

# **Imagine Waking Up**



**Russell Sisson**

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Xerellian Press

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## PROLOGUE

Imagine waking up and finding out that you are not really who you thought you were. Better yet, the “you” that you thought you were, doesn’t even exist anymore. That person just faded away into the mist. It’s like you are someone totally brand new. New, in the sense that everything about you is completely unrecognizable. No matter how many times you shake and rattle your head or rub your blurry, tired eyes, you have no idea who you are.

Now I know that just sounds a bit far fetched. You would have to be on some really weird drugs to find yourself in this kind of situation. Before you jump to any such conclusion though, let me explain that I face this every morning when I wake up. Let me begin by describing my typical morning routine. It kind of goes like this.

I am an early morning riser. I usually find myself waking up to the darkness of a room yet to be filled with the light of the sun coming through the windows. After laying there for what seems like an inordinate amount of time, I begrudgingly roll to the side of the bed and right myself for the next event in my morning routine. Which is starting my day. Sounds simple enough, huh? Believe me, it can require extraordinary effort and determination. Getting out

of a comfortable bed is just something most people tend to put off for as long as possible. Myself included.

Be that as it may, when I finally make the decision to get out of bed, that first step away is a bit unsteady. Directed, yet still somewhat wobbly. After a moment or two, I reset my balance and I am on my way to what, hopefully, is the bathroom. A place of comfort and relief, if you know what I mean.

Finding the door of the bathroom, my hand automatically reaches up and to the right. I don't really need to direct my hand. It just does what it has done hundreds, if not thousands, of times before. That is, to flip the switch that will fill the room with light. The switch that will light up my life. Literally!

What I have just described is fairly representative of most people's mornings I think. That being said, what happens after I flip on that light is quite a bit different from the average person practicing this typical morning drill. Normally, the light is switched on and the person being reflected back at you in the mirror is someone a bit disheveled, but somewhat familiar. Your hair may be a mess. Your face in need of special attention. Your eyes are blurry to the fog of a new day that you have awakened to. Still, it's you.

For me, what happens is a shocking realization. It's not me in the mirror! It's not the "me" that I went to bed as. The "me" I went to bed as is gone. Yet, I am somewhat aware that there was a previous "me". That "me" is now fading away, slowly being replaced by the past of someone

new. Someone else that I will become more familiar with as the day goes forward. All I have for the moment, is an inkling of what that person is supposed to do today. An expectation of a future “me”. My past? Well, like I said, there is a past, but who’s past is it? It’s the past of the person who I am becoming. A past starting to come into view, climbing its way out of the darkness. Filling in the gaps. Taking on a definite clarity, that will go on to shape the future “me”.

I know this all sounds a bit confusing. Suffice it to say, that every time I wake up, my life starts anew. As a totally different person. When that light turns on in the bathroom, I never know who I am going to be that day. But once the light is on, it all starts becoming clearer. I gain a purpose. I obtain a goal. I procure an objective. I get a past.

Is it disconcerting? Of course it is, but the feeling goes away quite quickly as the memories kick in. That's just the way it is. Sometimes the old “me” is someone I liked. Someone I was comfortable with. Other times, it is a blessing that the old “me” is gone. It is only disconcerting because it is so unnerving.

Is it exciting? Yes, in a way. There is a certain exhilaration in knowing that each day is going to bring something totally new and different. Each day becomes an opportunity. To learn something original. The only unfortunate part about it is that it only lasts for so long. Then, it’s over.

Believe me. I have had plenty of time to overthink this. The one thing that I can always count on is time. Time to try

and figure myself out. There is some consolation in knowing that it is only a matter of time before I will know who I am. It happens the same way every time and, as far as I know, it will continue to happen this way into the foreseeable future. Until, as at such time it doesn't. Then what? That's what I don't know. Is that when I will for all intents and purposes cease to exist? Die?

My death is another subject all together. I think about that too. A lot. It's that overthink thing. I have no set expectations as to how long I am supposed to live. I don't even really know how long I have been alive. I seem to recall that I have experienced many lives over what could be called my life. But as far as my death, I can say with some certainty that I don't think that I have ever died.

Other people tend to view their lives as beginning at birth and ending when they close their eyes for the very last time. Their body shuts down, their heart stops and their brain ceases to function. I have been both very far and very close to that eventuality, but I always seem to wake up again.

Life and death seem to be part and parcel of all that is around us. The yin and yang of each and every thing. Being of the curious type, I often wonder how my situation fits into all of this. When I contemplate this, I rely on science to help me understand how it all works. Scientific explanations just make sense. Unlike that found in the cathedrals of religion that just try to make you feel good.

As such, science theorists have discovered very important principles that guide me through the shadows.



They have entangled scientific names, but they all have to do with the concept of energy. Essentially, what they say is that everything we see, and in some cases that which we do not see, is made up of energy. People, animals, plants, rocks, planets, stars and our universe, are all made up of energy. Then, there are those other microscopic things like molecules, atoms and fundamental particles that are also, just energy. Even space, which we would normally consider to be empty, has energy.

The key takeaways are two. First, there is only so much of this energy to go around. The amount of that energy was set when the universe was born. The theory being that energy is not created or destroyed, it is merely repurposed. Second, energy follows a process of moving from a point of order to that of disorder. The quantification of how energy is transformed can be done in any number of measurable ways. But in all cases, that measurement seems to show that things increasingly randomize over time.

It's the over time thing that is important to understand. Time is understood to move in only one direction. Forward. So all things in our universe move forward in time. In that forward motion, there is a movement away from order, to that of becoming more disorganized. It's as if all things dilute over time. Things containing iron, rust over time. People, age with time. Life begins, life ends.

Underlying all of this, is the idea that there is a cause for every effect. That the effect of increasing disorder is caused by a concept of time that only progresses forward. Thus, life begets death. When we are born it's like a brand

new car, just off the showroom. We are one orderly system. As we get older, disorder in the system occurs. Such that, over our lifespan we eventually become so disorderly that our life ends. We simply rust away.

Which leads to the question of whether death begets life? In order to do so, that very disorder must somehow become orderly once again. I would argue that can actually happen. Since energy cannot be created or destroyed and is simply altered from one form to another, as life's energy expires, it is transformed into another life form's energy somewhere else. Thus, allowing death to beget life, theoretically.

Hopefully, I have not lost you at this point. Just try to embrace that as one life starts and moves forward, it inevitably leads to another life starting and also moving forward. And so on and so on.

Which brings me back to the notion that I do not really know how long I have been alive. I have been moving forward over and over again without the means of being able to count how many times I have done this. I may be able to make a feeble attempt to measure the length of my previous lives, but that's all it is. A feeble attempt.

For most people, and I certainly cannot speak for all, there is no observable information about what happens after they die. They just cease to exist. Any new form of energy that may arise from their death, is information not available to the deceased or us. The key difference between them and myself is that I am aware, somewhat, of

my previous life. My previous energy. All I have to do is look in the mirror.

It doesn't matter when that previous life occurred in the cycle of time. It could have happened in the past or it could be the "me" in some distant future. Each time a new life starts, I move forward from there to its eventual conclusion. The outcome of which may include that person simply falling asleep or, tragically, even dying. My outcome? I just wake up as somebody else.

What about the period of time where I am neither here nor there? The so-called, for lack of a better description, in-between "me"? The in-between "me" just keeps going on like the energizer bunny. Occupying the gap between one life and the next. Whatever the technical explanation may be, the bottom line is that it is as if I never die. I have been a new born baby, just making her journey through the birth canal to the world waiting outside of the womb. I have been the elderly gentleman who can't remember much anymore, but knows deep inside that the end is near. Yet, I continue to wake up and face the prospect of a brand new day. Even as my eyes close for the very last time, I know that they will open once again. How long have I been doing this? That I cannot answer.

Consider this phrase. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. What that means is that you are not limited by your past. So today, is the day to start something new. To make a change that will blossom into a future that is not determined by its past.

Is that really true for me? I guess so. I mean, each day really is my first day. The problem, if you want to call it a problem, is that the rest of my life is limited to that first day. My future is limited to how long I can stay awake. And my past? Well, when I wake up I can remember some details about the day before. Who I was before I fell asleep. What I did. Who I was with. Then, all of that morphs into who I am now. What I am to do today. Who I will be with today.

Is there any way to connect who I was with who I have become? Only if I imagine myself as, somehow, existing in between. Think of it in terms of the “stuff” that makes up our universe. Our universe is made up of matter and space. Matter, meaning stars, planets, you and I. And space, the non-empty, energy filled, void that exists all around the matter. I occupy that space. That’s what I mean by the in-between “me”. Maybe that’s why I don’t seem to die. I am simply, energy conserved. While those around me fall victim to the unforgiving laws of matter, which mandates life and death.

Meanwhile, I just keep flowing on as a field of what seems like limitless energy. Never dying. Knowing full well, that what appears to be endless, has, never the less, been predetermined at the beginning of time. When the universe began.

# **WAITING FOR THE PAIN TO STEP ASIDE**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

I try to convince myself that I don't really need to get up and out of the sack as I struggle to keep the sheets and blankets of my warm, cozy bed wrapped snugly around me. Unfortunately, the sunlight coming in the window next to my head is making it hard to do so. Reluctantly, I drag myself from my bed and toddle to the bathroom for another game of who am I today. I find that the light switch is not where I expect it to be. For some reason, I have always expected it to be on the right. Turns out, this one is on the left. Oh well. Just another minor adjustment in my morning ritual.

As I flip the light on and position myself in front of the mirror hanging high above the sink, I am a bit surprised when the appearance of a female slowly sharpens into view. I don't remember the last time I have occupied the body and mind of a woman. A young woman at that from all appearances. That's not a judgmental thing. It's just kind of confusing to me during the transformation process from one life to another. There is this past male that is lingering in the background, confronted by a female "me" that is trying to break out. Until that process completes you just have to go with the flow and allow the female "me" to take over. My guess is that I am somewhere in my early twenties, judging by the sparkle in my eyes and the lack of wrinkles on my

face. In a moment of clarity, my mind confirms my age to be twenty years.

This morning the first thing that I am grateful for is that at least I do not have to shave. That does not necessarily mean that having to shave has gone away. It has probably just been replaced by having to shave a different part of my body. There does appear to be more of a mess of hair to deal with however. That will have to wait until later. After a hot and refreshing shower to cleanse my body and clear my mind.

First things first though. What are those ugly looking lines accentuating my eyes? There appear to be dark circles under my eyes and a puffiness to my eyelids. Obviously, an indication of a heightened lack of sleep. Otherwise known as sleep deprivation. The cause? Not sure yet, but as the morning wears on and the memories surface, that will probably become more apparent.

The shower proves to be worth its weight in gold. Mamma always told me that a good shower in the morning rinses your problems away. Mamma is usually right. I am a whole new “me” after a nice hot and invigorating shower. But something deep down inside reminds me that Mamma’s old adage is not totally correct. There are some residues that are harder to get rid of than others. What they are, I don’t know at this point. Hopefully, that will also become clearer as the day wears on.

Pushing that thought aside, the time has come to deal with that mess of hair on the top of my head. Considering the amount of conditioner I put on my hair in the shower, it

should be fairly easy to manage. Combing through the last of the tangles, I decide to just let my hair dry naturally today. Next up? Dealing with my face. I have got to do something about those dark circles under my eyes. Dabbing a little eyeliner here and some makeup there, makes all the difference in the world. Oh, and those lips could use a bit of lipstick. Not a lot, but enough anyway to make them stand out. At last, after spending an inordinate amount of time primping and preening myself, I am ready to make my appearance in the kitchen. Mamma will already be there, waiting for her princess to arrive.

During the time spent in the bathroom, there has been a continuous process going on in my head of orienting myself as to who I really am. The memories of my past history are starting to be replaced with those of the person who I am today. As a result, the causes for the dark circles under my eyes are slowly starting to take on some meaning.

Mamma always starts the day off for me with a big smile and a warm welcome to a brand new day. I can't remember a time that I haven't referred to her as Mamma. That's what she is and that is who she will always be. Mamma only had one child and being an only child is who I am. I can't really remember a dad. Of course there had to be one, but I have been told that he was never really around much. Within a few short months of me being born, he apparently just kind of disappeared. There were rumors, of course, that he just moved on to another woman who caught his fancy. Mamma never confirmed that. Mamma never talks about this point in her life. All I know is that it

has always been just Mamma and me. With the exception of a slight deviation in my life that occurred a couple of years ago. I say a slight deviation, but it opened up a hole in my life that not even a long hot shower could ever hope to wash away.

When I was seventeen I got my first job. Down at Harvey's Cafe, just a few blocks from our house. Mamma and Harvey were friends, or I should say, Mamma and Harvey's wife Sheryl were the true friends in this relationship. Harvey was the head cook as he liked to say, even though he was the only cook. Sheryl spent her days huddled behind the counter next to the cash register. That and working behind the counter serving up meals to the customers. Most importantly though, it was her knack for numbers that kept Harvey's Cafe afloat. Needless to say, it was worked out that I would start my first job as a waitress helping Sheryl pass the plates. Serving food and supplying conversation for the good people down at the cafe. Although I was still just finishing up my commitment to compulsory education at the local high school, Mamma and all agreed that the extra income would be very much appreciated.

There really wasn't much to the job. Don't get me wrong. It was, at times, challenging and very exhaustive work. Hearing about all the things that people like, or more so, don't like. Accepting complaints about the food that someone else had just regarded as one of the best meals they had ever had. Learning how to juggle the orders of multiple tables and carrying as many plates of food at one time as I could. And that very first time when I broke



something? How humiliating. A plate slipping off your arm or a glass of juice tipping off the tray as you approached the table was my worst nightmare.

Harvey's Cafe was a small place with just barely five tables, a counter with as many stools, and a clientele that rarely filled up over half the seats. The part I liked the most, and the part I did the best at, was socializing with the customers. Mamma and I were well known to have the gift of gab. Seeing as we spent so much time together, we were naturally very good at communicating. Some liked to call it gossiping. We just thought we were engaging in polite social conversation. Keeping up with what was going on in the neighborhood. That being the case, it was just as easy for me to engage in that same kind of conversation with the customers. Didn't hurt that it also helped with tips.

I was always want to look up and see who had just walked into the restaurant. This time, when I heard the little bell on the door jingle, it wasn't any different. Most of the time it was just one of the regulars. I felt that noticing who had just come in gave me a jump start on what the conversation should be about. This one morning, the jingle of the bell signaled the arrival of someone I had never seen visit the cafe before. It was like those times when you do a double take just to make sure what you saw is really what you just saw. In my case, the double take was to make sure that what I just felt was not just a minor earthquake. A tremor of the heart that feels as if it just skipped a beat.

I happened to be working behind the counter at that moment. Fiddling with the dinnerware. Drying some plates and coffee cups, probably. The man, after having opened

the door, headed directly to the first open seat directly in front of me. There were plenty of seats open. We really were not very busy, even though it was a Saturday. There were only two or three other customers in the whole place. To take the stool directly in front of me?

As he sat down, he immediately started up a conversation about how hungry he was. How he didn't normally find himself going out to breakfast, especially to a place like Harvey's Cafe. I wasn't quite sure if I was supposed to take that last comment as a slam or not, but I decided to ignore it in order to find out more about this person. This person that seemed to be attracting me like a magnet that sticks to the refrigerator.

The man was quite a bit older than me, I'd say about twice as old. But there was a captivation of souls that I just could not ignore. As best as I could, I tried to cover up what must of looked to be a pretty obvious attraction. Try as I might, I could not keep my eyes from wandering back in his direction. Trying to figure out what it was about this guy that was causing such a stir of emotion. Then I was caught. What I thought was an inconspicuous glance in his direction was met with an oh-so-obvious nonambiguous look in return. Quickly shifting my attention away, I made what I am sure was a futile attempt to cover up my exposure. I pretended as if I heard another customer asking for some more coffee.

When it finally came time for me take his order, the anticipation of meeting him eye to eye left me fumbling for my pen and frantically searching for my order pad. It must have been so painfully obvious to the likes of Sheryl and

Harvey as to what was going on. My only hope was that they were not paying very close attention. As nervous as I was, I made my way over to where he was sitting and asked him what he would like. With an air of confidence and a truly delightful smile on his face, he politely asked if he could have two fried eggs over easy, toast with jam, orange juice, and a side of bacon. And, oh yea, keep the coffee coming please. No sugar, but plenty of cream.

My hands shaking, I jotted down his order on the ticket, thanked him and turned to make my way back to the kitchen. Along the way, I mumbled to myself something about how well that had all gone. I didn't think I had shown myself to be some prepubescent teen or something. I was actually quite proud of myself for not completely bungling the whole process, let alone writing down the wrong order. If there is one thing people don't like, and I mean really don't like, it is not having their eggs prepared properly. Which of course, is the way they ask for them to be.

I carefully pinned the order up on the kitchen's ticket holder and snuck another glance back at the man sitting at the counter. He appeared to be reading his paper, his head down. I looked up and saw Harvey. Harvey was staring back at me impatiently. I was sure he was going to make some snidely remark. Turns out all he really wanted me to do was release my hand from the ticket. I returned to the counter with a cup of hot coffee and a container of cream fresh from the refrigerator. Making sure that his cup stayed full as the time progressed.

As his breakfast was being prepared, we continued to play the cat and mouse game of exchanging coy looks. He

pretending to read his newspaper and I acting as if I was busy or something. Before too long, his order was ready and I loaded up my hands and arms with his food. This was not going to be the time that I dropped a plate or spilled the coffee all over the customer. As I successfully sat down each of the items in front of him, he complimented me on the swiftness of the service and how pleasantly attentive I was. I felt I had just scored the winning goal in a world cup soccer match.

It wasn't long after that, the man finished his meal, collected his bill and gathered up his things to leave. As he stood up, he glanced one more time my way and made his way over to the cash register where Sheryl was waiting. I could see Sheryl was quite pleased with whatever the man was saying. As he opened the door to leave, he turned around and bid me a fond farewell. My heart seemed to skip a beat as the door closed behind him. Afterwards, Sheryl came up to me and revealed all the nice compliments the man had for the cafe, the food, and, especially, me. Especially, me.

My shift finished, I headed home late in the afternoon. As I entered the front door Mamma was there to greet me. The first thing out of her mouth was to ask who the man was that I met in the cafe? I guess I had not been as anonymous as I had thought. Obviously, Mamma had already been informed of the encounter by Sheryl. Deciding to play along, I crumbled into the chair by the door and pretended to act as if I had no idea what she was talking about. I was hoping that would lead Mamma into revealing what it was that Sheryl and she had already talked about.

Seemed to be worth the effort anyway. Mamma was way too smart to fall for that one. She pressed further, wanting to know what I thought about this man. What did it feel like?

So we proceeded over the next couple of hours to discuss the significant event that had just intersected my life. You know how mothers and daughters can just dissect something into the tiniest of pieces? It was actually quite a relief to be able to talk about how it felt when I first saw him enter the cafe. How it was a feeling that I had never, ever, felt before. How, somewhere deep inside, I knew that he was someone special.

Finally, with a heavy sigh of relief, we both slumped back into our chairs for a well deserved break. After a few minutes of silence, Mamma re-initiated the conversation by asking if I knew what the man's name was. Quite embarrassed, I had to admit that it hadn't even entered my mind to ask him what his name was. It was kind of like a reality check. Here I had been going on and on about this man who I had totally flipped over and I didn't even know his name. Come to think of it, I didn't know where he was from. Or what he did. It seemed that I didn't really know much about this man at all. All I had was a feeling.

Something told me Mamma had orchestrated this eye opening revelation from the very beginning. Of course she did. She hoped all along that this was just a fleeting infatuation. Based on a feeling? How silly of me. If I had really wanted to analyze what had just happened, I suppose I could have gone further. How this was really just a way for Mamma to keep me for herself. Yes, of course, Mamma was threatened by this man's attempt to steal her daughter

away. Then again, maybe I was analyzing too much. Mamma, whatever her intentions or motivations, was probably right. Funny how Mamma didn't even have to say this. She got me to figure it out all by myself. This would be just another passing flirtation.

We both agreed it was time to get up and start the evening meal. Heading toward the kitchen, Mamma turned around and gave me a big hug. She whispered in my ear how much she loved me. To please be careful and take things slowly. Wait for the events to reveal their true meaning. If it was truly real, then so be it.

The next morning was to be my last Sunday that I would have to work for awhile. School had come to a close and, with it, the end of high school. I had finally made it to the end of my compulsory education requirements. Graduation was set for the next weekend and then I would be free. Free to do what, I did not know. All I knew was that I was done with schooling. There wasn't going to be any college for me. I was perfectly happy living in this town, working at the cafe and living with Mamma. She needed me. I needed her. That's just the way it was going to be.

Arriving at the cafe I stationed myself as I usually did, behind the counter. Sheryl hated working the counter and tables on the weekends. I knew from experience that the counter was the first place the regulars chose to begin their day. It wasn't as if they needed a table. They were usually alone and just looking for some coffee and something sweet to start their day. They couldn't afford much else. I always made sure they had a little something extra to eat.

That was good with Harvey and Sheryl. That was good for them.

My day had barely started when I heard the little bell jingle and who should walk in, but the very same man that had stole my heart the day before. That very same feeling of the earth trembling beneath my feet reappeared. My mind started to race. My heart started to race. Mamma's voice from the day before, echoed in my ears.

Mamma's voice was drowned out by the sound of the man wishing me a boisterous good morning as he headed straight over to the same stool in front of the counter he had occupied the day before. The same stool I was front and center over today, as I had been the day before. Without hesitation and, probably, without any real thought, I returned his good morning with a welcoming smile that I am sure let the world know that I was floating as high as the clouds. I knew that Sheryl was probably grabbing for the phone at that moment, but it didn't matter anymore. That feeling of perfection from deep within my heart had returned.

I greeted him with the same question with which I greeted all our regular customers. The "usual" was reserved for those who knew what they wanted, didn't require a menu and expected no less than the same thing day in and day out. I knew he wasn't a regular. Yet. But it certainly wouldn't hurt to treat him like one. He nodded his approval, but just to make sure he repeated his order once again. Before he could finish, I had the hot coffee and fresh cream in front of him. No sugar.

I felt more comfortable talking with the guy today, especially since I knew I had a few things I needed to accomplish. One was to get his name. Another was where he was from? And, finally, what did he do? I guess I kind of let the other customers suffer a bit, as I spent a lot more time catering to the needs of my man. I hoped they would understand. This time it was blatantly obvious that Sheryl and Harvey were paying attention to what was going on. They didn't seem to mind my inattention to the other customers. I think they understood that regulars are going to stay regulars no matter what. No, what they were interested in was how this potential relationship was going to play itself out.

It wasn't hard to get him to talk about his job. I just simply asked him what he was going to do today after breakfast. Fortunately for me, he was working this particular Sunday. He said he worked down at the local furniture store selling, what else but, furniture. So, I guess you could call him a salesman. He also acted as a buyer, such that there were times when he would travel out of town to shop for merchandise. He didn't own the store, but the owners pretty much let him run the whole show.

Talking about his job also allowed me to find out where he was from. He was actually born in a larger town about six hours north of here. The name didn't really matter. All I needed to know was that he now called our town his home. He just happened to live about two blocks from here. He had never really considered coming to Harvey's Cafe before, but, for whatever reason, he had some inkling to try it out yesterday. He was very happy he did. He made it very



clear that he came back just to see me again. I had made quite the impression on him.

I thanked him for the compliment and confessed that, I too, was very happy to see him walk back through the doors again this morning. I didn't want to make it sound that it had actually changed my life. But that's what it had definitely done. There was only one more thing to find out. This seemed as good a time as any, so I just asked him his name. I said that if we were going to continue talking it would be a lot easier to refer to him by his name. Rather than just calling him that man or guy. He nodded his head in agreement and said his name was Nick. Nick Taber. The only thing left to do was to tell him my name, which when he asked, I gladly obliged.

It was then that I heard the familiar "ahem?" coming from the corner by the cash register. Enough so to abruptly remind me that I was supposed to be working the whole counter. That immediately ended the conversation with Nick. He was pretty much finished with his meal anyway, so he made his apologies for getting me into trouble and asked for his check. Before I knew it, he had paid his bill and was out the door. I couldn't fault Sheryl for what she had done. Although I wasn't quite ready to let him go.

That afternoon, after ending my shift, I made my way down the street from the cafe. There, standing on the corner was Nick. He very politely asked me if it was all right for him to just appear out of nowhere like that. I replied that I wouldn't have it any other way. We continued talking about things, ourselves and what not. I told him that I was almost eighteen and was finishing up high school. There

was a graduation, my graduation, to be held this coming weekend. Without really thinking about it too much, I just came right out and asked him if he would like to come. Probably not the smartest thing to do. I still didn't really know him. But without hesitation he replied that he would love to attend. There was no way to describe the joy that I now felt. He gave me his phone number and asked that I call him with the additional details, but, for now, he needed to get back to the furniture store. With that, we went our separate ways.

The rest of the way home I fretted about how I was going to tell Mamma about what had just transpired. I knew that she would have already talked with Sheryl. What Mamma didn't know was that I was going to have a guest at my own graduation. How I was going to tell her that?

As I walked in the front door I expected to find Mamma waiting there, her arms folded and ready to ask a lot of questions. To my amazement she was nowhere to be found. I went from the kitchen, to the bedrooms and the back yard, but to no avail. Walking back to the front room, I found her just walking through the front door. Relieved, I walked over and confided in her that I had been quite concerned. She was always there waiting for me when I came home from work. She said pretty much the same thing to me. At least the part about being worried. She said that I always came straight home from work, except for this time. Concerned, she went out looking for me. Only to find me standing on the corner with a man she could only assume was the one from the cafe. She decided to stay her

distance. Not interfere. Yet, she stuck around wanting to make sure that I was all right.

Knowing that she had already been made aware of what had happened at the cafe, I decided to be upfront with her. I told her the man she saw had a name. It was Nick Taber. And, as she had assumed, Nick was the man from the cafe. We both settled into our chairs, as we usually did, and began to hash the whole thing out. I made it very clear that Nick was someone I was very interested in from the first moment I set eyes upon him. Somehow, something moved inside of me whenever I saw him. Whenever I was around him. I was pretty sure that he felt the same way about me. Why else would he come back to the cafe two days in a row, at the same time and sit in the same seat knowing that I would be his server? He went completely out of his way to surreptitiously meet me at the corner. Why else would he look at me the way I looked at him?

It was about this time that Mamma began to try and calm herself down. Not that she had accepted the premise of my story. Mamma was not that easy. She was calming herself down to tell me something that she had been keeping inside of her for most of my life. She was finally ready to open herself up to talking about my father. The father that I never knew. The father that left my Mamma so many years ago.

Mamma began to tell me the story of how she had met a man in a similar way as I, once before. It was about a year later that I was born. She too was totally enamored with this man who came out of the blue. He just happened to walk into her life and light it up like a burning candle. As

she reflected on what had happened, she mentioned how it all seemed to be kind of a blur now. She knew the blur was the good part. There was this feeling of being lighter than air, her heart racing to catch up.

She said she wasn't going to tell me his name. She hadn't said that name since the day he left and she wasn't going to start now. I told her that I was long past trying to figure out who my father was. I had no intention of ever trying to locate him. It didn't seem to make much of a matter to Mamma. She just nodded her head in agreement.

She continued that the blur was somehow the cause for how much it hurt when it came time for him to break her heart. They were quickly married and had me, although it wasn't long afterwards that he up and left. She said she never wanted to tell me for fear of me thinking that it was I being born that caused him to leave. It was more than that for sure. He just felt that it was time for him to move on. Into someone else's life? Settling down and raising a family was just not in his cards.

The pain that he created, the hole that he left behind, was something that Mamma could never get over. She said she had promised herself that she would never let that happen to me. But, try as she might, here it was. Happening all over again. The signs were all there. As she stood there watching us on the corner, she saw herself standing right there. With a man that was at least twice her age. It was eerily reminiscent of the past that still haunted her to this day.

I was pretty stunned by what I heard. I was so sorry for all the pain and hurt that Mamma had gone through. But I felt that was Mamma and this was me. I just knew, deep down inside, that this could not happen to me. The challenge was, getting Mamma to believe that. So I told Mamma that this time things were going to be different. The least she could do was to give me a chance. To give Nick a chance.

Reluctantly, Mamma knew there was nothing else that could be done to convince me otherwise. She would have to let it all play out. But she remained convinced that she was right. We ended the conversation with me telling her that Nick was going to be coming to my graduation ceremony. It just came out. She didn't look happy, needless to say. She might be standing right next to the man that was going to take her baby away. Worse still, break her heart forever. Just like Mamma's.

As luck would have it, I didn't have to work the week I was getting ready for graduation. Nick and I met each other frequently over the next few days. When the day finally arrived, I was more than ready to rid myself of the high school I had come to dread attending. I just could not see the purpose in learning things that I would never, ever, use. There were more important things to do with my life. My first priority was Nick and the life I hoped we would live together.

Standing on the stage, I could make out all my friends in the audience. Sheryl and Harvey from the cafe. Even some of the regulars showed up. They were all standing there with pride in their hearts and smiles on their faces.

Then there were two others that looked extremely uncomfortable. Two, that although standing right next to each other, acted as if they were separated by miles. There was Mamma, staring straight ahead without a trace of emotion on her face. I know she was happy for me, but she wasn't about to let it come to the surface. Just like she was never going to say my father's name ever again. Next to her, albeit a little to her left, was Nick. Try as hard as he could, he could not overcome the nervousness of knowing that everyone was looking at him. That everyone was judging him. He also just looked straight ahead, knowing that Mamma would let him have it if he made any attempt to move.

After the ceremony, we all gathered around to offer congratulations and share some refreshments. Nick and Mamma did the best they could to avoid one another. It was getting rather uncomfortable when I decided to take the bull by the horns and introduce Nick to those gathered. Making it very clear that we were a couple. Making Mamma steam even more. Everyone, except Mamma, seemed to take it all in stride. Some even came up to Nick and gave him hugs of acceptance. Eventually, all those gathered went their separate ways leaving just me, Nick and Mamma. It must of have been very hard for Mamma to say goodbye. But, she too, eventually bid farewell and left for home.

