. I recognize many of the visitors seated below me as I fly around the room, and I know many of their stories as well.

I see that my ex-wife, Ann, and our two grown sons, Michael, Robert and their wives are sitting in the front row, with our five grown-up grandchildren. I guess I am surprised that she came to my calling hours. It must have been for the kids’ sake! Tears are flowing freely. I guess it’s good to know they cared for me and will miss me. I loved Ann to the very end, and I will miss my sons who bravely tolerated our family breakup.

I also noticed that my sister, Anita and my brother, Alan, are paying their respects as well. Alan still owes me 20 bucks from about five years ago. He must feel good that he doesn’t have to pay it back now that I’m gone. I don’t think I ever would have gotten it back anyway.

Well, now I see my next-door neighbors in row three, Peggy and Martin Solomon. They were really wonderful people with whom to associate. Both Peggy and Martin are almost my age, and they spend much of their retirement years helping others. Peggy reads for a blind person and is a volunteer curator for our local art museum. Martin is a retired college professor who now donates his time tutoring needy high school students. More people should be like them. They’re my personal heroes. On a personal level, I had my leg operated on after I developed a leg clot so Martin would make sure I had my daily newspaper at my door instead of the beginning of our driveway. They continued their wonderful gestures years later, though I eventually had no problems walking. I did, in turn, get their paper and mail for them when they vacationed. Wonderful people. So glad they came.

I also spy with my little eye my golfing partner, Walter, who, despite being at least 10 years younger than me, could never out distance my drives. Certainly, with my new-found swing style, he would have even more trouble. Well, he can beat me now. I can’t swing a golf club too well with a white sheet over me. Besides, how can I even hold a club, much less swing it? I will miss chasing that little elusive ball around the course, though I could never master the game like the pros! I don’t know how many times I’ve tried to change my swing over the years. I guess my latest swing change was the best that I could achieve, and I am happy about that. What I’m not happy about, though, is the way my life began.

Like many of you, I’m sure, my life could have had a better beginning. Children brought up under adverse conditions generally have a poor outcome. Psychological research has shown that that harmful circumstances in one’s upbringing can have deleterious effects later in life. That is true, but the scars of childhood are often removed later depending on the offspring’s personality. The more resilient children can often escape the youthful physical or emotional trauma. I feel that I was fortunate in rebounding from the hurt in my early life.

I was three-years-old, and the baby of the family, when my two older siblings and I were given up to an orphanage during the depression years. I still remember to this day, almost 90 years later, clinging firmly to the orphanage’s front door, crying my eyes out, as we were pushed inside and never to see our parents ever again for the next decade. I felt so abandoned. I developed this feeling of insecurity that would resonate in my personality throughout my entire life.

Ever hear from the frying pan into the fire? Well, life never improved much once I surfaced from the dungeon I felt I was in. I bounced from foster home to foster home, never feeling loved by any of my keepers. To make matters worse, I was living with a foster family that clearly was in it for the money the state was paying to keep us. While I got along with my foster siblings fairly well, the foster dad was terrible to get along with. He was one of those returning war veterans who no doubt had a good case of PTSD. I mean the guy was always complaining and yelling his head off for no apparent reason. We almost came to blows one day when I returned home late from school and he accused me of shirking lawnmower duty I was supposed to have that afternoon. Even after I told him I had to help out the librarian at school, he accused me of lying and then grounded me for a week.

I had a good brain, at least, as I managed to do well in school. I met a few girls at school and tried dating them but I really fell flat romantically. When I graduated from high school, I could hardly wait to join the Air Force, mostly just to get away from my foster father, but I also wanted a career in whatever field Ma Air Force would put me in. My grown-up adventure was about to begin.

CHAPTER 2

Well, what do you know? I see an old flame of mine from many years ago sitting in the fourth row of seats. Mary Lou Anderson from Maryville, Tennessee. I’m surprised she showed up as I haven’t seen or heard from her in years. I’m also surprised that she’s sitting in the same row as my wife and kids. Neither ladies are obviously aware of their impact on my life and my past relationships with both of them!

I grew up in East Lyme, Connecticut, attended all the schools there but I wasn’t ready for college. I have known little Ann Hathaway since kindergarten , and we’ve been close friends ever since. Our parents used to visit each other, as we lived a few streets away, and Ann and I would often go out to play. We were best friends who grew to love each other. After high school graduation, I told Ann of my plans to join the Air Force and later go to college.

“Sam, you can’t do that to me. You just can’t leave me!”

“I know, I know, Ann, but I talked to the recruiter about joining the Air Force and he said they needed more recruits to fill their ranks. He promised me that I could get training in the medical field.”

“But, Sam, how can you leave me like this. I’ve known you all my life, and now you want to leave me?” Said Ann, crying.

“Please don’t cry, Ann. I didn’t mean to upset you. You know I’ll be back. Tell you what. Just to prove my love for you, let’s get engaged and we can get married when I get out. What do you think?”

“Oh, Sam, I would love that. Make sure you write me often. Now, kiss me!”

“My pleasure, Ann. I know I’m gonna miss you so much. You mean so much to me, sweetie!”

Most young guys I know, I joined the military to get away from home after high school. I wanted to experience some adventures and learn a trade. After basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, the Air Force trained me in laboratory technology at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and sent me to my first post in Tennessee. It was a good gig as I had a civilian lab tech working the lab with me, and from whom I learned so much. The lab job was mostly about screening for venereal diseases, examining various annual blood tests, such as cell blood counts, screening for diabetes, etc. there must have been around 100 or so airmen assigned to McGhee Tyson, and we became a tightly knit group. I truly enjoyed my career and assignment. We got to towns such as Maryville, and once in awhile traveled by bus to nearby Knoxville.

I first met Mary Lou at a dance given by the USO at my base. Girls from the local town were chaperoned to our base. I didn’t know any of the girls that came, of course, but I spotted this cute girl standing by herself across the dance floor. She wore a knee-length blue dress, black suede pumps, and a short cardigan over her shoulders. She had a pretty face, red lipstick and blond hair with a blue ribbon tied around it. I got the nerve to go up to her and introduced myself.

“Hi there. My name is Sam, Sam Gannon, and I wonder if you would like to dance with me?

“Hi Sam, okay. My name is Mary Lou Anderson.

“Great, Mary Lou. But first, let me apologize for my poor dancing ahead of time. I felt sorry for my prom date at East Lyme High School where it seems I often stepped on her toes.”

“Not to worry, Sam, I’m not the greatest dancer in the world, either.”

Mary Lou and I danced somewhat gracefully as I tried my best not to tread on her shoes. She swirled wonderfully during the waltzes, and she ‘cut a rug’ sharply during the jitterbug. During the band’s interlude we sampled the virgin punch provided by the base. I asked about her life and she said she had just graduated from Maryville High and planning to go on to college the following year after taking a year off from high school.

She said, “It seems that schooling is so long, don’t you think? From kindergarten, through junior high, then high school. There’s no break. So I told my parents that I needed a year off. They didn’t like it at first, ‘cause they felt I should still keep going. But they relented and they feel okay about it now.”

“Don’t blame you, Mary Lou, elementary, junior high, and high school are long enough. Enjoy your free year!”

I loved roller skating; it always mesmerized me. The rink in Maryville, Tennessee was especially beautiful to skate on. The wind always seemed to sweep through the wide-open bay windows cooling us as we noisily rolled counterclockwise on the wooden floor. There was a mirror-ball chandelier that hung from the ceiling, sparkling brightly, and entrancing the skaters with its kaleidoscopic effect as it swung back and forth from the breeze’s effect. Music was also surrounding the skaters, and the speakers usually sounded out songs like the Tennessee Waltz.

I remember skating particularly well this one time with Mary Lou. She and I danced well together on our skates, and one night when she got tired and decided to rest, I then took off on a solo run. Not to brag, but on that one particular day, I roller skated with apparent carefree abandon, passing the slower skaters, kicking out my right leg that flawlessly twisted my left leg into a smooth backward move. I was in a groove. Then a pirouette vaulted me and flung me high, landing me softly and in full control. My graceful stride with extended arms continued its eagle-like glide, now forward, now backward, until finally stopping in front of Mary Lou on a dime.

“Wow, you are quite the showoff, Sam. Where did you learn to skate like that?”

“I took lessons many years ago, when I was younger. As you can see, I thoroughly enjoy this sport.”

We then had sodas at the local A&W soda fountain, and that’s when I broke the news to Mary Lou.

.“We’re having fun, Mary Lou, but I gotta tell you that I am engaged to this girl back in Connecticut. So, feel free to date someone else if you want.”

“Well, thanks for telling me, Sam, but I don’t mind. Like you say, we’re just having fun. Does your fiancé mind you’re going out with other girls?”

“Well, I haven’t told her about meeting you, figuring we’re only friends, and I don’t want to make her jealous.”

“I like you and we’ll keep our relationship as friends. I love the things we do together.”

*I don’t know about you, dear reader, but can you keep a boy-girl relationship just basically friendly and platonic, and restrain your hormones when you’re so young?*

As expected, our meetings became more frequent and loving, and we became more intimate. As the saying goes, we became friends with benefits! We continued dating for another six months, and then I received my discharge papers from the U.S. Air Force. I needed to return home and I dreaded telling Mary Lou. When we had our next date, I broke the news to her:

“Mary Lou, I’m being discharged from the service after four years and I need to return home to Connecticut to see my family and Ann, my fiancé again. I’ve grown to love you over these past months, but I still have a strong feeling for her back home. I need to return there and see if I still feel the same about her.”

“Sam, I love you so much! Please don’t leave me. I know you told me honestly that you were engaged when we first met, but I didn’t think I would fall in love with you.”

“I feel rotten about this, Mary Lou, but I did make a commitment to my girl, Ann, back home. I’ve got to return and see how things are. Please try to understand. I’ve got to see her again. It’s only fair. Maybe she changed her mind by now, I don’t know, I’m just confused. All I know is that I have to do the right thing, see her again, and discuss our future together, if there is one!. I’ll just see if it works out. If not, I’ll be back, Mary Lou, I promise.”

