

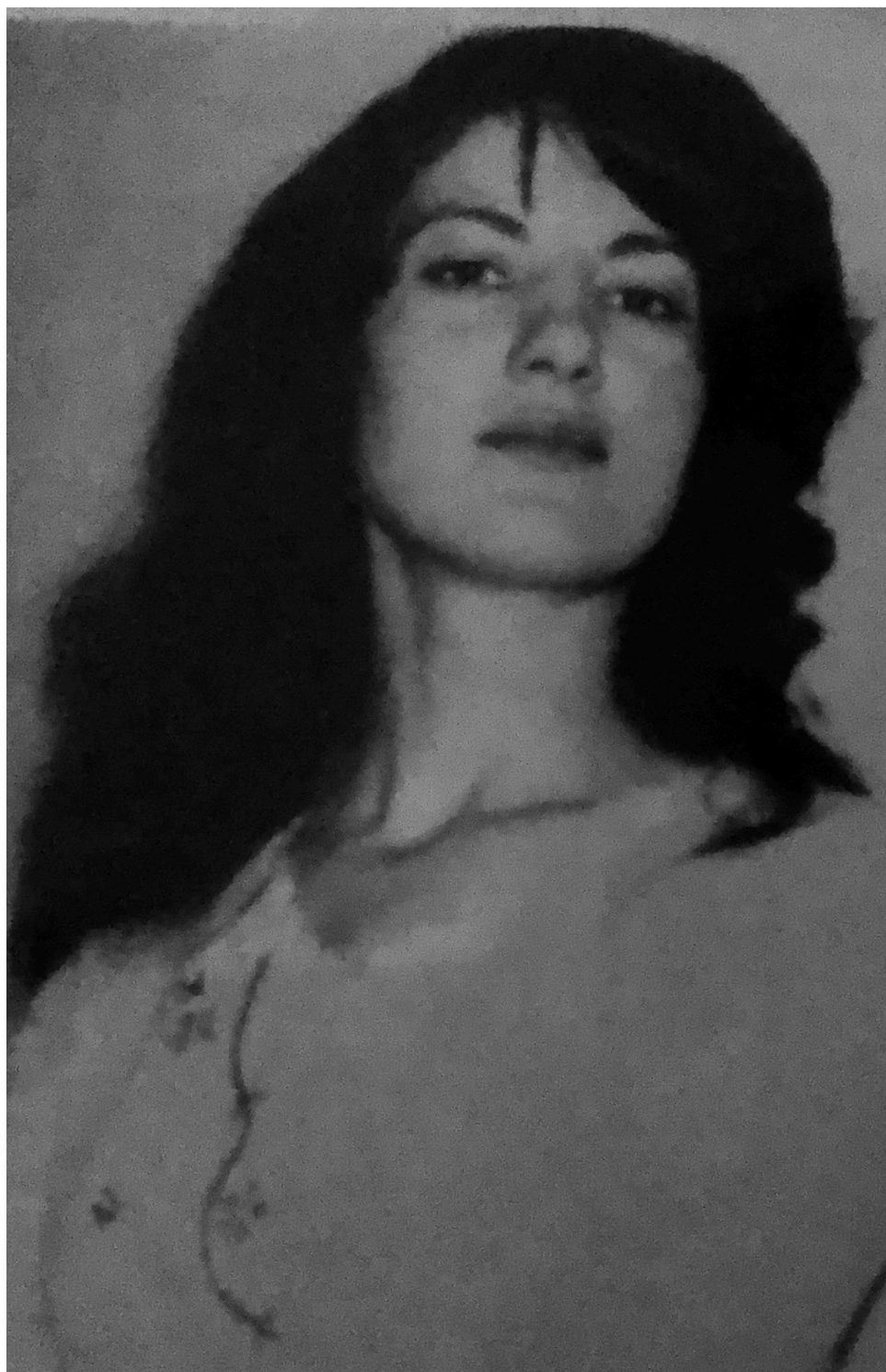
A Memoir

A Mother's Tears

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ISBN: 9798627428987

*For my guardian angel, my best friend—
my mother.*



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Chapter One



Two sharp knocks then the oncologist entered the room. He pulled up a small swivel-chair, sat, and started flipping through the chart before getting down to business.