Nick and I had already planned on doing some celebrating of our own. First place we were going to stop though, was the cafe. Sheryl and Harvey had prepared a special meal just for us. And a few of the regulars who, being regulars, didn't even need an invitation. Mamma was

invited, but declined. It was very nice of Sheryl and Harvey, but it felt really weird being on the customer end of things. After a short while, Nick and I left for a night out on the town. This was going to be our first night out alone. Just the two of us. Hopefully, all night.

We really couldn't do some of the things Nick had planned out, seeing as I was under drinking age and all. When it came right down to it, it was easier for Nick just to buy a bottle of whiskey and head back to his house. I hadn't really drank alcohol much. Especially whiskey. I might have had a few beers after some high school football games, but that was about it. Hard alcohol was a whole new ballgame.

Like I said, we ended up back at Nick's place. I was, of course, quite nervous about how things were going to go. Nick put on some music and we grabbed a couple of his shot glasses he had up in his cupboard. The first shot of whiskey was the hardest. It was very strong and my face grimaced as it slid roughly down my throat. Nick got a chuckle out of that but was quick to pour me another shot.

What happened after that second, or maybe third, shot I can't really remember. All I remember is waking up early in the morning, my head about to explode, not wearing any clothes and Nick laying next to me on the bed. I had this tingling sensation in my lower extremities that I had never felt before. Before last night I was a virgin. Now, I was pretty sure, I was not.

By this time I was pretty uncomfortable. Somewhat embarrassed. I decided it best that I try to leave unnoticed. I slipped out of his bed as quietly as I could and quickly

donned my undies, pants and top. I could put my shoes on later, outside. Dressed, I made my way through the house and out the front door. Outside, I gave a sigh of relief. I knew I needed to get home to Mamma. It was still very early, so maybe Mamma was not awake yet. Guess I thought I could sneak one past Mamma. That was stupid.

As I made my way up to the front door of my house, I felt like some kind of criminal or something. Sneaking around in the early morning sunrise. Hoping I would not be caught. I slowly opened the screen door, which only encouraged the old hinges to squeak even more than usual. Hopefully, Mamma did not hear that. I then proceeded to open the front door and peer in around the edge. There, sitting quietly in the overstuffed chair was Mamma. Apparently asleep. Must have spent the night there worried to death. Quietly walking past her, the sunlight was just starting to make its way up to her face.

I made it to my bedroom door thinking I had successfully navigated the front room without disturbing her. Slowly closing my door, I heard a voice ask if I was all right. Was there anything I needed to talk about? That was enough to scare the living daylights out of me. I'm sure Mamma had that well planned. I politely responded to Mamma that I was very tired and needed to sleep. We could talk further after I felt better. I closed the door behind me. Of course we never did.

Over the next month or so, Nick and I would spend a lot of time together. Whenever we could find time away from work. He the furniture store and me, the cafe. That left mainly late afternoons and evenings. Making the next



morning work schedule very tiring and difficult at times. Mamma pretty much resigned herself to not seeing me very much, although I still called our house home. Sleeping with Nick overnight was an occasional thing. I felt I at least owed Mamma that much. Mamma and I never really talked much about Nick, acknowledging that our relationship existed but failing to want to discuss the details. We usually talked about details. I missed talking.

My relationship with Nick was such that I had free access to his place whenever I wanted it. He had given me a key and all. I found myself showing up quite unannounced often. Probably my own insecurity of not wanting to be alone. Knowing that I would feel a whole lot better being with him. I missed Mamma's conversations horribly and was trying to replace them with visits to Nick's.

One day Sheryl and Harvey surprised me with an unplanned day off. Not sure what the occasion was, but I was more than happy to oblige. My first inclination was to spend the day with Nick. Going home just didn't seem to be an option. Besides, I could spend the day at Nick's cleaning things up and making a nice dinner for the two of us after he got home from work.

I made my way to Nick's front door, inserted the key and noticed that the house was actually unlocked. That was very unusual for Nick to not lock his house when he was not there. Once inside, I heard sounds coming from the bedroom. At first I thought Nick must have been sick and had come home early to rest. But it wasn't just Nick's voice that I heard. There was another voice. A female voice. Coming from the bedroom. I walked over to the partially

closed door and opened it up to find Nick in bed with another woman. They both looked up rather surprised at being interrupted in their love-making. Maybe a little bit of embarrassment. Some guilt. Then again, maybe not. Probably more of being caught in the act.

Me? My life flashed before me. Everything that I had planned for, all that I felt for Nick, my future? Changed forever. The anger began to well up inside of me. How could this be happening to me? I only hoped that Nick could see the daggers coming from my eyes. Pointed directly at him. I don't ever remember feeling so angry at something. At someone. The anger over being misled. Being lied to. The cover up of an adulterous behavior that must have been there in Nick all along.

How could I have been so stupid? To think that someone would actually love me the way that I wanted to be loved. That is something that I had been dreaming of for years. And now? Just another example of how it was just never going to happen for me. I gave away my heart and opened up my sole. Never again. Never again.

Most of all, a flaw in my own character had been revealed. A flaw that I had refused to see. My trust in the goodness and honesty of someone's attention. My naivete in trusting someone of the opposite sex. My ignorance of the very thing that Mamma had warned me of. She knew there would come a time when he would stray. My thought that, somehow, I was different. That my situation would produce a different outcome. Admitting to myself that Mamma was right.

It didn't take long for me to flee the scene that had unfolded before me, although it seemed like an eternity. Without a word, I turned around and ran to the front door. There I stopped and resolutely looked back one last time. The tears began streaming down my face. My nose started to run like a faucet. I thought my heart was going to burst. I had to say something, but words were hard to come by. All I could blurt out was a final and excruciating goodbye. Broke my heart to have to say goodbye.

I should have known Shirley would have called Mamma to let her know that I was not working this day. Arriving home, a total wreck of a person bolted through the front door to find Mamma waiting there. As usual. Waiting for me. She had no idea of what had just happened. But my appearance alone was enough to inform her that the inevitable had occurred. The hurt and pain she had felt so many years ago returned. Somehow making its way across the universe and all time to forcibly implant itself in the very real person of whom she had given birth to. The person she had tried so hard to warn and protect. The last person she had ever wanted to feel such rejection, shame and humiliation.

I fell into the only pair of arms that I trusted to hold me up. She held me tightly, trying to provide comfort. After the sobbing subsided somewhat, after what seemed like an eternity, we both collapsed onto the sofa. Mamma was aghast, but didn't seem surprised. Once you experience something this horrible, you at least have something to fall back on. Whether you like it or not. Mamma had been

there. She knew that, for now anyway, her only response should be to continue to hold me and provide comfort.

Later that evening we settled into agreeing on having a little something to eat. Mamma made some soup and biscuits, while I continued picking up the pieces of my shattered love gone bad. I was worn out and torn to bits. After a few spoonfuls of soup and half a biscuit, I was ready for bed. I stumbled off almost incoherently to my bedroom, leaving Mamma to clean up the mess. The mess of dishes, but most of all, the mess I had made of my life.

Anyway, as I think about where I am now, my mind has finally caught up with restoring all the memories of my life. The memories of who I am and why I wake up looking and feeling the way I did. My mornings start with migrating to the kitchen where I find Mamma has prepared another lovely breakfast for me. Usually, eggs, bacon, toast and freshly squeezed orange juice. I decided to take an extended absence from the cafe and spend my entire time at home with Mamma. Trying to figure things out in my head. Lately, I have developed quite the routine, bordering on obsessive depression, where after eating I head out onto the front porch and sit awhile. Well, not just for awhile, but pretty much all day.

I have become quite the celebrity around town. The regulars at the cafe know me as the woman, just around the corner about a half a mile from here, waiting. She sits outside on her front porch, hoping that he'll reappear. They say she wasn't quite ready to let him go. But mainly, she's waiting. Waiting for the pain to step aside.

That's how I spend the majority of my days. Sitting out on the front porch waiting. As this afternoon wanes, I get up out of my chair and head back inside. There, I find Mamma waiting for me. It's almost like returning to the comfort of Mamma's womb. Mamma says time will eventually push my pain and hurt further back into the recesses of my memory. But, she adds, it will never go away. A piece of my heart has been stolen from my life. Chipped away such that no glue will ever be able to repair.

I think about this a lot. I think about this as I skip dinner and decide, instead, to go straight to my bedroom. Once there, I climb back into the comfort of my bed and close my eyes to my past. Hoping to forget.

# ALL ALONE

## CHAPTER TWO

Something is different about this morning. Something is very different. While I usually wake up warm, pleasant and snugly amid a pile of cushy blankets, this morning I am not anywhere near that state of comfort. I am actually quite uncomfortable, sore and where are my blankets? This definitely does not feel good. There's something amiss here.

My first thought, as usual, is to contemplate getting up and off of my mattress. As I roll over to attempt sliding out of my presumed bed, my face is rudely met by a pile of leaves cluttering my view and obstructing my breathing. Jumping back in response to my obvious mistake, I notice that it is not much different in the other direction. More leaves. More dirt. I am beginning to wonder if I am in a bed at all.

What shortly becomes obviously clear, is that I am actually laying on a patch of hard, bare ground. Well, not exactly bare. A lot of leaves, dirt and debris surround me. I seem to be wearing clothes, although not what I would typically call pajamas. I am laying on something cold and hard, presumably providing a thin layer of separation from the ground below. Feels like some kind of makeshift

cardboard material, hastily thrown upon the ground to demarcate the place where I might sleep.

My mind is starting to come up to speed with my current situation. That moment of playing catch up with my past. My eyes begin to focus on what is around me. Which, in my case, is nothing but more ground, some bushes and trees. Looking straight up, I see no ceiling. No walls that would normally outline the confines of a bedroom. There's only a pale blue sky overhead with some cloud formations that are fashioning the start of the coming day.

Obviously, there is not going to be any rolling out of bed this morning. At least the kind anticipated. Next question is, if there is no bedroom, is there a bathroom? I've got to have a bathroom with a mirror. How else am I going to see who I am today? Sitting up and apprehensively looking around, my questions are answered. There is no bedroom and there is no bathroom. Which also means, there is no mirror. In fact, there is no house with which to have a bedroom or a bathroom with no mirror.

Resigning myself to the situation at hand, I begrudgingly accept the fact that I am simply laying on the bare ground. Outside, with some bushes and a few trees randomly growing out of the ground all around me. I have no blankets to snuggle under. I am wearing smelly clothes that I would normally reserve for the wash tub. And, I am oh-so-terribly sore and stiff.

With a growing need to relieve myself, I struggle to my feet and hustle over to one of the nearby trees. Not knowing where else to go. I don't know why, but for some reason I

have this sneaking suspicion that I must be a male. A woman wouldn't be looking for a tree to relieve herself. That's a guy thing. As I am standing here unzipping my pants and letting loose on the tree, I look up and question what it is that I ever did to a tree for them to deserve this kind of mistreatment? Also, kind of a guy thing to ponder such a question while peeing.

So I am a male. What else is there about me that I can figure out or remember? Looking back at where apparently I fell asleep, I notice that there is a small bag placed next to the scrap of cardboard that served as my bed for the night. What appears to be a well used backpack. Unfolding the flap and peering inside, I find some items of interest. There's a crumpled up tee shirt, a pair of shabby socks, some underwear that has seen better days and a small paperback book with some pages obviously ripped out in haste. Digging deeper, I find something more interesting. A small mirror. Ah, a mirror.

At last some things are starting to come together. The memories of who I am are beginning to coalesce as they always have in the past. At least that is somewhat comforting, even though waking up where I did and the way I did was not. Furthermore, I have found something useful in the old worn out backpack adjacent to my sleeping place.

Time to start coming up with some explanations as to what I am doing here. Option one could be that I am out camping with some friends. In some campground. Maybe next to a lake where we will spend our days fishing and having lots of fun. That would lead to the implication that I



am on some kind of vacation or, at least, a well deserved long weekend.

Surveying my surroundings, I pretty much eliminate the first option. This is not a campground. There are no other camping spots anywhere near me. There are no other people sleeping in my vicinity. Lastly, there is no lake. Thus, I have to conclude that I am not on vacation, although it still could be a long weekend. Maybe, longer than I think.

Momentarily, option two rears its head. Where I am is simply a result of where I happened to end up last night. Arriving here late last night, I set down my belongings, stretched out my piece of cardboard and laid down. While at the same time, covering myself haphazardly with some extra clothing to keep me warm while I attempted to fall asleep. Sometime during that routine, I strolled over to that tree over yonder and did the unthinkable. Yes, number two. Do I need to mention the part about not having any toilet paper? Guess that explains the missing pages from the paperback book found within the backpack.

That being the case, option two seems to be the winner. Makes all the sense in the world. For all intents and purposes, I must be homeless. Living on the streets. Sleeping on the dirt. Thus, the reason for there being no house. No bathroom and no mirror.

Ah, the mirror. Fetching the mirror out of the backpack, I have my first look at who I am and what I look like. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised, but I look like a total mess. Attempting to inject a little humor into my unfortunate appearance, I dryly say to myself that I am going to skip my

cleansing and refreshing shower for today. For that matter, by the way I look, there will be no shaving as well.

Focusing my attention back on the mirror, I'm having trouble determining my age. Is it the unkempt and greasy long hair? The ragged and scraggly beard that covers most of my face and neck? Or the deep set eyes with darkened lines underneath that tell a story of many long and sleepless nights outdoors? The dirt all over my face, my hands and my body? My God, it appears to be caked on from many years of neglect. The only thing I can come up with is that I am somewhere around my late twenties. Maybe, about twenty-seven years old. As my memory starts to solidify, I settle on that age. Additionally, if my new memory serves me, I have been homeless for at least a couple of years. What did I do before that? I'm sure that will come to me at some point.

Well, that was certainly uplifting. Such a pretty sight. Such a dreadful awakening. Putting the mirror back into the backpack, I search for other evidence. The first thing I find in one of the side pouches is some food. Some old, partially eaten food. Someone's hastily thrown away meal maybe. Or sandwich that someone could not just quite finish. In any event, it is something that barely looks like it is still edible.

Almost as if in automatic response mode, I pull the awful excuse for a sandwich up to my mouth and consume it with a vengeance. First thoughts? Not too bad. Lovely mixture of texture and taste. At least it didn't immediately make me want to puke and violently vomit the whole thing right back up again. Wouldn't be the first time that had happened. Wouldn't be the last time either. Searching

further, there is nothing else left to eat. Looks like that is it for what will be my breakfast for today. Not even worth brushing my teeth for afterwards. That's a laugh. As if I even had a toothbrush to brush them with. Instead, I reach for my bag and pull out a partially consumed water bottle from the side pouch. Taking a mouthful of water, I use it to both rinse and swallow my morning meal from my mouth.

Something tells me it's time to get up and break camp. Might as well keep the same clothes on I slept in. Another laugh. Getting kind of used to the smell. So, where are my shoes? You never know where things are going to end up sleeping out in the open like this. Sometimes you wake up minus some things you went to bed with. I've had my shoes stolen, the meal I went to bed with thinking that I would save the rest for morning and, of course, my pride. It is amazing how some of the more fortunate ones have nothing better to do than harass those less fortunate than themselves.

Fortunately, last night was spent uninterrupted and no unwanted visitors showed up. Except for probably some of the many insects, rodents and other small animals that may call where I slept home. Finding my shoes, I fasten them on with what's left of the laces that have been broken and retied more times than I can count. Finally I stand up, pack my things away in my backpack and throw it over my shoulder. Time to hike my way out of this little piece of paradise I have called home for the night.

My destination is a street corner about three blocks from here. If I am there early enough I can garner rights to a prime location at the intersection. I'm not really sure what

time it is, but judging by the sun's location in the sky I'm guessing it is about ten o'clock in the morning. Along the way, I stop at a gas station with a market on the inside. It's not the gas I'm looking for. It's the bathroom inside. I have become friendly with the clerk over the past month or so. He lets me use the bathroom to clean myself up in the mornings. I have learned to be quite the expert at contorting my body around the sink in order to give myself a sponge bath. On the way out, the clerk offers me one of the day old donuts that has been left getting stale on the counter. That and a hot cup of coffee is much appreciated.

It doesn't take me long to reach the street corner that is my destination. The place where I will spend most of the day standing there with a sign asking for help. For some kind of assistance. Really, I'm looking for money. Lucky for me, the street corner is empty of others looking to do the same thing and there are plenty of cars whizzing by at this time of the morning.

What's special about this street corner is that it has a turn lane into the shopping center. A shopping center most people refer to as a strip mall. Lots of small businesses trying to make a meager living by selling various items to those in the neighborhood. The turn lane, of course, is controlled by a signal. Which makes it nice and convenient for me to stand there looking terribly sad, worrisome and hungry as the people are forced to wait for the signal to change.

I don't need anything too fancy to advertise my cause. Just a sign that reads "Spare some change?" Some people prefer to use other means of capturing someone's

emotions. Like partnering with a half starved dog sitting close by, or a skinny and tattered mother with an anemic looking child in her arms. Some even use a joke sign. You know, a sign that makes a joke of the whole thing. Like, "I need money to buy more beer". That works on some people where the emotional one does not seem to strike a chord. Funny thing is, for some of the panhandlers, the money begged goes to buying alcohol or drugs anyway. So, they are just telling the truth. Me? I prefer to stay away from that stuff. All it causes is trouble and heartache. I am looking for a way out of the bad situation I am in, but not the one that takes you out in a dark van driven by the coroner.

When I talk about garnering rights to a corner or a spot from which you can beg for money, there is more to it than just showing up first. Most of the time that's all that it takes. But actually, there are unwritten rules that govern who can use a location and who cannot. You don't learn these rules by going to a class. You don't get a license to stand on a certain corner. Although, in some cases, local law enforcement does require a license to panhandle. One learns these unofficial rules of engagement from the school of hard knocks. In other words, you usually find out the hard way that you are in someone else's location.

Like most things, being there first counts. But if someone bigger than you comes along, you usually back down. Kind of like the law of the jungle. Then there are other situations where it doesn't matter if you are there first. Someone else has garnered the right to that location because they were there the day before. And the day before that. If they are willing to let that location go, then so

be it. But if they are not, then others will definitely let you know of your indiscretion.

What it all boils down to is that, even though you are not part of civil society, civility still matters. No matter what your station in life, there are still rules. There are expectations and ways of doing things that need to be respected. Especially rules that govern how one behaves. It is not just about you. If you don't abide by that, you will not last long. If you don't like that, you will be forced to move on.

Now of course all of this comes with a caveat. When you get right down to it, there are two types of homeless. Those who abide by such civil laws and those who don't. Usually, those who don't are the ones who have some kind of disability or mental disorder. In other words, they only live within themselves and have no concept of what is required to live with others. Unfortunately, these are the ones that society has given up on. Cast them aside to fend for themselves. Being unable to take care of themselves, they are usually taken advantage of by those bent on doing so. Having been taken advantage of and desperate to survive, they will lash out. Sometimes violently. Without concern for their own safety. Or anybody else's. Consequently, they end up the victim of foul play or worse, the victim of homicide.

Myself? I prefer to live within the confines of the social structure set up by the homeless and for the homeless. It is just easier that way. And safer to be sure. But safety, even for those who do abide by such unwritten rules, is not always guaranteed. You still have to watch your back. Keep

track of your stuff. There are those that may be mentally fit, but still feel that what you have is fair game for them to try and steal. Especially at night while you are sleeping.

Enough of the rambling. I must get ready to start my daily routine. This street corner is my location and has been earned as such through simple possession over the last few days. No one has objected and no one appears to want to fight me for the spot. Doesn't really matter. I won't be here much longer. After a few days, you kind of wear it out.

You can think of it like fishing. Once you catch a fish in a hole, chances are you are not going to catch any others in that same spot. The other fish are now aware that something is going on. They form an opinion to not go for the bait. Well, the same thing happens when on the street. You can over fish it. Chances are the people who gave something to you the first time are not going to do it again. The ones who didn't give you anything? They just get more agitated. So, you move on.

Settling in underneath the turn signal light, I bring out my cardboard sign from my backpack. A sign made from a ripped off piece of the same cardboard I sleep on at night. A sign that says, "Spare some change?" Standing up and holding my sign at my waist, my work day has begun. I am sure it is as unsettling to those people in the cars as it is to me, but the experience does allow me to make some observations. It's all about eye contact. If you can make eye contact with a driver, or even a passenger for that matter, you are well on your way to getting a donation from someone in that car. So, as the cars back up in the turn

signal lane, you want to make sure you look directly at the driver in each of the cars.

Now, the people in the car are not defenseless participants in this scenario. They can play the game with the best of us. What you tend to see sometimes, are drivers and passengers obviously turning their eyes away. This in an attempt to not get caught by the spell being cast by the homeless person standing right next to you. Just refuse to believe they are there and wait for the light to turn green so you can escape. That's not what I want to happen. Of course, I would appreciate a handout. But that strategy does work.

The other behavior you tend to see, comes from those whom you have made eye contact with, but attempt to redirect the request for money to something else. This, I believe, in an attempt to make sure that whatever is given, is not uselessly wasted on alcohol or drugs. In this scenario, the giver does not provide money, but something more tangible like food. I have even had some people offer to take me to the grocery store so that they can personally watch me buy something they consider worthwhile. Again, the overall strategy is a good one. I'd rather just have the money, but I'm always looking for something good to eat or drink.

Another behavior I see ends up being rather annoying. Some drivers or passengers will roll down their windows and yell obscenities at me. Or, throw objects out their windows at me. It goes along the lines of I must be lazy or something. Why don't I just get a real job and quit mooching off of others? These are the ones you have to watch out for.



They can be hurtful and, even, dangerous to deal with. There is some underlying accusation that if they have to work, then I should be out there doing the same thing. What they don't understand is that I would, if I could. All you can really do is just stand there and take it. Hoping that the turn signal will change soon and they will be on their way.

Lastly, are the ones that are truly a pleasure to meet. They seem to understand your situation. A situation that you may not have any control over. You are truly down and out on your luck. These drivers and passengers are willing to generously give you what they can. In some cases it may be that they have this religious guilt driving their behavior. In other cases, they understand that they may be looking in a mirror at themselves. If something had happened to them differently, that could be them standing there panhandling for money. It doesn't take much. Living paycheck to paycheck and losing a job could put them on the streets just like me. The underlying premise seems to be that by giving me money, that act of kindness might be just what I need to get back on my feet again. That act of mercy might be what keeps them from becoming me.

It's now heading towards twelve o'clock and so far, today hasn't been particularly fruitful. Just a few dollars from a handful of cars that have felt compelled to give. I decide that it's time to give it a rest. Take whatever money I have made and head on over to the fast food joint across the way. Packing up my sign and the rest of my belongings I start thinking about what it is I can buy that will get me through the rest of the afternoon.

I don't spend too long at the fast food joint. I'm getting a lot of anxious looks and grimacing faces as I stand at the counter trying to figure out what to get. I settle on a cold drink and one of the cheap breakfast muffins that at least has some egg and a little bit of bacon. There seems to be a sigh of relief from the customers as I shuffle my way back outside. Looking across the street I see that someone else has opened up shop at my location beneath the turn signal. Guess that decision has been made for me. I have no real objection. It was time for me to move on anyway.

Next stop is the central downtown plaza. On the way I settle down on a bus bench to eat what seems to be my breakfast for today, even though it is noontime. At least I have the bench to myself. Not very many people are willing to come up and sit down on a bench with a homeless person. Doesn't bother me too much. I know the stigma and I understand that I may unpleasantly smell. More room for me to stretch out after having quickly consumed my breakfast muffin. Taking a short nap is definitely not out of the question.

By about one o'clock I reach the plaza. It is just after lunchtime and the workers have all been sitting out by the fountain eating their lunch. The plaza is prime picking for leftover food. Timing is everything. You don't want to get there too early. People are still eating, talking or reading. Get there too late and some other homeless person will have already made the rounds, leaving me slim pickings. As the time gets closer to one o'clock the workers gather up their belongings and throw away whatever it is that they did not finish from their lunch.

Pickings is the operative word here. There is quite a science as to how to go about picking through a trash can for food. The idea is to go from trash can to trash can, digging through each one, hoping to find something of edible substance that has not spoiled. You start from the top and work your way down. Obviously, the items on top are fresher than those further down. You have to be careful of broken glass or other sharp objects that can slice through your hand or fingers. Also, look for drinks that are still standing up and haven't been tipped so that their contents spill all over the food below them. Same goes for the bags. Look for those that are situated upright and have been securely closed. It's more work to open them to see what they contain, but at least you know that they haven't been contaminated by any spoiled food around them. Sometimes the only way you can tell is to take a bite. Smelling it can help, but that is not as reliable as just taking a good old fashioned bite. Take a drink, if you can. Avoid using the straw. That can have all kinds of germs. Remove the plastic cover from the drink and take a good swig. It almost instantaneously lets you know if it is any good or not.

Today's lunch group has been particularly good at not eating all of what they brought for lunch. Don't know if that is a good thing for them, but it is definitely a good thing for me. As I go through each trash can, I place some of the food in my mouth and stuff the rest in my backpack. Completing the circuit of cans, I have successfully walked away with enough food to cover my dinner and, maybe, tomorrow morning's first meal.

What I have described is a fairly routine practice for me by now. It wasn't always that way. It took me quite awhile to become numb to the fact that I was eating out of trash cans and that other people were watching. I never really have gotten over the angst of approaching the first trash can, in the middle of a crowded square full of people on their lunch break. Try as hard as I might to stroll anonymously up to the first can in the sequence, I know that I am being watched. I can feel their eyes watching my every move and their heads turning in my direction.

When I bend over the can, I sense the crowd reacting in utter disgust. How humiliating the whole thing is. Both for me and those watching. But you know what? You get over it. Am I ever going to get to know these people? Do I really care what they think of me? What's more important is that I eat. And, fortunately for me, these people have decided to throw away perfectly good food that is mine for the taking. So who here should be the ones ashamed? Who here should be judging me?

That's pretty much it for my work day. Usually, the lunchtime crowd leaves me plenty of food to sort through. If not, then there are always the restaurants I can go to for anything I might need for an evening meal. I don't actually go inside the restaurant as a customer would. I kind of hang around outside waiting for customers to leave with their little doggie bags full of half eaten food. It is something like standing on the corner panhandling cars for money. There are those walking out of the restaurant that just have this obligation to give away a little something. Rather than cart something home that they will probably end up throwing in

the trash can anyway. Why not give it to the poor, starving homeless person sitting right there on the sidewalk?

The rest of my day is spent figuring out where it is I will be spending my night. My days have been pretty much reduced to the basic necessities. Finding food and finding shelter. I have actually formulated a plan that I have been working towards over the last couple of days. So that keeps me fairly confined within a geographical area where homeless assistance is offered. My main goal is to try and make it to one of these shelters. I have already put my name on one of their waiting lists. In order to stay in one of the shelters you have to get on a list. Those are the rules. Follow the rules and you will get a bed. You are limited to a stay of a day or two, but at least it is indoors and out of the weather. There will even be a meal provided and, in some cases, a medical checkup. My overall health is pretty good, but I know I have some dental issues that need attention. Maybe I can get that taken care of.

Spending the night just anywhere can have its problems, as I eluded to earlier. But there are some options. A lot of the time it's the weather that determines where you are going to spend the night. At least that's the first determinant. Other things include who else is around and, frankly, will they let you into their inner circle. It's the weather that is most important though. If it's nice, then you have your pick of just about anywhere outside. I usually like more of a park setting. Some place where there are bushes and trees that can make it more private and quiet.

When the weather starts to turn you have to become more picky. Changes of season from summer to winter can

be quite challenging, depending on what part of the country you are in. Cold and snow are things you try to avoid if at all possible. Rain storms offer their own challenges. When a rain storm happens or you have some forewarning of one coming, I like to plan on finding some place dry to spend the night. In these situations I like to head for the freeway overpasses or bridges. They usually have room underneath them where you can seek shelter.

Unfortunately, I am not the only one to think this way. It can get quite complicated finding a place to call home for the night under a bridge. You are usually not alone. It involves what I was earlier referring to as being let into someone's inner circle. It becomes a challenge to find acceptance when you are intruding on someone else's space. Some people are really good about inviting you in. Others will fight you tooth and nail. Once again, it can depend on the mental state of those with whom you are seeking refuge.

Although not ideal, under a bridge is one of the best places to be when it is raining cats and dogs. You are able to keep fairly dry and, like I said, you do have company with whom you can interact. The worse part is the noise. If it's not the cars and trucks going by overhead, it's the cars and trucks driving close by. Then too, you get the occasional types that just want to harass you. You have to try and ignore the honking horns, yelled obscenities and flying bottles directed at your encampment.

Even though there is comfort in numbers, if there are too many people huddled for the night underneath a highway bridge, you stand out more. The more you stand

out, the more likely it is that the police will come, confiscate your belongings and throw you out. So, you have to pick and choose carefully. The ultimate goal is to try and stay dry for the night. Avoid the police and hopefully, get some sleep.

There are other places you can spend the night, although they are less attractive options. These are places chosen more in emergency situations. Situations when you find yourself in a sudden rain storm and are caught off guard. In these cases, you try to find the first available place that can provide you shelter from the storm.

I remember one time when I was downtown, in the shopping district. It was late in the evening after all the shops had closed for the night. My plan was to make it to the outskirts of the shopping district before settling down for the night. But the wind came up, threatening clouds started to form and before I knew it, it just started dumping rain. All I could do was to quickly dart into the closest place to offer shelter. It happened to be a covered doorway to one of the shops. I thought I would stay just a short while, but the rain continued to drop in buckets for the next couple of hours at least.