It was wonderful to see family back in East Lyme, Connecticut after being absent for so many years in the service. After settling in, I called on Ann who only lived a few blocks away on Spring Rock Road. Her parents greeted me at the door and asked me to come in.

“Ann has gone out on an errand,” said Mrs. Hathaway, “but she’ll be right back. It’s so nice to see you again. Are you discharged now? What are you planning on doing with yourself?

“Yes, Mrs. Hathaway, I am out of the service and I plan on looking for work. You know, the Air Force teaches you a trade. I’m planning on applying what I learned at L&M Hospital for a tech position in a few days. I also plan on entering law school after I get a B.A. from UCONN.”

“Well, that’s wonderful. Welcome back. We missed you around here, and I know that Ann missed you even more. Let me get you a cup of coffee, Ann should be here soon.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Hathaway, it is great to be back. I have to get back home, though. Please tell Ann that I’ll catch up to her later.”

When Ann got home her mother told her that I had been there She dropped her shopping bag on the floor and ran toward my house. She didn’t even knock on the unlocked door, and upon seeing me, she rushed into my arms, kissing me, and saying how wonderful it was that I was back.

I said to her, “I missed you so much, Ann,” while once again gazing into her beautiful blue eyes, “I wonder if you still love me after all this time that I’ve been gone?”

“Of course, silly, I’ll always love you until my dying day! I keep your love letters and reread them often.”

“Let’s go out to Anthony’s to eat for a celebration, tonight. I have so much to tell you. I’ll pick you up at eight tonight, OK.?”

“Sounds great, Sam. See you at eight, it’s so wonderful that you’re back!” “

During dinner, I could hardly control myself, exclaiming how beautiful Ann looked and how much I missed her. She wore a beautiful blue dress that matched her eyes, and she had a gold pendant over her cardigan. I told her about my military days, longing to see her, and that I was so happy to be able to come home and see her again. I also told her that I’m applying for a laboratory technician position at the hospital, and, if everything works out fine, we can plan the wedding.

Right or wrong, I never let on about Mary Lou back in Tennessee. I kept getting mail from her, asking me to return because she loved me so much and that she would wait for me. I never responded to her letters. I felt like a cad.

About a year later, my job was working out well. Ann had her first job as an elementary school teacher, which she loved. I kept working on my degree and eventually went to law school. We decided to set the date for our wedding following my graduation. One day, while Ann was visiting me, my mother heard the mailman by our mailbox and, because she was in the middle of cooking dinner, asked Ann to fetch the mail for her as I was busy fixing a loose roof tile. Returning with the mail, Ann was surprised that I got a perfumed letter from Tennessee.

*Hmm, sounds like trouble ahead, dear reader?*

“I got the mail, Mrs. Gannon, but I couldn’t help but notice that Sam is getting mail from Tennessee, and a perfumed letter at that.”

“Well, I have seen a few letters addressed to Sam from Tennessee in the past year, but I figured it’s his business, and he would tell me about them if he wanted to.”

So, when I came back in, Ann suspiciously asked me about the Tennessee letter:

“Who’s writing you from Tennessee, Sam, and sending you scented letters?

“Ann, let’s step out on the porch for a minute because I have something to tell you.”

Puzzled, but suspicious, Ann said, “O.K., but what’s all this about, Sam?”

“I know I never told you, but I met and dated a girl by the name of Mary Lou back in Tennessee, I just needed someone to pal around with. The guys on base were always tied up with something or other, and they didn’t like skating as well. I really didn’t think anything would come from it, but she got serious and fell in love with me. She doesn’t mean anything to me, Ann, you have to believe that. To me she was just a good friend that I hung around with.”

“Why is she writing to you? Didn’t you tell her that you are engaged to me?”

“Yeah, I did, but she took a good liking to me, and is probably hoping things don’t work out between you and me, that’s all.”

“What were you doing dating a girl when you’re engaged to be married to me?”

“I did tell her I was engaged, and she didn’t mind. We were just hanging out together. I guess I just got lonely and wanted companionship, that’s all.”

“Well, I guess I never would have known about your Tennessee romance if I hadn’t seen that letter, would I?”

“I’m sorry, Ann. I didn’t want you to know so you wouldn’t get upset.”

“I’m glad I found out in time to know that I guess I can’t trust you. For all I know, you would do it again after we got married.”

Crying, “I’m calling off our engagement. I never want to see you again!”

“Ann, please, I made a mistake. It’s something I never would do again, especially after we got married.”

Ann, sobbing, said, “I never want to see you again, Sam.”

Well, I knew she would be alarmed. For months I tried calling her at home, but her mother who answered the phone told me that Ann says that she was through with me, and not to call again. Time has a way of soothing past angers, and a few months later, Ann herself answered her home phone and began to relent to my pleas to reconsider as I said I loved her very, very much, and that I was truly sorry for what I had done. Ann then reconsidered and we resumed our engagement.

The wedding was set. As customary, I showed up first at church for the ceremony. My best man, Bob, gave me a letter from Tennessee that Mrs. Hathaway asked him to give me.

“Ann’s mother gave you this letter for you to open on your wedding day, Sam.”

I replied, “What? Why on earth would she do that on my wedding day?”

“ I don’t know,” said Bob, “she just said that it was important for you to read this right away.”

I recognized the letter and from whom it came, of course. I quickly tore it open and read:

*“Sam, I heard that you’re getting married, but I wanted you to know that I love you so terribly much and that I sorely miss all the good times we had together. Thank you so much for having been in my life. You will never get another letter from me knowing that you have found your true love. Have a happy life. Love, Mary Lou.”*

When Ann and I returned from our honeymoon in Bermuda, I made a point of speaking to Mrs. Hathaway, now my mother-in-law, about Mary Lou’s final letter to me.

She said, “I know you must wonder why I would want you to read your Tennessee girl’s letter, especially on your wedding day, Sam, but the seal on the envelope was loose and I decided to read it myself before letting you read it. After reading it, I felt then that the news would finally completely settle your past with her, and then you could continue to go on with your new life. Please forgive my being so nosy.”

“Mrs. Hathaway, what you did was a wonderful thing, as in fact, the news made me feel better about her decision to let our past relationship go. I gotta tell you, though, that I still feel like such a cad, knowing that Mary Lou cared so much for me, and that I let her down. That will always bother me! Also, so that you know, I love your daughter so very much, and I promise to always be true to her and learn from my past mistakes.”

“Sam, you’re a wonderful son-in-law. Welcome to the family.”

*And so, dear reader, this was the beginning of my early romantic life for which I will always be grateful. I can’t help but think how fortunate we all are when someone actually falls in love with us. It is the greatest feeling of all because it says that you were special and that you mattered to someone. And that, in a nutshell, is what life is all about, don’t you think?*

I’m also happy that Mary Lou showed up at my funeral! She obviously continued to care for me over all those years. I just hope that she still has had a good life and settled down with someone.

*Sounds like a happy beginning to a new life, doesn’t it? Hmm, what about the ending, huh? Well, read on!*

Ann and I bought a colonial style home in East Lyme, Connecticut after a law firm had offered me a partnership. We lived there very comfortably with both of us happy with our careers. Eventually, Ann and I had two boys, Michael and Robert and we basically lead a normal life until when years later Ann was growing restless. She began meeting with fellow teaching staff after school and getting a few drinks at a bar before heading home. The boys were both away at college, and she enjoyed her time with her friends.

Ann had complained to me a few times how her single life back then had been so carefree. She never had to take care of children, see to their needs, cook every day, do the laundry and housework. She also reminisced that she used to be a party girl and enjoyed the freedom of going out with friends and staying out late.

“I can’t live like this anymore!” she moaned to me, “and I’m getting depressed. I’ve got to have a change, Sam. I am so bored with my life. I just need to be by myself, alone. I have always lived with others, first my family, then with you and our kids. I love you and I love them, of course, but I want a new lease on my life. ”

“Wow, Ann, I sensed that you were not yourself the past few years. How about my setting us up with a marriage counselor so we can find a solution?”

“It’s not going to help, Sam. I need a change, and now!”

“Are you looking to dissolve our marriage? How will our kids feel?

“I just want a separation for now, Sam. I know it sounds selfish. But, after all these years of giving of myself, I want to do something just for me. Both Michael and Robert are away at school now and I think it’s a good time for me to do this. I just don’t want any responsibilities, anymore. That’s it.”

“O.K., Ann. I think I understand. You’ve slaved for us all these years and now you want your freedom without being responsible for our care. I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you find yourself an apartment and go live by yourself for a while. We can get a divorce too, if you want, but just try it out and see if you like it. Just know that I still love you after all these years, and I only want your happiness.”

“I’m sorry to be doing this to you, Sam. You know that I will still continue to love you. You’ve been a good faithful husband and a loving father to our children. But I’ve got to do this. I’ve got my own savings, my job, and I don’t need anything from you, Sam. I just want to live by myself and be responsible for my own affairs. I’ll call the kids at school and let them know what I’m doing and why. I know they’ll be shocked but hopefully they’ll eventually understand that I’m looking from some freedom for a while.”

“Wow, I guess I’m trying to understand why you’re doing this. In a crazy way I can see your point of trying to be more independent, Ann.”

“I asked Susan at school if she was aware of any apartments being available and she said that another teacher had just bought a house in town and vacated her walk-up apartment on Main Street. So, I went to see it after school was over today, talked to the landlady who was pleased that another teacher wanted to rent it. Also the rent is fully furnished and reasonable and she said I can move in anytime I want. So Sam, I’ll be moving my stuff this weekend.”

“I can’t believe that 25 years of my life being married to you has ended this way,” said Sam. “Whatever has happened to ‘til death do us part’ anyway? But, listen, I hear you loud and clear, and I will help you in any way I can, Ann. I’ll give you a hand in moving. You can take anything you need from our house. “

“Sam, you’re the greatest person I know.”