“I’m sorry to tell you this, but it’s cervical cancer.” The doctor placed his clipboard down on the counter as my mother’s stomach fell through the floor. *That’s it?*, she thought. *That’s how my story ends?* Gabriela hadn’t lived in America half a decade before being given the devastating news. Little did she know that not only her world, but her husband’s would also be turned upside-down as they’d both go on to battle individual cancers while simultaneously raising a nine-year old son—, that through a swirl of illnesses and sadness, she’d eventually find true happiness amid busy downtown streets and sun-drenched beachfronts—, that everything undoubtedly happens for a deeper reason than we can fathom and once we’re far enough back to see the bigger picture, it ultimately tells of something so beautifully grand. No, that’s not how her story would end, it’d barely even begun.

My mother was born in a place that'd throw someone into a cell shorter than their full-length body for simply speaking out against the government. They wouldn't be able to stretch their legs or straighten their back. It'd be an incredibly uncomfortable position to be in—, purposely and for long periods of time. Before beginning her fight with cancer, escaping persecution from the secret police, and having the ability to eventually fly around on planes in America, she endured a heavy childhood in her native homeland. Romania was a communist country in 1951 and remained that way until the '89 Revolutions of the Eastern Bloc swept across totalitarian European states. President Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej ruled over the poor nation without any sympathy for the oppressed population. His iron-fist eventually reached my mother's own family and so, seven year-old Gabriela's life was never the same.

Under the government's laws, if a store's cash register was caught short on money, the manager was to blame—, they alone took on the full responsibility of their employees' actions. It just so happened that in a small town in the southern region of the country, my grandfather held this very position as the head of a hardware shop. Its drawer turned up less than expected one night. For the next four years, Gabriela came home everyday wishing

her father would be released from the jail cell he was kept in for someone else's crime.

She still remembers going to see him with her mother. The skies were overcast that day with darkened gray clouds. There was tension hanging in the air. My grandmother had brought along a small package filled with food to give to her husband upon seeing him. Getting to the courthouse, there was a strip of metal bars separating the inmates from the rest of the crowd. It was within that room my mother saw her father for the first time since he'd gone away. She sat on a bench and tried not to cry.

"Who are you waiting to see?," an officer asked Gabriela. He could tell she was clearly distressed.

"My father," she replied, looking down the long hallway in my grandfather's direction. They were too far apart from being able to communicate and any talking between them was strictly forbidden. The police officer felt pity for my mom.

"Go drink some water from that fountain," he advised her, knowing it was right next to the room her dad was housed in. That way, they could at least see each other more clearly. As she walked down toward the other end of the hall, her father ran up to the bars to see her better. Upon reaching the room, she peered inside and saw him standing there waiting for her. My mom was wearing new pants

she'd just gotten and couldn't wait to show them off to him. She tugged at them proudly.

"They're new," she said to him with a smile, trying to hold back tears from flowing down her cheeks. She saw him looking back at her with intense sadness, knowing how much he loved her and wanted to come back home to his family. The whole day before he was to go to jail, he'd propped Gabriela up on his bike while he rode around and kissed the top of her head hundreds of times. Of his two daughters, my mother was his favorite. That's what hurt the most for those four long years. It wasn't until she'd finally turned eleven that she saw him again. Once home, he never spoke of his time spent in the infamous Jilava Prison though its inmates were well-known for being the intellectuals which communist leaders had been most intimidated by, and so, thrown into cells and locked away like nameless shadows.

Many books have been written about the atrocities committed at the hands of brutal dictatorships the world over. Romania is no different. Some of the most shocking examples of what these innocent people had to go through include; having to stand on one foot with weights placed around their shoulders for a couple of days at a time, a Communion involving the prisoners' waste in place of bread and wine, and being beaten so

badly they'd faint from the pain, waking up to fallen teeth and splatters of blood surrounding them. Another of the tortures involved a long hallway with a dozen officers standing on either side, rubber clubs in hand. The prisoners were forced to walk from one end to the other while they were beaten as badly as possible, once reaching the end, they had to turn around and walk back the other way. Those who'd pass out from the pain were revived from the water splashed onto their collapsed bodies. Their only source of hope were the small pieces of ripped paper they'd write Bible verses on and pass around for inspiration to endure another day. When asked what one of the worst things they had to live through was, an ex-prisoner said; "Having to make a cross with our tongues inside our mouths from the fear of being seen making one with our hands." They suffered dreadful fates at the hands of evil men who marched onward to the ideas of other evil men. All of their captors despised God and anything to do with Him. They'd force unimaginable blasphemies out of their captives' actions and most don't even repeat the words they were coerced into saying to this very day. These were the realities of the country my mother was born into on the first day of August in 1951.