There wasn't much I could do, so I just settled in for the night. Making my bed as best I could in the entryway, I placed my bag up against the closest wall. Took off my shoes and placed them next to me. I huddled up on top of the doormat and shivered until I was able to fall asleep. The next morning, I was awakened by the sound of a woman screaming at me at the top of her lungs. She was shaking her fists, kicking at me and calling for help. I was rudely

awakened, but I can just imagine the rudeness I presented to this woman opening her business for the day. The sight of a homeless person sleeping on her front porch? What an indignation. As quickly as I could, I gathered all my belongings and hightailed it out of there. At least I thought I had gathered all my belongings. Unfortunately, I forgot to grab my shoes. The shoes that I had just found at a thrift store the previous day. My previous pair had completely worn out and this pair was just what I was looking for. Oh well. Getting a new pair of shoes just moved itself up to the top of the list of things I needed.

Sleeping outdoors does have its positives though. Especially if you meet up with some friendly people. It is always nice to be able to share your experiences, have someone else to talk with. Being homeless is not easy. The days are way too long and you spend most of them on your feet. Standing on street corners with signs asking for money or food.

Personally, I like being by myself. It is safer. More private. At times like these I can let my mind wander and think about things. One of the things that I think about a lot, is how and why all of this is happening to me. How did my life get so rearranged? I haven't always been homeless. I hate hearing those words, because it makes me realize that there was a time when life was better. I suppose, easier. When I had a home, friends and things. Yes, things. All the little things that we collect, value and take for granted.

I sometimes hear people say that they are just things. If you lose them in a fire or someone steals them from your possession, they can be replaced. They are not like a loved



one, a pet, or your life. Being homeless, I have to differ somewhat. Yes, they are not as valuable as a life. But when you don't have such things to attach yourself to, your life becomes unattached. It's hard to commit to anything. There is less of a sense of security. Your only identity becomes, homeless. Because of this, you feel the overall urge to just give up. I am homeless and there is no use trying to deny or correct it. A pit of despair sets in and you give in to alcohol and drugs as a way out. Or at least, as a way to cope with your situation.

As for me, I am not ready to give up just yet. I still remember what it was like not to be homeless. I still would like to recover that which my homelessness has stolen from me. The way I look at it there are three different kinds of homeless. First, those who are homeless because that's the lifestyle they have chosen for themselves. That's the way they want it. Second, those who for no fault of their own, have been thrown out on the streets because they have some disability that society no longer wants to deal with or treat. Mental illness is high on this list. Third, those who see homelessness as a temporary setback. They desperately want to abandon their homelessness and are just looking for a hand up. This is where I rank myself. So I continue to hold out hope that my life will change. That it will be rearranged one more time, such that the pendulum swings back from whence it came.

My previous life certainly was not perfect. There were things I could have done differently so that things might not have turned out the way they did. Maybe I could have done better in school? Gone to college and received a degree

that would have set me up for a good job? It's kind of funny how it only takes one little mistake and, wham, that's it. You're done. Some people can make the same mistakes over and over again and they are somehow given another chance. For other's, they are only given one. Who decides? Is it your biology? Your destiny? Your Karma? Whatever it is, it's just not fair. That's what you have to accept. That life is just not fair. It doesn't have to be. It doesn't know that you think it's supposed to be. It just doesn't.

I was born and raised in a small mid-western town known for just one thing, farming. Nothing special about it. Miles and miles of flat farmland. My town was like a number of other towns with the same identity. The difference was that the farm I grew up on had been in my family for generations. Passed down through the fathers to the oldest of the male children. That's how my father got the farm. Naturally, I was expected to continue that tradition. My parents didn't think much of schooling, so it was never really pushed much. Consequently, I and my sisters looked upon our schooling as a chore to be done as required by the state for a specified number of years. Then, it was done. College? Not even the barest of considerations.

Unfortunately, I hadn't totally bought into the idea that I was going to take over the family farm and spend the rest of my life on a small plot of land. I didn't care how fertile it was. I didn't need to go to college to dream of other ways of doing things. I had been exposed to the notion that there were other places besides the farm that I could explore. I watched my fair share of TV and listened to the radio enough to know that there was more this world had to offer.

I needed that something more. More excitement. More things to do. So, instead of the farm, I chose the west coast. Specifically, southern California. Los Angeles looked like a good place. Seemed to be a lot of people and things to do there, according to the TV.

Well, obviously that did not sit well with my parents. Try as they might, they could not convince me otherwise. There were a lot of arguments, guilt trips and the such. Which, of course, created quite a nasty and divisive environment for us all. The consequence of it being that all normal relations between myself and my parents were abandoned. I had no idea what I was going to do, but I knew I had to leave. I had to get out of that terribly toxic environment and venture out on my own.

So, one day, I announced that I would be leaving. I was heading to California to start a new life. I thought it would take about a week to plan it all out before leaving, but my parents thought otherwise. I was told that I had to leave immediately. In fact, I was never to return. Their actions made it quite clear that I was being disowned. I hastily packed whatever I could, said whatever quick goodbyes I thought necessary and headed out the front door towards the bus station about five miles away. I never looked back even once. Then again, I don't think anyone even watched me go. My sisters were too scared to try and my parents no longer had a son.

After a long walk with my belongings slung over my shoulder and one bag being pulled behind me, I arrived at the bus station. Fortunately, the ticket man was very helpful in making my arrangements for the trip out west. He looked

me up and down and over again. I'm certain he was wondering what my story was. But he didn't provide any resistance. Maybe he had been in my shoes before. Living in such a small town, I'm sure he knew who I was or at least knew of my parents, having the same last name and all.

I only had to wait a short while before my bus showed up. It wasn't the fanciest of buses, with a couple of hubcaps missing, dust and grime covering the outside. The bus driver opened the front door and I stepped up to hand him my ticket. Like the ticket man, the driver gave me the once over, but didn't try to engage in any unnecessary conversation. I made my way back to the end of the bus, stopping at the last row to throw down all my stuff. I had the whole back bench to myself, the bus itself having only a handful of travelers. I had stopped at the snack shop before boarding the bus and picked out a few choice items. Thought maybe they would last the whole trip. Most of it was gone before the first mile was out.

We spent the whole first day driving the narrow two lane highway from one mid-west county to another. Frankly, they all looked the same. Farm after farm, each with their own traditional farmhouse and painted red barn, faded from years of neglect. Just before sunset, the bus driver pulled over to the side of the road in front of a no-name motel he had probably stopped at hundreds of times before. The other passengers slowly filed their way off the bus as the driver gathered up whatever suitcases had been stashed down below. They had made previous arrangements to spend the night there, but not me. I didn't know anything about reserving a place for the night. Or the next few nights,

for that matter. The bus driver was very accommodating to allow me to sleep on the bus overnight. I just curled myself up on the back row seat and tried to sleep as best I could. Seems as if I would just be falling asleep when some four wheeler would come roaring by.

Anyway, three days later I arrived at the bus station in Los Angeles. Stepping off the bus was like stepping off a rocket ship onto another planet. Not that I had ever done that. But this was a whole new world for me. Lots of noise, tall dirty buildings, hordes of cars and trucks spewing all kinds of awful smells. And people? There were mobs and mobs of people, all trying to go in different directions at the same time. My head was stirring.

Interestingly enough, some people took a special interest in me. It must have been fairly obvious that I was a newbie to this place. What I didn't quite understand was that their interest was not in helping me but, rather, helping themselves. It didn't take long for me to figure that out. No sooner had I stopped to accept someone's offer to help me with my bags, that my suitcase was hauled off never to be seen again. I was quite distraught. First to having lost my suitcase but second, to having not been better prepared. All I could do was to write it off as a lesson learned.

Shortly after, I guess you could say I was rescued from somewhat of an unlikely source. I had never really been a religious person, but there suddenly appeared before me someone who professed to be a child of God. There to help another child of God along their way. I think I knew that this was simply another person out to help

themselves, but I felt safe in their presence. So why not take advantage of the situation and play along for awhile?

I must admit, the inner actor in me decided to make an appearance. I professed a profound belief in whatever God it was they were talking about. My story was that I had traveled out west in order to find a closer connection to this loving God. I threw in a few “amens” and “thank you, Jesus” at the appropriate places in the conversation. Actually, anywhere in the conversation was good enough. It didn’t make no difference. In just a matter of minutes I had made my first friend. A friend that had been sent by God to protect me and offer me shelter. Shelter for the night? That was convenient.

My friend had their own private transportation back to their place of worship. We piled my stuff into their car and drove off in a direction taking us away from the bus station. About twenty minutes later, we arrived at our destination. We were greeted by other disciples who were more than eager to show me around. I was particularly interested in where I was going to bunk down for the night. Seemed like the Jesus thing to do. Along with that hospitality came a full and nutritious meal. After traveling so long on minimum food intake, I was quite ready to partake in the feast. More “amens” and “thank you, Jesus” pronouncements were in order.

As the evening drew to a close, I thanked everyone for their generosity and declared my desire to retire for the night. It had been a long and arduous journey. Retreating to my room, I found fresh towels lined up on the counter. Obviously, a nod toward taking a refreshing shower before

heading to bed. It was just what I needed to clear my head and cleanse my soul. Before climbing into bed, I knelt down beside the bed and pretended to say a little prayer. Just in case anyone was watching. Probably didn't hurt to ask for a little forgiveness as well.

It was nice to sleep in a comfortable bed for a change. This one was even better than the one I had back home. Still, it was somewhat of a restless night. Tossing and turning, mulling over what my next moves were going to be. I didn't have a watch with me and there was no clock hanging on the wall. I just kept waiting for some bit of daylight to sneak its way into the room through the curtain. Finally, the room started to get a little brighter. Or was it my eyes getting used to the darkness? I slipped out of bed and opened the window curtain for a quick peek. My eyes were not fooling me. The sunlight was fingering the sky with its presence.

I made a quick trip to the bathroom, packed up my backpack and opened the door to my room. No one else was awake yet or, at least, they were not roaming around. I made my way to the kitchen area and helped myself to some leftover food, stuffing any extras into my backpack. I also packed away some fruit and a carton of milk.

Looking suspiciously over my shoulder, I didn't see anyone else around. As quietly as I could, I slipped out of the building and walked purposefully to the edge of the compound. Reaching the street, I made the determination that it was some kind of main drag. The traffic appeared to be building for the morning commute. There would soon be

lots of traffic. Plenty of opportunity for a ride. Going somewhere.

Standing by the side of the road, I stuck my thumb out in the hopes of getting a ride. I had heard that this was what you were supposed to do if you were looking to hitch a ride somewhere. It wasn't long before a blue, VW Microbus slowed down and stopped not too far ahead of me. As I ran up to it I made mention to myself of how fortunate I was. A blue VW Microbus. Just like the ones I had seen on TV shows driving around with old hippies or surfers in search of a wave. Not sure what this guy's story was going to be.

As I climbed up on board, the driver leaned over and asked me where I was going. Befuddled, I mumbled something about Griffith Park. Something else I had heard about on TV. Supposed to be a large and beautiful park somewhere in the Los Angeles area. The driver said he would be passing by that area and would be happy to have the company. He lived in Glendale, just a hop, skip and a jump from Griffith Park. Guess this guy wasn't a surfer. I didn't see any surfboards on top of the car. I was on my way though. To Griffith Park.

Not too long into our journey, the guy pulled something out of his shirt pocket, set it aglow and took a deep and long draw. After a few seconds, he let out this mouthful of smoke that filled the car. He turned and offered me a "hit". I wasn't quite sure what it was or what a "hit" was, but it didn't seem like something I wanted. I asked him what it was and he was a bit surprised by my question. He gave me a double take and answered by saying that it was marijuana. By taking a deep and long draw into the lungs it



made you feel good. It made you very relaxed. His explanation sent my mind into a quick search of the old memory banks and, sure enough, marijuana was there as something to be avoided. Not only was it harmful to your lungs and your health, it was illegal. Pulled that one from my high school years. From some class on health or something. I thanked him for the opportunity, but declined his offer for a “hit”.

He was curious as to what I was doing out on the road so early in the morning. Asked me where I was coming from? Knowing that we probably had a bit of a ride and that I would probably never see this guy again, I went over my entire story. Well, not all the specific details. Just enough to make it sound as if I knew what the hell I was doing. He said that he was actually impressed. To just up and leave like that? Not really knowing what you are going to do or where you are going, was kind of far out. I wouldn't say “impressed” was the word I would use. When it came right down to it, it was pretty presumptuous of me to believe that I was going to somehow come out of this thing in one piece.

I must of inhaled some of that stuff he was smoking along the way. I found myself getting drowsy and starting to nod off. Before I knew it, the guy had stopped his VW Microbus and was shaking me awake. We had reached our destination. At least, my destination. He indicated that this was a good spot to make my way into Griffith Park. I think he kind of knew that I wasn't there to see the zoo or the observatory. Whether I knew it or not, I was looking for a place to settle for the rest of the day. A place that I could call home for the night.

I stepped out onto the curb, grabbing my bag as I did so. The guy pointed towards the top of the hill in front of me. He told me that if it was him, he would head for that stand of trees at the top of the hill. His last comment was that I should not build any fires, as that would be a sure way of letting others know that somebody was living up there. Rolling up his window, he pulled away from the curb as a last waft of smoke trailed behind. I yelled out to thank him and waved goodbye, but I'm not sure that he heard me.

Turning around, I was suddenly faced with the immediate reality of my decision to venture out on my own. Away from the comfort of my home and family. Away from the safety and security of my friends back at the church. I regretted having to use them the way I did, but underneath it all I rationalized that they had accomplished what they set out to do.

All I could see before me was this forest of trees and bushes. A trail here and there leading to where I did not know. Which one should I take? Guess it didn't make much difference at this point. So I just started walking. I made it up to the tall stand of trees and continued on inside. The sunlight faded away and the darkness engulfed my progress. A little ways in, there was a small opening. A clearing that looked like a good place to set up camp. I didn't want to be completely exposed, so I laid out my belongings close to the edge of the trees. I figured that would make it easier to remain hidden from view. Plus, it would provide some cover in case the weather turned.

That first night turned into nearly two years of nights. Not necessarily in the same place, but out on my own.

Fending for myself. Learning how to survive on the streets. As I look back on it now, it's not how I wanted it to be. I didn't think I would be on the streets for as long as this. It just kind of happened that way. Time has a way of just slipping away from you.

Today is the day I take a hike back downtown. After a noisy night spent under a set of trees on the cloverleaf exiting the freeway, I am ready to go. My destination is the social service agency that I have an appointment with to try and get some help. I have been told that they offer assistance to those like me on the street. Their goal is to get you back on your feet again. Which, essentially, means to re-insert you back into normal society. Whatever that is. This is the same place I put my name on a list for a bed. There should be a space for me by now, according to what I was told. Staying in a real bed and eating some real food for a change is something I have been looking forward to for quite awhile. Not to mention having my teeth checked. I know there is something causing pain in my left jaw that needs to be taken care of.

Ideally, I should be able to talk with someone about getting some part time work. I believe they have some kind of work referral program. Being homeless, a referral is about the only way I am going to get a chance at a job. There are not very many employers that are willing to hire somebody who has been living on the streets. I guess I don't really blame them. I understand that it is better to have some kind of experience and stability in your life. Bottom line is, I am tired of living the way I do. I would welcome the change. This is not what I left home for. My

own laziness has kept me from doing what I came here for. This is a chance to get that hand up that I have been told about.

Almost there, only a few more blocks. Just ahead is an outdoor shopping mall. Should be a good place to walk the trash cans for something edible left behind by a wasteful shopper. I know that sounds judgmental, but that's just the way I look at it. As I make my way from trash can to trash can, there doesn't seem to be anything worthwhile. Exiting the shopping area, my focus returns to getting to the social service agency.

Just when I thought things were finally going my way, a stumbling block appears. I am about to face another reminder about how fair life can or cannot be. Out of nowhere, a couple of police cars roll up to the side and in front of me, blocking my path. The one in front of me has pulled into a driveway, the two officers inside flinging open their doors on their way towards confronting me. The other police car screeches to a halt along side me and another two officers hurriedly exit the vehicle. Again, charging with agitation in my direction. My first reaction is to flee. Why? I don't really know. Just instinctual I guess. That fight or flight thing.

Before I can do much more than blink an eye, two of the officers are on me. I yell, "What'd I do?, What'd I do?" They turn me around and throw me to the ground, without an answer. My face is painfully pinned down against the concrete sidewalk, my hands are forcefully brought behind me and bound tightly together. As I hear the metal cuffs lock together, I know I am in trouble. In a matter of seconds,

I have been totally immobilized. Without any conversation, they drag me up to my feet, cart me over to the police car and unceremoniously throw me into the back seat along with my backpack. I can't say I am entirely thrilled with what has just occurred. Can't say that matters at this point.

The next few hours are somewhat bewildering, but I think they went something like this. After what seemed like only a few blocks, the police car came to a complete stop. In some parking lot that, I assumed, was the police station. It wasn't long before I was escorted from the police car and dragged inside the busy station. Once inside, I was confronted by another couple of officers who began questioning me about who I was and what I was doing at the shopping center?

I gave them the whole story as best I could, but they kept interrupting me, peppering me with questions. They seemed intent on matching me to some alleged crime that had gone down close to the shopping center. Seems, some woman had reported seeing someone fitting my description snatching a purse from a car and running back towards the mall. I explained that I had no idea what they were talking about and that all I was trying to do was get to a shelter downtown for an appointment that I hoped would turn my life around. The interrogation went on for what seemed like hours. Obviously, they were hoping that somewhere along the process I would break down and confess to stealing the purse. There was a lot of back and forth, with one of the officers leaving every now and then to get more information.

When all was said and done, the officers told me they were finished. For now. They admitted they didn't have

much of a case against me. Their story was that they had been called to the shopping mall by a woman who was waiting outside, frantically waving her arms. She said that she had just witnessed someone stealing a purse out of a car and, then, running away. While they were getting the lady's statement, she leaned into one of the officers and pointed to a person walking just across the street. Turning swiftly around in the direction to which she was pointing, the officers spotted me. Ambling out of the shopping mall. Calling for backup, they waited just a minute or two before setting off to capture their suspect.

The police confided in me that they didn't think I was the purse snatcher. They found no evidence of the purse or its contents in my possession. The more they talked to me, the more convinced they became that they had been a little hasty in pulling me in. There had been no reported loss of a stolen purse in that vicinity. All they had to go on was a description from a hysterical female witness who appeared desperate to identify someone. Anyone, who didn't look like they belonged there. My walking by at exactly the wrong moment had made it easier for the cops to pull over and haul me in for questioning.

Be that as it may, the officers thought it best not to let me go. They were going to hold me over for the night. I don't know if it was pride, embarrassment or what, but that's just the way it was going to be. They made some lame excuse about it already being too late in the day. They thought it would be to my benefit to remain locked up. I think they meant well, but in reality, they were just trying to cover their butts. I had this sneaking suspicion that it had

something to do with satisfying the accuser that something had been done. The conversation ended, I was transferred to one of the holding cells for processing the next day.

Right now, I am laying on the bunk in my cell. Thinking over everything that has just happened. And what has not happened, as a result of not making it to the shelter I was supposed to go to. I remind myself over and over again, how unfair life is. My expectation of spending the night in a homeless shelter? Gone. There will be no one to address the pain in my lower jaw. No hand up.

I suppose one consolation is that I will have a couple of free meals. Another is that I won't have to scout out a place to camp for the night. I resign myself to the fact that there is nothing else I can do. Then it hits me. I had never thought I would end up on the wrong side of the law. Never thought I would be accused of a crime someone thought they saw. I am here, all alone. All alone.

Rolling myself up into a fetal position, I try desperately to get warm. The blanket too thin. The springs too painful. Closing my eyes, I sense myself drifting further and further distant from here, as the moment slips away.

# **SOME THINGS WE KNOW**

## **CHAPTER THREE**

Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I hear a voice calling to me. It's not like I recognize the voice as being from someone I know. It's just a voice that keeps interrupting my sleep. Causing something inside of me to stir. Giving rise to me waking up and opening my eyes.

Things are still a little blurry, but fluttering my eyes a few times seems to be clearing them up. I appear to be laying on my back, looking up at a sky that is obviously not a sky at all. It looks more like a ceiling. The ceiling of a room that, as I look around, is painted a light blue. Blinking a few more times to try and clear the gunk from my eyes and the muddle from my mind, I hear that voice again. Gently calling to me. Asking me to wake up.

Out of nowhere, I feel the warmth of a hand stroking my forehead, pushing back my unkempt hair so that whoever it is that is calling me can presumably see me better. I am not sure who this person is but they seem to know me. Know that it is time for me to wake up and get out of whatever bed I am laying in.

This is a very unusual situation for me to be in. Normally when I wake up, I am soon cognizant of my surroundings. I just need a few moments to catch up. This



time, I am in somewhat of a haze. I am having a hard time making my way out of the fog that is surrounding my mind. I can feel the presence of someone around me. That I know. I just can't seem to break out of this stupor to find out who it is.

The person keeps asking me to wake up. What I'm wondering is, why? What I want to know is, the whereabouts of the nearest bathroom. Where is the mirror that I am so dependent on in establishing my identity? Why does this person keep asking me to wake up? I am awake. It may just not seem like it to them.

I need to let this person know that I am aware of their sitting next to me. Maybe if I make a move to get out of this bed, I can show them that I am awake. As I try to slide my legs up, roll over to one side and slip out of bed, I find that it just doesn't seem to be happening. The more I try to think my body into action, the more frustrating it becomes. My body is just not cooperating. My legs are barely moving. Rolling over to one side? Not happening at all.

There is that voice again. Still, gently asking me to wake up. As I strain to focus on who it is, I can make out the figure of a woman sitting directly across from me. Next to my bed. For a short time our eyes meet and lock in a moment of significant recognition. Apparently satisfied that I am awake, she is now asking me if I want to get up? I'm thinking, what do you think I have been trying to do for the last few minutes?

She must of somehow heard that mental smart-ass comment. She has now stood up and swung my legs over

the edge of the bed for me, while maneuvering my back to an upright position. Imagine that. I am now sitting up, looking at this lady now standing directly opposite me. She seems intent on cleaning me up. In one hand she has a washcloth that she starts to use to wipe my face. On the table next to her is a comb and brush that she uses next to purposely disentangle my hair in a very methodical way. There is a tray by the side of my bed with a glass of what looks like orange juice and a piece of toast with butter on it.

Whatever she is doing, it appears to be working. I am beginning to think a little more clearly now. At least I think I am. My friend here has now decided to bring out a mirror that she places in front of my face hoping to get a reaction. Gain my approval, by showing me how she has brushed my hair and cleaned up my face. For me, all I care about is looking in the mirror to find out who I am. I don't really care about how she has arranged me. I just need to see what I look like.

As she brings the mirror closer to my face, I get my first glimpse. My reaction? Not exactly what I was expecting. But, then again, is it ever something that I should expect? First thing I discern is that I am a man. An old man at that. A very old man. Hmm. Definitely not expecting that one. My hair has been brushed back in some kind of gentlemanly fashion with a nice, sharp part on the side. I have lots of wrinkles. All over my face and, especially, around my eyes. It's my eyes that start to attract all of my attention. It's the eyes that reveal just how old and tired I really am. They are sunken and droopy. There is no glint. Hardly any color. Grey, if anything. They are just dull and

listless. A wearisome result of way too many years spent in keeping an eye on the world around me, I suspect. So much learned, yet so very well worn.

The woman asks me if I want a shower? It will, supposedly, make me look and feel so much better. I think to myself, what an embarrassing question. I mean, I don't even know who this person is and she is asking me if I want her to give me a shower? My hesitation causes her to further explain. She assures me that someone else, a male caregiver, will be giving me the shower. Caregiver? I think I will let that one pass for now. Before I can even mutter an answer, another person is laying me back down again. He is beginning to take off my underwear, which seems to not really be underwear. Seems more like a diaper of sorts. Guess that explains why I don't feel like I have to go to the bathroom and relieve myself. I already have. Thus, the reason why this other person is taking off my soiled diaper.

The person who undressed me begins to escort me to the shower. One small step at a time. One small remnant of who I am appears in my brain. I think to myself there is really only one explanation. That being, I am a very old man, living in some kind of institution and being taken care of by at least two people who seem to know me. One knows me rather well. The other one seems to be some kind of personal helper. What is referred to as a caregiver. Be that as it may, I am sure there will be a whole lot more to this story once my memories kick in. For someone as old as I look and feel, that may be awhile.

The overall state of my physical condition reveals itself as we reach the room with the shower. As I stand there

buck naked in front of a mirror, my skin shows the effects of my advanced age. The wrinkles that I see all over me cannot be avoided. My extremely dry skin has lost its elasticity, resulting in the loss of its smoothness. Many years of exposure to the sun has left its myriad of marks known as age spots and dark blotches. Things are about to get worse.

My face looks like it has lost weight so to speak. My forehead, nose and mouth are very pronounced as a result. True, for my ears as well. They appear big and long. Not to mention my bulbous nose, sagging jaw and double chin. As I open and close my mouth, its apparent that I am missing a few teeth. Actually, most of my teeth. That might explain the other glass next to my bed with a pair of dentures soaking. My gums? Without my teeth, it seems I am all gums.

I could go on, but this simply confirms my suspicion. I'm not only in my advanced years, but I may be extremely close to the end. I can't help but feel disgusted with the condition that I am in. I and my companion slowly enter the shower together. Under the hot spray of the water, I am attended to by someone stronger and more proficient at caring for such an elderly gentleman as myself. A person in the last year, if not final moments, of his life.

Once we are through, I am gently dried off and led out of the shower room, back towards my bed. There, my new undergarment is waiting for me to be refastened to my bum. It's a bit embarrassing, but apparently necessary. That is followed by my caregiver wrapping me in some kind of hospital looking gown and plopping me down into a wheelchair. My two newly discovered friends look at me

with a sense of accomplishment, stating how fresh and full of energy I appear. Well, maybe to them. I, on the other hand, don't feel much different at all. And I certainly don't feel fresh and full of energy.

After a moment whereby my friends straighten up my room, I'm wheeled down the hall to the dining room for breakfast. The glass of orange juice and buttered toast by my bedside having barely been touched. The dining room is full of people just like me. It's very overwhelming. All of a sudden I am getting this paranoid feeling like I'm being surrounded by twenty mirror images of myself. They are all in wheelchairs, pushed up to a table with a plate of something akin to food I remember eating as an infant. No wonder most everyone is just sitting in their wheelchairs, staring down at their laps. Nothing looks appetizing or appealing, as I pass by the tables on the way to my designated spot. Of course, if you were to talk to the attendants they would tie that zombie-like behavior to our dementia.

Even though we are all sitting close to one another, there is no verbal conversation. No talking. Just staring down. As I look around, there is the occasional head that pops up, acknowledging that something, someone, has changed in the room. Obviously, there is still some life there somewhere. It doesn't last long though. We make the briefest of eye contact, but that's about it.

The curious thing is that there does appear to be some nonverbal communication going on. A few of those who recognized my presence earlier, actually glance my way again. A sign of seeking further contact of some kind? They

don't want to talk. It's what's written on their faces that communicates the message. A message that seems to be saying, "What am I doing here? I can't feed myself. I end up just spilling it all over my clothes". Then their head drops back down again. Hoping it will all end soon. As if to be saying, "Please, someone, just wheel me back to my room so I can be alone in my misery."

All of this has left me totally undesirous of food, if you can call what has just been placed in front of me food. My attendant leaves me temporarily for a little romantic flirtation with one of the female nurses by the entrance to the cafeteria. I may not be totally all here, but I do know my way around the predicament that I am in. The lady next to me is, obviously, not doing very well with her meal. So, I decide to add some of my meal to hers. Just a few spoonfuls sprinkled here and there on her plate. On the way back from his little tryst, my attendant looks at my plate and congratulates me on making such a good attempt at eating my morning meal. Good news for me. A little humorous news for someone at the next table who lets out a muffled chuckle.

Having successfully downed my morning meal, my attendant wheels me out of the cafeteria for the next step in today's routine. This is my day of the week to visit the medical director. The only reason I know this, is that I'm going in the opposite direction of where I came from. I do remember enough to know that I have been this way before. Lately, my visits have not turned out well with this person. No reason to believe it is going to be any different today.

Sitting behind the desk as we enter the examination room is a young gentleman in a white lab coat. He exclaims how good it is to see me again, expecting some kind of response from me in return. I have nothing. I know who it is. I just prefer not to indulge him. For the next half hour I am asked a series of questions about what I do and don't remember. Do I remember this? Do I remember that? Who is this? What is my name? His name? It goes on and on. At the end of the session, goodbyes are said and I am wheeled back to my room where I wanted to go in the first place.

I completely understand what has just transpired. I haven't been able to answer any of the doctor's questions satisfactorily. Plain and simple, I just don't recall. That's the problem. People who I am supposed to know, I don't remember. Events that I am supposed to know, I don't remember. Who I am, I sometimes forget. At least, not well enough to answer the doctor's questions. I do know who I am. But I also know I am not the same person I was fifty years ago. Let alone yesterday.

What have I been told? Dementia. More likely, Alzheimer's. They won't really know for sure if I have Alzheimer's until after I have died. After they have looked at my brain, trying to find evidence of its existence. Let's face it. I have trouble remembering things. It doesn't matter what you call it. Friends, relatives and family? Events that I have participated in? World events? Maybe some, but not others. Call it what it is. I have Alzheimer's.

I liken it to getting rid of the things that clutter your life as you get older. In your later years, you move from a larger

home to a smaller home. With less clutter. You get rid of the things you don't really need anymore. You have to. All of it will simply not fit in a smaller house. Then, you move from the smaller house to something even smaller, like a senior apartment. You get rid of more clutter. Next, you move from a senior apartment to an assisted living place. Even less clutter. Finally, you end up where I am now. A nursing home. A bed in a room. There may be two beds, if you share that room with another. Maybe some pictures. I believe it's called downsizing. That's what Alzheimer's really is. Downsizing.

That's not all there is to my story. Every story has a beginning and so do I. I may not remember enough of my story to properly verbalize it to others. Sometimes the pieces of the puzzle come together. Sometimes not. When I think back on the events in my life, there are periods of time when I can remember quite vividly what took place. Those are the special times. Although I'm sure there were lots of special times, these are the really special ones because I can still recall them. For some reason they are still accessible. Ask me to re-create my story for someone else and I just may not be able to do that. Some things we know, go away as we grow old. But we know that they are still inside. Somewhere.