Well, Ann made a new life for herself. She felt happy and free, although I’m sure she missed me and the kids. Still, she felt that she had done the right thing. When the boys came home from school, they would visit her at her apartment, and explained to them what she was doing. Michael, the youngest brother, had the worst time understanding why their mother would do such a thing.

Although technically still married, for now, Ann went out on a few dates, attended parties, and socialized with her school friends at bars. She loved her independence. Her greatest concern, though, was the married life she left behind along with not seeing her boys even on school break. She felt this more during the quiet of the evening, upon settling herself to sleep, and feeling miserable about her selfish experience.

Meanwhile, I still continued to have concerns for Ann, hoping that she may want to return home someday. But, after a few years, it dawned on me that maybe I should get out more as well. It was Aldous Huxley who once wrote that chronic remorse can have undesirable effects. And, believing hat, I had to let it go. My fellow attorneys had invited me on several occasions to attend parties to which I usually declined.

One day, though, Olivia, an attractive coworker, asked me to meet her for drinks after work. She said she had a difficult client who didn’t want to settle her case despite the fact that it would be in his best interest. She knew that I had strong persuasive tactics that could help convince her client, and maybe we could discuss it over drinks. I obliged, and we met at the Black Sheep, a pub across the street from our office on Main Street in Niantic.

The pub was well packed around 5:30, which was a busy time drawing many for a quick one for before going home. Olivia and I found a small table near the back where we could more privately discuss her problem case. Olivia was well dressed in a professional black suit, white blouse with her dark hair short and well styled. We discussed her case and I said that I have had similar clients who wanted to drag out their claims, asking for a jury trial, etc., despite the fact that settling would be more certain of the outcome. I told her to be firm about her counseling to her client and see if he’ll finally capitulate.

“What I also do, Olivia, is I ask another attorney in the office to come into my office with my client present and have him or her discuss the reasons why settling a case saves money and ensures that the claim is in his favor.”

“A good idea, Sam. Can I ask if I can use you.”

“I don’t know why not. Let’s coordinate our schedule to make sure we’re free. Of course I’ll need to read about your case so that I can come up with a rationale for settling.”

“Thanks so much, Sam. If you want, shall I ask your secretary for a time?”

“Sounds like a plan, Liv.”

The planned meeting took place the following week and I was successful in helping Olivia with her case. She thanked me after the client was gone, and offered to treat me to an after work drink again at the Black Sheep.

Liv was dressed in a black suit that fitted her trim figure very nicely. She wore black high heels, a white satin blouse and a string necktie. Liv had dark hair cut short, a lovely face which displayed a full, smiling face showing perfectly even teeth.

“I’ve seen you around the office a few times, Sam, and I don’t know much about you. The grapevine says you used to be married. Do you have any children?

“Yes, I have two grownup children, Liv, Mike and Bob, and they’re all grownup now and living their own lives.”

“Never remarried?”

“Nah, Ann and I had a good 25 years together, and raised two good boys. How about you, Liv? Ever married, have a boyfriend or are you a lesbian? Now, I’m the nosy one!”

“Wow, I think you are nosier than I. Anyway, no, on all counts, counselor!”

“You both sound like you had a nice family going. What went wrong?”

“We really did have it all, as the song goes, Liv. But I guess circumstances change over time. Don’t get me wrong. I loved Ann, and I guess I still do. We separated friendly enough. She wanted her liberty to do as she pleases and to have no responsibilities. Oddly enough, I thought I knew what she meant, so I didn’t stand in her way.”

“Wow, you were understanding about it all. Not sure most couples would split up so easily.”

“Well, Ann has been a very good wife and mother. I guess she needed a break!”

As they conversed, Ann walked into the pub with a male friend and sat a few tables away from Sam and Olivia. Sam noticed them and told Olivia,

“Speaking if the devil, Liv, guess who just came in with a boyfriend.”

“Wow, is that your ex there?

“Yep, and looking very happy,” said Sam.

Ann’s friend pulled her chair out for her, gave her a peck on the cheek, and sat next to her instead of across from her.

“Sorry, Liv, I know we’ve gone our separate ways, but it still hurts to see it, you know?

You’re with somebody 25 years, have two great boys, and now I see the full realization that it’s really over.”

“I know it still must hurt, Sam. I experienced something like it with my divorce a few years back. But, if it helps, it does eventually get better, I found out. I have been through the dating scene too, and often it’s not pretty. Want to get out of here and come to my apartment for another drink?”

“Good idea, Liv, but I have put a downer on our meeting here. But, you know what? I’ll take a rain check on your kind invitation ‘cause I have to prepare for court early tomorrow morning.The weekend’s coming up, so how about meeting me for brunch on Saturday morning at the Morning Glory in Old Lyme. They have wonderful food there. The weather is supposed to be great, and the outdoor tables overlook a pond which usually has swans floating by and you often see kayakers as well.”

“Okay, Sam. I can’t believe you didn’t jump at my invitation. Makes me respect you even more. See you Saturday!”

On the way out, Ann noticed me getting up with a lady at my table and our eyes met briefly. While going by their table, I nodded to Ann and said,

“Nice seeing you, Ann. Have a pleasant day!”

Ann responded, “You too, Sam.”

When outside, Liv asked me, “Are you okay after that encounter?”

“Yeah, I think so. I did feel weird, though. I’ll get used to it.”

“Alright, Sam, see you at the office tomorrow.”

“G’night, Liv. Thanks for your understanding.”

Several days later, I received a call from Ann:

“Hi Sam, just thinking about you and how you’re adjusting to our breakup. You looked like you’re doing well when I saw you at the Black Sheep the other night.”

“You looked like you weren’t doing too badly yourself, Ann.”

“I called because I think we really should draw up divorce papers,” Ann said, “I’ll have my attorney meet your attorney and set it up. I’m sure you don’t want to contest it, Sam. You know, getting my freedom also means not having to rely on you for anything. I don’t even want any alimony.”

“I think you’re right, Ann. I’m sorry it’s come to this. But as you know, I am willing to let you live your own life, not that I like it, of course. There will always be a part of you in my heart. And, if you ever need anything, please call. I love you still, and always will.”

So, dear reader, unfortunately it’s a story that’s often repeated to many others. Lucky are the ones who persist through life when faced with the continuing vacillation of the ups and downs of relationships. To marry ‘until death do us part’ is indeed the greatest goal to be achieved.

Ann and I never remarried. We formed newer relationships that gave us new adventures, and saw each other on our children’s birthday celebrations, their marriages, and our grandchildren’s parties. But, I know, however limited our 25 years together turned out to be, it still was the best of times! So much better to have loved than never to have loved. Don’t you agree, dear reader?

CHAPTER 3

Well, of course, I see Reverend Paul Ryan speaking on my exaggerated behalf at the podium. You know, he wasn’t always so reverent! He told me that he really had a difficult childhood. Some of you readers may not have had it easy growing up either and you may identify with Paul. You see, he was an only child who had to be given up to an Irish orphanage. She was a poor mother who was unemployed and unable to provide for him. When Paul’s father was around, which was rare, he was always drunk and unemployed.

At her wits’ end, Mrs. Ryan placed Paul in the Bethany Home for Children in Dublin when he was only three years old. The Home was run by the Church of England whose main goal was to care for the children of unwed mother, and for all practical matters, she was considered unwed due to her absent husband. Paul Ryan told me all about his early life, mentioning that he was badly mistreated in the Home. When children there became malnourished and sick, most of them died, he said. Years later, after Paul had left, the Home eventually was taken over by Protestant groups who helped clean the orphanage up and do a better job at caring for their young charges.

A few years later, Paul was told that he and some of the other children were going to be shipped to Australia. When he heard that all the kids that have been sent there were forced into manual labor, he planned to escape before they shipped them out with his friend, Harry. So, one night when all was quiet, Paul woke up his friend by whispering:

“Harry, wake up and don’t make a sound. It’s time to break out of here. “

“Huh?”

“Shh, be quiet and get dressed. I’ve picked out the window we can crawl out of on the first floor. But you gotta be quiet, or else the matron in charge tonight will hear us.”

“O.K., let me put on my clothes.”

“Harry, follow me and watch that third step going down ‘cause it creaks.”

As the boys were sneaking out, Harry forgot about the third step and it creaked loud enough for the night matron to be alerted. Both boys started to make a run for it down the stairs to the window, but Harry was too slow and got nabbed by the pursuing matron. But Paul quickly raised the window and got out in time. He ran away as fast as he could and headed to his mother’s house.

Mrs. Ryan was shocked to see Paul, and asked him what happened,

“Mummy, those people in the Home are mean to us kids. They don’t give us enough food. We always go to bed hungry at night There are many who are sick, and some have died! Now they want to ship us out to Australia where we would be laborers on their farms. I couldn’t take it anymore, so I had to run away! My friend Harry got caught, though. I don’t know what they’re gonna do to him. Please don’t send me back!”

“My poor Paulie,” his mother then said, “you are definitely not returning there. Somehow, I’ll try to make do. There’s a breadline around the corner every morning, and maybe I can get a piece of leftover meat from the butcher.”

“Oh, thank you, Mummy. I never want to return to that place again.”

A few days later, Mrs. Ryan saw her neighbor, Frank O’Malley, who rented an apartment next to her. He told her that he had saved enough money from his patrolman’s job in town to travel to America. He got a work visa permit to work as a patrolman in Boston, and the pay is much better than he is currently earning in Dublin. Mrs. Ryan then pleaded with him to take her son with him to America, to which Frank said that he wouldn’t be able take him because he has no visa.

“Please, Frank, I can’t provide for Paulie and I’m afraid he might get so undernourished that he might die, like so many other Irish children. Can you help him, please?”