She came home from the hospital to a family of both parents and a three-year old sister. They lived

in a countryside-town about forty minutes outside of the capital. It was a quiet place to grow up, where all of the neighbors knew each other and traded goods whenever they'd have them—, eggs, bread, foods they'd grown themselves. Everyone went to church on Easter after eating lamb, and on Christmas after killing and eating the pig each family had for themselves. Traditions went a long way in those small towns. Life was slower and things seemed to be simpler than they are today.

Some of Gabriela's earliest memories include time spent with Ioana, her aunt. She was my mother's favorite relative. She'd go to work with her when Gabriela was just a few years old—, her aunt's pet lamb in tow. While the woman worked, my mom would take a baby bottle filled with milk and feed the small animal. He was like a child for Ioana, as she couldn't bare children herself. Gabriela kept to him quite a bit, but she kept to her aunt even more. My mother could say that she was practically raised by her. The woman was always there for her niece no matter the circumstance.

On an evening after her father had already been taken away from Gabriela, she was on her way to visit her aunt. She was almost to the front doors when she began hearing music coming from inside the house. The closer she got the louder the music became. It was a common theme of Ioana's

husband, to blare their radio that way whenever things got out of hand, but none of that crossed my mom's seven-year old mind at the time. She slowly turned the doorknob and entered the dimly-lit home. Through the loudness of the speakers, she could make out a sort of whimpering coming from the bedroom. She walked in and saw her aunt sitting on the ground, crying—, her face was bruised and beaten, a bloodied nose dripped heavily onto the carpet below.

“He’s at it again,” she said through the tears. Her husband was your typical abusive-type; always angry, short-tempered, and liked the bottle more than he did his own wife. The scene was a tough one for my mom to process. Her father—, who was her closest friend—, was in jail for something he had nothing to do with and though her mother loved her and was always present, Gabriela felt more affection from her aunt. Now Ioana was sitting on the bedroom floor with broken bones in her face and a shattered heart in her chest. My mom always wanted to mend it back together, to fill the hollowness her aunt had deep inside for not being able to have her own son or daughter.

She remembers going to buy strawberries with her aunt, spreading out a blanket, and sitting down beneath the trees. Both began ripping off the stems so they could put them in a bowl and pour sugar on

top of them later on. They played cards while eating them together at Ioana's house just minutes away from Gabriela's own home. These were just some of the memories my mom had made before the night she heard her aunt had suddenly passed away.

Two policemen came to my mom's house and told them the tragic story; on the side of the road coming back into town, Ioana was hitchhiking and eventually picked up by what seemed to be the sole car out that night. The man driving was acting strangely enough that she knew to grasp the door handle once they were already moving and try to jump out. He quickly grabbed ahold of her leg and she was dragged for yards amongst the gravel and dirt before being let go. While she lay there helplessly, the man drove away with her boot still in his hand. This news went on to devastate my mother for the rest of her life. She never forgot the feelings upon hearing what had happened and kept them hidden away inside herself for decades to come. Having to go through something like that as a child would be rough on anyone, but Gabriela didn't have her father to go to either. She didn't have his comforting embrace or his soft voice telling her that everything was going to be alright, and that Ioana was in a better place now, looking down upon her niece. Gabriela had to feel these things alone and deal with the pain all by herself. Many years

afterwards, my mother and I would pass by the winding curb where her aunt had jumped out of the moving vehicle and she showed me the wooden cross still standing there in the ground, marking the exact spot of Ioana's final breath. Life continued onward for Gabriela and not until a few years later did anything dire happen again.

It was an average day when my mom of twelve years old decided to go to the local grocery store right down the street from her house. She walked the short distance and entered inside with the rest of the shoppers. Nothing was out of the ordinary. The date was November 22, 1963.

As Gabriela strolled through the aisles, she listened to the soft music coming from a small radio in the corner of the store. Suddenly, an announcer cut in on the air, interrupting the normally scheduled program. The volume was too low for anyone to hear what he had to say so the store manager came around to turn it up. My mother couldn't make out much but did hear the most important words clearly.

"The President of the United States has died in a hospital..." the announcer went on, so full of emotion that everyone around Gabriela—, herself included—, began tearing up. They didn't know all the details yet, but it was obvious the world would soon change. My mom went home with tears in her

eyes. She had no idea where she'd end up decades later—, that she'd ever come to America much less become a United States citizen, that she'd ever travel from city to city and get to see so many of the wonderful things the country had to offer. All she knew at that moment was the USA had lost its leader, and that was enough of a reason to break down.