This is very unusual for me to have transformed into someone who has trouble remembering their history. Their memories. I rely heavily on knowing them. That's how I gain a sense of who I am and learn about the circumstances of who it is I am going to be that day. The challenge I face now is getting those memories to come forward. At least,



the important ones. Think about it this way. All those memories are still there. It boils down to a question of access. For whatever reason, maybe Alzheimer's, the connection has dropped. My hope is that there are enough of those connections left to at least access the most memorable of those events. Those significant memories.

So my story becomes one of retrieving the most memorable events of my life that I can, hopefully, recall. It starts with a significant event that happened many years ago, when I was around twenty-five years old. This was around the time when I first realized what I wanted to do with my life.

I never really thought much about going to college. It was something that my parents always expected me to do. It wasn't until I graduated from high school, with no where else to go, that it became the expected thing for me to do. I started out slowly, taking a mishmash of subjects hoping that something would jump out at me. That jump occurred about my second year of study when I took a course in cultural anthropology. The subject was simply fascinating to me. Studying the way people lived all over the world, through all walks of life and at all levels of technological development. It opened up my world. It expanded my view. It became a world view. A world view of tolerance and acceptance that would shape me for the rest of my life.

Learning about humans from all over the world, particularly those living in more rudimentary societal conditions (we called them primitives at the time), exposed me to the rich array of beliefs that human beings hold. Beliefs about the natural and the supernatural. With so

much variability in the beliefs that people held about who they were and why they were here, it solidified my own belief in the absence of a god. It gave me the strength to be a confirmed atheist.

The rest of my college years were spent in studying the various fields of anthropology. The one field that I eventually settled on was primitive religion. Again, not really the best of titles. The term primitive tends to imply the lesser of two things. Such as when you associate its use with the term advanced. Like advanced is somehow better? I preferred to call what I studied, initial belief systems. The belief systems of very early humans that would, eventually, become the religions that we experience today. There were societies still around current day that could be studied, visited and lived amongst, in order to gain a perspective of how beliefs begin and propagate.

I ran through the typical exercises of getting my Bachelors degree and my Masters in the field of anthropology. Also, as was typical, I spent a couple of years in the field pursuing my PhD. It was with great pleasure that I returned from my field work to accept a position at a major university as a full professor. Teaching anthropology of course, with an emphasis in what was referred to, unfortunately, as primitive religion.

It was about the second semester that I met my future wife. I would notice her at gatherings we called colloquiums. These were like informal seminars held at the house of the professor giving the presentation. Other professors and, especially, undergraduate and graduate students attended. It provided an opportunity for those in the college of

anthropology to get together, socialize and learn about the latest fieldwork occurring in the discipline. Our relationship started out on a very professional and platonic level. After conveniently meeting at a number of the colloquia, our conversations became more personal.

Yes, she was a student in one of my classes. It took me until the end of the second semester to get up the nerve to ask her out on a date. So when we finally started really seeing each other, technically, she was no longer my student. That kind of resolved the awkward student/professor relationship that is usually frowned upon by the university.

Needless to say, that relationship became the second most significant event of my life. Which, in due time, led to the third and fourth significant events. Those being the birth of our children. The first one a boy and the second one a girl. That's about all I can recover from my memory at this juncture in time. The rest makes up all the minute details of which I just can't seem to recall at this moment.

Finally, come the events that lead up to the state I find myself in today. These are the episodes where I start to see cracks forming in my armor. Affecting my ability to remember the past. Or at least to be able to verbalize them to somebody else in a white lab coat sitting behind some official looking desk.

There is one event in particular that I believe to be the prime precursor to my downfall. An extremely disturbing event that makes its way to the surface of my memory very infrequently. An event that I prefer to keep closed off for my

own protection and sanity. It wasn't long after our kids had grown up and left home, that something horrible happened. I have been able to repress it, mostly, ever since it happened. Now, it has come back. They say it was a drunk driver. My wife didn't have a chance. It was over before she could of understood what was happening. It hurts too much to try and remember much else.

Somehow I think that this event may have been some kind of trigger for what started happening to me. I know there is no evidence indicating there is a connection between dementia and tragic events. Maybe because it just hasn't been studied enough? Something inside of me though thinks there is a connection. It wasn't long after that gruesome event, that I started to notice lapses in my memory. I took a leave of absence, a sabbatical, from my teaching responsibilities for almost a year.

Returning from my sabbatical, I resumed my teaching duties. I had been teaching long enough to not require more than a simple outline of what it was that I wanted to lecture about. I always included something new just to keep things interesting. For me as well as the students. It was when I was introducing a new topic in class one day, that I stumbled to recall where I was supposed to begin. I had the outline in front of me, but I just could not come up with the details with which to fill it in. I fumbled with my papers for about a minute and then it finally came back to me.

I didn't really think too much of it and I don't think the students really noticed. I wrote it off as a simple moment of forgetfulness. Which is probably what it was. Later on in the semester, it happened again. Seemingly, in mid-topic, I

could no longer remember what came next. This one I thought about a little more seriously. I knew that as we grow older it is common to have occasional lapses of memory. Changes occur in the brain that make it take longer to learn new things and to remember things that have been well known for years. Still, it concerned me. Enough to try and keep track of the times that these kind of events occurred.

It wasn't until I reached my mid sixties that I started to experience these episodes more frequently. Being past when I expected to retire, I thought it prudent to finally excuse myself from my teaching responsibilities. I wasn't quite ready to call it quits for my academic endeavors. I still enjoyed doing the research and writing the books that accompany these activities. I rationalized that I could do these things at home. Away from the public eye.

As the time progressed, it became increasingly difficult to even do the research. To keep myself focused and on topic. Writing books based on my research, kept being put off until later. That was just my professional life. My personal life and living all alone in such a big house, also took its toll. I used to be able to keep up with the chores and the upkeep. I had a housekeeper for awhile, but I made some executive decision to end that relationship after I retired. Actually, I think what it was is that she kept putting things away in places that I could not find them. There was even some thought given to her stealing things. Things simply went missing.

Without a housekeeper, it all became too much to handle. The house was a mess. The clutter grew day by day. My personal appearance was impacted and not in a

good way. I couldn't remember the last time I had washed the clothes that I was wearing. I had trouble even remembering when the last time was I had changed my clothes.

Over the months my daughter became increasingly concerned. We would go out together occasionally, for dinner or something. Maybe I would go over to her place and visit with her and the grandchildren. But I would never invite them over to my place. On numerous occasions, I would show up late or worse, not show up at all. One by one, my daughter started to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Connect the dots as I was unable to do. Daily living became a struggle for me.

One day, unbeknownst to me, my daughter and the grandkids showed up at my house. They said that I had invited them over for a BBQ. I didn't remember any of that. Obviously, I was caught totally unprepared. They made light of the situation and everyone hurriedly gathered up to go out to dinner. But the damage had been done. My daughter saw how I was living. Saw the mess that the house was in. Saw the mess that I was in. She knew I needed help, both physically and mentally.

Of course that was not the end of it. Now that my daughter was concerned, she filled my son in on all of the details. My son, being the one who rarely visited, was not quite as concerned as my daughter. Having not seen my house or my appearance in a long time, it required too much effort on his part to think that I might be in trouble. So, he just retreated to a safe place of simple denial.

My daughter and I started having many discussions over the ensuing weeks about my stability. My mental stability, of course. I, predictably, argued that I was perfectly fine and just needed to have a little help with the house. She responded that it had nothing to do with the house. She was concerned that I was the issue. There was something going on inside of me that was preventing me from living at my usual level.

The final discussion ended with me agreeing that I would visit the doctor in the hopes of discovering whatever it was that was causing my confusion. That was her word, not mine. Deep down inside I guess I agreed with the use of the word “confusion”. I was just too damn afraid to admit it.

The day finally came for me to visit the doctor. My daughter made sure that I made it to my appointment on time. Showed up at my door and drove me straight there. No excuses this time. Good thing she did, I probably would have conveniently missed that visit. She continued to stay with me throughout the entire visit. At first I was a little uncomfortable having her there, but it ended up being reassuring to have her by my side.

I hadn't been to the doctor in a number of years so we started off with a medical review. A personal medical assessment, although I did notice that there seemed to be a bias towards questions related to my recollection of things. Next up, a physical exam was ordered. Taking vital signs, drawing blood samples. That kind of thing. Of course, that required leaving for what we were told would be just a short while. It ended up taking a lot longer than my daughter and I expected.

Be that as it may, we ended up back in the doctor's office later that afternoon. The final step was to perform some neurological tests. Presumably, to assess my balance, senses, reflexes and other cognitive functions. It was the other "cognitive functions" that created some difficulty. My daughter was quite shocked to hear that I didn't remember the answer to some of the most basic of questions. She didn't say so, but I could see it in her expression. The way she would look at the doctor as if to say, "Is this normal?" The visit ended up taking the full day. The doctor said that he would be reviewing the results and scheduled another appointment to discuss the findings.

On the scheduled day, once again, my daughter drove me to the office. But this time, it was just the doctor and me sitting face to face discussing the results. Matter of factually, he started off by saying that he was going to be very straight forward with me. All indications were that I was experiencing a moderate loss of cognitive functioning. I knew the next word out of his mouth was going to be dementia. That was the word I was expecting. That is the word he finally delivered.

I decided to bring up the tragic passing of my wife and the depression that resulted. I was curious if this kind of medical condition could lead to something like dementia? The doctor responded that, yes, certain medical conditions can cause dementia-like symptoms. In these cases though, the symptoms usually disappear once the condition is treated. In my case, the doctor was pretty confident that my wife's death had little to do with the symptoms I was experiencing today. The more I thought about it, the more I



settled on the notion of what does it really matter to know the cause? Guess I was just looking for something, anything, that might dismiss the diagnosis.

Bottom line, there did not seem to be any medical condition causing the dementia that could be reversed through medication or other forms of treatment. It was a disease that was going to take its course. I heard that quite loudly. It was not going to get any better. It was only going to get worse.

We finished our visit with the typical comments about how we would need to schedule regular visits to monitor my condition. Of course I concurred. Inside, I wasn't quite ready to accept his diagnosis. Making regularly scheduled visits? What for?

What I found out later on the drive home, was that the doctor had already discussed all of this with my daughter. So much for doctor-patient confidentiality. Given the circumstances, it was probably better that she was told. I apologized to her for becoming so much trouble. I could sense that the information the doctor revealed had devastated her tremendously. More so, she would have to revisit that conversation over and over with my son. There were going to have to be decisions made in my best interest. Even though they may not be the decisions I thought best.

The next day my daughter showed up at my house bright and early, presumably to make sure I was all right. She fixed me breakfast, we prepared some coffee and sat down for a conversation. A very frank and deeply personal

conversation. She wanted to know what it felt like? I replied that it was like being hit by a ton of bricks. Except, they don't kill you. She said she understood, but that was really not the question she was asking. She wanted to know what it felt like to have dementia? She wanted to know what was going on in my mind.

At first I didn't want to discuss it. But then, I figured what the hell. I agreed to try and describe what it is like to not think clearly anymore. To not remember details of my life. To be able to reason. I began by likening the whole experience to pictures that you hang on a wall. I told her that I think of my life in pictures. It is the succession of these pictures in my mind that creates the element of time. Of time passing. The pictures of my life start out being hung on an empty wall located deep within the recesses of my mind. That's how my life gets ordered. My memories are the stacked pictures linked to some story. The older I get, the more pictures and stories get stacked. That requires even further links. Whenever I try to remember something, it's the pictures that come alive again. In my memories of time. The faces of people I have met, reappear in my mind after hearing their names spoken. Places that I have traveled to far away, seem so near to me in my memories of time.

But lately, the pictures have started to fade. Some of them even disappearing occasionally. The memories cannot be recreated. Time is not passing much for me anymore. When I try to recall what is left on my wall, all I have are some detached pictures. Pictures that have lost their connection to my memories of time. The wall seems to

be getting smaller, regressing in its content. I have trouble connecting faces with the people they represent. The places that I have traveled to, are so far away that they no longer exist. The events of my life are like confused dots on a piece of paper.

My daughter sat back in her chair and just started crying. I thought maybe I had gone too far. It's funny how I was able to so finely describe to her what it all feels like. Somehow, those dots got connected. I was surprised at this sudden moment of lucidity. I felt horrible for my daughter, having to hear how she was slipping away from me. In an effort to try and console her, I tried telling her that I was fine with all this. I had come to accept my position, my diagnosis, of at the very least, dementia.

I was lying. I was just trying to make her feel better. I ended the discussion, by asking her to remember something that might provide some comfort. No matter what the diagnosis, no matter what the outcome, there are some things I will always know. Things, that may appear to go away as I grow old. But, they are there forever. They are somewhere, still inside.

Over the next few months I settled into a mode of saying goodbye to the things of my life that I had collected over the years. My daughter and I were quite busy reorganizing my life's belongings into a smaller package. There began a fervent effort to find a new place for me to live. An effort to downsize.

I wasn't completely sold on the idea of leaving the home I had been living in for the last, uh, hmm. Let's just

say it had been a very long time. Things that I had collected representing my life's accomplishments filled the house. Most of these would have to go. It was my library that caused me the most distress. All the books, research papers, teaching notes and ancillary documents that identified who I was. My wall was going to get a lot smaller. These pictures were already starting to drop from the wall of my memories of time.

We visited a few places that my daughter thought would be a good next step for me to live in. They were called senior apartments. She made it quite clear that these were not nursing homes. I was not about to move into a nursing home. I was still quite capable of taking care of myself and could not imagine myself sitting in some wheelchair, slouched over, talking to myself with drool dripping from the corners of my mouth. No, a senior apartment was all that was required. A place that provided me with some things that I needed, like meals and housekeeping. Other than that, I would still be responsible for my own independence. There would be no nursing care or medical services provided. It would be the hand up that would get me back on my feet again. So that I could return to living a normal life again.

I and my daughter finally settled on a place about a mile away from where she lived. I felt my son lived too far away and I didn't want to miss out on my daughter's kids. My grandkids. My son had married a few times. They didn't last long enough for him to provide me with any grandchildren. So it just didn't make any sense for me to try

to live close to him. He was never much around anyway. Always working or some such thing.

My daughter was still married to the same man that gave me my grandchildren. He had a great job that allowed for my daughter to be able to stay at home and raise the kids. She made an effort to keep in touch with me as much as she thought acceptable. She was the first one that actually started to notice my decline over the years. It made better sense to stay close to her and the grandkids.

During the process of moving in, I noticed an obvious tension between my son and my daughter. They tried to hide it as best they could, but my sense was that my son was not quite onboard with the whole relocation thing. I think he thought all I needed was to have more hired help to assist in the upkeep of the house. My daughter kept trying to convince him that it wasn't just the house that was falling apart. Hiring help would have to include someone to do the cleaning, the cooking and taking full care of me. I was a little embarrassed, but she was right. That being the case, a senior apartment would provide all that for me and be easier to maintain. I could tell my son was not convinced, but he reluctantly agreed to give in.

Living in my new arrangement required a few adjustments to my style. The hardest thing to get used to was the size of my living area. There wasn't much room to wander from room to room. I, basically, only had the option of being in one of three rooms. The living room/kitchen, the bedroom and the bathroom. I call it a kitchen, but it was really just a small area where I could do the most minimal of

anything related to cooking. Going downstairs for meals became my only real venturing out into the neighborhood.

My mornings here became quite predictable. I rose early, got myself dressed and proceeded to the elevator that would take me downstairs for breakfast. I was always one of the first arrivals, but things changed quickly when some of the others noticed that their favorite pastries went missing. Having already been consumed by none other than me. I didn't realize that there was a limited amount of food being provided. The pastries just seemed to be up for grabs to the first person making it into the breakfast area.

Realizing my mistake, I started arriving a little later in the morning. There's nothing worse than riling the very people you are supposed to get along with. Especially, when you are expected to sit together at the same table. I must admit though, some of the comments made about the vile person who ate all the good pastries did hurt. I was not particular about my pastries. The good pastries suffered from my grubby hands just as much as the so called bad ones.

I always looked forward to finishing my breakfast and excusing myself to head back upstairs. I knew I had some more coffee brewing upstairs that would go well with the confiscated pastry that I had secretly placed in my coat pocket. I won't say anymore about that. What I was getting to was that my leaving allowed me to look back at the breakfast room to get the full effect. The outside of the breakfast room looked like an overly congested parking lot at the local Galleria shopping mall. Instead of all the cars, there were carefully parked walkers. Blue ones, green

ones, red ones and black ones. One behind the other and placed side by side. All inexplicably linked to someone's memory.

I have to admit there were a few times when I made my way back and sort of rearranged a few of them. Positioning them a little differently, you could say. Then I would go upstairs, sit on the big overstuffed couch and wait for the people to start leaving. I sat close to the stairs heading down to the breakfast area so I could get a good view. As people would leave they would drift to where they thought they remembered having parked their ride. The looks on their faces and the resulting confusion when their walkers were not there, made for some good times.

The thing that I didn't realize was that there were numerous cameras placed at strategic places inside and outside of the building. Making for what I thought was an anonymous move, as obvious as all get out. Consequently, after the second or third time, I was gently asked to desist and abstain from that kind of behavior. I thought it funny that it took them so long to approach me. Whoever it was that was watching the security camera probably got a good chuckle out of it.

My daughter would come and visit with me at least once a week. I'm afraid I didn't see much of my son. About once a month my daughter and I would travel to the doctor for my scheduled checkups. The doc and I would always talk about the same old stuff. He would ask me questions about what I could remember and I would respond with the all too familiar "I don't know". Occasionally, I had further physical checkups and scans to add to my building mental

portfolio. I didn't feel that things were getting any worse. But then again, they weren't getting any better either.

Other times my daughter would come join me for a meal and then, afterward, we would talk. She also thought it quite funny that the breakfast, lunch and dining areas looked more like parking lots at meal time. We would usually talk about my life at the home, but the conversation always seemed to get back to my dementia. I preferred to stay away from that subject. It wasn't going to change, so why talk about it?

After a year of living, somewhat independently, I felt pretty good about the whole situation. I was adapting quite well, making friends and putting on weight. Probably had something to do with all that pastry I had been consuming. My daughter wasn't quite as convinced. Towards the end of the first year, our conversation started to get a bit more confrontational. At least from my perspective. We would discuss all the friends that I had made, particularly at meal times. My daughter had accompanied me enough at various mealtimes over the last few months, that she acknowledged I seemed to have made various friends. She conceded that, yes, we always sat together at the same table. The same people at the same table. In the same seats. I figured something was brewing.

On one visit, she made some comment about my forgetfulness. She recalled how I had introduced her as my daughter to people that had already been made aware of that fact. Lately, I had repeated my introduction of her as my daughter to everyone sitting around the dining table. I didn't really see anything wrong with that behavior. I



thought I was just following proper social etiquette. I immediately went into defense mode. I tried to blame it on the others sitting at the table. I had to repeat myself each time. They all had trouble remembering those kinds of things.

Then there were other comments made. Again, it had to do with my friends around the dining table. She said I had trouble remembering who they were. When we talked later after eating, I would not refer to them by name. It was always in some kind of reference to something else, like where they were sitting. My daughter's conclusion was that my memory was getting worse. I was having trouble remembering their names. I thought she was just jumping to conclusions. We were both quietly reserved for awhile after that. She was trying to give me time to let that sink in. I spent the whole time absolutely fuming inside.

Over the course of the next month or so, I can't remember exactly, other lapses apparently occurred. My daughter said that she was called in to the administrator's office to discuss the concerns of the staff. There had been an increased incidence of residents reporting that I had been found wandering the halls. They would be startled by someone knocking on their door. Upon opening the door, I would be found standing there asking for help in identifying which door it was that I was supposed to go to. I always used the same excuse. It was just too dark in the hallway or something like that.

The staff also reported that there was an increased number of times reported that I had missed my meals. Upon searching for me, they would sometimes find me

sitting in my room unaware that mealtime was now over. Other times, they would find me at the end of the hallway, sitting in one of the overstuffed chairs. Upon being asked if I needed help, my reply was that I just kind of lost my way and had to sit down to rest.

Of course all of this wasn't anything new to me. At least some of it anyway. I did have a vague recollection of wandering the halls at times. Especially, towards bedtime. Frankly, I tried to put a lot of that out of my mind because it just scared the wholly hell out of me.

I would find myself fumbling my way down a darkened, narrow hallway. In some cases I was so rattled, I would turn around so fast that I actually bounced off of the wall. Or two. I knew deep down inside that this was the hallway I was supposed to be in. That somewhere in this hallway was a room that I called my own. I just didn't know which door it was. There were so many doors. I would just start knocking on whichever one I came to first.

I don't know what I expected to happen if the door I knocked on had turned out to actually been my room. I suppose I would have just moved on to the next one. Needless to say, I probably didn't even consider that as a possible outcome. What usually happened is that someone would answer, act as if they knew me and proceed to walk me to my room. Once inside, I would spend the next hour or so trying to calm down. Just happy that I was back in my safe place again.

In our later discussions, my daughter did admit that it had appeared I had lost some weight. That was confirmed

at my next doctor's appointment. My doctor also confided in her that things seemed to be getting worse. That the dementia or, more likely Alzheimer's, was winning. One of the determining factors was my lack of understanding a very basic thing. The difference between what something is used for and what something is. The example was the key to my room. When I was found out in the hallway and escorted back to my room, I never needed a key to get in. I never locked my room. When the doctor asked me what the key was for, I didn't really know how to answer. I had been asked before about not knowing where my key was. Not knowing what a key is for, really stumped me.

It was soon after all of this that my son made an unexpected appearance. He came with my daughter. I knew something had to be up. My son never visited and the fact that they both wanted to talk with me was a real red flag. They both made it quite clear that they were concerned. My daughter's anxiety was in trying to identify what the next step should be. Where I would be going next to live. She thought I needed a place that had better care for someone with my kind of disease. My son's duty was to make sure that didn't happen. He wanted to make his own assessment of the condition I was in. It wasn't a pleasant conversation, especially since they seemed to do all of the talking.

Their discussion, more like an argument, got more heated as the minutes wore on. My son's opinion, based on what he was seeing and hearing, was that I was fine. Maybe I had slipped a little bit, but he thought I was perfectly able to continue living in my apartment. My

daughter's argument, obviously more convincing, was that I had no choice. The administrator had made it clear that for my own safety, they were going to have to recommend me moving to a nursing home. A nursing home that had special care for dementia and Alzheimer's patients. Checkmate.

There was one last episode that drove the nail into the coffin, so to speak. One morning I awoke to my daughter sitting next to my bed. It was pretty obvious she had been there for a long time. Once again, my son was nowhere to be found. I woke up with one big lump on my head and one terrible headache. My daughter was called when the staff had found me on the floor of the hallway. Apparently, I had fainted, hit the wall on the way down and that's where they found me. Crumpled up on the carpet. Unconscious. The paramedics arrived and transported me to my room. After doing a careful assessment, they determined that I had not broken anything. Maybe a slight concussion, but nothing to really worry about.

That was the final straw for my daughter and, I assume, the administrators of the senior apartments. I overheard a phone conversation between my daughter and my son as I lay in my bed. I think my daughter had finally had enough. She wasn't going to take it anymore. She really laid into my son for his failure to step up and participate in the decision making processes affecting my life. She had been there to pick me up when I fell down. She had been the one expected to take me to all of my doctor appointments. She had been doing everything. She was the bad cop, while my son sat back and made

judgmental accusations about how things should have been done differently.

I'm not sure how the final conversation ended. Things got real quiet. Too quiet. There was some final hushed whispering and that was that. I had a suspicion that a conversation with me was next, although I knew it would not be like the one I had just heard. But I also knew that it was not going to end pleasantly.

Days later, as I suspected, the anticipated conversation began. I have to admit, my daughter's approach was very direct, but gentle. She made it very clear that her main concern was for my well-being and safety. Then she started asking me the dreaded "remember" questions. She asked me if I remembered what was significant about the address 145 Sky View Lane? I looked at her as if there was this fog between us. A fog that divided my world from hers. I just stared back at her, when she replied that was the address of where I lived most of my life. A life that included two children and a wife. She asked if I knew what the significance of the University of Anthropological Studies was? Once again, I just stared at her feeling a sense of shame and guilt for not knowing. She replied that was where I had worked for a good number of years. That I was a professor of anthropology emeritus. The final blow came when she asked the question if I knew who she was? I knew deep inside that was an important question. That one I was really expected to know the answer to. I looked directly into her eyes, trying to discover a sense of who she was. Trying to pull the answer from the

depths of my sole. I finally said, skeptically, that she was my daughter.

I guess that wasn't good enough, as the conversation then turned to her suggesting that I move out and into a nursing home. Some place that could take better care of me. Some place that was better staffed to deal with people like me who had severe dementia and Alzheimer's. My head went spinning. Feeling betrayed, I told her that she was just trying to get rid of me. This wasn't just another downsizing move. Nursing homes are where people go to die. I tried pushing her away but she just pulled me closer. It was comforting. It was reassuring. I started to feel secure in what I was being told. My daughter and I made a promise that she would be with me throughout the whole process.

Looking back on it, I didn't stay long at the nursing home. Maybe a month at most. On one of my last visits to the doctor I was given a terminal diagnosis and referred to hospice. Returning home to live out my last days. Home, being my daughter's house. The referral to hospice was a godsend. My hospice nurse and medical social worker visited me often to ease my pain, reassure my mind and comfort my daughter and her kids. I really can't say enough of hospice. Without them, without their genuine concern and care for my welfare, none of us would have been able to accept the ultimate fate that awaited me.

As I lay here today, I am surrounded by all those who have taken such an interest in me lately. Even my son is here, somewhere. Probably in another room talking on the phone. My daughter? Right by my side. Where she has

always been throughout this whole ordeal. As she promised.

They are all probably thinking that I don't really know who they are. Even though my eyes are closed, I can see the tears in my daughter's eyes, flowing down her cheeks. The pain in her face, as she fights to control her emotions. They don't think I know what's happening to me. But I do.

As my eyelids flutter for the last time, they don't understand that there are still some things I know deep inside. Things that have gone away as I have grown old. But I know are still somewhere inside.

# MEMORIES OF TIME

## CHAPTER FOUR

My eyes are still closed. I can barely hear the voices around me as I lay still, fading, fading away. I will, over time, grow faint from their memories. My memories? Mine seem to be sharpening. The memories of my timeline here on Earth are coming back into focus. Right now I feel like I am caught somewhere in between here and somewhere else. A kind of limbo. Being pulled in two different directions all at the same time. Like the stretching of taffy.

Floating in the void of neither here nor there, a distant consciousness forms. A memory of something I learned in college while attending a class in cosmology. A class totally unrelated to my major of anthropology but, none the less, equally as informative to my intellectual development and future well being. Now, for whatever reason, it has come back to me. Trying to help me understand my present predicament.

We were studying a very perplexing concept of whether things are alive, dead or both at the same time. The idea comes from a famous thought experiment known as Schrodinger's cat. The idea goes like this. A cat is put into a box. The box has an element in it that, through random radioactive decay, may or may not release a poison. If the box remains closed, we have no idea whether



the poison has been released. As such, we have no idea whether the cat is alive or dead. Here comes the physics. We conclude that the cat is in a state of superposition. In other words, that the cat is both alive and dead at the same time. We just can't tell.

It is not until the box is opened that we know for sure if the cat is alive or dead. This act of opening the box, making an observation, collapses the superposition to one of actual position. The act of creating an interaction causes the cat to be alive or dead. It's all related to the very weird and unpredictable nature of quantum mechanics.

So what does all this mean to me now? I am like Schrodinger's cat. I am neither alive nor dead. I'm getting there. Either one or the other. But in the meantime, I am both at the same time. I am in the superposition of myself, while those around me are observing me as having died.

There are still events floating around in my brain that make up what I call my memories of time. These will soon start to fade away as I interact with someone else. Those events will then start to be overshadowed by the memories of who I am to become. But in the meantime, I'm still here.

## SUNDAY AFTERNOON

### CHAPTER FIVE

The recollections of my life here on Earth are not just a series of random events on a timeline. Rather, there is an order that follows the arrow of time. At the moment, my mind is trying to dredge up one of those remembrances. A memory that has grown faint over my many years. Funny how memories can just grow dim like that. Similar to going down some long, darkened hallway toward an exit sign that is ominously flashing red. This flashback's not doing that. Not fading away at all. In fact, it is getting stronger. I'm not sure why this particular event is important, but I'm guessing I have little choice but to follow it.

Waking up on a Sunday means different things for different people. Some people set it aside for a day of rest. The final side of the weekend that began only one day before. Others use Sunday as the day of the week set aside for observing their spirituality. They may go to a church or some other such religious structure, in order to show their strongly held beliefs about why it is they are here or where they may be going when they die. Even make a financial donation of sort, as a way of paying for what they wish for. Let's just say that for many of these people, Sunday is their day of worship. The day to profess their religious beliefs in a public way. Not everyone shares their religion on Sunday. For some it's a different day. Then too, others have no set

day to do so at all. They express themselves every day. Life is their reason to celebrate.

Then there are people like me. I remember myself being a child of around eight years old. I had decided early on that setting aside Sunday for worship was all just a horrible waste of time. As my memory tells me, I had more important things to do. Why sit inside some church somewhere when you could be outside playing ball? I figured it this way. Going to school five days a week was all I signed up for. Attending church on Sunday? That left only one day to do what I and my friends really wanted to do. And that was to play ball.

Were we sacrificing our ability to live forever in some place called Heaven? To be atoned for our sins? I am sure that was something our parents said to try and get us to drop the ball, so to speak. It didn't work. The here and now said gather up your friends, head up to the local elementary school and engage in a little game of friendly tackle football on the school's front lawn.

It was football with the guys. I can distinctly see myself standing with the guys on the school's front lawn discussing our strategy. Who was going to be quarterback? Who would block and snap the ball? Who would run through the opposing player's backfield hoping to catch the far flung ball and carry it victoriously into the end zone?