“Mrs. Ryan, you know he has to be a relative to travel with me and get admitted to the States. The only thing I can think of is to adopt him. Only then, could he get a travel visa to go and maybe then I would be able to take him with me. I know he’s a good boy, having seen him play around the neighborhood. “

“That would be wonderful, Frank, if you could do that. It would lift a heavy burden off my shoulders to know that my son would be safe and getting a new start in life.”

“I’ll get the court papers for adoption going tomorrow, Mrs. Ryan. Then I’ll check with the American embassy to see how I can get a visa application going for Paul. I have to act quickly as my ship leaves in a few weeks!

“Frank, I don’t know how I can ever repay your kindness.”

“Well, keep your fingers crossed that I can pull this off!”

Five days later, Frank rapped on Mrs. Ryan’s door, and when she answered, he smiled as he told her he had been successful. He just needed her to sign the adoption papers indicating she could no longer afford to care for Paul, and he would then return to the courthouse with the papers.

“After that, Mrs. Ryan, I’ll be off to the American Embassy and see if I can get a visa for Paul. I don’t think there will be any problem when I show them the adoption papers.”

“Wow, Frank, I can’t believe you can pull this off. Thank you again, so much. I’ll be forever in your debt!”

A few days later, Frank told Mrs. Ryan that everything was all set, and that he would be back in a few days to pick him up with what clothing she could pack for his trip.

According to Paul, the sea voyage was long and rough, but Frank O’Malley was so happy to sail with his new charge and to the adventure that lay away for them. Paul was sick from the rocking ship at times, but he managed to hang in there. They eventually reached New York Harbor, went through customs with no issues, and then boarded a Greyhound bus to Boston.

Frank and young Paul were provided with a 2-bedroom apartment in Boston, where they remained for many years. Frank O’Malley became a model policeman and rose through the ranks. It took very little time for him to be promoted to Sergeant. He also took good care of his adopted son, seeing to his every need. He also sent letters to Mrs. Ryan informing her about Paul’s progress in his new country, of which she was so pleased to hear.

Paul was eventually enrolled in grade school there when he became of age and he became a good student. He missed his Mum terribly, but he was quick to make new friends, though some would prove to be his undoing in high school.

How does one change from being a model student in grade school? If you’re intelligent and can learn well, it becomes a matter of the friends with whom you choose to associate

and to be influenced by! Paul recounted to me that his behavior became quite an issue in school after joining up with troubled youth. He liked his cool friends. It seemed to Paul that acting out made him feel superior, and he continually sported a rebellious attitude. He started smoking regular cigarettes, at first, then joined his gang in using pot and drinking beer. He became absent from school on many occasions.

Mr. O’Malley was notified of Paul’s school behavior and absences and warned that his son’s behavior would not be tolerated. He had already had many school detentions and that he had been caught smoking in the bathrooms. A home reckoning was due. One day when his son came home from school, Mr. O’Malley confronted Paul:

“Come over here, Paul, I want to know what has happened to you. You were such a good boy growing up, polite, having good school marks, and now you’re a total disgrace! You’ve been skipping school, you’ve banded with a bunch of hoodlums, and I hear you’ve also been smoking! I’ve tried to be a good father to you, providing as well as I can. You’ve got the latest jeans and sneakers. You lack for nothing and yet you behave this way. What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know, I’m just bored with school. I met some cool guys who have a lotta fun and I like hanging with them. I know you must be upset. I’ll try to straighten out, Dad, I promise.”

Paul behaved himself for a few weeks, but it didn’t last. Much to his father’s chagrin, he started again staying out late, beyond his curfew, and again coming home smelling of alcohol. Mr. O’Malley grounded Paul and took away his allowance, and he was told that this was the last straw. Paul was told to come home directly after school and work on his homework. He again disobeyed his father by not sticking to the rules he had set up. He was so concerned about Paul’s behavior that he wanted to consult with the school. He then asked for an appointment to speak with the school counselor. Miss Anita Richards. A meeting was set up for the following week.

Frank O’Malley was taken to Miss Richards’ office for his scheduled appointment at the Boston International High School that Paul attended. She greeted him from behind her desk and asked him to sit. Frank found Anita to be a very good looking brunette, quite slim, who wore a very smart black dress with a white collar. She asked Frank about her concerns:

“I don’t know what to do about Paul, Ms. Richards, and I’m hoping that the school can help. I’ve threatened him, stopped his weekly allowance and grounded him. Despite all my efforts, he still continues to defy me. You know, Miss Richards, Paul had a rough start in life coming from a broken home in Ireland, and all. But he settled down nicely when I adopted him and brought him to Boston. He was doing so well in the primary grades. Ever since he started high school, his behavior completely changed. I know that much of his behavior is due to the friends that he pals around with who have been a bad influence on him. I can smell the beer and the cigarette smoke on him when he gets home.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. O’Malley. I checked with the staff, and I don’t have any complaints from his various room teachers, except for a few absences and an occasional comment about how they feel Paul seems to have much better abilities than what he’s demonstrating in class. The school principal is also concerned about the many absences. But thank you for bringing it to our attention. Of course, as you know, we naturally don’t have any control about who he associates with outside of school. I can schedule some counseling sessions if you want to try to get at the bottom of his problems, but I’m sure, as you say, it must be who he’s associating with.”

“Well, I think your suggestion of counseling is a good one, Miss Richards. I’ll sign my parental permission for that to take place. Thank you so much”

When Paul got to his homeroom the following day, he was told to report to Ms. Richards’ office. He grumpily marched to her office and said,

“What do you want with me, Ms. Richards?”

“Hi Paul, please have a seat. I’d like to talk with you for a few minutes, if you don’t mind. Your dad told me he was worried about you and he gave me permission to have a chat with you and to offer you a few counseling sessions to see if there’s some way that I can be of help.”

“I don’t need any help, Ms. Richards. My grades are O.K., and I get along with all the teachers at school. What’s the problem?”

“Well, for one thing, you have had quite a few absences from school, and your father said that they were never because you were sick. Also, your teachers feel you could be a better student if you really applied yourself. Your father’s concern, also, is about the bad influence you’re getting from some of your friends here at school.”

“Well, they’re my friends and I like them!”

“I’m sure you do, Paul, but can you see how you have changed since you joined them?”

“Yeah, now I have more fun and I can do things I’ve never done before that’s cool.”

“The problem is, Paul, that your behavior is way out of line. It may seem like fun to you but you’re smoking now and drinking as well. I’m not here to lecture you, only to point out to you what you’re doing that is not socially acceptable for a teenager like you. Your father is very upset as well!”

“Yeah, I do feel bad about Dad. I know he does his best by me, having saved me from my bad days in Ireland, and all. All I can tell you, Ms. Richards, is that I’ll try to break up with those guys.”

“Paul, that would be wonderful. I’ll let your Dad know about our little meeting, and I know he will be very happy.”

When Paul got home after school his dad told him that he had heard from Ms. Richards and that he was delighted that Paul was going to behave better. However good Paul’s intentions were, however, after a few months, he resumed his associations with his old friends and again came home late and smelled of beer and cigarettes. Frank O’Malley tore into his son and threatened him with more home grounding.

The following day, Paul saw his best friend, Alex Boisvert, after class and told him he was thinking of running away to somewhere like California because his father was always on his case.

“Alex, I gotta get away, I can’t take it anymore!”

“My folks are like that, too,” replied Alex.

“What do you say me and you go splitsville on them, Paul?”

“Problem is that I only have about 90 dollars to run away with.” Paul said.

“I know where my dad keeps extra bucks in the house, and I could ‘borrow’ them,” replied Alex.

“Tell you what, Alex, let’s set up a plan tonight after school. I’ll meet you in front of the school tomorrow with some extra clothes.”

“Sounds good,” replied Paul, “I’ll bring a large backpack and stuff it with clothes instead of books. See you there.”

The boys met as planned and, instead of entering the school building, they took off for the Greyhound bus station a few blocks away. They figured that they had enough money to make it one-way to San Francisco. While waiting for the bus, Alex started to have some doubts about running away and he told Paul:

“You know, Paul, I’m too nervous to be doing this. Look at me! I’m shaking like a leaf. I don’t think I can do this, buddy. Tell you what, take the extra money I’ve got and go by yourself. I really can’t do it. I’m too chicken.”

“Alex, you’re going to bail out on me? Wow! Well, I guess I really don’t blame you, though. I know it’s a crazy idea, but I still gotta go and get away. But you keep your money ‘cause I know some of that is your dad’s stash. Make sure you put it back so your dad won’t accuse you of stealing it.”

“I’m sorry to pull out on you, Paul. Tell you what, take at least my money to help you when you get there. None of that is my dad’s loot.”

“Alright I will, Alex. Wish me luck, I see the Greyhound coming in. I’ll try to write to you when I get there. Bye.”

Paul went off on his escape without a hitch. ‘Go west young man’ had often been quoted, and he was about to discover such life altering adventures there with resulting outcomes that he could never have guessed!

CHAPTER 4

THE TRANSFORMATION

Paul arrived in San Francisco the following day. His Greyhound bus dropped him off on Market Street. Typical of San Francisco, the air was damp and drizzly. None of it bothered Paul, though, as he was too excited on this September afternoon, stretching his legs from his extended sitting position, and displaying wide open eyes as he took in the sights of Frisco with mouth agape at times, seeing the beautiful architecture, and street cars for the first time. With his heavy backpack in tow, he wandered around until he found a pub, near the Ferry Building. Paul found a place at the bar, and as he was thirsty and hungry, he asked the bartender for a beer and where he could find a place to eat.

“Here’s your beer, son,” said the bartender while putting down his drink, “you look lost. Did you just come into town? I see your large backpack you just set down.”

“Yeah, I just got off the bus from Boston with many transfers. I’m sure you can tell from my accent. This is sure a long way! I gotta find a place to stay. I thought I would try the local YMCA. I heard that they might have available rooms, cheap! But right now, I’m really thirsty. Bring a beer, would you?”