Chapter Two



The years slowly rolled by; school days came and went, the seasons changed like clockwork, and finally my mom grew into a sharp-witted teenager. Her father had finally come back home. Life was good again. He would walk with Gabriela for an hour to the train station where she'd take it to her high school, making sure she boarded before turning around to walk another hour back home. Rain, snow, sunshine, it didn't matter—, all he wanted was to spend as much time with his daughter as possible. These are some of my mother's most cherished memories of her father.

A year after graduating high school, Gabriela and her cousin were walking through a forested area nearby both of their homes on a sunny summer afternoon. The trees were particularly beautiful and they came upon an open space in the middle of the woods that seemed to all but speak out to them.

"This would be perfect," my mom said. They'd been looking for a place to hold summer get-togethers with their closest friends and what they'd just discovered was the place to do it. For the next

few years, on and off, my mom and her cousin would have these gatherings with the radio blaring all their favorite songs. They decided it was a perfect place and so decided to call it Paradise. That was their go-to escape when they were young adults and needed a spot for themselves. Far from my generation, they didn't need drugs and alcohol to party or have a good time. They were content to dance and just hold hands whenever they'd feel sparks of love. Living under communism, people took pleasure in the simpler things a lot easier than their children ever would. She'd daydream throughout it all—, not knowing what type of life lay ahead. Not knowing she'd ever see the downfall of Romania's dictatorship, not knowing she'd eventually come to America, and not knowing what battles and victories would cross her path. She just listened to the music and kept on going in rhythmic movements, completely free and blessed. To be that age again is something so many people wonder about later on in life. When things were so simple and at the same time, everything was the end of the world. I remembered my own adolescence while my mom would reflect on hers—, it was so innocent and full of compassion that I couldn't have wished for a better upbringing. Nothing could level my enthusiasm for life. My mom related in more ways than I'd thought she would.

Gabriela had little loves that came and went throughout those years. None of them ever reached a mature stage where something deeper developed but she had plenty of eyes set on her. She was popular enough in school to have boyfriends here and there, but as she grew into an adult, her style became that much more refined.

Finally, Gabriela was turning twenty-one years old on the day she and her cousin planned the perfect birthday party in Paradise. They invited all of their friends and went to the train station to meet them.

“Ready for tonight?” Gabriela asked her companions. They all shook their heads in anticipation. They eventually made their way into the woods, deeper and deeper they went until reaching their second home.

“Let’s make a fire,” my mom’s cousin suggested. They lit the leaves and twigs laying nearby and sparked the flame. It grew higher and higher up toward the night sky. They’d brought along their radios and set them all on the same station, turning the volume up as loud as it’d go. They danced well into the night and until sunrise the next day.

“We should do this every year,” Gabriela said. It wasn’t meant to be—, that was the only birthday she’d ever spend with her closest friends in her preferred place of partying. The years would keep

rolling by and they'd see less and less of their Paradise. My mom eventually moved to the capital and quickly began her new life there.

Gabriela had been living in the Colentina neighborhood of Bucharest by herself for a couple of years when she was at a local grocery store one day. There, she met a woman who was living in the building next to hers.

"My name's Gabby," my mom said with a smile. After the short introductions the friendly woman invited my mother over for dinner on an upcoming night. The walk to the neighbor's apartment was short as she lived only a few minutes away. My mom entered the neatly-laid out space and sat down at the dining table. Dinner was already prepared but there were four place-mats set up.

"I invited a couple of friends who also live in the building to join us tonight," the woman said. "I hope that's alright." Not long afterwards came a knock on the door. In walked two handsomely-dressed men, both in suits and ties. They looked to be about mid-to-late thirties and one of them immediately started eyeing Gabriela out of his peripheral.

"This is Marcel and his friend," the woman said, introducing the two. They took their seats and began their night of light conversation, food, and fun. Decades later, my mom would tell me how she truly felt about meeting my dad.

“I didn’t like him at first,” she’d say. “He was so intelligent and clean but he liked to drink. That was his downfall.” Over the next few months, my mom saw more and more of Marcel and came to meet all of his friends. There was a spark between the two but still not enough to pursue anything serious. It was the way he treated her. “Any woman would’ve loved being the center of his attention,” my mom reminisced, “he treated me so well.” It just wasn’t meant to be—, at least, not yet.