We were want to play real football and that meant tackle football. We played football while in gym class at school, but that was restricted to flag football. Just not the same. We only had a few options of where to play. We

could play on the asphalt pavement on one of the side streets. Not a good idea for obvious reasons. We could play at our school on the baseball field, which was a mixture of dirt and grass. Better, but still not ideal. Finally, there was the lawn out in front of our elementary school. It was just the right length and width. It was all grass so being tackled and thrown to the ground was a bit easier. There was only one problem. Sprinkler heads. We had to be very careful to avoid those areas of the lawn when being tackled to the ground. Sometimes we didn't have a choice.

Obviously, we chose the lawn in front of our school to hold our scrimmages. Me, I had another reason for choosing the lawn on the school's front yard as our playground. The girl who lived across the street. I cannot believe that my mind is returning to a memory of the very first girl that I was attracted to. All I know is that I was caught between desperately wanting to talk to her and being too shy to do anything about it.

Anyway, she lived across the street from where we played football on Sunday afternoons. I saw her often while in school, either in class or at recess. There were many lunchtimes when I would nervously fantasize walking up to her and saying hello. Hoping to strike up a conversation. That never materialized. Playing football across the street from where she lived gave me hope. That she would someday come stand outside of her house and watch us play. Watch me play. I don't remember that ever happening, but, then again, maybe she was watching from within her house?

There was just something about her that made me feel different inside. Special. Feelings that I had never felt before. Feelings for someone else. A girl. I watched her every move in class, out in the playground and on the bus when we took field trips. I thought about all the ways that I could approach and talk to her, but that's all they were. Just thoughts. I was never able to get up enough courage to follow through with my thoughts. My friends would let her know that I liked her, which embarrassed me to no end. Letting my friends know that I liked a girl was not an easy thing to admit. She said to my friends that if I was that interested in her I should just let her know. I just couldn't do it.

The only time that I did get up enough courage was on one occasion while playing football in the school's front yard. Remember the sprinkler heads? Well, I was on my way up the field, breaking tackles, when I was unceremoniously grabbed and flung to the ground. Right on top of one of the nastiest of the sprinkler heads to rise above the grass. I saw it on the way down and stretched out my hand to break my fall. Unfortunately, the palm of my hand struck the sprinkler head with such force as to rip and tear the skin, causing a painful cut and a fair amount of bleeding. Everyone gathered around as I lay on the ground, pretending that it didn't hurt, but knowing that it did.

Here was my big chance to finally be face to face with the girl I couldn't stop thinking about. I blurted out that I needed a band-aid to stop the bleeding, knowing full well that none of my friends would dare to have one. My idea was to have them carry me over to the house across the

street. Carry isn't exactly what they really did, but it does sound better. It just so happened that this was the house where that girl lived. You know, the one in my class? Was that coincidental or what? She would certainly have access to a bandage or something to sooth my pain, both physical and emotional.

So the gang proceeded to hoist me up and hobble me over to her house, where we proceeded to knock on her front door. Her mother answered the door. We all looked at each other, unsure as to what to do. She told us that her daughter was not at home, but could she help? It wasn't the response that I was quite expecting. I had played something else out in my head that just wasn't in the cards that day. I had imagined that girl tending to the wounds of her favorite warrior. Providing comfort, care and tenderness. Alas, not today. But since we were there, I let her mother bandage my hand up instead, so that we could go back to playing football. Of course I was devastated. I finally get up the courage to talk to her and she is not home? Chances are, she had never even watched us play. Didn't even know we were around. I was thoroughly dejected.

My one-sided affair continued on for another couple of years. I was never able to break out of my shyness and seek her affection. I think it had something to do with a fear of rejection. It wasn't too long before my family and I moved away from the neighborhood where I grew up. My father got a new job in another state. I never again played football in the school's front yard on Sunday afternoon. I never again saw the girl I was so attracted to. Apparently, I have never

forgotten the impact she had on my life. That being one of my first memories and all. Nor have I forgotten the scar on the palm of my left hand that I can still see clearly today.

The memory of my childhood seems to be moving, with remembrances of some being replaced by others. I see flashes of my friends, my teammates, coming into view. Our teams were usually made up of four players on a side. We never had a problem in finding another team of four to play against. We all went to the same elementary school so they were all our friends anyway. The other three players on my team were the ones I hung out with the most. Let's call them Don, Timmy and Ricky. I must admit I am having trouble remembering their real names. We spent a lot of our school and non-school hours together although that was a long, long time ago. It was with them that I had my very first sleepover.

Not that sleepovers should be that big of a deal. Especially, for boys. I suppose, as I look back on it now, it was just the first opportunity to spend the night away from my parents. The reason for the sleepover was that it was Don's birthday. He had been planning this event for weeks and we had all been invited to what was supposed to be one of the most memorable events of our childhood. Don was kind of like the leader of our group. He was usually the quarterback of our football squad and the one who stood up for us all when anyone else tended to get in our face. Not quite the bully, but almost.

We were all supposed to arrive at Don's house sometime early on Saturday afternoon. His actual birthday. He lived about ten blocks from me so my mom drove me

over and dropped me off in front of his house. Sleeping bag and pillow in hand. I have to admit I was a little insecure about spending the night. I had never done that before. Once my mom dropped me off though and my friends had all arrived, the insecurity seemed to fade away.

The highlight of the evening was that the four of us were going out to the movies. Don's dad was to be our driver and chaperon. This was to be a night out at the drive-in, where movies played on the really big screen and you sat in your car watching the movie with an audio speaker precipitously hung from the side of the door. To make things even more special, Don's dad had made sure to bring along a couple of six packs of our favorite cola beverage and plenty of snacks. We were living in hog heaven.

The real topper was the movie. One of the scariest movies out at the time. At least we thought so. A movie called "The Angry Red Planet". This was my first exposure to science fiction and rated right up there with my first exploration of the solar system using a telescope in the fifth grade. Anyway, as the movie title indicates, the story was about a journey to Mars. A journey that proved to be full of adventure and downright Halloween scary fear.

Surveying the surface of Mars, the crew is attacked by a carnivorous plant, trapped by a huge spider crab with legs like trees and held hostage by a one-eyed giant spinning eye that ends up killing one of the crew and disabling another. We were all squirming in our seats, afraid to let out screams of the real terror we felt. By the end of the movie there were plenty of empty cola cans and shredded snack



packages scattered everywhere throughout the car. We were more than ready to call it a night.

Arriving quite late back to Don's house, we spread out our sleeping bags in the living room. Most of us were hoping to get some sleep, but almost afraid to close our eyes. The birthday boy had a different plan. After his parents went to bed and closed their door, he gathered us all around him and said he had an idea. The idea was to stay up all night and continue talking. So, we were not to fall asleep. We weren't particularly thrilled with the idea of not being able to fall asleep, but we did our best since it was his birthday.

It wasn't too long before I heard one of the others start to make noises as if they were nodding off, snoring as they did so. We all looked at each other and wondered what would happen next. It was Ricky. As soon as the birthday boy became aware of the transgression, we had our answer. He was up in a flash making his way to the kitchen where he grabbed a pitcher from the cupboard and began filling it with cold water. Quietly retracing his steps back to the living room, we looked on in horror as he began pouring the cold water over Ricky's head and face. He immediately awoke, coughing and snorting. He was greeted by our laughing host who promised to do the very same thing to anyone else daring to fall asleep at his party. We had been duly warned and the rest of the night was spent making sure we stayed well enough awake to keep our host happy.

The next morning, we all made our separate exits from the party. Early. Making flimsy excuses like we had promised our parents we would be home early to go to

church or something crazy like that. We were all slightly offended by what had happened the night before. I gathered up my sleeping bag and pillow, slightly wet from the previous night's antics, and slowly made my way out the door and onto the street. Truth was, I was supposed to be picked up by my mom later in the morning. I was having none of it and started slowly walking the distance back to my house before she would have even left.

I had quite a long time to think over what had just happened. Sleeping overnight at someone else's house didn't seem to pose the issue. It was the way that Ricky had been treated by Don pouring cold water over his head that made me feel uneasy. Guess it made me feel that my best friend wasn't such a good friend after all.

That played itself out one day at school. We were all playing in the school yard at recess when Don approached me and said he wanted to fight me. I was caught by surprise, as nothing seemed to have happened to warrant such behavior. I questioned him as to why he wanted to fight with me, but his only response was to show me his fists. I thought about this for a minute and then responded by saying that I had no reason to fight with him. We were good friends and good friends do not fight each other. In my head I heard this voice that said, just turn around and walk away. Sometimes it is better to just walk away. So, that's what I did. Our friendship never recovered. As I remember this event in my life, I think how odd it is that seemingly good friends can turn into not-so-good ones. All it takes is just one bad experience. One rotten apple, so to speak.

There were other relationships that I had when I was young that fell into this same category. Other relationships that didn't turn out as well as I had hoped. One, a friend who lived just across the alley from me. His name was Jay and, ironically, it was Jay who gave me my one and only black eye. But that's another story.

We used to play together in my back yard almost every single day. Sometimes, into the night. My parents had built a house that backed up to an alley, the back portion of which was never developed. That area was bare ground, the center of which had been piled a big mound of dirt we called a mountain. My mountain. That mountain is where we played with our toys. Things like cars and army men. We made roads and tunnels all around the mountain. I don't know how many hours we spent together making up stories and imagining new lives and friends.

There was one time, at the end of the day, when my mother called me in for dinner. Jay and I were not quite finished playing, so we made a pact to come out early the next morning to continue our little fantasy world. We knew better than to try and delay a call from a mom too long. Plus, I was hungry.

So I went to bed that night telling myself, over and over again, that I needed to wake up early and get outside to play in the backyard. Sometime in the wee morning hours, I assumed the agreed upon morning hours whatever that meant, I quietly got myself out of bed. I shared my bedroom with my brother so I had to be careful not to wake him. I made my way down the hall towards the back door. After a couple of tries at opening the door, I realized that

the door had been locked. Unlocking it, I slipped quietly outside, closing the door behind me.

When I got to the mountain, I expected to find Jay waiting there for me. But he was no where to be found. I was a bit surprised as to how dark it was, but was determined to go and find Jay. Jay happened to live across the back alley and down a ways. I went through my back gate and down the alley to Jay's house. Still no sign of Jay. I slowly opened the gate to his backyard and looked up at Jay's bedroom on the second floor. No lights, no Jay and no sign of movement.

I bent down and looked for some pebbles to throw up at Jay's window. Maybe I could wake him up? I grabbed a handful, reached back and heaved them up at the window. As first throws often do, I missed the window by a wide margin. So I did the same thing a few more times until I was finally able to rattle the window I had aimed at. I waited. Still nothing. Jay was not responding.

Defeated, I went back out of his gate and retreated back down the alley. Between Jay's house and my backyard, there suddenly appeared a man walking toward me. Before I could sneak in my gate, the man and I made contact. He asked me what the heck I was doing out there in the alley? So I told him the story of how Jay and I were supposed to wake up early so that we could continue playing cars on the mountain. As Jay was not there, I was trying to wake him up. The man got this astonished look on his face and laughingly asked me if I knew what time it was? I said that I didn't. He told me that it was two-thirty in the morning.

Well, I sheepishly bid adieu to the man and crept through my backyard, passed the mountain to the back door. Going inside, I locked the door behind me. Guess I was trying to make sure no one else would find out about my little misadventure. Quietly slipping back into bed, all I could think of was the lost time that could have been spent driving my cars up and down the mountain.

The black eye thing? Not that it is really important now as I recall it, but it did change my relationship with Jay. Kind of like how things changed with my relationship with Don. One night, after dinner, I was standing in the alley behind my garage. I was supposed to meet Jay for some reason. As I was standing there, I felt this tap on my back shoulder. When I turned around to see who it was, there was this fist heading towards my face. Landed square on my left eye. It was Jay. Why? I have no idea. I ran immediately back into my house, with my hand covering the left side of my face. My mother fixed me up as best she could, but that was pretty much the end of my relationship with Jay and cars.

After that, Jay started to get into trouble. A lot. The kind of trouble that I did not want to get involved with. One afternoon, I went looking for Jay at his house. His brother, Sammy, told me that Jay was not there but I could wait for him in his bedroom upstairs. So Sammy and I went up the stairs and got sidetracked by something new Sammy had just got as a gift. It was a pair of binoculars. While we were busy playing with the binoculars, we heard a siren coming down the street from below. Curious as to what was going on, we looked out of the window and saw a fire truck making its way towards a canyon not far from where we

lived. We used to visit that canyon a lot. It was kind of like another playground for us.

Looking out the window towards the canyon, we saw a bunch of dark smoke billowing up from its sides. We couldn't pass up the opportunity to try out the new binoculars. Sammy took the first look. Then he passed the binoculars to me. I focused over at the canyon and saw the fire racing up the hill. As I watched, I turned back to Sammy and said I thought I saw a familiar figure trudging its way up the side and out of the canyon. Passing the binoculars back to Sammy, he excitedly exclaimed that the person looked to be Jay. As he came closer into view, it looked as if Jay was running in a panic. He was trying to run as fast as he could back to his house.

When he finally made it home, we were waiting for him. He didn't say anything. We didn't say anything. But we did notice that Jay's clothing was covered with ash and smelled to high heaven of smoke. It was not a huge jump to think that Jay was the one who had started the fire in the canyon. Nobody else ever found out. We never said a thing. Just an example of where Jay was heading for in life.

It's strange, but my mind has returned me to that walk back home from Don's house after the sleepover. It's like the walk that won't end. I just keep walking and walking. Thinking and thinking. The journey seems to be taking longer and longer. Why is it not getting shorter and shorter as one would expect? I should be home by now. It's almost as if I am slowing down and time is being stretched and dragged out. Never getting there. Yet, at the same time, I feel like I am trying to catch up. Catch up to what?

As if in a dream that jumps from one fantasy state to another, my memory switches gears releasing me from the never-ending walk home. Bicycle gears. Now, I have transformed into riding on my bicycle. The one I modified with new high rise handlebars. I am riding furiously up a very long and windy hill. My brother and my cousin are ahead of me. Getting further and further ahead of me. I peddle harder and harder trying to catch up, but I am not making much progress. Then, they are out of my view. Too far ahead. Struggling, I finally arrive at the top. I have to stop, get off my bicycle and sit on the ground to catch my breath. But I can't. I can only breathe in a little bit before giving it up. My brother and my cousin have made their way back. They find me struggling to breathe.

Unexpectedly, the bicycle trip disappears from my mind. In another metamorphosis, it is replaced by me hiking up the side of a steep mountain. A very high mountain. Long, deep, switchbacks mark the trail up to the summit. I'm still struggling. Still struggling to catch my breath. My backpack's belt has broken. The one that is supposed to hold it tightly to my waist. Ahead of me, far ahead of me, are others that are rapidly leaving me far behind. I quicken my pace, but my pack keeps sliding from side to side. Forcing me to breathe even harder and harder, trying to catch up. Forcing the air out of my lungs quicker than I can suck the air back in. Panic is starting to set in. I can't breathe. I'm losing ground.

Expelling what I believe to be one of my last breaths of air, I try to fall to my knees, but stumble as I do so. I attempt to regain my balance, but my backpack's weight is forcing

me to one side of the trail. Closer and closer, until I'm near the edge. I can't recover, as I begin to slide off the side of the mountain. Falling like a dead bird out of the sky as I tumble head over heel to the depths below.

Somehow, everything has now become tranquil. A feeling of comfort and warmth washes over me, as the collision with the ground never seems to come. All is quiet now. The memories have stopped. I am home.



## BONNIE

### CHAPTER SIX

Rolling over in the comfort of a bed, I am blinded by the sunlight filtering its way through the narrow slit of a curtain hanging over my bedroom window. As I spring back in reaction to the glare of the sun in my eyes, I am startled by something else. The sound of a disturbing ringing in my ears. It takes me a second, but I figure out it's my alarm clock going off. That unforgiving reminder for me to get up, get out of bed and start the day. Reaching over, I fumble blindly for the switch on the clock, successfully stopping the alarm mid sound.

Now that things have quieted down, I just want to lie here for a moment. I roll over onto my back and just stare up at the ceiling, kind of daydreaming about nothing at all. Then I remember that this is not a work day. It's Saturday. My day off. That bit of good news has come a little too late. I am already wide awake. I try to gather up my strength enough to sit up and begin my day. One strong push and I'm sitting awkwardly on the side of the bed. Over there on the other side of the room is what appears to be a bathroom. Ah, a bathroom. I have a bathroom. That's a good sign.

Another good sign? I'm actually feeling good about getting out of bed now that I have laid here for awhile. I

seem to be looking forward to starting my day. There's an energy that is building in my thoughts and body, telling me that it's good to be alive. Just one more giant yawn, followed by an expansive stretch of my body and I'm ready.

All right, I'm up. I've got the bathroom in sight. Looks like it's just a few simple strides away. Stepping over a pile of clothes that were hurriedly flung onto the floor the night before, I reach the open door of the bathroom. My right hand automatically reaches up and to the right hoping to find the light switch that will suddenly expose who I am.

As the light turns on I am pleasantly surprised to find a young woman staring back at me in the mirror. I have long dark hair cascading over my shoulders and a set of hazel eyes that have already begun to sparkle in the morning sunlight. I would guess that I am somewhere in my mid to upper twenties. That will become clearer later on, I'm sure.

For now, looks like I am going to be jumping in the shower. It doesn't take long to undress, as all I seem to have on is some underwear that I have slept in. Reaching into the shower, the handle is pulled out and turned to its hottest setting. After the hot water has begun flowing, I adjust the temperature and step inside to let the hot water pour over my head, across my face and down over my body. It feels good to have the water flow through my hair as I massage my scalp and lather the shampoo. Soon, all that's left to do is soap up and rinse off my face and body. For good measure I huddle under the shower head one last time, watching the stream of water circle the drain located at my feet. Hoping that the drain doesn't clog today as it has on other occasions.

About ten minutes into the shower, I turn it off and step back out in front of the mirror again. This time to dry off with a towel that has been left to dry from the day before. Slipping into a bathrobe, I use my towel again to wrap up my hair on top of my head. Mainly, just to get it up and away from my face so I can proceed with the next step in the morning routine.

Reaching for the purse resting on the counter top next to the sink, I am looking for something specific. Inside there should be an eyeliner pencil and a makeup compact. I get the feeling that trying to find something in the purse can be quite challenging. This time I'm in luck. Without much effort and too many things extracted almost surgically from the purse, I have found what I have been looking for. There, together side by side.

What's even more exciting to me is that they are lying right next to an identification badge of some kind. The kind that has a picture and a name. Looking closer, I am able to make out my name. My name is Bonnie. The picture matching perfectly with the face I see in the mirror. Without the makeup yet, of course. Seems as if I work for a business called Sav-N-Mart, which is displayed prominently at the top of the badge. Not sure what a Sav-N-Mart is, but no matter, I have a name. My name is Bonnie.

After spending a considerable amount of time in the bathroom making herself presentable, Bonnie finally emerges back into the bedroom. On the wall to her right is a calendar. A calendar that has tomorrow's date, Sunday, circled prominently in red. Now that could mean a few things. Could be that it is her birthday. Or the day she goes

to church. Or an anniversary of some kind. Or maybe just something simple, like the rent is due. Don't really know yet.

Bonnie stops to look at the calendar more closely, her eyes seeming to focus on the encircled date. Almost as if being frozen in a daze. There is something emotional brewing inside of her. I can also feel it building Inside of me. The extended pause to take a look at the calendar is taking way too long. Her finger slowly makes it's way up to the calendar and gently caresses the encircled date. Carefully tracing the circle as it makes its circuitous route around the date. There's somewhat of a memory forming in my brain. There is an emotional meaning behind the date emerging out of the steamy mist left from the shower. But it's just not there yet.

After a minute or two, Bonnie finally breaks away from the magnetism holding her to the spot in front of the calendar. Looking in the closet she finds something suitable to wear. A nice top and pair of pants that were cleaned and pressed just a night ago. Nothing flashy here. Seems she is quite pleased with the selection she made at the local Salvation Army. Shoes? No need for shoes at this point. I have a feeling she is going to be staying in for awhile.

Next on the agenda is finding something for breakfast. Heading out to the kitchen, first thing on Bonnie's mind is to make some coffee. I know the feeling. I just have to start my day with at least a couple of cups of hot coffee. I notice Bonnie doesn't buy the fancy coffees, just something cheap that she has probably picked up at the Save-N-Mart. There's another clue. Looks like the Sav-N-Mart is not only where she works, but it is also where she probably does the

majority of her grocery shopping. With the coffee being started, Bonnie decides to go for her usual bowl of granola with some fruit cut on top for good measure. Adding a little milk to the mixture, she is ready to go.

I'm starting to feel like I am finally thinking like Bonnie and anticipating her thoughts. I'm picking up on her habits and her preferences. Making them my own. Becoming Bonnie. It's like opening doors to rooms that I have never been in before. Then finding out that it's comfortable and reassuring inside.

My favorite thing to do after preparing breakfast is to go over to the table by the window facing the street and park myself there for awhile. Sometimes I read through a magazine or two that I have picked up at the Sav-N-Mart while eating my breakfast and sipping my coffee. Other times, I just like to look out the window and gaze at the street scene unfolding below me.

I live on the second floor of a two-story apartment building that is situated smack dab in the middle of downtown. Right below me is the road running down its center, not surprisingly called Main Street. Somewhat towards the middle of Main Street hangs a very ornate sign that reads "Welcome To Whisper Creek". Whisper Creek is the town where I live. It is not a large town, there are only a few thousand people at most. Everybody here is very friendly and helpful. That's what keeps me here.

My apartment is a pretty modest one bedroom unit. But it has everything I need at this point in my life. I don't have a television. Don't watch television. I have just the

basic furnishings, such as a couch and chair in the living room, a small table next to the kitchen where I can eat my more formal meals and a twin bed and dresser in the bedroom. I spend a lot of my free time reading books. I get most of my information about Whisper Creek and the outside world from reading the magazines and newspapers that are sold at the Sav-N-Mart. That and, of course, listening to the customers that frequent the Save-N-Mart.

The walls are pretty bare, save the occasional piece of art I have ripped out of a magazine and taped tackily to the wall. Then, of course, there is my calendar. Displayed prominently. That's how I keep track of my life. I check it every day to see what's upcoming and how much progress I have made in my life. Not to mention, it also has some pretty nice pictures adorning each month of the year.

The view from my apartment window affords me the opportunity to see what's going on downtown. I know it's very voyeuristic, but it keeps me a safe distance away. The Sav-N-Mart is only a block away. A well-lit sign marks its presence. Right now, there are already cars starting to stream into the parking lot. Having it that close, makes it very easy for me to get to work and around town without using my car. That's a very good thing, since it is a very old car, needs a lot of work and can be kind of finicky at times.

Looking more closely, I locate the gas pumps situated in front of the main entrance. Cars are starting to fill up as I speak. The Sav-N-Mart is kind of like part gas station and part local convenience store. Convenient shopping for just about anything you might need in a hurry. Things such as groceries, hardware, clothing and all. This is where I work.

By the time I have finished my reading, looked out the window and cleaned up my morning dishes, there is a knock at the front door. I have been expecting a visitor this morning. This isn't just a stranger making an unscheduled visit. I enthusiastically open the door and welcome my guest in with a big hug. Her name is Carol. Carol is my confidant, my source of strength and the shoulder I can cry on. Carol is my sponsor. We meet once a week and on special occasions to discuss how I am doing. Carol is quite a bit older than myself and has been through what I have been through enough to know myself better than I do.

Today is one of those special occasions. Carol has come by because she understands the significance of the date encircled on the calendar hanging on the wall of my bedroom. Tomorrow is an anniversary. A one year anniversary of my arrival here in Whisper Creek. Carol is here to walk me through that year. To help me understand why it is such a special occasion.

As we sit down with a couple of cups of coffee in our hands, we start off with the usual pleasantries to ease our way into the conversation. You know, talking about things like the weather, my job and any family-related questions. We have been doing this for almost a year now and I think I have picked up on some of Carol's professional techniques. Funny thing is, they really do work to calm me down as we approach talking about a very difficult period of my life.

Carol makes it very clear about how proud she is of me. Proud of how much I have changed over the previous year. The challenges of re-setting one's life back to a somewhat even keel are too insurmountable for most

people to accomplish in such a short period of time. I have been discouraged often, especially in the beginning. Carol has been my rock and, for that matter, I have provided Carol with a reason to keep doing what she has been doing for all of us who have been dealt a very unfortunate hand from the deck of life.

Carol wants me to recount my life again up to this point. We have done this many times before. Her point is to try and give me focus on just how far I have come. Where I was and where I am now. To give me pride about who I am. To feel confident about where I am going with my life. It seems to have been a winning strategy. So it begins.

I wasn't actually born and raised in Whisper Creek. I am not sure where I was really born. I was adopted as a baby and ended up in a small town very similar to Whisper Creek, only about a hundred miles from here. My parents, I'll refer to them as my real parents even though they aren't, lived in a town called Beasley. They were unable to have children of their own. Not sure what the difficulty was. They gave it the good old college try for a couple of years, but to no avail. Their desire for having a child was greater than the disappointment of not being able to so on their own. So, they decided their only option was to adopt.

As I said, I don't know who my biological mother and father are. The agreement made with the adoption agency was that those details would never be revealed. So, even if my adoptive parents had wanted to know who my biological parents were, they would have not been able to find out. Pretty much all they were told is that I was a normal, healthy, baby girl. My biological mother had been through



an uncomplicated and routine pregnancy. My adoptive parents were ecstatic that they had a child, a baby girl, of their own.

I grew up never really interested in finding out who my real biological parents were. As far as I was concerned, they didn't exist. The only parents who mattered were the mother and father that raised me. They were my real parents. That's all there was to it.

My childhood can be described as being as close to normal as anybody could have wished for. My parents were both loving and caring individuals who did their best to provide me with all the necessities of growing up in Beasley. Including an education and social life that afforded me many friends and intellectual freedoms. My father was the pharmacist at the local drug store. My mother was able to be a stay-at-home mom. Along with making sure things at home were run properly. They were very proud of me and I couldn't have asked for better parents.

I don't remember there being anything special about my years prior to high school. High school is where I guess you could say I started to break out of my shell. I ended up being on the cheer leading squad in high school. My boyfriend at the time was on the football team. He played some kind of receiver. When the quarterback needed a touchdown, he always threw to my boyfriend. I always threw in a couple of extra bounds and leaps whenever he would catch the ball. We were in love, you know.

We took to doing things that we probably shouldn't have. My parents certainly would not have approved if they

had known about them. We never really had full on sex, but we came awful close. Making out on the bleachers after practice seemed like an acceptable thing to do. Then there were other things. Every now and then we would sneak off behind the practice field and smoke a joint. Maybe drink a couple of beers. It made us feel good. Didn't see any real harm in doing it.

Things didn't start to get messy until after I graduated high school. About a year after graduation, my father had a severe and fatal heart attack. We thought he was in good health. He wasn't acting in any way out of the norm. There wasn't anything that anyone could have done differently. He was gone, just like that. My mother and I were devastated. Thinking that we were forever set as a family, we were left with quite a hole in our lives. After the funeral, my mother and I sat down to discuss our future. The primary focus of which was that our sole source of income had just evaporated.

In order to make ends meet, we both agreed that we would need to get jobs. My mother was a college graduate so that at least made her eligible for a wide range of jobs with which to make some decent money. I, on the other hand, had only a high school diploma. My hopes of attending college had suddenly disappeared. I ended up with a job at the same drug store where my dad had worked as a pharmacist. I mainly stocked the shelves and swept the floors. There was the hope that someday I could learn my way into a checker position. More pay and more responsibility. Like I said, that was the hope.

My college education wasn't the only thing that dried up. My boyfriend decided that he wanted to explore relationships with other girls. According to him, it wasn't that he didn't love me. He just wanted to be sure. I think what he really meant was that he wanted to find someone else who could be more attentive. But that's just my interpretation. I suppose I should be grateful that he was, at least, honest with me about the whole thing. He could have just tried to hide it from me, hoping that I wouldn't find out that he was messing around with other girls. Needless to say, I really didn't have the time to spend with him anymore. My priorities had been changed for me.

I think the emotional toll of my father's passing was far greater on my mother than it was on me. He was a very good father, but he was a husband and companion to her for a much longer period of time. She found a good job, but she never seemed to fully recover from the loss. The job just seemed to fill up the time in the day that she would have, otherwise, spent thinking of him. As the weeks passed, she became more lethargic and reserved. Professionally, she became more depressed.

After six months, I think she finally just gave in and wore herself out. Or gave up, I'm not sure which. I came home one night late to find her slouched over in her recliner. I tried rousing her, but she wouldn't wake up. Frantic, I called 911 and within minutes the paramedics showed up. They did their best, but it was too late. The paramedics surmised that she had probably been dead for at least a few hours. The similarities to my dad's sudden demise were eerily reminiscent.

I suppose that was the final straw. Final, as in I was now completely alone. I sat huddled in the dark that night and cried until I could cry no more. I tried to put everything into some kind of perspective. About all I could come up with was that at least I had a roof over my head, a car that was in good working order and a job that paid well enough to get by on. But the bottom line was that I was all alone. Everyone I cared about was gone. It became unbearably lonely.

From that point on every day became a chore. I struggled to just get by. It wasn't so much the lack of money as it was not having someone close to be my friend and confidant. No one to come home to and discuss how my day had gone. Or how their day had gone. I needed a friend. I needed someone to love and to love me.

Easier said than done, when it comes to people that is. So what I did is find an alternative. I never really was a drinker, but as the days wore on I found that friend in a bottle. At first I would just buy the small bottles of bourbon and mix it with a little coca cola. It made me feel better, more relaxed and was something to come home to. As time went by, it just made more sense to buy the bigger bottles. Although, as time went by, they lasted about as long as the small bottles.