After his third beer, the bartender said to Paul that he had had enough.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I need some food; got any more nuts? “Here’s more for you, son. Not any of my business, but why did you travel all the way from Boston to come here? You don’t even have any connections in this town, do you?”

“I had to get away from home and try to live somewhere else, that’s all.”

“Runaway, eh? What’s your problem?” asked the bartender.

“Nothing much if you count growing up in an abusing orphanage in Ireland, leaving my mother at the age of 7, getting adopted, coming to a strange country, to a town named Boston. I settled in at first but when I got older I joined up with a rough high school gang, skipping school, getting drunk and smoking whatever. I don’t know why I did it. I guess I was just trying to get away as far as possible from my adopted father. He was always on my case. Not that I blame him; he did his best raising me. I’m such an ungrateful loser! I don’t have a job, no future. I’m a worthless case!”

“Boy, you are down on yourself, and you’re too young to be talking like that. Look, pal, my name’s Bill,” continued the bartender, “what’s your name?”

“Paul, Paul Ryan. ”

“Look, Paul, I’ve seen plenty of alcoholics in this bar during the 10 years that I’ve been here, and life always looks so bleak to so many of them. Even when they attend AA meetings, so many still go back to the booze. But you’re still very young and you can still change if you’re willing to do it. Listen to me! All those things that have happened in your life are no excuse for you to throw your young life away. Paul, I’m going to give you my two-bits worth of pseudo-psychological advice. O.K., right here and now, I want you to stop thinking about your past,” continued Bill, “that life is all gone, in the past, and you can’t do anything about it. Now, pretend that you’ve just been born and that you have no past whatsoever. No Ireland, orphanage, adopted father or anything! You’re a brand-new person! Now think about what you want to do with the rest of your life. You’re sitting here right now on this bar stool on this day, June 10th, 2013. I want you to focus completely and think only about your future and what you want to do in your life.”

“Yeah, that sounds easy, Bill, but I don’t think I can get rid of this garbage in my head that easily.”

“Listen to me. It’s only garbage and it needs to be thrown away like all trash. Remember, you have to think that the new you now have a new life starting right now and knows nothing of your past. Grab the brass ring, my friend, and run with it.”

“Hi, I don’t want to interrupt you two, but I couldn’t help but overhear your discussion from the table over there. My name is Oliver Lathrop and I think I can help this young man.”

“Yeah, he does need some help, Oliver, we need to hook him up with AA or some agency in town. Do you know anybody?”

“You know, Paul, Bill is only trying to help you here and he is so right to have you try to erase your past like that. I happen to be a psychiatric social worker and I strongly believe in cognitive therapeutic approaches which stress mind control over personal issues. You know, we all act like we think, so if you have faulty thoughts, they need to be rearranged. I strongly believe that AA might be a good place to start. First, though, I would like to help you decide who you might want to be for the rest of your ‘new’ life. If you can come to a prayer meeting at St. Agnes’s Church on Friday evening around 6:00 o’clock, I’d like to introduce you to Father Tom. It’s just around the block from here Will you come?”

“I don’t know, Oliver. I’m not very religious. The Catholic nuns in the orphanage turned me off. They were supposed to take care of me and the other kids back in Ireland when my mother dropped me off there, but we were mostly neglected. I’m lucky I ran away from there.

“Listen Paul, many people have sad tales from their past but those that can overcome are the real winners in life. So, what do you have to lose? Go for it. If it doesn’t suit you, you can always leave,” said the bartender.

Oliver said, “I’ll tell you what, Paul, you probably don’t have a place to stay tonight. Come over to my house for a good meal and a bed. I’ll let my wife know we’ll have a guest tonight, and you can find out if Father Tom can help you tomorrow.”

“Wow, you would do that for me, Oliver? You don’t even know me. Thanks. Like Bill says, what have I got to lose?”

On the way out, Paul hollers to the bartender, “Thanks for all the advice, Bill. I don’t know if I can forget my past, but I’ll try!”

“What past are you talking about,” replied the bartender, “you are officially brand new right now!”

Oliver drove Paul to his home and introduced him to his wife, Ann.

“It’s awful nice of you, Mrs. Lathrop, to put me up overnight like this. I don’t want to be any trouble to you.”

“Nonsense, Paul, it’s no trouble at all. Please call me Ann.”

“O.K. if you say so, Ann. Do you have any chores that I can do for you?”

“Please don’t think that you are obliged to earn your stay here, Paul.

We’re more than happy to have you stay here. I’m sure that Oliver will see to it that he connects you with Father Tom tomorrow after the prayer meeting.”

“Ollie, would you show Paul the guest bedroom and have him clean up? Dinner will be ready in about 30 minutes.”

“Paul, I see you don’t have many clothes with you. You and I are about the same size. Let me get you some jeans and a fresh shirt.”

“Oliver, you’re just too kind. I don’t know how to repay your kindness.”

“Not a problem, Paul, please make yourself at home. After breakfast I’ll show you around town. Frisco has some beautiful architecture and sights to see. Later, I’ll introduce you to Father Tom following his 6 o’clock service at St. Agnes’s.”

Oliver took Paul to see Father Tom the following evening and introduced him as someone who needs guidance after a long struggle growing up, getting in trouble, and using drugs and booze. After learning about him Father Tom asked Paul how serious he was about wanting to change his life and allowing God to lead him.

“You have to understand, Father, I really don’t have much faith after all I’ve been through. The only person I loved was my mother and she kept trying to get rid of me. The sisters at the convent in Ireland were very abusive and yet they represented Christianity. How can I believe in some spiritual guidance when all around me is failing me?”

“Paul, that is exactly when you need spiritual guidance. If everything was perfect in your life you would not need help from the Almighty. What I think you need, Paul, is a place that will allow you to think about who you are and not who you were. You know there’s a good biblical reference that applies to you rather nicely, Paul. In chapter 2, Corinthians, 5-17, I quote: ‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come.’ You need a fresh start in your young life. If you’re willing, I’ll call the Monastery of St. John in San Francisco and see if they can fit you in. You will find, Frank, that the Monastery is a place that will stress your search for meaning in life and to bring you closer to God. If you don’t fit in, you can always leave. What do you say?”

“A monastery and live like a monk? Wow, I just can’t imagine that. But, I guess, as drastic as that is, what have I got to lose? I have no other options except to keep on drinking and continue to waste my life away.”

Paul spent another couple of weeks with the Lathrops until a vacancy came up at the monastery. Meanwhile, he met with Oliver daily at his office so that he could begin some cognitive therapy, focusing on rearranging his thought processes that would help clear his mind from his past experiences and help build a plan for his ‘new” identification!

Paul was finally notified that he could enter and be accepted as a novitiate in the Monastery of St. John. He eventually realized in the first year that monastic life was too austere for him. Nevertheless, he received enough religious exposure to whet his appetite for furthering his goal of serving the Lord. Father Tom was able to secure a scholarship for Paul from a religious grant set aside for aspiring priests. He first enrolled in Southeast Community College in San Francisco and then transferred to City College there where he achieved a bachelor’s degree in theology and psychology. With continuing financial backing from Father Tom, Paul then applied and got in at Yale Divinity School in New Haven where he eventually earned his D.Div. with a minor in psychology.

One day Paul decided to return to San Francisco and visit his bartender friend, Bill, at the Red Dog Saloon. He walked in wearing his priest’s collar. “Is that you, Paul? I don’t believe it! You’ve become a priest? I hadn’t heard from you, so I always wondered what had happened. I did hear from the Lathrops, though, who said that you were headed for a monastery somewhere.”

“Thank you for turning me around, my friend. What wonderful advice you gave me, Bill, about starting my life all over again by forgetting my past life! How can I ever thank you for setting me straight! You’ve made a new man out of me and I’ll never forget you. So, I just stopped by to say thanks as I’m headed for my first assignment at St. Agnes’s in Niantic, CT.”

“I’m so proud of you, Paul, or is it Father Paul now?”

“I’ll always be ‘Paul’ to you, Bill. Pray for me as I begin to serve my first parish as an associate priest.”

“So, back East for you, eh Paul? What about your father back in Boston? Are you planning on visiting him? He would be so proud of you despite what happened.”

“Yes, I’ll make a point on seeing dad back home. You know I hold no grudge whatsoever against him for putting his foot down when I misbehaved. In fact, I owe him big for bringing me to America and adopting me. I was such a profligate. Talk about being ungrateful for a man who was kind enough to adopt me and raise me.”

“Well, we all grow up eventually, Paul, and I’ll tell you, you sure have!”

“There’s no way I could have done it without your insisting that I forget my past. I’ll never forget your guidance, Bill, and the help of Oliver and Ann Lathrop, which reminds me that I must stop by and see them next before I leave and thank them also for their help. I’ve already said goodbye to Father Tom and thanked him too. What’s that old saying that it takes a whole village at times to raise a child? Well, you guys were my village!”

“Do you want a beer before you leave, Paul?”

“No, thanks, Bill. I haven’t touched a drop of beer or liquor since I last saw you, and it’s going to stay that way.”

“Good luck, Father Paul, you will be in my prayers. Go save those souls!”

“Bye, Bill, and God bless you!”

The first thing Paul did was visit his dad in Boston.

Father Paul Ryan was sent to a few other parishes before being assigned as head pastor at St. Catherine’s in East Lyme, CT. He became an excellent speaker, and his reputation grew. He could bridge the more abstract theological concepts into more concrete messages that people could understand. The congregation loved him.

CHAPTER 5

THE SECRET

I now spy with my little eye my good buddy, Michael Windham, in the last row. He’s nearly 90 and in good health. We grew up together in East Lyme, Connecticut. We only lived a few streets away from each other and attended elementary and high school there. He told me an astonishing story about his encounter with Father Ryan when he was younger.