Marcel eventually introduced her to a good friend of his. This friend instantly fell in love with Gabriela and so, they began their own relationship quicker than anything developing between her and Marcel. They had dated for more than a year when the boyfriend’s family decided they needed to move away. Before making it into America, they needed to go through an immigration camp in Austria. He raised hell on the train ride there.

“I’m not leaving her!,” he shouted, pounding on the walls and doors inside the cabin. Everyone tried to calm him down, but his heart was set on being reunited with Gabriela at all costs. Eventually, he accepted the fact that he wasn’t going to return to Romania anytime soon and so asked a favor of Marcel. “Please take care of her,” he sobbed over the phone to my dad. With that, Marcel and Gabriela began seeing more of each other than ever before.

He'd bring her groceries and take her out to restaurants. They reignited their innocent friendship, still withholding any deeper feelings they may have felt. It was a given that my mom's former boyfriend was going to at least visit Gabriela at some point in the future. Once his family had settled down, he was on the first plane back to Romania. Marcel was going to pick him up from the airport early the next morning.

Knowing that it was probably their last night together, my dad invited Gabriela over for dinner and as long a talk as possible from his standpoint. Tomorrow, she'd be back in her boyfriend's arms and the thought of Marcel and her being an item would dissipate for good. What was to be a lively night between my future parents turned out to be a quiet and somber evening. They knew that the inevitable sunrise would mean they'd be parted from any potential relationship. Theirs would remain a friendship and nothing more. One night left; all of the future memories they were to experience together came so close to being forever erased from their reality. No marriage, no son, no escape to America. It would all disappear in a matter of hours.

Sunlight finally came calling and they both knew that soon, Marcel would have to leave and pick up his friend from the airport, essentially putting an

end to all future communication between my parents. Fate works in wonderfully strange ways—, as my mother’s boyfriend was stopped at customs and turned away from entering the country due to lack of papers. He was distraught. Marcel couldn’t help but feel elated. From that point on, my parents were officially a couple.

Marcel published four novels before meeting and falling in love with Gabriela. She tried reading them to me many years later to no avail as I hardly understood the language he used. I still knew they were important, that they spoke of a time before my existence in a country I barely got to know. They were completely anti-communist in nature but it wasn’t obvious to the audience at first. They’d have to read closely.

Gabriela would often stop and speak to a friend or fellow coworker on her way to work. Maybe she’d run into someone she knew on the street, on any random corner of the city, unaware that she was being watched by the Securitate—, Romania’s secret police. Every step she took, every move was scrutinized. They knew whose wife she was, that neither Marcel nor she would ever become card-carrying communists like so many others had done in fear of persecution. They stood their ground and so, were constantly under the government’s microscopes for it.

“What did she say to you?” they’d ask my mother’s friends after she was well on her way and out of sight. “What did you two talk about?” They wanted to know every last detail, making sure my mom didn’t speak out any anti-communist messages or had anything negative to say about their worshipped president.

Finally, the day came that my mom began experiencing morning sickness. Marcel thought it’d be a good idea to send her to America for a brief visit with his cousins in Oregon. My mom didn’t want to go, she’d already felt his family’s disapproval of her in the past and to spend anymore time with them would’ve only aggravated her pregnancy. Eventually, she agreed to go on the condition that she’d be able to come back if things got too heavy to handle. Before anything else, my mom needed a passport to travel outside of Romania with. That became my parents’ first priority. Luckily, my mother had kept her maiden name and my father was primarily known under a pen-name of his. Neither of my parents could be tied to the other so it didn’t seem like one was leaving in order to bring the other over into America afterward. Prior to getting her passport, she’d have to be interviewed by the Securitate at their offices in downtown Bucharest. She arrived early and prepared herself for the upcoming interview,

mentally going through what questions may come up, how best to answer them, how to be most composed. Finally, her turn came around. She was interviewed for nearly an hour.

“For what reason are you going to America?,” she was asked. “How long will your stay be? Who’s inviting you?” At that time, you couldn’t leave unless someone sent for you from another country, most of all the United States. The person calling you over took on all responsibilities until you’d return—, living expenses, medical bills, etc. My mom was lucky enough to have a few options open to her.

A few weeks later, she was back in a police station awaiting confirmation on her papers. This was a crucial moment—, without a passport she’d have no chance of leaving the country. She knew she couldn’t afford to seem shaky or self-conscious about her actions. *Just stay calm*, she thought to herself over and again. Through the backroom doors, she could hear a girl’s screams from down beneath in the basement—, nobody in the lobby moved a muscle. It was so customary to witness such things at a communist police station in those days. The doors eventually opened and out came a young teenager with bandages wrapped around her bloodied hands. She had the reddest eyes from all the crying and Gabriela couldn’t help but feel heartbreak for the girl.