The interesting thing is that, although I had my own personal parties going on after work each night, it made it easier for me to make the decision not to go out. To meet other people. Maybe make some friends. I decided I needed to do so. So where do you go to meet other people like that? Well, to bars of course. Once again, I started out

small. I would only go out to the bars on Friday nights. Then it became Friday and Saturday nights. I think you can guess where I'm going with this.

One Saturday night I met this guy named Saul. We were both sitting at the bar, nursing our drinks, when we fell into a conversation that I think we both needed. Turns out, Saul, went to my high school. He was on the football team and was semi-friends with my old boyfriend. We talked about that strange coincidence for quite a while. He knew that my old boyfriend and I had broken up just after my father had died. He also confirmed my suspicions that my old boyfriend was just looking for someone new. No matter now. That was quite awhile ago.

Saul and I continued to meet at this same bar over quite a few days. Seemed like we always spent more time talking about me. I never really got to know much personal about Saul. If his situation was anywhere near to mine. He never tried to hit on me and I never really thought of him in that way anyway. We just became good talking and drinking buddies.

I mentioned the times that my old boyfriend and I would sneak across from the football practice field and smoke pot. One night Saul showed up with a joint that he said a friend had given him. It was supposed to be really good stuff. All he could think of was sharing it with me. We decided to slip out the back door of the bar and take a few hits. It had been quite awhile since I smoked pot, but it all came back kind of natural like.

The pot we smoked must have been laced with something else or it was of some different strain. After a few minutes, I started to feel like the stresses of my current life were floating away. It was a heavy dose of relaxation that the alcohol simply wasn't able to duplicate. Although the fact that we had already been drinking may have influenced that feeling in some way.

Saul had given me the impression that he wasn't really that much into smoking pot or doing drugs. Guess that must have been the liquor doing my thinking. Turns out, Saul became my supplier. I wasn't the only one buying marijuana from him, so I guess you could call him a dealer. I started buying pot from him on a regular basis. I started smoking it on a regular basis. At home before work. At home after work. At home while drinking my bourbon and coke.

One night, I invited Saul over to my house to share in my new found pleasures. I hadn't done that before, afraid to have someone else intrude into my private space. We sat down in the living room with our drinks and prepared to light up a joint. Saul was particularly interested in the stack of mail that had piled up on the end table next to the chair he was sitting in. He picked up the stack and wondered if I had actually gone through it to see if there was anything of importance? I admitted that all I had been doing was grabbing the mail from the mailbox and plopping it down right there, next to the chair. It all seemed to be addressed to either my father or mother and I figured it had nothing to do with me. I did look for things like utility bills. Paid those as best as I could. The rest I figured was probably just junk.

As Saul fingered through the envelopes he separated out the ones that were marked with an “Urgent” or “Open Immediately” clearly stamped on the outside. Probably something I should have done earlier, but just didn’t think it important to do so. Saul convinced me to open the latest one marked “Urgent”. We both sat there wondering if it was some kind of scam or something.

The letter was from the local bank. It made reference to mortgage payments that had not been made over the last few months. Pushing my drink aside, I leaned over and looked closer at the details hoping to find something that would explain the apparent error. They had the right address. The right names, those being my parents. Everything looked legit. Including the all important parts about how the house would be going into foreclosure if the back payments were not made.

I had always thought my parents owned the house? They did, just not outright apparently. Remember when I said that one of the things that I had was a roof over my head? I could start to feel that one come crashing down all around me. All of a sudden I was in a panic that quickly sobered me up to the facts at hand.

Saul got up and said that it was probably best that he go. Before leaving, he made mention of the fact that I should try calling the bank to discuss the situation. He indicated that he was quite sure that the bank would only want to foreclose as a last result. It wouldn’t be in their financial interest to actually foreclose. Talking to them might open up a way to renegotiate the payments. Maybe to something that I might be able to afford? I thanked Saul for

his advice, but I don't think it really helped me. I knew damn well that there was no way that I was going to be able to afford a house payment. Let alone, qualify.

After Saul left, I sat back down and decided to go through the rest of the mail. What else had I missed? The lights and the water were still on. The telephone still worked. I was pretty sure I had caught all of those. There were some other ones that had to do with the TV, insurance and things like that. I didn't care. They had already lapsed and I didn't seem to miss them anyway.

The next day I decided to take Saul up on his advice of the previous day. I called the bank to discuss my options. The conversation didn't go well. It wasn't that it wasn't a pleasant conversation. The bank representative was very nice and appreciative of the opportunity to resolve the issue. It just didn't end the way that I hoped it would. It's kind of like a doctor giving you a terminal diagnosis. All you really want to know is how long do I have to live? Well, all I really needed to know was how long do I have to live in the house? Turns out, they gave me about three more months. And that was being generous. I got what I asked for.

Over the next few days and weeks it became obvious to me that I was going to have to move out. I was going to lose the house that I had never really owned. There was so much stuff in that house. Stuff that I had no interest in, even if I had some place else to put it. I started going through and sorting out all the things that I should keep and use. The other stuff? I would hold a garage sale. Anything that didn't sell, I would officially donate to whoever moved into the house after me.



Keep in mind, that all of this was going on while I was still trying to hold on to a job at the pharmacy. As little as it paid, it was what I was depending on for my daily expenses. I tried to figure out if there was a way that income could be stretched? Maybe enough to get a small apartment somewhere around town. I had no idea, but it was something that was worth considering.

I guess reality set in the weekend I decided to hold the garage sale. Saul was there to help with the pricing and we negotiated the ins and outs of how best to do this thing. We neatly arranged everything to be sold outside on the driveway in front of the garage. We decided on prices and carefully affixed them to each of the items. Lastly, we decided we would open for business eight o'clock the next morning. With all of that done, Saul left for home and I spent a restless night worrying about the small stuff. Such as, what happened to my life?

Around six o'clock in the morning the hordes started arriving. Saul wasn't even there yet, so I hurriedly jumped out of bed and made my way downstairs to the front door. The people on the other side of the door said they were there early to make sure they got the best deals before anyone else could do so. I said it didn't start until eight o'clock in the morning but they weren't going anywhere. I thought it all pretty rude, but caved in and got myself together enough to try and run the show outside by myself.

I was so happy when Saul showed up to relieve me a little while later. The first thing I did when I went back inside was to roll a joint and head to the backyard to smoke it. That left Saul outside, alone, to handle the deal seekers.

But he was in his element. I would look out on the driveway every now and then, and there would be Saul wheeling and dealing his way to a sale.

At the end of Sunday, we were both exhausted. There didn't appear to be anyone else coming up the driveway, so we decided to end it around four o'clock in the afternoon. Methodically, we slowly moved the rest of the items that had not sold into the garage and closed the door. We took down the garage sale sign and closed the front door behind us, as we threw ourselves onto the couch with reckless abandon.

We talked ourselves into sitting up and counting up the proceeds. At the end of the day we walked away with a cool five thousand dollars. Not too shabby for a couple of days of work. I was so proud and grateful for Saul's help, that I flipped him a few hundred bucks. He was very appreciative of the offer, but said he just could not accept it. He said he just had way too much fun and didn't want to be paid. Fair enough.

The question became what was I to do with all the stuff left in the house and garage that didn't sell? As far as I was concerned, the only things I needed to take with me were my bed, the dresser, a few cooking items and, of course, my clothes and toiletries. Saul mentioned that I could always call one of the thrift stores and have them come out and pick it all up. Not a bad idea, but I was sure they wouldn't take everything. There were rules about what is clean, what is too old and what can sell. That would still leave me with stuff that I would have to somehow deal with.

The more we talked about it, the easier it became to just leave all the leftovers. The house was being foreclosed on. After I left, did I care what remained in the house? It wasn't like the bank was going to come after me and make me clean it up. Saul left a little later with the understanding that we were done, except for the very few items that I would need when I officially moved out.

As the days drew closer to my having to leave the house, it became apparent that my search for another place to live had come up empty. The places I was interested in were either too expensive, too unkempt or not located where I wanted to live. It didn't help that I had not heard back from any of my inquires. Maybe I should have been looking more closely at the mail? Or listening to the messages left on the telephone answering machine?

With just a couple of days left, Saul said he had something to discuss with me and was it all right if he came over? I was more than happy to have a visitor and invited him over after my work shift. When Saul arrived he asked me if I had been able to find another place to live yet? I said that I hadn't and was actually quite concerned as to what I was going to do. Saul mentioned that his roommate had just moved out and he was wondering if I was interested in moving in to take his place? I would have my own bedroom and bathroom, could use the kitchen whenever I wanted to and would have free run of the rest of the house. The best part, the rent would be very minimal. Something I could easily afford.

Without hesitation, I accepted his proposal. It just seemed like the right thing to do. It came at just the right

time. How could I say no? The next day we spent a couple of hours sorting through and packing up the rest of my belongings. At least the ones that I would be moving over to Saul's house.

With the last of my items neatly packed in the back of a small truck we borrowed from a friend of Saul's, I told Saul that I would meet him over at the house. I just needed to do a few more things before leaving. As Saul drove the truck down the driveway, I turned around and faced what I guess I had been avoiding ever since my parents died. The personal loss of their lives in my life. The loss of my future that had been so well planned out for me.

The devastation of the moment hit me like a ton of bricks. Here I was standing in the front doorway of the house where I grew up. Here I was leaving behind my childhood. As I turned around and closed the front door, I knew, deep down inside, that I was closing a door to a part of me that I would never be able recover. With tears streaming down my face, I slid into the front seat of my parents' old car, turned the key in the ignition and slowly pulled away from my life. I didn't want to have to say goodbye.

Carol's voice gently pulled me back from the despondency of the moment. She was quick to point out that this was a definite turning point in my life. She needed to make sure that I knew this. Obviously, a turning point describing a downward spiral of life events. But on the flip side, a turning point acknowledging that things had gotten really bad for me. An acknowledgment that things needed to get better. A first step in a recovery that was yet to come.

I stared intently into Carol's eyes with a questioning look and, then, proceeded with my reflective journey.

Let's see. Where was I? Oh yeah, on my way over to Saul's. On my way over to living as a roommate with a very good friend of mine. Yet, still, living as a roommate in somebody else's house. As I drove over to the house, I had a lot of things going through my head. Even though I thought I knew Saul quite well, how much did I really know about him? I hadn't even been inside his house before. I had no clue what he would be like to live with. What kind of habits he may have? Was he a clean freak? Or, was he a total mess? I wasn't even sure of what Saul did for a living, besides selling me marijuana.

When I pulled up in Saul's driveway, he was already busy unloading my stuff. He was waiting for me to help him with unloading the big stuff, like my bed and dresser. As we unloaded my bed and carried it towards the front door, I was busy looking around to get a clue as to just where this guy lived. The outside of the house was actually kept up quite well. The neighborhood Saul lived in was fairly respectable and his house matched what you would expect houses to look like based on the other houses on the block.

Walking in the house with a bed wobbling back and forth in your arms is not the best way to get a view of someone's house, but it's what I was trying to do. A quick glance to my left and I could see the kitchen. No dishes in the sink. Everything put away nicely. Traveling through the living room everything looked clean and neat. The couch, chairs and TV all looked in very good condition. Not the

kind one would find if you were getting your furniture through a thrift store.

Finally making our way to what would be my bedroom, I was quite pleased with the size and the color. Painted a neutral tan color that looked as if it was not too long ago that it was painted. Off to one side was my bathroom. The person living here before me was a guy, so I was quite apprehensive about how it would look. After plunking the bed down next to its accompanying bed frame, I took a quick peak inside. Once again, I was really pleased. Everything was freshly cleaned and scrubbed. Someone, I assume Saul, had spent some serious time scrubbing the sinks, shower and toilet. He had even installed a new shower curtain. Not necessarily what I would have bought, but, hey, he was the landlord.

After unloading everything from the truck, I was intent on organizing my room. Saul perfectly understood and left me to the tasks at hand while he went out into the living room to watch some football or something. I closed my door and sat down on my bed to gather my thoughts. Once again, alone with my thoughts.

I actually felt pretty good about the whole idea of living with Saul. While I initially thought that he might live in some trashy neighborhood, in a run down house with lots of problems, turned out I was wrong. Everything seemed just perfect. Which got me to thinking even more about maybe too perfect? Something inside of me said be careful. Don't let your guard down just yet. Things may still turn out to be not quite as perfect as I saw them now.

I didn't have a lot to do to get my room organized. I set up the bed frame, made the bed with fresh sheets and a cover and added a decorative pillow that I brought with me from my childhood. My clothes came out of their boxes and were placed neatly in the drawers of my dresser. The bathroom toiletry items took a little longer, but once again I put everything back in their proper place.

When I was done I figured I should make an appearance out in the living room. When I came out, Saul was busy on the phone with somebody, so I just sat down and waited for him to finish. The football game was on the TV but the sound had been turned down. I wasn't much interested in the game, but pretended to watch. Saul finished his phone conversation and said that a couple of people would be coming over to pick up some things. I didn't know if he was asking for my permission, but I said I just needed to really thank him for everything that he had done for me. I made it clear that I couldn't have done all this by myself.

Saul said he understood how I must have felt over the last few months, with everything seeming to come crashing down on me. He was just happy that he could be there for me and that I was willing to let him help. We were talking about what we could do for dinner when his two friends showed up at the front door.

Saul welcomed them inside and introduced them to me. It didn't seem that they were very close friends, just from the way they talked and moved. After the short round of introductions, they proceeded to Saul's bedroom where they closed the door behind them. I wasn't quite sure what

to make of this, but I just pretended to keep myself busy putzing around.

After about a half an hour, Saul's bedroom door opened and out they came. His two friends were carrying a package of some kind, which they hadn't had when they went into the room. They made their cordial goodbyes and left without any further conversation.

Saul came back into the room and sat down on the couch next to me. Guess he thought that I was going to just fall right back into the conversation about dinner. But what had just happened just seemed too weird to go on without any further discussion. I guess my perplexed look was enough for him to feel the need to explain a few things.

Saul started off by saying that we had never really discussed what his occupation was. I interrupted by letting him know that I was not trying to impose on his personal life. He felt that we needed to discuss this now that I would be living here and seeing some things going on that were not completely above board. I asked him if that meant that he was doing things that were considered illegal? He responded yes.

Putting all his cards onto the table, Saul made it very clear that he was involved in selling product. By that, he meant that he was not just selling bags of pot to friends here and there. He was in the business of supplying customers with large quantities of marijuana. The two people who were just here were picking up a sample. A portion of which they had tried inside his bedroom.



That didn't really surprise me too much, I guess. I was very familiar with the smell that wafted out of his room after they left. I also knew that he had re-introduced me to smoking pot, so it just kind of seemed natural that he would be doing the same for others. Just not on such a large scale as he had just admitted.

Saul continued that it wasn't just marijuana that he was dealing in. That is when I started to get concerned. I could feel my stomach starting to spasm a little. I didn't know if I was entirely comfortable with what I was about to hear. He said that he was also dealing in large quantities of cocaine. When he talked about selling product, he meant that he was pushing both marijuana and cocaine.

I tried not to be too judgmental by what he had just revealed. I was not really in a position to be judging him. Especially, considering what he had done for me over the last few months. But, in reality, I did not approve. I guess it was just the way I had been raised, but drug dealers were not people to be associated with. Let alone, be complicit with.

As I said though, I was not in a position to abandon my current living situation or the life changes that had delivered me to this day. My puritan upbringing was going to have to let this one go. That being said, I was still curious as to what had happened to him to turn him into a product dealer, as he called it. I wondered if Saul would tell me how he got involved in such a high risk profession. I wasn't quite sure if it was an appropriate thing to ask, but I decided to do it anyway. After hearing me ask the question, he hesitated a

short moment and then said he hadn't really tried to put it all together before, but he would give it a shot.

He began by telling me that it had all started about a year after he was out of high school. His future intentions were to go off to junior college, take some classes and figure out what it was he would like to do with his life. Unfortunately, his parents had a different idea. They sat him down one day to have an adult conversation. An adult conversation? They informed him that they would no longer be living together and were filing for divorce. They had already figured this out much earlier, but they were waiting for Saul to turn eighteen to make it official. He would then be able to take care of himself and wouldn't need their financial and emotional support any longer. Saul kind of forced a laugh, an indication that, obviously, he thought that was all just a bunch of crock. What did they know?

Saul admitted that he had probably ignored some of the early warning signs that his parents were not happy. They had been experiencing an increasing number of disagreements. Leading to louder and louder verbal fights between them. There was never any physical violence, but Saul wouldn't have been surprised if it had happened. Saul just kind of disregarded all of this as being something that parents do. His friends had experienced similar behavior from their parents. He just never imagined that it would lead to his parents getting divorced.

There wasn't much further discussion allowed between Saul and his parents after that initial conversation. The decision had already been made for Saul. In fairly quick succession, his parents filed for divorce, became

separated from each other and, over a short period of time, moved out of the home that Saul had been born into nigh eighteen years earlier. They each headed in separate directions away from each other. True to their decision, Saul was not included in either of their plans. Without much else to do, Saul said he was left to fend for himself.

I must admit, I was struck by the similarities of what had happened to Saul and what had happened to me. Not so much the details, but the end result. Which was one of feeling abandoned and lost. The loneliness of having to become an adult before you are really ready or capable of being so. Saul continued his story, but stressed that he would really prefer to try and keep it short. Obviously, he must of thought he had already taken up too much of my time.

Saul was used to going to his old high school's football games. It gave him something to do on Friday nights. Now, it allowed him a distraction from his troubles. On a particular Friday night he ran into a couple of his old buddies from high school. It was kind of like a reunion. They hadn't seen each other since graduation and Friday night football became the stage for their re-acquaintance. Saul's friends thought that it was just dumb luck that they had picked this Friday night to start re-living high school football games again. Whether it was dumb luck or not, this moment in time is what Saul saw as the turning point in his life.

The three of them pretty much ignored the football game for most of the night. Instead, they reminisced about their high school days and what they were doing now. When his two friends found out about Saul's anxiety over

where he was going to live and what he was going to do, they offered him a solution. It seemed they were in need of a roommate and to top it off, they could use his help in their business. Due to the immediacy of the situation, Saul was not one to ask too many questions. He and his friends had been good buddies in high school and he saw no reason to pass up the opportunity to forge a path forward.

Saul decided to sum things up by saying that, to make a long story short, his life started to change dramatically for the better. Living with his friends turned out to be a no-brainer. They actually had a lot of things in common and they had more than their share of fun together. As far as the business they wanted his help in? Their business involved buying product and re-selling that product to their customers. That product was, in fact, marijuana and cocaine.

Saul admitted that he had never done cocaine before, but that changed after moving in with his friends. They provided him with his first few lines of coke and the coke provided all the rest. He considered it a natural progression from smoking pot to another form of getting high that involved snorting a similar substance.

Over time, Saul said he started selling his own product. He developed his own private network of customers that relied on him to provide them with product. After a couple of years, Saul moved out as a roommate and rented a house of his own. That is where he lived now. That is what he does now. That is where I lived now.

I was pretty mesmerized by what I had just heard. On the one hand, here was someone I thought I knew pretty well, telling me about very intimate details of his life. On the other hand, this was a story about my life too. It was all just a little too familiar and crazy. I must admit though, it was somewhat comforting to know that someone else had gone through what I had been experiencing.

I guess I should have seen this coming, but the next thing Saul asked me was whether I was interested in trying cocaine? He knew that I had never done so and that I was pretty much against it. But, he thought he would ask never the less. I thought about it for a long while, which I should have recognized as a sign that I was leaning towards a nod of acceptance. In the end, I don't think I ever answered in the affirmative. I just kind of fell into the moment.

Saul got up from his seat, went into his room and came back with a small box that he placed on the table in front of us. He opened it up and pulled out some items that he very deliberately placed in front of himself. I spent the next few moments watching as he instructed me as to how to go about doing the drug.

He opened up a small bag of white powder, took out a pinch or two and placed it on a small mirror. He then used a razor blade to finely chop up the mixture into four straight parallel lines. Rolling up a crisp twenty dollar bill into the shape of a straw, he then bent down over the mirror, placed the straw inside his nostril and pinch-closed the other nostril. Then, hovering over one of the lines, he forcefully inhaled it directly into his nose. Leaning back, he looked up at the ceiling and let out a long sigh. As if he was

summoning the gods or something. Then, one more time, he repeated the procedure. Only this time, snorting the coke into his other nostril.

He then offered me the rolled up twenty dollar bill. I felt a little shaky at first, but I figured why not? The curious thing to me, just the way my mind works, was comparing the routine for pot and that for cocaine. I was used to the bag of product being pot. You pull out a couple of pinches and place it in a previously retrieved piece of cigarette or joint paper. Then you proceed to roll it together between your thumb and fingers until you get a nice, tight cylinder. It takes a little practice, but appearance is everything. Contrast that with the description for snorting cocaine and what you have in common is just a process. The process is what seems to be crucially important. Two different methods of getting the drug into your system, but yet, there has to be a process.

Saul told me to stop stalling. I was getting too involved in analyzing the situation, as if I was already high or something. Guess I had been properly busted. So I did what was expected. I ran like hell! No, just kidding. I was way too scared to have even moved an inch. But, I had no idea what this stuff was going to do to me.

I nervously leaned over towards Saul and grabbed the twenty dollar bill from him. Assuming the position, I inhaled the line heavily, as if I was drawing in the smoke from a hit of pot. I had taken in my first toot. After letting out my breath I then snorted the remaining line, following the same procedure as before. In the meantime, Saul laid out a little more cocaine on the table.

My first reaction was that of no reaction at all. Then, after a little bit, it started to hit me. The high itself was very similar to marijuana, as far as I was concerned. The real difference to me was the tingling sensation I felt in my nose. Actually, all around my nose. It was sort of a numbing effect. That's when Saul dipped his finger into the little bit of cocaine on the table, gathering up some as he did so. He then rubbed it on his upper gums, with a grinning smile on his face. Looking at me with a look of expectation, I followed suit. In a matter of seconds my gums were numb. It was a very unexpected feeling that complimented the initial snort.

The more I thought about it, even though I knew I shouldn't have been trying to over analyze it, rubbing the coke on my gums seemed to be a bit more like showboating. Was it really a necessary part of getting high on cocaine? Only if you considered it something else to do as part of the whole experience. Not absolutely necessary to the experience itself though. Saul tended to agree with me, but thought it was still cool.

I began to rationalize everything I had just done by thinking that partaking in cocaine was just another way of getting high. As far as I was concerned, different from marijuana, but not that much different. With the exception of pot somehow giving you the munchies. Really, the difference was in how you got the high. Once again, the process. Saul agreed with me, explaining that it was just another way of getting F'd up.

Over the ensuing weeks and months, Saul and I worked together to build up the business. I made a lot of

new friends. I guess I should really call them customers. At some point it became necessary for me to think about quitting my other job at the pharmacy. I wasn't making much money and, frankly, it was just getting in the way. So, one day, I just walked into work and told them that I would be leaving. I thought it was a big deal, but they didn't seem to care one way or the other. I wouldn't be missed.

Meeting other people, my customers, allowed me to also find new ways of getting F'd up. Taking the leap into cocaine certainly made me aware that there were other types of drugs out there. Drugs such as heroin, meth and various psychedelics. I had no intention of delving any further into their worlds. But I did find one, related to cocaine, for which I made an exception. Crack cocaine. Looking back, this is when I crossed the line.

As I said before, the high from snorting cocaine was not that much different from smoking pot. It was easy to do, long lasting and very satisfying. The high from crack cocaine was definitely more intense and powerful. Unfortunately, the high didn't last as long. Only about fifteen minutes or so. Which, in and of itself, led to a whole slew of other problems. I found myself needing crack more and more often, just to keep up the intensity of the feeling. It almost seemed as if it wasn't a matter of choice anymore. It became a dependency.

The other thing about crack was its manufacture. It wasn't just a simple matter of taking regular cocaine and snorting it up your nose. Crack cocaine must be fabricated from regular cocaine. Basically, to get crack cocaine, we dissolved regular cocaine and baking soda in water. Then



we boiled it to separate out the solids. Finally, we let it cool and then cut it up into rocks. The end result was then either snorted or smoked. A lot more effort, but a lot more profit.

The first time I tried crack I snorted it, just because I was already so familiar with snorting regular cocaine. The effect was very intense and fast acting. I felt wildly euphoric and highly stimulated. I had sudden bursts of energy and, like pot, it made me extremely hungry. Whatever I ate had to be eaten quickly, like having to gorge it.

Like I said though, the high didn't last very long. I tended to feel fatigued and extremely tired after fifteen minutes or so. I wanted to sleep for a very long time. The really bad part? I wanted to take even more of it in order to maintain the high longer and avoid the sudden fall from grace.

This turned out to be a point of diversion between Saul and myself. Saul preferred to stay away from crack, simply because of its addictive nature. I, on the other hand, found it greatly enhanced the whole experience of getting high. I felt I could deal with its addictive qualities enough to not become addicted. What I really found, is that crack took me further and further away from the realities of my current miserable life. That was the voice of Carol whispering in my ear.

I have to admit that the so-called friends that introduced me to crack cocaine weren't really the kind of friends I wanted to remain associated with for very long. First and foremost, they were my customers. Maybe I felt like I needed to do crack just so I could relate to them more.

Sell more product. But I should have known from the beginning that if what they looked and acted like would be what I ended up looking and acting like, I should not try to be like them.

What I saw in them and what I didn't like, was a very unpredictable and manic behavior. Of course, I was only able to see this when I wasn't getting high with them. When we were all high, we had no way of seeing the difference. They would sometimes be talking very normally and then, all of a sudden, start talking very fast and rapid. Eating was another issue. The crack would initiate intense cravings for food. In some cases just going on all day eating binges. While at other times they would not eat at all. The extreme oscillations between the two caused extreme agitation and ended up exhausting them. Such that they would fall asleep for extended periods of time. Even over extended days. Overall, their behavior was so unpredictable that they could be extremely argumentative, dangerous and even violent. Even if it meant giving up a customer, I tried not to let my flirtation with crack develop into the kind of addiction that would make me just another crack head like them.

Whether I realized it or not, a situation arose that certified the direction I was going to take, regardless of my trying to avoid addiction. I was home one day, or I should say Saul's home, when I got a frantic call from Saul. He was out delivering some product when he reported that he had been accosted by three or four aggressive and violent men. They made it very clear that he was to be done with dealing drugs in their territory. My heart started to beat furiously as the conversation continued. Saul said that he

had been roughed up a bit, just to make sure that the point had been well made. I started to ask if Saul was all right, but he told me to be quiet and just listen.

These men said they knew where he lived and would make sure that things would be taken care of there, soon. I could tell Saul was quite shaken by the whole thing. His voice noticeably trembling as he told me the news. He only wanted to make sure of one thing right now and that was if I was fine? I said that I was, but obviously I was panicked. I quickly parted the curtains to the window and looked out to see if I noticed anything unusual. I told him that everything looked normal.

Saul only had one final thing to say to me before he abruptly hung up. That I was supposed to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. These guys were not messing around. They would be on their way there soon. I was to grab whatever clothes and items I would need immediately, throw them into a bag and vacate the premises. Pronto. He added one last thing. He wanted me to quickly search the house for anything that could be used to identify who I was. Forget about him. They already knew who he was. He wanted to make sure that I took whatever I found with me. I asked him about the rest of his stuff? The phone went silent.

I did as Saul said, running from room to room looking for things to pack up into a grocery bag I grabbed out of the kitchen. Before running out the front door, I grabbed the keys to my car. Jumping into the front seat and throwing my shopping bag into the back, I put the key into the ignition and started the car. Throwing the car grinding into reverse, I

pressed the gas pedal as if I was going to push it through the floorboard and screeched out into the street. Slamming on the brakes, I placed the car into drive and sped off down the street, leaving a trail of smoke and tread marks behind me. Heading anywhere but where I was.

I was fearful of what had happened to Saul. I thought I might not ever see him again. But I was oh so grateful that he warned me. That he had protected me. The thought of Saul being roughed up by some neighborhood thugs made me sick to my stomach.

I got about ten blocks away, when I had to pull over to the side of the road and park. Emotionally a nervous wreck, I laid my head down on the steering wheel and just bawled my eyes out. I had never been so scared in all my life. In time, I lifted my head up and looked at myself directly in the rear view mirror. I said to myself, "What the hell do you think you are doing? What a mess you have made of your life. Just where do you think you are going?" It was all I could do to not just end it all right there and then.

Somewhere, deep down inside of me, came my redemption. A voice that said to me that it didn't have to be this way. I didn't have to be the drug pushing, addiction plagued, societal miscreant that I had become. Looking back on what had happened to me personally, I became grateful for the sudden turn of events. Grateful? What happened to me was a good thing, in that it preempted me from becoming the kind of hated person that I feared I might become. If I had I fallen further into the vicious trap of crack cocaine addiction. Something told me there was another option. But it all had to start right here. Right now. The voice

said that I needed to make a drastic change in my life. A turn around. So that's what I did.

I started up the car and slowly drove away looking for a street that would take me to the main drag. I needed to get to the main street that would orient me as to which direction was the way out of town. After making a few rights and another few lefts, I found myself staring directly into the crossroads of my future. Going in one direction, would lead back into the center of town. Back to the miserable mess that had brought me here. Going in the other direction, out of town, would lead me into my future. I hoped.

I made the wide right turn onto the street heading out of town. I thought it was kind of prophetic that it was a "right" turn. Ahead of me was a long, straight two lane road that went on for what seemed like as long as I could see. Driving only a few miles ahead, I noticed that I was starting to climb. Then, even more so. By the time I reached what I thought was the highest point, I pulled over to the side of the road and stopped the car. Sliding out of the front seat and easing my way out of the car, I turned to look back. I was greeted with, what seemed to be, a different perspective on my life. I got to see Beasley as separate from myself. Beasley was just a place in the distance. Sure, it was a place that held fond memories. I recalled how this was the home where I grew up. But this was also the place where my life started to fade away. I decided that was enough of that.