It happened on one particular beautiful Sunday morning while attending church at St. Catherine’s. Sitting alone in the front pew, Michael was accustomed to his relative isolation. He usually found that church seating was always sparse in the front pews. Most parishioners favored the back rows where they could be the first to leave following the service. People are really funny, Michael thought, they want the front of the bus, the middle of the road and the back of the church! Only the more brave and fervent souls generally position themselves up front. They become the unofficial leaders of the many standing, seating and genuflecting moves the Catholic rituals call for during the service.

Father Paul lectured on the pulpit that morning on the mystery of faith acknowledging that to become a believer in Christ appears to be tantamount to blowing away the reality base of facts of which we’re accustomed. We tend to believe only what our senses dictate. However, Father Paul added,

“We all should be accepting the Lord as our God and Savior on the basis of understanding that there are some things more mysterious in life than what appears to be.” Father Paul continued, “Faith sees the invisible, believes the incredible and receives the impossible.”

That’s a hard reach for many people, but not so for Father Ryan and Michael. To illustrate his point further, Father Paul quoted Emily Dickinson, a famous poet who lived as an agnostic recluse in Massachusetts, who never had much belief in a supreme being and yet penned the following: *“I never saw a moor,*

*I never saw the sea,*

*Yet I know how the heather looks,*

*And what a wave must be.*

*I never spoke with God,*

*Nor visited in heaven,*

*Yet certain am I of the spot,*

*As if the chart was given.”*

“Now I challenge all of you to grow in your faith and give your all to God without questioning that he exists. Look about you; he is everywhere! He is present in the miracle of newborn babies, the beauty of fresh fallen snow, the white poppies and other flowers that spring forth on the new green grass that clothes the earth, the majestic hills and mountains whose peaks form the earth’s landscape, to the wondrous ocean with its bounty of seafood. God is everywhere my friends; He is manifested in thousands of ways.”

On this beautiful spring Sunday morning, parishioners were filing out of church to the sound of robins and finches. The air was cool and refreshing. Father Paul was ‘pressing the flesh’ at the front door and listening to the kudos of his excellent sermon. Mrs. Newcombe, walking out of church, complimented him on yet another excellent sermon by saying: “I just don’t know how you keep coming up with such wonderful sermons, Father.”

To which he modestly but humorously replied, “You know. Mrs. Newcombe, my secret to my sermons is to follow George Burns’s advice that a good sermon must have a good beginning, a good ending and to have the two as close to each other as possible.”

Father Ryan became a gifted orator who always packed in messages from the bible while interspersing everyday meaning to his parishioners. An avid reader who majored in Literature and Humanistic Psychology at Harvard and who then graduated from Yale Divinity School, Paul Ryan was always at ease quoting famous essayists and poets. Indeed, St. Catherine’s Mass attendance had grown exponentially since he was assigned there 25 years ago. Bishop Martin marveled how this priest had impressively become the pied piper of the masses.

Michael Windham was one of the last to file out of church and he approached his busy pastor,

“Will you have time for a relaxing walk this afternoon, Father?”

“Sure, Michael, just give me about a half-hour to change out of my robes. Meet me in the back of the parish house.”

It was a beautiful spring day as Father Ryan and Michael followed the path behind the parish house which wove its way for a hundred yards around several barren oak trees that hadn’t yet pushed out their green cover. The path they took was lined with loose stones that crunched noisily under their feet. The walkers passed several early flowering azalea bushes and budding trees that appeared to welcome their chance to renew their birth. Father Paul and Michael then came upon a small clearing in the woods which was devoid of overhanging branches and which was lit by a shaft of sunlight. The clearing also overlooked a verdant meadow abuzz with finches, sparrows and an occasional cardinal. There on the side of the path rested an old wooden bench that appeared to beckon to them. They both sat and took in the pastoral view that lay before them.

“Michael, I’ll let you in on a little secret,” said Father Ryan, “that I have never told anyone else. But you must swear to keep it a secret.”

“A secret? What on earth do you mean, Father?”

“It was a few years ago, Michael, when I used to take my usual walk after church behind St. Catherine’s and sit here on this bench and pray. I didn’t know what was happening to me. I kept getting these weird vibes as if someone was watching me. When I began to walk back, the weird feeling disappeared, only to reappear again when I returned and sat back down on this bench. It was really strange. It’s hard to describe. The feeling gave me a sense of calmness and peace that I have never felt before. I would just sit here and pray in complete solitude and feeling so serene. I would then close my eyes, feel my breath inhaling and exhaling and become more aware of my heartbeat. Maya Angelou once said, ‘Listen to yourself, and in that quietude, you might hear the voice of God’. Could that had been happening to me, Michael? I don’t know. So, you can see why I keep coming back here so often.”

“I don’t get it, Father, but it’s nice to have a special place to go to when you feel stressed out, I’m sure.”

“True, but I think there’s more to it than that. Michael, take out your cell phone from your pocket and try to make a call.”

“O.K. here goes. Well, I can’t, Father, my cell phone has no signal.”

“Exactly, Michael, that’s what makes this so odd.”

“But Father, there’s nothing new in having dead spots for cell phones. That happens in many places, particularly where there are few cell towers!”

“Well yes, I do realize that Michael, but if you move a few feet off that bench in any direction, you’ll find that your cell phone has a full signal. There’s something about this spot in particular. I call it a live spot because, while it cuts me off from the outside world, it connects me emotionally and spiritually to some presence. I come and sit in this quiet clearing daily and pray for humanity and I often get this wonderful feeling of serenity and peace. It’s wonderful and I can’t explain it. As Shakespeare once said in Hamlet and I paraphrase, ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,’ and I add, than can be rationally explained by man.”

“Wow, that is strange.”

“Yes, it is but for the same reason, please keep it a secret, Michael, people will think I’m losing it. And maybe they might be right!”

“Mum’s the word from me, of course. If you don’t mind, Father, could I also return to this spot for some contemplation of my own?

“Of course, Michael, feel free to share this quiet clearing away from civilization, if you will. Hopefully, you’ll get those same wonderful feelings I’ve been blessed with.”

“By the way, when do you think you’ll want to retire, Father Ryan? You’ve been such a busy pastor here at St. Catherine’s for decades now, and you’re not getting any younger!”

“I don’t really know, Michael. I really never give it much thought. I’m only 75, for goodness sake! I love what I’m doing, serving the lord and helping save people’s souls. What better calling in life could anybody want and what would I ever do in retirement anyway? You know there’s a saying by Barbara Larking that goes something like this: ‘We don’t stop dancing when we grow old; we grow old when we stop dancing!’ Besides, I would miss our monthly walks together where you and I discuss so much of life and now our little hideaway secret!”

“As far as I’m concerned, I hope you never retire. I’ve learned so much from you.”

“You know, Michael, I may be your spiritual teacher but I’ve learned much from you too. The mentor often learns much from his protege. In many ways, Michael, you and I are like two peas in a pod. You were only thirteen when you came to Mass one day after having spent your childhood in an orphanage. As you know, I too survived after having been placed in a home in Dublin. But also, you had a religious experience at that orphanage that occurs to so few people. Have you ever thought about studying for the priesthood yourself?”

“You know, Father, I have thought much about it, but I don’t seem to have the calling to become a priest like you did. I do believe in God, of course, and that angelic vision I had when my brother, Alan, died in the hospital will stay with me for the rest of my life. I was probably just hallucinating being overwrought from the loss of my brother. After all, why of all the people should I get such a visitation from an angel? I’m just a plain boy with no special talent of any kind.”

“God moves in mysterious ways, Michael. Think of Mary’s apparition to just regular children in Lourdes and Fatima, as an example. I know it’s hard to conceptualize but look what happened to you at the orphanage in which you were brought up. I heard that your parents had to give you and your siblings up to the orphanage because your family was near starvation during the depression years. Although you missed your family terribly, all you Windham children settled in over the many years you were there. But, a terrible event occurred while you were there.

CHAPTER 6

“I heard about your big brother, Alan, who became so enraged when he found out the orphanage’s priest had tried to sexually violate little Christine in his office. Upon hearing her scream, the priest held her mouth closed so tightly that he broke her neck. Allan heard about this from the nuns and barged into the priest’s office and confronted him. Angry words were exchanged and a scuffle ensued. Then the priest drew a pistol from his desk and waved it at Allan. Alan was able to grab the priest’s wrist, and in so doing the gun went off shooting the priest in his head, killing him. Panicking, Alan ran out of the orphanage, bolted over the wrought iron fence that encased the orphanage grounds and ran away as fast as he could.”

“Yes, that’s true Father, but what happened next was that the police were called, reporting the shooting and killing, and notified that my brother, Allan had done the shooting and he was on the run. Police cruisers searched the nearby streets and eventually spotted him behind some fencing. Allan, feeling that the police wouldn’t believe his story, he continued to run as fast as he could away from them. He eventually became cornered in an alleyway, but he tried to scale a wall. The police yelled for him to stop, but he kept on climbing. He was then shot and wounded.”

“You then visited your dying brother at the hospital, I remember, Michael. You witnessed your brother taking his last breath.”

“Yes, I will always remember my brother. I knelt and prayed next to his bed, while holding his hand, I was bawling my eyes out. But the strangest thing happened after that. I’m sure I must have been delirious, but toward the ceiling, near the hospital window, was this bright light that lit up the room. It looked like a beautiful, smiling face that rapidly faded as soon as it appeared. Obviously, I was in shock, Father.”

““I believe that it was a message from God that was sent to you, Michael, and that means he has special plans for you.”

“I just don’t know what that plan could be.”

“Someday it will come to you, Michael.”

“By the way, Father, could you be getting a message from God yourself on this old bench in this clearing?”

“One never knows, Michael, one never knows. But I think that may be what you and I have in common, Michael. Could we have been contacted by angelic visitations?”