“I hope you’ve learned your lesson,” the police officer said in front of everyone, not caring who overheard what. “I don’t ever want to see you back here again.” The young lady left the building and my mom wondered where she was headed, whose house she’d find solace in and whom she could trust from here on out. This was the atmosphere Gabriela grew up in.

She couldn’t dwell on the distraction for too long, it’d soon be her turn to go speak with the clerk. She approached the man at the desk and asked about her situation. In Romania, it was customary to give gifts to anyone who was to either help you or who had helped you in any given circumstance; doctors, policemen, government officials, they were all expecting something in return for their services. My mom slid the clerk a carton of the most sought-after cigarettes at the time, hoping he’d take the present and just move onto other business.

“Oh no..., I’m sorry I can’t accept anything,” he nervously said.

“Please take it,” my mother pleaded. It wasn’t meant to be. He refused again and she slid the bag back into her purse. Not long afterward, he presented her with a brand new passport that she happily placed with her belongings as well. Gabriela left the police station feeling an elation she still can’t

describe—, she was someone going to America and that made her precious.

She still couldn't get the thought of not giving the kind clerk his gift, so instead of walking home like she could've done, my mom took a seat outside of the police station and decided to wait for him until he exited the building. He finally came out at half past five in the afternoon and almost immediately saw my mom waiting there for him. His face showed a surprised expression but he just continued on his way, not stopping to talk or ask why my mom was still there. Gabriela waited a few moments before standing up to follow him—, she didn't want to risk any chance of being watched and flagged for suspicious behavior. She finally caught up to the clerk and resumed her plea.

“Sir, you've been so kind to me and have helped me more than you can imagine. Please accept these cigarettes as a sign of my gratitude,” my mom said to him. He at last accepted.

“Thank you ma'am,” he said and was off on his way. He too, knew it'd look strange for them to have a full-length conversation on the street so near the police station. My mom turned to walk away and again felt an excitement wash over her. She was finally going into the Promised Land—, milk and honey abound.

Chapter Three



The flight to the States was surreal for Gabriela, knowing she'd soon be in a completely different country than the one she'd known her entire life. She arrived safe and sound, making her way through the Pacific Northwest. Upon reaching her temporary home in Portland, she quickly decided that she'd be staying only a month before returning back to Romania. She didn't click with my father's family. They didn't like that she was brought up Orthodox Christian while they were Pentecostal. That didn't stop them from trying to give her a decent trip on Marcel's utmost request.

When dinner would be long over and with Gabriela in her second trimester, she'd experience strong stomach pain from being so hungry. She never truly felt comfortable there—, so instead of searching the kitchen, my mother would sit out in the backyard on a little bench, pick blackberries off of a tree in the corner, and eat them quietly by herself. Being so far away from home, she couldn't have been more lonely than in those moments of complete solitude.

It was on a beautiful Sunday afternoon that my mom and my father's relatives were headed to the local Romanian church in their neighborhood. It was customary for everyone to stand outside for another hour after the service to catch up and talk amongst themselves. A couple with wide smiles approached my mother and began a friendly conversation, knowing she was soon heading back to their homeland.

"You're Gabriela, right?," the woman asked. My mom acknowledged as much and continued to stand there, surprised at their warmth. "So you're going back to Bucharest next week?," they asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Wow—, we have so many friends still living there. And what about your husband, is he going back with you?"

"Oh, he's already there waiting for me."

"Who is your husband anyway?" My mom told them, knowing Marcel was better known by his pen-name. The couple looked at each other and then back to Gabriela.

"He's one of our favorite authors," they said, completely stunned. "We have a quote of his hanging on our wall at home—, 'totul trece ca un negru nor—,'" which translates to 'everything passes like a dark cloud.' My mother instantly recognized it and was just as shocked as they were.

“I love that line,” she proudly said. They invited her over for dinner at their place later on in the week but even so, my mom never saw them again as she’d left shortly thereafter.

Gabriela returned back home and was immediately interrogated by the Securitate upon her arrival.

“Where did you stay while in America?,” they asked her from their windowless room of intimidation. “Who did you stay with? What did you talk about?” On and on this went for a good amount of time before they finally turned their attention toward asking about my dad. “We know Marcel likes vodka—, we need to know his favorite brand.” My mom tried her best to stay calm, but the questions were becoming increasingly ludicrous. Once the secret police finally finished up their business, Gabriela was let free. Not a month passed by before another random officer knocked on my father’s front door.