I got back in the car and continued on my way. I was wasn't quite sure where I was going, but I had enough money with me to just keep driving until I felt that it was a

good place to stop. I felt like Columbus trying to find the new world. He knew there was land out there somewhere. All it took was for him to keep going until the land found him. I had to laugh though when I remembered from my history classes that what he had found was not really what he was looking for.

After stopping once or twice for gas and food, I looked up to see a sign welcoming me to the town of Whisper Creek. I only had a few miles to go and I would be entering a town whose name sounded like the kind of place I wanted to live in. I made my way down the off ramp and onto the main road when I was suddenly confronted with a question. Now what?

Off to the right and down a ways, I saw a sign for a motel. The Vagabond Motel. I thought to myself that this was the perfect place for me. I was truly a vagabond. Without a home, without a job and without a place of my own. I knew where I was from. I just needed a place, even temporarily, to come home to.

I pulled into the motel parking lot and found a place near the lobby to park my car. Opening the front door, I was greeted inside by a woman who welcomed me to the Vagabond Motel and, furthermore, welcomed me to Whisper Creek. Somehow she knew that I was not from here. Her name was Lily and I know she wanted to strike up a conversation with me, but I just didn't feel up to it. It was getting late in the day and I needed to be alone. We talked for just a short bit, while we negotiated a room to rent for an extended period of time and at a discounted rate.

Key in hand, I moved my car over closer to the room and parked right in front. Placing the key in the front door, the only door, I opened it and carried my grocery bag of clothes and things inside. Shutting the door behind me, I felt like I was shutting the door to Beasley, as I lay down on the bed and fell immediately to sleep.

When I woke up, it was early the next morning. I was drowsy, my muscles were sore and more than anything, I craved a hit. Pot or crack, it didn't really matter. When I escaped Beasley so quickly, I was remiss in not packing up any pot or coke. Maybe that was a good thing, but now I knew I would be paying the price.

I had seen my crack customers develop the jitters after having not indulged for a period of time. I figured those would be coming for me next. Fortunately, mine were fairly minor at the moment. But the craving for something to help me get the day kick-started was strong and powerful. It was not going to go away any time soon. I thought I would grab a quick shower and then go out to find something sugary to eat, in the hopes of relieving the uneasiness.

Locking my motel room behind me, I walked towards the lobby to see if Lily had any recommendations for some place to eat. She was inside, just as cheery as I suspected she would be. She told me that, actually, the attached coffee shop had the best food around. She said she was about to take her break and was going to be meandering over there. She asked me if I wanted to join her? I remembered that I had kind of dismissed her gruffly last night and I knew it was going to have to happen sooner or later, so I said I would be happy to tag along.

The coffee shop really did have good food, but I am afraid that Lily's fifteen minute break turned into a much longer unofficial absence. Hopefully, nobody was trying to rent a room or something. Over breakfast, which by the way included more than just something sweet, I laid out my past in quite a blathering way. Somehow, Lily got through it all. She was able to see just how important it was for me to break out of the hostile pattern that had been defining my life. I felt relieved to have exposed my story, even though it was to someone I had just barely met.

Before returning to my room, I hugged and thanked Lily for what had just happened. It was something that I needed. I felt a huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders. But the craving for something to get me high was still there. I had made this commitment that I wanted to stop using, but thinking clearly as to how to do this was just not part of my vocabulary at the moment. All I wanted to do was to crawl back under the covers and sleep some more. I closed the curtains to the room and slid back into bed.

I looked over at Carol, seeking approval that this might be a good stopping point. She agreed that it would probably be good idea to take a break. Get some more coffee and maybe grab something to eat. We continued talking as we got up and filled our coffee cups. When I finally launched back into my story, I was ready to talk about Carol.

I was first introduced to Carol while Lily and I were having breakfast one day at the coffee shop. When I arrived, I was a little surprised to see Lily sitting with another woman at our table. Lily introduced her as her good friend Carol. Lily thought it was time I met Carol and that



Carol and I get started on piecing my life back together again. Thus began my relationship with the person who I am sitting with now. The person who, along with Lily, saved my life.

Carol was, of course, very quick to point out that it was me who saved my own life. She was just acting as a guide on how to do so. Carol knew how to do all of this because she had been down this road before. She had been in a situation very similar to mine and it was her sponsor that took her under her wing and brought her back from the path of addiction.

When Carol and I first began our sessions, the first thing I was faced with was breaking the physical need for the crack. She explained that it was both my mind and my body that were craving the chemical reaction created by the crack. Breaking the body's dependency for the drug was what needed to happen first. It would be the most intense disruption to the system, but require the least amount of time. On the other hand, breaking the mind's dependence on the crack would be less intense, but require a longer period of adjustment to correct itself. It became very obvious to me that this was going to be a very long and drawn out, multi-step process. I was all in.

Simply going without the crack, or even regular cocaine for that matter, is not usually suggested as a good idea. Some people refer to that as going cold turkey. But for me, that is exactly what I did. Only I had Carol by my side, evaluating my condition and monitoring my progress. That being said, what I had in my favor, is that I really wanted to quit. I had reached my low point or hit bottom as people

say. I had made the commitment to myself to clean up and dry out. My will to quit made the pain and the stress of eradicating coke from my body a whole lot easier. Without getting too graphic, I will just sum up by saying that over a week I noticed that the muscle cramps, the diarrhea, the irritable behavior and the cravings started to fade. Carol was there for me the whole time. Day in and day out. Through all the highs and lows of my body's separation from the drug.

Of course that was only the physical detoxification. The psychological ramifications of going without the cocaine were another matter altogether. The cocaine and marijuana had always been there for me when I needed a lift. The habits that I had formed were deeply entrenched in my everyday life. When I needed a distraction from the stressful events of my day, crack and cocaine were there waiting for me. I likened trying to break the mental dependency to what people experience when they try to quit smoking. There is that endless reaching for a cigarette that is never there.

I learned that even after having destroyed the subliminal urge for more cocaine, there was the possibility of psychological damage that may have arisen as a result of the addiction. I had thought about the psychological dependency, but damage to my brain? According to Carol, one normally deals with this by being admitted to a hospital setting. Being as my condition did not seem as serious, Carol felt that I could successfully deal with this aspect of the withdrawal without having to be an inpatient at some hospital. Remaining at home, or in my case the motel,

provided me with the care I needed as long as Carol was there with me.

Severing the psychological dependency? I can confirm that took a lot longer. Forming bad habits is fairly easy. Breaking those habits, can be damn difficult. What it really boiled down to was finding something else to replace the habit I was wanting to break. Smokers, who are used to having something in their hand or mouth all the time, tend to choose food as a replacement. Not necessarily ideal, unless you don't mind gaining weight. I wasn't willing to replace my many bad habits with, simply, more bad habits. I needed to make sure that however I changed my behavior, it did not simply lead me back into another addiction.

So Carol reinforced in me that one way to do this was to learn from my previous behaviors. In other words, replace my inappropriate behavior with something more appropriate. So that I could see that my previous behavior to desire crack and cocaine was a mistake. That crack and cocaine use was simply not a good idea. This is one of the reasons why Carol would have me review my past history. It would show me how bad behavior simply led to equally bad results.

Of course, that implied that the people who had been supplying me with cocaine and feeding that bad behavior were to be marked as mistakes as well. Merely, mistaken relationships. That meant severing ties with the people who I thought were good friends or trusted family. Moving away from Beasley made the suspension of friend relationships easy to accomplish. As far as my family, they were already gone.

As is usually the case, when you do one thing, something else ends up needing to be addressed. Severing ties with friends and family presented a new set of problems to resolve. I had no current friends or associates to relate to. To that end Carol thought it essential for me to form new friendships. The right kind of friendships. One way to do so, was to get out and get a job after I had pretty much dealt with the physical dependency.

Once again, Carol and Lily came to the rescue. Lily had a friend that worked for the local supermarket and gas station. It was in the center of town, not too far from the motel and Lily's friend said they were looking for help. Carol made a special visit to the Sav-N-Mart, as it was called, and talked to the manager to let them know of my situation. The rest was then up to me.

To make a long story short, I guess I must have passed the interview. I was hired right on the spot. I was to start off doing a couple of different things for the store. Pumping some gas and working some cash registers. Not terribly intellectually challenging work, but work none the less. It would allow me to make new friends, form new alliances and hopefully, find purpose. Working the cash registers? Heck, that's what I had wanted to do back at the pharmacy in Beasley.

The day is getting late, but before I end the story that brought me here today, I need to discuss my relationship with Carol. What's the real reason for Carol having had me go through this whole process of reliving my past? It all has to do with therapy. Accordingly, it was important that I talk. That I continue to talk. Especially with Carol. The thing that

I learned through all of this though, is that it is more than just talking to someone you trust. It's the relationship. The connection I have developed with Carol is all about attachment. Kind of like the bond that exists between a mother and her child.

Talking with Carol has allowed me to share that kind of bond and allowed me to speak safely about the lowest points of my life. To carefully navigate how to correct for my life errors without the fear of feeling any harm. Repairing those transgressions, placed me on the path to redemption. I was able to start talking about my accomplishments. How I compensated myself for my errors. Carol's point was to allow me to visualize my progression over time. Going through the process of my life, starting at the deep end and graduating with flying colors to the summit of where I am today, accentuated my journey back to a normal life. A life that, although not perfect, is so much better than it was just a short while ago.

The day ending, Carol packed up her things and said her good-byes. We shared a long and meaningful hug before she walked out of the apartment. As I closed the door, I reflected on just how good a day it was. How I really have made a lot of progress. How my life has definitely improved. Tomorrow marks my first anniversary of breaking free. Free of the pot, free of the cocaine and free of the crack. I have never felt better about my life.

I think about how I need to continue to work my way up in position at the Sav-N-Mart. I hope to become manager of all the cashiers soon. For now, I will continue to pump gas and work the registers. That is who I am. I will

never forget where I came from. Never forget that I started out at the bottom. I will always remind myself of just how lucky I am to be where I am today.

Where am I today? Well, I eventually moved to where I am living now. It just made sense. I'm close to where I work. I'm starting to make more friends. I enjoy the view my apartment affords me to the comings and goings of what's going on downtown. I pay my own way, meet my obligations and have even learned to save a little. Most of all, I know who I am, where I am from and that I have a place that feels like home. I can honestly say that I am a productive member of society again.

As I retire for the night and my head hits the pillow, I start thinking about the guy at the Sav-N-Mart that I have been kind of flirting with over the last few weeks. He makes me smile. He gives me hope. Sometimes, I think about my past. I remember what my past was like and what I have been through. Except now, I have a place, a place that I can come home to.

## MARK AND JUDY

### CHAPTER SEVEN

My eyes slowly open to find a darkened room crowding my vision. This isn't the first time I have found myself in this situation tonight. In fact, there is something that tells me it has become more of a recurring problem over the years. I'm talking about sleeping through the night. I seriously can't remember the last time I have been able to sleep the whole night through. I might sleep a couple of hours and then find myself lying there wide awake for another couple of hours before, maybe, falling back to sleep. So, here I am again.

Only this time, as I try to order my mind to relax, there is something else going on in my body. I have this undeniable feeling that I have to pee. I had a similar feeling the last time I woke up, but I must have pushed it aside and fallen back to sleep. Thinking that I may be able to do so again this time, I close my eyes and try to doze off. In just a few short minutes, my eyes open again to the realization that the feeling is not going away. In fact, it is getting more pronounced. As I turn over on my back, I let out a big sigh, acknowledging that this time the unrelenting urge to pee has won.

Rolling back onto my side, I look over in the direction of where the bathroom must be. It's dark in the room, but I

still remember where the bathroom always seems to be. Slipping out of the sheets and standing upright by the side of the bed, I have to gather all my strength as I navigate my way slowly through the blackness that awaits me. Reaching what I think is the doorway, I raise my hands and push them forward a bit, in the hopes of contacting the door jam before it contacts me.

With another sigh, of relief this time, I have successfully found my way through the open door. I try to keep my eyes shut as much as possible as I struggle to find the toilet. I have to fight the urge to turn on the light. That will just wake me up further and I will never be able to fall back asleep. Finding the toilet through pure tactile experimentation, I lower the lid and slowly sit myself down. Only to suffer the alarming consequences of a warm butt meeting a very cold seat. Trying to relax, I wait for it. And wait some more. Finally, it starts to trickle out. After what seems like an interminable amount of time, I'm done.

Feeling so much better I get up and flush the toilet, ready to make my way back to the warmth and comfort of my bed. For whatever reason, habit I guess, my hand automatically reaches up, flicking on the light switch. I soon realize what a mistake that was. A flash of unforgiving light temporarily blinds my unprepared and vulnerable eyes. Covering my eyes with my hands, I figure I might as well keep the light on for a bit, so that I can point myself correctly in the direction of the bed.

After a few seconds, my eyes start to adjust to the light filling the bathroom and the bedroom beyond. Looking over at the bed, I notice something strange. There's a big clump



of crumpled sheet and blanket lying next to where I was sleeping. The odd thing is that it's a clump with an obvious shape. The shape of another body comfortably nestled between the covers.

Trying to get a grip on all of this, I remind myself that I am new here. I haven't had time to put all the pieces of my new life together just yet, but this is an unfamiliar one to me. I ask myself if I am in some kind of relationship with this person, whoever they might be? But now is not the time to try and figure it all out. So, I reach up and turn out the light.

Slowly guiding my way back to the bed, I climb in, careful not to awaken the other person who is sleeping so soundly next to me. Getting myself as comfortable as possible under the sheets, I close my eyes hoping to fall back fast asleep. Hoping to fall back fast asleep. Still hoping. So, when is it that you finally give up hoping and accept the fact that you are not going to fall asleep? For me, it was about a half hour later, as far as I could guess.

There is this gap between accepting that you are not going to fall back asleep and deciding to actually get out of bed. A gap filled with just lying there hoping that the decision will be made for you. It is a painful decision to make, but an even more painful decision to leave the comfort and warmth of your bed for an uncertain future out in some other room. Be that as it may, I slowly climb out of my bed to begin the journey. Standing up, I remember there is someone else in my bed. Someone I am leaving behind. Turning slowly around, I look back hoping to see that they are still unfazed by my recent jostling.

Only, they are suddenly turning over. Only, they have just revealed something about themselves. It appears that I have been in bed with a woman. It's kind of dark still, but there's a new finger of moonlight slowly crawling its way from the window, towards her face. Judging by my emotional reaction, this is someone special. Maybe it's the way her long hair is draped over her face as it lays upon the pillow. Maybe it's the look of utter contentment on her face. Whatever it is, she seems to be very comfortable where she is. As if she belongs here like, I belong here. For now, as foggy as my mind is at this point in my waking up, all I can do is scratch my head. Knowing that soon, it will all come back to me.

I turn out of the bedroom and head down a long hallway. A hallway that opens up into a large room that has that same bit of moonlight shining in to guide my way. Over in the corner is a cushy old couch, a lamp standing watch by its side. I head in that direction stopping first at the lamp, my fingers struggling to find the chain that will turn on its light. Pulling the chain down, I am rewarded with a room that becomes fully illuminated.

With another heavy sigh, I plop myself down into the awaiting couch, wondering where I am. Who am I today? Looking around the room, I am pleased to see that it looks as if I am in very comfortable surroundings. On one side of the room is a stone fireplace, the logs from the previous night still smoldering and glowing in the early morning light. Behind me is a large bookcase, with plenty of books crammed onto each of its many shelves. Some of the

shelves hosting various items of what appears to be memorabilia.

Alone with my thoughts, things are starting to come back to me. I know the feeling. I have felt it many times in the past. Before I let it consume my attention though, I have to stop myself. I don't even know who I am or what I look like. I have to somehow figure that out first, before allowing those overwhelming memories to start flooding my mind.

On the other side of the room, next to the fireplace, is an ornate floor length mirror. Obviously an old one, considering the intricately carved wood acting as its frame. Some might think it gaudy, but I'm just looking for my reflection. So that the truth about who I am will start to reveal itself. I chide myself for not checking myself out while I was in the bathroom, but there was just too much going on. The thought didn't even occur to me. But now, it needs to happen.

Pushing myself up and out of my seat, with another very audible sigh, I shuffle over to the mirror against the wall. As I do so, a wall clock starts its Westminster chime, announcing that it is one o'clock in the morning. Not surprised as to how early it is, I turn and face the mirror. I am hoping that it will talk to me like the wall clock has just done. That it will tell me who I am and, along with that, reveal who the woman is that was lying next to me so cozily in the bed.

The first thing I notice is that I am a male. I didn't really need the mirror to tell me that. Even though I was sitting down on the toilet in the darkened bathroom, I knew what

that thing was for. Considering the gray, almost white, hair and wrinkled face, I appear to be in my later years. Probably pushing eighty years old. Fancy that. I have a beard. Not a long scraggly one, but a beard that is neatly trimmed and coiffed. And, of course, colored to match my hair.

I start to focus in on the eyes. It's the eyes that invariably reveal who I truly am. The color is an ocean blue, but that's not what I'm looking for. It's like the mirror is drawing my soul from my eyes, so that I can see what it sees. It tells me that my name is Mark. I am eighty-five years old and have lived in this house for the last thirty years. But wait, there's more. I have not lived in this house by myself. I have had the momentous privilege to have shared this house with someone who I can simply not be without.

Turning around, I look back towards the bedroom. Remembering the face that is gently caressing the pillow. That gave me such an emotional feeling just a short while ago. The memories are starting to fill in, but by turning around it's as if the connection has been temporarily interrupted. Or, maybe it's that I am just too tired.

These kind of discoveries can be very exhausting and, in some cases, very traumatic. For me, now, I need to get back to my seat. To rest my body and soul for a moment. Almost ready to sit down, I notice a picture frame resting on the bookshelf behind the couch. It's as if it is a magnet, just waiting to attach itself to me. On the way down, I pluck it from the shelf and position it on my lap in front of me.

My first impression is that it is just a photograph. A picture of a very young couple posing romantically on the happy event of their wedding. It's not even a color photo, so it is a little hard to make out any of the finer details. Like who they might be. There is this attraction though. Like I said, it's as if a magnet was trying to affix itself to me. Thinking that there might be some information on the back of the photo, I slip it out of its frame and turn it over. Written on the back is a short, but highly significant, sentence: "Happy Sixty-Fifth Anniversary! All My Love, Judy".

Well, I don't need a rocket scientist to help me figure that one out. All the emotions I had felt earlier, suddenly had meaning. That is our wedding picture. A picture of Mark and Judy on their wedding day, sixty-five years ago. From the looks of things, it was an actual photo taken from our wedding, but converted into black and white to make it look old. Vintage. Like us, I suppose. Must have been Judy.

I laid the picture down on my lap and leaned back in my seat. As I did so, the flood of memories began again. Only this time, I allowed them to flow unabated. The emotions? I can only liken it to what scientists refer to as the release of endorphins and dopamine. Chemicals released by the body to boost one's happiness. In my case, to make me happier than I thought I could ever be.

My mind forms a recollection of one of my favorite childhood pastimes. Riding my bicycle. I was probably around ten or so, but I would ride my bicycle up and down the sidewalk in front of my house and throughout the neighborhood. Occasionally, I would ride my bike in the street, but that was really frowned upon by my mother.

More like, she disallowed it. Didn't say it didn't happen though.

I had a twenty inch Schwinn bicycle that I am sure I received as a Christmas present at some point. I was pretty proud of that bike, although I became even prouder over time. There was a craze going on amongst the neighborhood boys at one point, whereby the cool thing to do was modify your bike with accessories. I was probably one of the last of the kids to do so, but once I did, there was no looking back. There were two things that absolutely had to be done. One, was to replace the handlebars and two, replace the seat.

The memory doesn't really tell me how I was able to swing getting different handlebars and a new seat. My guess is that my parents paid for them after quite a bit of negotiation on my part. Or, maybe they bought them and I paid them back? Doesn't really matter. The handlebars were what they call high rise handlebars, so-called because they had an exaggerated height and the rider had to reach up to grab the handle grips. That meant no more riding hunched over. These babies were for riding high in the saddle. As a side note, I seem to recall in some previous life that I also had a bike with high rise handlebars.

Speaking of the saddle, that was next on the list. For this the requirement was to buy what is referred to as a banana seat. Instead of the short stubby seat that tended to cramp your style if you know what I mean, this seat was elongated. It allowed you to move up and down its length making it much more comfortable. It also came with a little

extra height, which complimented the high rise handlebars to a tee.

It only took me a short while to trade out the factory parts with my new accessories. A little elbow grease and the right kind of wrench and I was done. It probably wasn't that easy, but looking back you tend to forget a lot of those finer details. I remember that very first ride as if it was yesterday. I was quite the site to behold. Riding down the street with my arms held high and my back to the wind. It was as if I was really riding the wind. I imagined myself being turned into the wind. I would hear my name being called by something I called the North Wind. The breeze that would come up releasing me from the ground. Riding my accessorized twenty inch Schwinn bicycle made me feel as if I was flying free.

Anyway, I've digressed too much. I would ride the neighborhood and its outer boundaries, routinely checking things out. Without a bicycle it was pretty hard to roam the outlying neighborhood that formed a perimeter around my own two-lane street. I could have walked it I guess, but this was a lot more fun and it took me further and further away from the confines of my own, all too familiar, backyard. By the age of ten, I had pretty much worn out all the possibilities that my own neck of the woods had to offer.

One day I was riding a couple of blocks away in my usual manner when something totally earth shaking happened. I don't know how many times I had ridden by this one house in the middle of the block, but this time my life was changed forever. As I approached, a girl about my age came running outside to go the mailbox. Well, as I went

riding on by I made the unfortunate mistake of doing a double take. Looking back, I lost control of where I was going in front of me. The front wheel startled to wobble violently, veering off to the right as I jumped the curb and out into the street.

The good thing is that I didn't crash. I was able to regain control and pretend as if that was what I had intended to do all along. My pride was saved. One quick glance back at the girl told me that she had not been fooled. She was standing by the mailbox having a good laugh at my expense. That's all right though. It allowed me the opportunity to talk to her some other day. Certainly, not that day.

My opportunity came sooner than I thought. The next weekend my dad made plans to take my brother and I to a professional football game downtown. School was supposed to start that Monday, so it was kind of like a celebration of the end of summer. Or, beginning of football, I'm not really sure. This was pure excitement for the two of us. We both played a little football on the side. You know, flag football since our mother didn't allow us to play tackle football at our young age. She didn't really know that my brother and I played tackle football with the guys sometimes anyway at school.

We entered the stadium and found our way upstairs to the second balcony. My dad showed the attendant our tickets and he pointed the way to where we needed to go. There were lots of people milling about so we had to stay close to each other so that we wouldn't get lost in the crowd. Finally walking down a set of stairs to the rows of



seats, we checked each row for the row number found on our tickets. Our dad waited outside our row as we filed in to find the seat number we had been assigned. We were right on the fifty yard line. Up a little high, but not bad for a couple of young kids. We looked up and down the stadium at all the people filling in the seats. As we slid our way down the aisle to our seats, who should be sitting right next to me but the girl who came running out of her house and almost made me crash and burn.

I have to say that I was both embarrassed and excited all at the same time. As I sat down I looked over at her and flashed a smile of recognition. She returned the favor with that shy but flirtatious look that girls can give. During the team introductions I would look over at her and then, quickly, look away. The first time I saw her looking back I panicked and didn't look away. Transfixed, it seemed as if she was truly interested in me. I didn't really know what to say to her, especially since her dad was sitting right next to her very protectively. I finally decided to blurt out an introduction. Turning to her I said I was the kid who came riding by the other day. She said she remembered and apologized for laughing at me as I almost went down, careening into the street. I told her my name was Mark. She said her name was Judy, almost blushing as the words came out of her mouth.

Just then, the crowd went wild. The band on the field started dancing and playing the hometown anthem. The people in the stands around us stood up and started clapping and cheering loudly. The whole stadium seemed to join in the applause. Turns out, the home team players

were being introduced. But if you ask me, they were applauding for us. That day our football team lost. That didn't seem to matter to me. I don't think it mattered to Judy either.

Funny thing is, finally meeting Judy wasn't the only interesting part of this whole story. What I remember most was a sensation. I remember sitting down next to her and having this aromatic sense of a large bouquet of flowers overwhelm me. Roses, to be specific. My dad used to give my mom a bouquet of roses every now and then. I just loved going up to them and smelling their fragrance. Well, that it is exactly what I smelled when I sat down next to Judy. It was a fragrance or scent of roses. The only other way to describe it is to say that it was like she had just stepped out of the bathtub. A bathtub full of rose petals. I probably didn't know how to describe it so well when it happened, but that's what I remember about it now. Had I been a couple of years older, like my brother, I would have probably noticed the color of her hair or how beautiful she was. But being a boy of ten, it was her smell that I remember.

My brother and I used to share a bedroom, where we would spend an hour or so after the lights went out, rehashing the day's events. That night, we talked about the football game and how, even though we didn't win, it was really fun to have gone. Especially, to spend the afternoon with Dad. I think my brother was me giving plenty of time to bring up the girl I was sitting next to. When he got tired of waiting, he brought her up himself. He said that he noticed we talked a little bit, as if we knew one another. I said that I

had just met her and, by coincidence, her dad had brought her to the football game as well. I finally confided in my brother that I thought she was someone special. That I had this feeling about her that was different than any other feeling I had ever had. It wasn't like the feeling I had for my good friends, understanding that they were all boys. It wasn't like the feeling I had for Mom and Dad. It wasn't even like the feeling I had for my brother.

My brother got quiet. He wasn't quite sure how to tell me this, but decided just to tell like it was. He said that I had finally met a girl that made my head spin. In a good way. That's the way it was supposed to happen. He said that I was a little young, but that this was something that happens to everyone at some point in their lives. For me, he preferred to call it an infatuation. I had no idea what that was, but if that's what it was then I guess I had a good dose of it. I have to give my brother credit. He didn't make fun of me for the way I felt. He tried to explain it as best he could, knowing that it would be something I would have to learn for myself.

The next morning was the first day of school. My brother got to sleep in a little longer than me, since he went to a different school and would be catching the school bus to take him there. Me? I had to hoof it to my school. It really wasn't that far. I had done it many times before, but I sure resented the fact that my brother got to sleep in and I had to get up early.

After a hearty breakfast, provided of course by my mother, I grabbed my lunch, also provided by my mother, and headed out the front door. About two blocks away, I

was walking along thinking about the day ahead, when I found myself approaching Judy's house. I figured I would just walk on by, hopefully going unnoticed. That's not what I really felt, but I didn't want her to think that I was hoping just the opposite. Before I could even make it to the sidewalk leading to her house, she came flying out the front door. Just like the first time that I met her, although this time things were different. She was coming out to see me.

I stopped fast in my tracks, waiting for her to catch up. Her mother came rushing out of the house and down the sidewalk, carrying Judy's lunch with her. Judy thanked her for the delivery and gave her mom a kiss goodbye that I'm sure she was remiss at giving when leaving the house earlier.

I felt a bit awkward just standing there, so I introduced myself and said that I just lived a couple of blocks away. I told her that I took this route to school every day and, if she really didn't mind, could Judy and I walk to school together? I was hoping to make a good first impression. Judy chimed in that she thought that was excellent idea. I could see that Judy's mom was thinking about it and after a moment or two she gave her consent to the request. I think deep down inside she could sense that there was more to the story, which, I'm sure, she and Judy would discuss later. Thanking me in advance for watching out for her little girl, she turned and headed back to her house. Judy and I turned to each other, gave a sigh of relief and proceeded on down the street.

Over the course of the school year, Judy and I walked that route to school nearly every day. There were times

when I would show up at her house and her mother would come out and say she was sick. My mom would actually call Judy's mom when it became obvious that I wasn't going to school. Each day we walked to and from school, we found out a little more about each other. We both liked going to movies, although we differed on the type of movies we liked. I liked science fiction, whereas she tended to like family type movies. We both liked hamburgers and hot dogs, especially when they were cooked outside, over the grill. When it came to ice cream, we both enjoyed going out to the local ice cream shop to have our favorite, chocolate. When it came to our friends, this is where it became a little more difficult. It's not like we didn't enjoy each other's friends. What it boiled down to is that she had girls as friends and I had guys. At our age and time, they simply didn't mix well.

Once we had finished walking to school, Judy and I tended to split and go our separate ways. She would hang out with her girl friends and I would hang out with my guy friends. It was a well known fact that guys just didn't play with girls. They didn't like sports, they didn't like dirt and they didn't like to play war. Guys, according to girls, smelled. They were dirty and they tended to break things. Like their bones. What it really said was that girls had round, soft edges and guys had sharp, rough edges.

So, to avoid the consequences of being seen with a girl, I hung out with my guy friends mostly. Judy hung out with her girl friends. We found ourselves making eyes at each other from across the room or the playground, but that was about it. I don't think my guy friends ever caught on.

They preferred to only see what was directly in front of them. Judy's friends on the other hand? I think they knew what was going on. How could they not? That's what girls intuitively seem to know.

As a result of our frequent walks together, I think I started to develop more of a soft side. That's not a bad thing. As an example, one Easter I found myself making a bunny out of cotton balls that I gave to my mother as a gift. I wrote some kind of flowery poem that I attached to the bunny and left on the kitchen counter for my mom. For that day it was something that I felt my mom needed. To let her know that I loved her. Directly attributable to my becoming softer due to Judy's influence.

As the year wore on, my feelings for Judy grew. I looked forward to school days, not because of school so much as being able to walk and talk with Judy. There was one thing though that I wasn't quite sure how to talk to her about. That was how I felt about her. I think the same was true of her. We both knew that we liked each other very much, but we just didn't know how to put it all together into words.

As summer recess loomed, we both were sad to see the school year coming to an end. I guess I felt that I just needed a little more time to figure out what to say to Judy to let her know how I truly felt about her. School letting out meant that I had missed my opportunity. We made a promise to each other that we would continue to find ways to see each other, but we were both pulled in our own separate directions that summer. I had my football games with the boys and she had her, hmm. I'm not really sure

what she had pressing, but my guess is it had all to do with her girl friends.