CHAPTER 7

As Louis Armstrong sang in his memorable “What a Wonderful World”, was a reminder that, on the whole, we do live in that world. There are many more good things happening in our world than bad ones. There is a great future that awaits each newborn, and most will arrive at their destiny unscathed, but not all are so fortunate. There are significant events that occur in one’s early life that linger throughout time due to their impacts on sustained memory. The effects of parent-child separation, as an example, especially before the first five years of life, are well documented in the psychological literature during the formative years. While inheritable traits help to form the basis of a developing personality, the lack of adequate nurturing can often modify an otherwise healthy emotional growth. Indeed, personality disorders are often traced to dysfunctional upbringing due to a child’s separation from his/her parent or suitable replacement. So too a child’s lack of closeness and bonding may result in his aloofness with others. A child who is seldom hugged or kissed by his parents, as an example, may not easily develop close relationships with others! A child may develop anxieties and fears that may hamper normal social relationships. He or she may not possibly establish basic trust in others due to having developed a foreboding dread of abandonment during his/her lifetime. This effect is often seen in that child’s future relationships with his own spouse and children where closeness is often displayed superficially.

The literature is also replete with case histories of inheritable characteristics that threaten that ‘wonderful world’ in which we live. Chief among them, of course, are the myriad traits that sentence many to abnormal development and disease. Inheritable traits also cause the many behavioral dysfunctions found in the various addictions that plague mankind. However, there are some children who are more resilient to these early disturbances and manage to somehow overcome most of their effects. There are accounts of children who have nearly starved, been beaten and neglected who nevertheless grew up to be very adjusted, and who end up contributing well to society.

That description fits another friend who appeared in the second row at my funeral gathering. Was Alex Moore lucky enough to be a survivor of his environment or was he too beset by the ravages of nature and nurture? I knew him well and he filled me in on his troublesome life.

It was on a cold March morning in Cleveland, Ohio with the temperatures hovering around 50 degrees when three-month-old Alex was left on the front steps of the UH Rainbow Babies and Children’s Hospital by his unnamed impoverished mother. She had written his first name on a piece of paper and had pinned it to the baby blanket that securely wrapped him around his whole body. The mother knew about Cleveland’s policy of accepting abandoned babies at various municipal locations with no questions asked. She decided to give up her baby because she had become pregnant during an affair with a friend who denied paternity. The mother lost her job a few years before and she had no means of support. She also did not believe in abortion and felt that at least little Alex might be able to find a good home through adoption. The hospital called the both the Child and Family and adoption. agency and asked for their help in placing baby Alex up for adoption.

The agency picked Theresa and Brian Moore from their list of adoption applicants. They knew that the couple was financially stable and had a nice home. Theresa was a science teacher at the high school and Brian was a well-paid engineer. After trying for many years, Theresa and Brian could not conceive a child. They had been on an adoption list for a few years and finally received a call from the adoption agency that little Alex needed a home. They were very happy to adopt little baby Alex, feeling their dream had finally come true.

Alex Moore recounted to me about his life saying that his life with his adopted parents was acceptable. When I asked him about what he meant as ‘acceptable’, he replied:

“Well, I can’t complain, really, Sam. I mean they became my parents after what my real mother did to me. But I also understand about her predicament at that time and wanting to do the best for me. They provided for me really well, gave me everything that I wanted, a bike, a laptop and money when I wanted it. They sent me to a private school and paid for my college that prepared me for my present profession as an attorney. It’s obviously nice to have all these material things but my family was always more formal with me. I can’t recall many hugs and kisses growing up nor comments like ‘I love you’. I’d get a pat on the back from my dad whenever I mowed the lawn or bring home a school report, and my mom would tussle my hair on occasion and rarely kiss me on the cheek. I just wish they had been more loving to me, that’s all.”

Alex made very few friends at school and college. He told me that he himself always felt reserved and standoffish around his classmates. He did not have close friends, only acquaintances. Alex did meet a fellow law student, Alicia Bennings, in college and they began dating. For the first time in his life, he had a girlfriend and he fell in love! After about a year of courtship, the couple became engaged and set the wedding for the following year following their law school graduation. Mr. and Mrs. Moore were thrilled for their son.

Alex and Alicia moved into their new apartment and in a few years gave birth to twins, David and Ronald. Life became comfortable for the new parents who loved their babies. Alicia took a few years off from her law practice. Alex told me that his own relationship with the twins became more aloof. Oh sure, he said, he would hold them, take them for walks in their double stroller and act the proud father. But he said he just felt uncomfortable with them and generally had problems cuddling them.

Nevertheless, life moved on and the Moore family settled in nicely as the family grew. Alicia would receive invitations from neighbors to parties, and of course asked her husband if he would join her. Alex would often tell her he would prefer staying home with the kids and that she should go without him. But then Alicia would say that she had a babysitter all lined up. More often than not, Alex would begrudgingly go and at least play the part of being more friendly.

Alex still managed to live fairly well while trying to compensate for his poor social skills. But then he encountered another problem.

CHAPTER 8

The Moore family moved to a middle class suburb in Old Lyme, Connecticut where Alex joined a law firm. Alicia decided to stay home with the twins for a while until they were old enough to start kindergarten. At that time, Alicia would resume her law practice.

The Mashantucket Pequot tribe was recognized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and were issued a permit to open up a gambling venue. They named the casino, Foxwoods, and their original focus was just on bingo games. Eventually, the tribe opened up a larger structure which featured card games, craps tables, keno and slots. Eventually, Foxwoods added horse racing via television. The casino became a huge success drawing gamblers from across the country and other parts of the world. Many entertainment shows were eventually added to their theater venue which additionally drew many patrons to the casino. The state of Connecticut, meanwhile, received millions of dollars in gambling revenue. Thousands of local jobs were provided at the casino, and the tribe enjoyed the accumulation of much wealth.

The opening of Foxwoods so close to Old Lyme provided an opportunity for Alex and Alicia to see some stage shows. They were particularly fond of Frank Sinatra, so when they heard the casino was going to feature him, they planned on going. After getting a babysitter, the couple got tickets, stood in long lines and finally were seated. It was during the line wait that got Alex mesmerized by the nearby slot play, watching gamblers sliding $20 dollar bills into slots, pulling down handles or pushing in buttons that would roll various colorful visual figures all combined with music, bells, etc. Alex would see sad unlucky gamblers losing money and comment to Alicia how foolish they seemed to be wasting their money like that! Once in a while, though, he noticed that a few happier ones had some good hits including a few jackpots. It was after seeing the show that Alex suggested to his wife that maybe they should just drop in a $20 dollar bill into one of the slot machines before heading home. Much to their surprise, they hit a jackpot for $1000 dollars! They immediately quit after getting paid off. On the way home, they discussed their win but Alicia was the one to observe such beginners luck, and of course not to ever expect to hit it big like that again. Alex responded, “Of course, you’re right, that’s how you get roped in and people think you can hit it big all the time and then they get hooked.”

*Do you think that Alex listened to his own advice, dear reader?*

A few weeks would go by and Mr. & Mrs. Moore would need a Saturday night break, get a babysitter, and return to Foxwoods for another show. They again stopped by a slot machine after the show and gambled $20 dollars each on slots next to each other. Coming up empty, they returned home, and noted to each other about the waste of $40 dollars that could have been used to buy groceries.

Alex attended an attorney conference at Foxwoods one day and, during a meeting break, he wandered out of the conference room onto the casino floor where gamblers were busily playing the slot machines. Alex noted how bright and colorful the slot machines were with constant ringing sounds accompanying the roll of the symbols displayed on all machines. He particularly watched one gambler who was particularly lucky on a dollar slot machine that regularly doled out good hits. Alex could not watch anymore as he needed to return to his conference. When the attorney conference ended, Alex returned to watch the lucky gambler and became interested in trying a similar dollar machine himself. He had about $100 dollars on him, so he decided to try a similar dollar slot machine the gambler was playing. Betting $3 dollars with each pull of the slot, Alex found that the $100 dollar he had on him was quickly spent with very few small payouts. So, he left for home, dejected, and never spoke to Alicia about his gambling loss, only about the outcome of his conference.

“So, how was your conference, dear?”, asked Alicia.

“Not bad, I got some info on ways to procure more clients through advertising on various media which I already knew about anyway.”

A few weeks later, Alex had to meet with a client in Mystic over a land dispute and, Foxwoods being nearby, he decided to stop by the casino and again try his luck at the slots. He slipped a $100 bill into one slot, bet $2 dollars, and he immediately won $10,000 dollars. Overjoyed with his jackpot, Alex decided to move to other slot machines and continue his gambling. After a few more hours of play, he netted $9,500 dollars and went home feeling lucky and rich! Getting home by 7 o’clock, though, Alicia was angry saying his dinner was now all cold, and where had he been all this time anyway?

“My meeting with my new client took forever,” retorted Alex, “and I can’t control how late I can be sometimes. You know that!”

“I do know that, of course, Alex, but have you heard of a thing called a cell phone?”

“My cell was dead. I forgot to charge it overnight. I’m sorry, Alicia, I could have borrowed my client’s phone, I guess.”

Steaming, Alicia said, “I’ll warm up your cold dinner.”

Alex was mesmerized about his good luck at the casino and decided to visit Foxwoods during his lunch, spend a few luckless dollars and return to work. He would call home after work on occasion and tell Alicia he was running late.. Of course he would return to Foxwoods and spend about an hour trying to hit it big again. His gambling habit never abated as Alex would sneakily continue to gamble at the casino. Meanwhile, he had spent the entire jackpot he once won and now was digging into his savings account. Alicia eventually became suspicious about activities and called him on it.

“Alex, I called you at the office at 5:00 o’clock today so that you could stop on the way home and get a quart of milk at Stop & Shop. Your secretary said you left around 4:00 and she didn’t know where you were.”

“Oh yeah, I had to meet with a client at his office,” Alex lied, “and it took forever to convince him to settle his case.”

“Hmm, doesn’t your secretary know about your client meetings?”

“She usually does, so I don’t know how she forgot.”