“Marcel!—, I came to talk with you,” he said with a smile while holding my dad’s favorite brand of vodka. He invited himself in and began chatting up Marcel like old friends. All the while, shots of liquor were poured out one after another in hopes that my father would somehow make the mistake of saying the wrong thing to the wrong person and finally get

in trouble for his unpopular political views. This is how communism worked in those days.

Downstairs from his apartment was my father's photography studio. On top of being a gifted writer, Marcel also had a keen eye behind the camera. Gabriela would often come over directly after work to help him develop new pictures he'd taken. Though the studio was open for only four hours everyday, my father's friends would start showing up one by one for the upcoming night an hour before he'd close it down. They'd all go out to the finest restaurants, have fun, speak politics, and go back home in their own cabs at the end of the evening. Marcel was his friends' go-to person when any need arose.

A few months later, thick ice covered the streets and sidewalks, the biting wind blew in every direction—, it was one of the coldest blizzards my family had ever witnessed on the fifth of February in 1986. I was hours away from being born. My mother had hugged me in her belly for a full nine months and now I was finally on the way. They called the hospital to have an ambulance come out but none would dare drive in that weather. They called another hospital and another but nobody would dispatch a thing. Finally, at eleven-twenty at night, my mom gave birth to a twelve-pound baby boy. I was so big that every doctor working that night

came to my mother's room to see me. Gabriela held me up through the glass for all to see on the other side. Later on in the night, the nurse who had to make sure the newborns were properly fed came in with two babies on one arm and myself on the other, as she couldn't fit another beside me. I asked my mom one day; "What did you guys do once you got back home with me?"

"We celebrated," she proudly said. I was raised by the entire family—, my mother, father, aunt, cousins and grandparents. I was truly loved. My favorite cousin would read me stories at night before sleep. My grandmother would show me how a simple thread could make a button spin if you pulled on both ends. My father made sure I was always fed, bathed, and laid down in my carriage in the safest room of the house.

It was sometime in April of that year—, I was three months old—, when my aunt stormed into our living-room from her shift at the city hospital.

"Everyone take these—!," she quickly said, holding out a bag of pills she'd just gotten from work. In moments, the television shed light on what'd happened. An explosion at a nuclear power plant in northern Ukraine—, thousands already infected from the astronomic levels of radiation—, many dead, many more on their way. The newscasters repeated themselves over and over;

“Every citizen needs to go to the hospital and be administered five individual pills to be taken immediately.” That was enough to cause mass panic. My aunt relayed the scenes;

“Everyone was climbing over each other to reach the front windows where they were handing out the medicine—, it was pure chaos!” Chernobyl would go on to claim more than half of my family with cancer. Its first signs were of my grandfather grabbing his abdomen in excruciating pain. “You need to see a specialist,” my aunt advised. Not long after, that’s exactly what he did. Test after test, he endured a series of examinations, uncertain what the results would show. Finally, they came in without a sliver of doubt; intestinal cancer. They’d need to open up his stomach and try to quell the spreading disease. He laid under bright operating lights while his family waited anxiously in the hallway outside. My mom saw a nurse exiting the room and ran over to hear the news.

“Please...,” she pleaded, “do everything you can to save him. No matter the cost, no matter how much money it’ll take, please save my father.” She barely spoke as a thick veil of tears covered her eyes. Marcel stood by her side, comforting his desperate wife.

“I’m sorry madam—,” the nurse replied. “There was nothing we could do.” The doctors sowed my

grandfather back up and let the man rest as much as possible. Even though they'd cut most of his intestines out, there was no stopping the disease. It ravaged his body, his future, and his family—, everything in its path, it'd decimate down to ash.

The funeral was an extremely somber affair. There was an open casket which sat at the front of the line of people prepping to say their final goodbyes. When Gabriela's turn came around, she just looked down at her father's face and gently brushed his white hair back from his forehead, bending down to kiss him one last time. This made my aunt burst out into tears—, knowing how much her sister loved their dad.

“I'm so sorry,” she cried out in front of everyone, “I didn't mean to lie to you,” her words directed at my grandfather. “All those times I told you that you'd be okay, I knew. Deep down I knew—,” she didn't have to finish her thought. The onlookers tried their best to comfort the poor woman while my mom continued onward with her weary state.