One way I would see Judy was to ride by her place on my bike. She would just happen to be outside playing when I did so. Fancy that. What are the odds of that happening? I think our mothers had their own side thing going on too. Sometimes they would ask if we wanted to have somebody over for dinner. My answer would always be Judy, of course. Judy's answer would always be me. In any event, we held true to our promise to keep in touch as best as we could.

The beginning of the next school year was fast approaching. Judy and I couldn't wait for the first day of school so that we could, once again, spend significant time alone. During the summer months I had thought a lot about my feelings for Judy. Part of that softening thing I guess, since boys are not supposed to think or talk about real feelings. I talked with my brother at night before we went to sleep about what I should do or say to make my feelings known. He wasn't a real feelings kind of guy either, but he did suggest doing something bold. Make a statement. Come out and show her that you care. He was going to leave it up to me to decide how I was supposed to do that.

My thoughts are suddenly interrupted by what appears to be a light flickering on down the hallway towards our bedroom. I can hear footsteps pacing their way in my direction. As I turn around to see who it is, there is Judy. Just standing there, looking at me lovingly. Silhouetted by the fading light at the end of the hallway. The picture she sees of me is her husband of sixty-five years sitting on the

couch, holding a picture of our wedding anniversary on his lap.

Wasting no time, she makes some remark about how much of a romantic I am. She asks how long have I been sitting here, obviously, reminiscing about our past? I reply that, yes, I am a romantic and that it is all because of her. She has made me that way. Why am I sitting here? Because I had woken up in the middle of the night to pee and I couldn't get back to sleep. Truth be told though, because of the time that I have been sitting here reminiscing, I have learned a whole lot about myself and who the person is that I woke up to.

Judy gets that look on her face, just like what I remember she looking like when first we officially met at the football game. It is the feeling of love and promise that accompanies the look that two people share when they peer deeply into each other's eyes. Judy moves over to the fireplace, stoking up the few remaining, smoldering, logs. As they erupt into flame and a warm glow is cast around the room, she comes over and sits down on the arm of the couch. Reaching up to shut off the lamp, she joins me in recalling our lives at the point where I have left off.

I say to her that I was just at the part where we were starting our second year of walking to school together. That I had decided to do something bold and decisive in the hopes of clearly defining our relationship. Judy says to please continue, as she is curious to hear if I will tell the same story that she has heard so many times before. It is kind of our standing joke to make sure that we both agree



on the happenings of that significant moment in our lives. We are not shy about correcting one another.

As I begin speaking out loud, I describe how it was either the second or third day that I decided to make my move. Judy interjects that it was definitely the second day. She says that the first day I was noticeably distracted by something. What, she wasn't quite sure. On the second day I was preoccupied even more so. I seemed nervous and overly quiet as we made our way to school. I turn my head to Judy and say that she is right. It definitely was the second day. She likes to hear me say that she is right. She lets me know about it too.

Anyway, continuing on with my story, it was the second day that defined our moment. We were walking along, on our way to school, when I decided that it was time. I had been trying to formulate the right words to use in my head, but nothing seemed to really convey what was in my heart. Without any planning, I just turned around and planted a kiss on Judy's cheek. I immediately second guessed my behavior. She is going to think that it wasn't much of a kiss. Maybe it was too dry? Or, maybe it was too wet? I was wrong.

The act of stealing a kiss was the signature moment. She instantly turned to me and said that she had been waiting for that kiss for over six months now. She thought it was the perfect way for me to show my feelings for her. They were the same feelings she had for me. I could feel the nervousness start to fade away. The sweat on my palms didn't quite fade away as quickly, so I smartly wiped them off on my jeans. After facing each other and staring

into each other's eyes for a very long while, we turned and moved on. Only this time, I held her hand in mine as we made our way down the street. If it had been a cloudy day, I'm sure the glow on our faces would have brightened the way.

That afternoon on our return trip home, we both stopped and made a quick decision. This was not something we wanted our friends to find out about. The girls would find it very romantic, but still want to talk about it with everybody. The guys? They would laugh and ridicule me to no end. So, we decided to make a pact. A pact that said that we would not tell anybody about the kiss. About our true feelings for each other. Not yet. To seal the deal, we did the time-honored thing. We crossed our hearts and hoped to die. And, that's the way it was. That's the way it stayed. Someday we knew, that deep inside, our love would continue to grow.

I look over at Judy for confirmation of my recollection, but she has snuggled up closer to my neck and has silently dozed off. Confirmation enough that our love for each other had been sealed from that day forward. The glow of the fireplace starts to fade a little as the logs burn themselves down. I decide to return to my inner voice, so as not to wake the one who has fallen back asleep next to me.

Jumping ahead to the next school year, it was a time that marked some significant changes in our relationship. One of which was that we were no longer able to walk to school together. We had graduated to the next school level. Getting to school required riding the bus. Taking the bus meant that it was no longer just the two of us. The bus had

a number of stops to make in order to pick up all the students and get them to school. My stop was the one right before Judy's, so I would make sure that I sat on the aisle seat, towards the middle of the bus. When Judy got on board, she would occupy the seat directly across from me. That way we could still chat occasionally on the ride to school.

There was only one problem with that plan. The bus was way too noisy to have any kind of private conversation, let alone an intimate one. We were still trying to keep our true relationship somewhat under wraps, so we couldn't really sit together side by side. The boys on the bus were busy testing their increased testosterone levels. In other words, boys behaving badly. Most of that behavior was directed towards their fellow males, whereby shouting and screaming matches replaced the stereotypical chest pounding often seen in male gorillas. Some of that bad behavior was directed towards the girls, in the form of inappropriate comments and sexual innuendos. The girls, pretty much, took it all in stride. Explaining it as the boys being prepubescent jerks.

The other thing that Judy and I noticed about our induction into junior high school, was that our small world had grown immensely. We were no longer just represented by our small neighborhood group of kids. A whole bunch of other small neighborhood groups of kids had been thrown together into what was referred to as junior high school. It was quite a shock to be suddenly thrust into the mix of so many other kids we didn't know.

Because of the overall increase in the student population, we no longer had just one teacher assigned to teach us various subjects. Now, each subject had its own teacher and we migrated from subject to subject, classroom to classroom, throughout the day. All ordered by the sound of an annoying bell that signaled the beginning of the migration or the end, depending on where you were when the bell rang. The end result was that Judy and I realized that we were no longer going to always be in the same class.

Needless to say, Judy and I had to figure out a new strategy of how we were going to communicate with one another. Sitting across from each other on the bus helped, but was not the answer. The answer came one day when, in looking at our schedules, we realized that we were both taking English in the same classroom, but at different times. I had the class first, followed by Judy an hour later. The key was that the classroom only had so many books, so each class would have to share the same set of books. Knowing that I was assigned a certain book made it easier for Judy to make sure she got assigned the same book. The rest was easy.

Every day I would start the process off by writing a short note, describing whatever it was I wanted to communicate to Judy. I would then stick it way in the back of the book, knowing that no other kid would ever read that far ahead. She would then retrieve the note in the next class and write a short note of her own. She would then stick her reply somewhere way back in the book. The next morning I would pick it up and the process would continue

from there. We never wrote anything too personal or used any real names, just in case someone did happen to find our communiques. Like maybe the teacher? Or worse yet, one of our friends? Just like that, we had our own method of talking to each other. Keeping in touch. Showing that we cared about each other.

It was in our first year of junior high school that we experienced just how big our world was. I was sitting in one of my classes one day when the teacher was called outside of the classroom by the principal. A few minutes later, she came back in, visibly disturbed. With tears running down her cheeks and her hands shaking uncontrollably, she proceeded to tell us the terrible news. The President of the United States had just been fatally shot. She had some other details about what had happened, but we had already stopped listening. Surrendering to the horrible news that she had just delivered.

We were all let out early and sent home after that announcement. The buses we loaded into remained fairly quiet all the way home. There were a few kids, mainly boys, who apparently didn't get the message. We just shook our heads in disgust. At each stop, the doors would open and some kids would get off, only to be whisked away by their awaiting parents. Judy and I were equally numb as we approached our drop off point. I got off with Judy at her stop and made sure that she made it into her mother's arms. After which, I proceeded to slowly walk the remaining two blocks to my house. I was afraid of what I was going to find.

As bad as it was for us kids, I think it was far worse for our parents. We had just begun to barely understand what

a President was and the significance of a human life. We knew that it was a highly significant loss for a President to be assassinated. We overheard a few of the teachers even say they were afraid for our country. It would be something that we would remember for the rest of our days.

Our parents? My mother was the only one home. My dad was at work and my brother probably hanging out with his friends. My mother met me at the door. Obviously, she had been crying. After checking to make sure how I was handling the news, my mother suggested I go play in my bedroom. Off I went, closing the door after me. A split second later, I quietly snuck back out, listening from the cover of the darkened hallway. My mother had retreated to the kitchen, where she sat herself down and just started bawling her eyes out and sobbing uncontrollably. I can't even begin to understand the pain she was going through. Losing our President had far more meaning to her than I could ever imagine. Unfortunately, this would not be the last time that she, my dad or myself would feel such deep pain and loss.

Over time, our family distanced itself from the pain of that fateful day. The country mourned its loss and continued on its way. Changed forever by only looking at it from the distance of time. When it became time for Judy and I to enter high school, things changed for us again. This time, the change made things a lot easier for us to share our relationship. To share with ourselves and to share it with others. The trip to high school involved another bus ride, different from the one to junior high school. The first thing that we did was to stop trying to hide our relationship. We

made sure that, while riding on the bus, we sat on the same seat, side by side. The bus was still pretty noisy, but it was almost as if everyone had grown up a little. The games that we, as boys, played just a year or two earlier, were gone. In junior high school, boys were just learning how to relate to girls. They were conflicted, in the sense that they tried to repel them at the same time recognizing that there was some attraction there. The girls didn't seem to get the attraction yet. They simply had no interest in boys. Or maybe that was just a tactic?

In high school, the force afflicting boys that repelled girls started to disappear. Attraction to girls spread like a virus. The girls? Well, they realized that there was an advantage to having boys take an interest in them. They saw value in finally being able to manipulate the boys. Of course, that is just one male's observation.

As I think about all of this from the contentment of my place on the couch, Judy starts to fidget slightly on my shoulder. I thought sure she was reacting to my well-intentioned observation that girls manipulate boys. Instead, she slowly maneuvers her way off of my shoulder and slides onto the unoccupied portion of the couch. Settling herself down, she leans over and places her head in my lap. Looking up at me, I see in her a recognition of why I love her so much. Gazing into her eyes, I am hypnotized and have been across all these many years. I gently brush her long gray hair away from her face, her eyes close and she falls fast asleep.

High school was almost like living in a different world. We still had a separate teacher and classroom for each of

our subjects. We still had that incessant bell to manage our time and adjust our schedules. What was different was that there was just so much more of everything. Many more students, merged from the multitude of junior high schools in our district. There was a greater variety of subjects to take, increasing our options of where we wanted to go in life.

More than anything else, there was an increased exposure to social interaction and activities. There were dances, clubs and numerous sporting events to keep us busy. Judy and I finally had the opportunity to spend more time with each other outside of school and away from home. Some of the activities, like the dances, were limited for us as sophomores. Seems as if the juniors and seniors had a greater number of these. It didn't seem to affect the sporting events. Even though there were the typical junior varsity games, the varsity games were the big draw, open to everyone.

As I said, there were some limitations to being sophomores. Even though there were all kinds of after school events, it was getting to those events that was the problem. We were too young to drive and the events were just too far away to walk to. Our only option was to ask our parents for a lift, which wasn't always met with open enthusiasm. I can't blame them. They would have had to drive us to the event, figure out what to do while it was going on and, then, pick us up to take us home. We were asking a lot of them to be sure.

The thing Judy and I had going for us, was my brother. It was his senior year in high school and I was fortunate



enough to benefit from our sharing the same high school for that one initial year. My brother had his driving license, as new as it was, and my parents had bought him a used car for his birthday. I have never seen him more excited. He had his own wheels and he could even use them to drive to and from school.

I knew better than to ask him to drive Judy and I to school. That would have been asking way too much. But, he was willing to drive us to some of the dances and senior games. At least, the ones where he was going anyway. I remember the times sitting in the back seat of his car with Judy, as he and a girl friend would cuddle up to each other in the front seat. They kind of became a model for what Judy and I could look forward to in a couple of years. I just hope that I was able to properly show him how much I appreciated his help in every way that he had brought me under his wing.

It was in our high school years that Judy and I started to develop a path as to who we were eventually to become. Our first exposure to biology fanned an interest that only increased in intensity over time. Later, in our senior year, we advanced into physiology. Judy and I made sure that we were in the same class, which helped significantly when doing our homework together. Our teachers and counselors encouraged us to pursue our love for physiology even after we left high school.

We became somewhat of a favorite topic of our teachers. Not so much because of our enthusiasm, but due more to a physical condition that we both seemed to share. As I said, we tended to sign up for the same physiology

classes so that we could be together. We were very responsive to the questions asked by the teachers, always ready with the correct answer or formulation of a good question. You could almost say that we competed with each other. The physical condition was that we would turn bright red in the face whenever we were called on.

The teachers got a big kick out of watching our faces turn crimson. Sometimes, one at a time. Sometimes both, in unison. There was nothing we could do to control it. We don't know how or why it developed, but I had a partial theory. I believed we gave it to each other and, after a number of years it just continued to blossom. In any event, the bright red face phenomenon continued to follow us throughout the rest of our college and post graduate education. We never really did grow out of it.

My brother, on the other hand, never really developed a love of any particular subject. After graduating high school, he had no ambitions of going on to college. He was adamant that he would be able to find a good job working with his hands. Something like construction or working on cars and trucks. That lack of ambition turned out to be a huge mistake.

The Vietnam war had started to significantly wind down the year my brother graduated high school. Which was a good thing, since everyone our age thought we should have never been there in the first place. The fact that it was still going on though, meant that there was still a military draft. The primary way for our government to acquire bodies to fight their war.

My brother, by not having gone on to college, found himself vulnerable and eligible for the draft. A year out of high school, he was drafted into the army and sent off to Vietnam to fight. He was good with that, although he was not completely in favor of the war. The day he left, my parents were not very happy. They were worried sick that something was going to happen to him. I dealt with it in a little different way. I was losing my brother. The one that had help me find my way. To help me find Judy.

The one positive in all of this was that I eventually inherited my brother's car when I became a senior. My senior year with Judy had just been made a whole lot more attractive. We had finally graduated to that picture of the front seat we had created when my brother would cart us all around. We no longer had to rely on our parents to drive us places. That was a win for them and a win for us.

Part way through my senior year, my world fell apart. It was a Saturday morning, while my mom, dad and I were having breakfast, that there was a rapping at the front door. My mom was already up from the table getting more pancakes, so she went to answer the knocking. As she opened the door, my dad could see that there was a man there, in uniform. I don't know how he knew, but the first thing he did was to get up and rush me off to my bedroom. I had no idea what was going on, but I knew it had to be something serious.

My dad hurriedly made his way back out to the front door, sliding in next to my mom. The man was just beginning to introduce himself, as my dad recalled it later. I opened my door slightly, so that I could try to hear what

was going on. All I could hear was my mother screaming and my dad trying to console her. The front door was suddenly slammed and I slunk back into my room. This was more than just serious. This was devastating.

I must have stayed in that room most of the day, not knowing what else to do. Eventually, my dad came by and knocked on my door, asking if he could come in. He came in and sat himself down next to me on my bed. Putting his arms around me, he pulled me to his chest and told me that my brother was dead. The man at the front door was from the army. It was his responsibility to notify us of the death of my brother. The death of my parents' oldest child.

The shock to my system was more than I could bear. I cried uncontrollably in my dad's arms, as he tried to hold up his end as much as he could. Through my tears I asked Dad where Mom was? How was she doing? He replied that she was doing as best as could be expected, under the circumstances. I knew what that really meant. She wasn't doing well at all.

The next few weeks were all a blur. Dad took a couple of weeks off from work and I stayed home from school. Mom needed all the comfort we could muster up. I didn't know how to break it to Judy. It wasn't that I didn't think she should know. I just didn't know how to talk about it, without completely falling apart.

Judy already knew this. The word had spread through school about the death of my brother. Judy gave me a few days, then she came over to the house, asking to see me. My mom and dad both realized that seeing Judy would be

the best thing for me. They led Judy to my bedroom, opened the door and said that there was someone here to see me. Someone, who was an integral part of my life. She needed to be let in.

That was just another defining moment for me as to how important Judy was in my life. She sat with me for hours, letting me pour my heart out to her. I told her that I had received a letter from my brother just a week earlier. It was actually more like a short note, since it only contained a few lines. I had not shared it with my parents, feeling that it was something that my brother had wanted only our eyes to see. The note began by saying that he wished he wasn't in Vietnam. He wanted to make sure that I understood something important, just in case he didn't make it back. He wanted me to know one thing and that was to never let Judy go. We had something special between us that most people never experience. Ever hope to experience. With that, he ended the letter. Judy listened. She consoled me. She cried with me. It was a turn-around point for me. I had nothing else to give. There was no place else to go, except up. I just had to try and Judy wanted to go there with me.

My parents took a lot longer to accept my brother's death. That was understandable. I think the turning point for them was when the army delivered a package one day. They brought the package inside and carefully unwrapped it. What they found was a folded up American flag. In the shape of a triangle. It was the flag used to cover my brother's coffin when they flew his body home. I use the word coffin, somewhat incredulously. The truth of the matter was that my brother came home in a box and was buried in

a box. All my parents got for their years of being a loving mother and father, was a neatly folded flag in the shape of a triangle. I think the indignity of it all was abrupt enough to help them turn the corner.

The rest of my senior year was a bit rough, but with Judy's support and love we both graduated at the top of our class. We both knew what we wanted to do with our lives. In order to do that, we needed to attend college. Which, considering the Vietnam war was still wearing down, pleased my parents to no end. And Judy, as well. We needed to not just attend college, but be accepted into a very good medical program. We both intended to practice medicine.

During that last chaotic year of high school, we had applied to a number of prestigious medical schools. We were accepted by only two. Of those two, one resided in a small town and the other in a very large city. We could think of no better place to be but in a small college town. The personal touch to the program and the opportunity to residence and practice in the very same place, made our decision to accept easy.

Shortly after finishing high school, we moved ourselves and our possessions to this small college town. The same town where we currently live. We were both in it for the long haul. It was going to be a pretty intense number of ten to fifteen years, going through pre-med, medical school and finishing with residency.

Somewhere during our first year of pre-med, we both decided to take the next step in our relationship. We

decided to get married before our schooling became all too time consuming. Our parents and all of our friends were back home so that's where we decided to hold the ceremony. We didn't have a whole lot of time, so the number of attendees was kept fairly small. The wedding ceremony itself was held in the backyard of the house where Judy had grown up. Her parents had a lovely backyard that overlooked a far reaching canyon. Rows of chairs were set up on either side of an aisle leading to the alter that had the canyon as its backdrop.

We both decided that we didn't need a long drawn out ceremony. The duration of the ceremony was not was important to us. What was important to us, was our vows to each other. We agonized for weeks over what we were going to say. All we knew specifically, was that we wanted to speak to each other, face to face. In the end we settled on a very simple poem that we decided best fit how we felt about each other. The central idea being, that we would always be there for each other. Memorializing my brother's short note, that we should never let each other go.

Still holding the wedding picture in my hands, I suddenly remember that Judy had included the vows in the back of the picture frame. Revisiting the picture frame, I found them. As I read the poem, the moment we read those vows vividly came back to me. Standing in front of the minister, underneath an archway adorned with beautiful white and red roses, we held hands as we faced each other. Taking turns, we each read a verse to the other. I, the first one. Judy, the next. And, so on in a slow and meaningful progression. Until we got to the fifth verse, the

last one, where we both read it aloud in unison to each other.

Our vows were read as follows:



When you find your place in life, wherever that may be;  
Save a place for me beside, the leeward side of thee.

Just in case you'd rather be, someone else instead;  
Save a place for me beside, the other life you led.

When your heart aches for someone, to comfort and to hold;  
Save a place for me beside, protect you from the cold.

If you ever shed a tear, alone and feeling blue;  
Save a place for me beside, the lonely side of you.

You can always find me in, a grove of Aspen trees;  
I'll save a place for you beside, the trembling Aspen leaves.

With that, I remember being pronounced husband and wife. Upon which, we sealed it with one of those passionate kisses straight out of some very romantic movie. I was very confident of my actions this time compared to our very first kiss long ago. I made sure that this time, it was on the lips and not just nervously placed on the cheek. A stolen kiss, no more.

Walking back up the aisle, we felt like we were on the yellow brick road. On our way to the Emerald City. I think we were both exhausted, but relieved that this part was over. The backyard of Judy's home also served as our reception. There were plenty of good friends, food and beverages to go around. Very little of which Judy and I partook in. We were just too busy making the rounds, thanking everyone for being there and sharing the moment with us.

After cutting the cake, we made the rounds one more time to say our goodbyes and smile for last minute pictures. We then loaded ourselves into my brother's old car and sped off down the street. Tin cans had been tied to the back bumper, which made a terrible clatter as we barreled our way along. I'm sure the neighbors were not happy about all the noise. Friends asked us what we were going to do for a honeymoon, but we had no immediate plans. We were just off to a hotel for the night. The next morning, we got up early and caught a plane back to our small town college, where we continued on with our pursuit to become doctors.

Judy is resting comfortably in my lap now and is gone to the world. I fidget a little, just to see if I can get a stir out of her. My legs are starting to fall asleep and I need to

move to them to get the blood flowing again. I turn around to put the picture of our sixty-fifth wedding anniversary back in its proper place on the shelf. In doing so, Judy's eyes suddenly open.

In a very inquisitive voice, she asks if I am done? Guess she thinks that by trying to put the picture back I must be finished with the story about our life together. I can tell by the way she has asked her question that she thinks I must have left something out. I think to myself, how does she know that I'm forgetting something? She has been asleep. Seeing the puzzled expression on my face, she adds that I always tend to forget one last detail. Reaching up, she retrieves another framed picture from a shelf that is, apparently, reserved for this very special detail. As she brings it down and it comes into view, a smile forms on my face that reveals I know what this is all about after all. It's a picture of our two beautiful children. We had reminisced about our lives enough times in the past for Judy to know that I, typically, forget to end our story with the birth of our two children.

With Judy listening to my every word, I continue on with the last part of the story. While we were finishing up our pre-med classwork, we both decided that there was no time like the present to start our family. Judy and I agreed that it would be very difficult juggling two kids with our schooling and work schedules. When we look back on it, we are so glad that we just decided to do it.

They are both married now and have children of their own. They live somewhat far away, so we don't get to see them or the grandkids as much as we would like. We do

know one thing though. What we have passed on to them is something so special, time will never erase. They, themselves, put it this way. It's all about how they see us. They look to us and wonder how they can get what we have now? In their eyes, we are and always have been, hypnotized by each other.

With that, Judy seems to be convinced that the whole story has now been told. We turn and look at each other in a manner that only the two of us truly understand. Our children have been the joy of our lives as we sense one generation springing up and another one winding its way down to conclusion.

Judy and I both glance up at the Westminster clock hanging on the wall close to the fireplace. It is about ready to chime three o'clock in the morning. The logs in the fireplace have burned themselves almost completely out, leaving only a few final sparks trailing off into nothingness. The signs are all there. All we need to do now is to get ourselves up and off of the couch. Easier said than done.

Eventually, after a few creaks and groans, we march our way sleepily, arm in arm, down the hallway back to the bedroom. Judy climbs in bed first. I have to go pee one more time. Judy doesn't seem to have that problem. Yet.

Crawling back into bed, I slide into position along side Judy. I believe it is called cuddling. Wrapping my arms around her pajama clothed body, she leans her head back and I plant a big good night kiss on her lips.

Through all of our years together, it seems as if our love will never end. No matter where I am or how far I travel, in my mind she appears. In good times and the hard ones too, when I'm feeling down, I still see her in her wedding gown. Early on, we made a vow and we have kept that vow. It has made us strong. When I look in Judy's eyes, I have to admit, I'm still hypnotized.

I cradle my face deeply into the soft, carefully fluffed pillow beneath my head. I let out a healthy sigh and close my eyes as I enter into a world of absolute darkness.

## EPILOGUE

Sometimes I just wonder if I will ever cease to be. If I will finish the endless lives I live as I go from one person to the next. Repeated, over and over again. For some people, there is this desire to live forever. Hoping, beyond all hope, that they will never have to face the prospect of having their existence end. For me, there is a certain discomfort in knowing that I will keep waking up as someone new.

I sense that discomfort when I consider the difference between life and death. Those who wish to live forever do not know what it is like to have an infinite existence. To just go on and on and on, forever. Thus, it presents an attractive alternative. They secretly desire something that they have never experienced as somehow better. Only because it is different? I, on the other hand, have experienced what it is like to be infinite. What I crave for, is to know what it is like to be finite.

As I write this, I know that there is a third person inside of me doing the talking here. Third person you say? Yes, there are three lives that occupy my existence. There is the person who I was before I wake up. There is the person who I am to become after waking up. Finally, there is this third person who lives somewhere in between. This is the

person who is consciously aware of the other two, albeit for only a short, temporary period of time.

It's this third person, that I think would find solace in living a finite existence. The other two lives? They already know what it is like to begin and then end. The fact of the matter is, I'm tired. The idea that I am going to continue waking up as someone new, is exhausting. The third person "me", needs a rest. Even if it is permanent. The only option open to me at this point, is to desire finality. To want to be finite.

I find myself caught in the hold of two different worlds. One which is finite and one which is infinite. One where my life ends and one where it begins all over again. This is not supposed to be the way it is. I have been led to believe that it is either one way or the other. Not both at the same time. Nature seems to reflect our world from a binary perspective. As a result, things are thought of as being black or white. Positive or negative. Good or bad. Up or down. Physicists even describe the vastness of our universe as being either finite or infinite.

We have been taught to look at things in opposition to one another. Something we refer to as dualism. So, having a finite or infinite existence is just an example of how we look at our world. This, as opposed to, that. The first and second person "me" fit comfortably into the confines of that dualistic interpretation. One lives and one dies. The third person "me"? The one that seems to live forever? Not so much.

The truth is, like it or not, humans cannot really handle what it is like to be infinite. We try and take whatever is described as being infinite and put boundaries on it. We try to confine it. Take, for example, the number Pi. An irrational number that never ends. An approximation written in the form of 3.14159265359. Of course, the decimal portion goes on infinitesimally. The average public doesn't know how to work with that number, let alone mathematicians. So we shorten it to 3.14 or some such constrained number of decimal places. In other words, we make it finite so that it makes our lives more comfortable. Because it hurts our brains too much to imagine something going on forever.

What is it like to go on forever? Imagine what it would be like to only look up. Forever. Looking up is all that you can do. You can never look down. Down doesn't exist in the infinite world of only looking up. Say, you are hungry and travel to the store to feed your hunger pangs. But you never get there. You just keep going on and on, never reaching your destination. How frustrating is that? It just makes more sense to believe that what goes up, must come down. Once you begin a journey, the journey will end.

That's the conundrum presented by the concept of finite and infinite. It's not just that they are defined as being opposites of one another. It's that each one creates its own fascination to desire the other. Yet, each one preventing us from doing so. There is a transcendent grandeur to living forever, even though you don't really know what that is like. There is the conclusive satisfaction of completing one's purpose. Still, afraid that there is no more that life has to offer. How do you reconcile the two?



I have begun to question what my third person existence really is. Can it be quantified? Or, is it something that happens so fast it leaves no trail? It is somewhat easy to count up the people who I have been. I relive their histories. I retrieve their memories. My sense of self can be found in the delicate fabric that is woven by the stories that recall a life and point somewhat predictably towards a future “me”.

How do I count my memories as the third person? However many they may be? There is simply not enough time to capture them. Before I can remember who I am, I am stirred by the person of who I was. And, at almost exactly the same time, I am flooded with the memories of who I am to become. That moment of brief existence is described in physics as the immeasurable and minuscule amount of time that it takes for a quantum virtual particle to pop into and out of being. In other words, virtually no time at all.

It might be that my third person is simply an extension of mind. Maybe, the minds of the other two? I am really just a facet of consciousness, formed by the interlacing of a cognizance that is outside of myself. The third person “me” is, simply, an extension of their minds. I live outside of the confines of who I was and who I am to become. That tells me that I am something more than just the sum of the parts. That tells me that I am something more than just my two other selves.

That leads to an interesting question. If I am the consciousness of things outside of other minds, is there a community of consciousness in which I participate? In other

words, are there more of me out there that I simply have not met yet? I have no evidence of that. I am the only one as far as I know. It is purely speculation at this point, but there is some evidence of that in the literature.

Australian Aborigines have a concept of a community of consciousness that they call the Dreamtime. It is a knowledge that underlies all of their spiritual beliefs that goes way back to the beginning of time, approximately 65,000 years ago. It describes how the universe started, how they as a people began and how they should all interact. It elucidates the stories of their existence and the convictions they all grasp. Popular opinion holds that the key point of the Dreamtime is that it illustrates a beginning that never ends. A beginning without an end? Kind of sounds like the Big Bang, where the universe begins and then goes on forever.

Unfortunately, that is not exactly a correct interpretation of the Dreamtime. The Dreamtime does not have a past, nor does it have a concept of time at all. As we have discussed before, time is considered to be made up of the past, present and future. The Dreamtime has none of this. It simply exists and is all around us. It is truly a community of consciousness that does not have a beginning or an end. It just is, as the third person “me”, just is.

That’s what makes the concept of myself as a third person difficult. Just continuing to be. Am I eternally floating out there, somewhere, waiting for something to come and shape me into somebody else’s past or future? How I long for a finite existence that has clear boundaries. A container

wrapped neatly around me, like a comfortable blanket warming me on a cold winter's night.

In the meantime, I feel this familiar stirring deep inside of me. As if someone, or something, is starting to awaken from within. Trying to force their way out of the depths. I anticipate the coming of an urge to find my way to some bathroom to find a mirror. For my hand to automatically reach up to the right, searching for a light switch that may or may not be there.

I need to find out who I am. Today.

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