“You know, Alex, I don’t mean to sound suspicious, but are you having an affair with someone? There have been too many times when you arrived late coming home from work. Also, I noticed that you’ve withdrawn thousands of dollars from your savings. What’s going on, Alex?

Alex, feeling cornered, decided to open up to Alicia,

“I don’t know what got into me, Alicia. First, feel relaxed that this has nothing to do with another woman. Second, know that that I’ve become uncontrollably infatuated with another issue. I am a gambling addict! I feel terrible that I’ve been sneaking around and not letting you know about my secret trips to the casino. I had no idea that my slot playing would become so addictive. I really don’t know what’s happening to me. I need help!”

“Wow,” replied Alicia, “is that why you’ve been so tardy after work?”

“It all started when you and I went to Foxwoods to see Sinatra. I noticed some gamblers were winning big on the slots. Then you and I won $1000 dollars one night there. So I decided to go back time after time because I felt it was so exiting.”

“But didn’t you know that you can’t win all the time?” said, Alicia.

“Of course I knew that, but I couldn’t stop. I wanted to but the excitement I felt was too overwhelming. I’m really sorry, Alicia, for lying to you and sneaking out to the casino. I’ll get help.”

Alex called and got an appointment with Dr. Emily Young from Yale New Haven Hospital’s Behavioral Addiction clinic the following week.

After introducing herself, she asked Alex to sit next to her desk and to tell his story. He explained his gambling concern, the family and financial impact on their lives, and his inability to control his gambling.

Dr. Young said, “Alex, what you’re going through has become almost routine in the lives of many. You see your problem as gambling behavior, and rightly so. But did you know the general public at large is so addicted in so many other ways, as well? People are addicted to video games and their smart phones, and they spend hours just constantly viewing them. Now, to make the lure of gambling even worse, people can gamble on them as well!”

“I know what you mean, Doctor Young, I’m always on my phone as well, looking at social media, checking on the weather, my email, iMessages and others. Why are we so lured to all this information.”

“First, don’t get me wrong about my concerns that people have for basic information. In this modern era it’s wonderful to have so much available. My real concern, of course, has to be around the excessive use of modern technology. To get back to your problem gambling, Alex, you have to know that, in a sense, you have a psychological problem.”

“You mean, I’m crazy, Doc?”

“No, of course you’re not crazy. Although the definition often holds for being crazy is by repeating something that is maladaptive and expecting a different outcome. But, let’s call it mental maladjustment, for argument’s sake. You keep doing something that you recognize is overall harmful to you, your family and your future despite the fact that you are fully aware that you can’t beat the system. Despite some arbitrary wins, you know you’re going to lose eventually. You are aware of that and you still are drawn to those slot machines.”

“I know what you’re saying, but I don’t have any self control when it comes to being drawn into the casino. Which, by the way, goes against my own personality. Otherwise, I feel I have control over all other aspects of my life.”

“Well, let’s see if you can fix that. Notice, I said, let’s see if YOU can fix that. For your homework, Alex, I want you to get Adam Alter’s book called *Irresistible* which should help explain your dilemma Our time is up. Check with my secretary for your next appointment, Alex.”

One week later, Alex went back to see Dr. Young. With some difficulty, he was able to stay away from Foxwoods during the week.

“Please come in and sit, Alex, and let me know how you managed this past week,” said Dr. Young.

“Well, Doc, it wasn’t easy but I did not gamble at all.”

“Great, Alex. Have you had a chance to read any part of *Irresistible*?”

“Haven’t received it yet but I did order it from Amazon.”

“Good. I think when you get into it you’ll find some mind-blowing facts about addiction which, hopefully, will explain some of the gambling craving you’ve been experiencing. It’s helpful to understand from where this behavior comes.”

“I hope you’re right, Doctor Young. I still can’t believe that this happened to me. It’s so unlike me!”

“Let me ask you some questions about your background. Do you have any family members who love gambling?”

“My father loved to gamble on horse races, I remember he used to take me to them when I was young, and he often went to neighborhood card games. Nobody ever thought anything about it, though. No one else I can think of might be a gambler though.”

“The reason I ask is that the literature does show gambling traits in many families. Next question. Do you obey traffic laws, like not exceeding the speed limit at times, coming to a full stop at intersections, etc.?

“I have to admit that I do tend to go beyond the limit but not excessively so. Also, I do tend to be impatient at stop signs. But, isn’t that normal for most drivers?”

“To an extent, sure. But what I’m looking for in your behavior is whether it shows any indication of more aggressive acts on the road which often signal impulsive and risky tendencies which would make you a good candidate for risky behaviors on the slot machines as well. Tell me, Alex, have you been increasing your betting, say, from twenty-five cents to say, a dollar or more?”

“Yes, I even tried a five-dollar machine which pays off faster with larger wins but of course needs heavier betting.”

“Probably also when you took your greater losses as well. Alex, so that you can try to understand your addictive behavior better, *Irresistible,* by Alter, describes slot play as ‘the crack cocaine of behavior, electronic morphine, and the most virulent strain of gambling ever in man.’ Can you imagine that gambling can be more alluring than drugs, smoking and alcohol?”

“No, I can’t.”, said Alex.

“There really is an addiction epidemic of various sorts going on in this country as well as worldwide since we’ve seen the advent of viewing technology,” said Doctor Young. “The dazzle of colorful lights combined with happy-sounding music adds to the lure to entertain. Bored individuals are particularly drawn to the excitement felt with colorful games and chances to win. Studies show that parts of the brain, particularly centered around the pleasure center of the amygdala are triggered when gambling excitement fires them up. There was a study using college students which posed a question, ‘Which would you rather have, your smart phone taken away, or your finger cut?’ and overwhelmingly the students chose getting their finger cut rather than losing the phones that addicted them. Can you imagine the power of addictive behavior, Alex, even when it comes to visual stimuli? Gambling has similar properties, and whether you’re hooked on a phone or a slot machine, the effect on the brain’s pleasure center remains the same. Our time is up, Alex. When we meet again next week, I want you to think of a strategy by which you can solve your addiction. See you next week.”

The following week Doctor Emily Young asked Alex about what strategies he might have come up with during the past week to keep him away from the lures of the casino. Alex replied, “I talked it over with Alicia and we put our heads to get her to come up with a plan. First, we agreed that I needed some monitoring of my whereabouts as didn’t trust myself to keep away from gambling. So we decided on her keeping tabs on where I am through the “Find my” app on our iPhones. This way, Alicia would always know where I am as my phone is always with me.”

“That is a good strategy, Alex, but what’s to stop you from leaving your phone in the office while you decide to drop into the casino? Alicia would then think you’re still at the office. Have you thought of any other ways that would prevent you from even entering the casino?”

“Hmm, I guess I could get myself barred from the casino by asking Foxwoods to deny me admission.”

“Very good thinking, Alex. You know, once you’re banned from Foxwoods you could never go back because they could have you arrested for trespassing and your name embarrassingly might be printed under police matters in the newspaper. You know, Alex all addictions are based on availability. Remove the unwanted stimulus and you won’t be able to be affected. Think of alcoholics without any booze being available, cigarettes and drugs also not available, problem solved! Unfortunately, these agents of poisons are still available. Now, Alex, can you think of other outside support for your gambling addiction besides seeing me?”

“I saw an ad for Gamblers Anonymous in our paper recently, and I read that they meet on Saturdays at 11 at our local library. I am planning on starting there this Saturday.”

“Wonderful, Alex, I knew you could find a solution with my little prodding. Let me tell you that in all the years that I’ve been dealing with addictive personalities, you show the best chance for success. You won’t need me anymore, Alex. If you ever want to talk again, you know how to contact me.”

“Thank you so much for your guidance, Dr. Young.”

“You really did it yourself, Alex, which is always my goal in treatment and that is not to give advice as much as to have my clients find their own solutions. And you did that admirably, Alex. Don’t forget to read *Irresistible* when you get it, and say hello to Alicia for me.”

“I will, and thank you again.”

Alex did indeed have himself barred from the casino. When he was escorted out of the casino, Alex asked his escort, “Do you have any other gamblers who volunteer to be banned from the casino?

The escort responded, “We average about six gamblers per week who ban themselves due to lack of gambling control. Even though we’re always happy to have gamblers play our games, we never want anyone to become addicted.”

Alex attended GA meetings regularly on Saturdays for a few years, and remained free from the terrible gambling lure that had caused strife within his family along with the financial losses that he had faced. He was so happy with the psychological shackles removed from him. Eventually, he told Alicia that he really feels that if the casino was still open to him, he would not feel any urge to play the slots any longer.

The Moore family settled in quite nicely after their recent dilemma. Alex came out of his social shell more after the twins married and had their own children. Alicia was so pleased to observe Alex dote so much on their grandchildren thereby helping to overcome the early effects of his childhood that were plagued with his loveless, and uncaring foster parents.

CHAPTER 9

These are are only a very few of the myriad stories that reveal the human adventure. You are on your own journey. And the journey, despite the occasional wrong road you may have taken, is well worth the trip!

Please remember, dear reader, that you are on a special individual adventure while you’re alive. Enjoy all the nadir and apex stages of it. Also realize that we are very much part of nature; no more no less. Our bodies are merely returned to Mother Earth. As we exit and say goodbye to our adventure, know that we are returning to our humble beginnings. As Elizabeth Frye once penned,

*Do not stand at my grave and weep,*

*I am not there, I do not sleep.*

*I am the thousands winds that blow,*

*I am the diamond glints on snow,*

*I am the sun on ripened grains,*

*I am the gentle autumn rains.*

*When awaken in the morning hush,*

*I am the swift uplifting rush*

*Of quiet birds in circling flight,*

*I am the star shine at night.*

*Do not stand at my grave and cry,*

*I am not there, I did not die.*

So try to enjoy your earthly existence. For you, it’s the best there is. You may also find other adventures after you exit your normal life. I plan on finding out, and I’ll let you know what more awaits you beyond the grave. Exciting, isn’t it?

THE END?