Back home, the preparations for the family and friends-gathering were wrapping up. There was a big meal to be had by all who'd gone to the funeral and plenty of tables set up to seat the entire crowd. Gabriela sat down, not knowing what was going on or how she should act—, she was too fatigued from emotional exhaustion to be mentally present. There

she stayed, looking down at the food placed right in front of her, not touching a single bit. Marcel was nearby, trying to get her to eat, trying his best to show some support given the situation. At some point soon after, her memory gives out and she remembers no more. She fell unconscious and didn't wake back up until later the next morning.

Christmastime came around when I was three years old. Having no recollection of this moment, my mom fills in the gaps and tells me the story. I was celebrating the holiday season with my family when night fell on our small countryside city. It was lively and festive in our little home—, cookies, lit candles, and carolers filled the scene. We had a beautifully decorated tree and tinsel surrounding our living-room. It was almost midnight and well past my bedtime when there came a knock on the front door. In walked my dad—, dressed up from head to toe like Santa Claus and carrying a huge bag slung over his shoulder.

“Where’s Andrei?,” he asked in a disguised voice. Though I was too young to understand what was happening, I came face to face with the jolly man I had no clue was really my father. “Do you know any songs?,” he asked me. Kids rarely went long without learning a few verses of some random children’s tune they could recite. He finally reached into his bag of presents and gave me as many toys as he

could fit inside it. After he left our house, my mom tells me that he walked over to the neighbors' home who didn't live as nicely as some of the other people in town. He surprised them with a fully decorated Christmas tree and gifts just like he did for us. That was my father's character—, to always give and help others. Even so, my mother began suffering from a slight depression. Everything looked picturesque from the outside—, but Gabriela felt numb on the inside. She had fallen in love with my father's intellect and wit but soon, his drinking and overbearing attitudes would become too much for her to handle, understandably.

“He stopped laughing,” my mom told me. “He didn't like me laughing either.” I don't remember many things about my dad, but one of the characteristics I never saw was his jealousy toward my mom. Still, she couldn't have any close friends, as Marcel would always criticize their relationships.

Their marriage was complex; my mom loved Marcel—, but he stopped having fun long ago. Gabriela couldn't take much more of it. There are countless pictures of my mom during that time in her life and she isn't smiling in any one of them. Though she was a happy mother, she was a depressed wife. The days continued on and her fire inside raged like mine would so many years later. We shared the same sentiment at different stages of

our journeys; to be so wrapped up in the everyday regimen that one would forget what made them an individual to begin with. She felt it because of my father, I'd feel it because of my melancholia. Either way, we were spinning on similar wheels in separate timelines. What was she to do but go on as planned? The only escape was a literal one—, from the scenery and atmosphere of the past forty years. She needed a reshaping of her reality. I'd later understand what that truly meant. I was still three years old when the moment finally came that changed everything—, it'd go on to force my parents out of their home country once and for all, altering their lives forever.

Chapter Four



It was a cold day in December when the initial gunshots rang out in the large city of Timisoara—, signaling the start of Romania’s 1989 revolution. Back in Bucharest, Gabriela’s office was bustling as it had always been—, the coffee machine was on, music was playing from the corner of someone’s desk, everything was perfectly standard. The radio suddenly cut out as the song stopped. What replaced it were dozens of shouts and what sounded like a massive crowd booing and chanting “down with communism!” My mom couldn’t believe her ears. There was no announcement as to where it was happening or what was occurring at that moment, only the loud noises of an oncoming revolt.

About that time, a courier walked into the office from Section Five of the capital and was going back soon to deliver another package.

“What’s happening?” my mother frantically asked. The woman raised her eyes from the floor and softly said;

“The revolution’s started.” Everyone in the office stood wide-eyed, not knowing what to say or do. My

mom begged her to relay a message back to her niece who worked in Section Five as well.

“Tell her that I’m okay and to meet us at home.” Others asked the same favor of the courier before her trek back into the center of the city. There were so many requests to send messages to loved ones that the woman began writing them all on the palms of her hands. Gabriela’s boss called and asked for her personally. She picked up the receiver not sure of what he could possibly want at a time like this.

“Get home as quick as you can,” he told my mother. Everyone knew the moment had finally come—, the uprising had begun. All circulation throughout Bucharest stopped cold. No cars were driving around, the roads were nearly deserted. My mom hugged everyone and left to go fend for herself in the uncertain streets outside. She stopped by a bakery to pick up four trays of pastries in case we’d have to leave the city. On the corners she began seeing soldiers standing atop their tanks handing out flowers to people walking by. She reached up and gave them some of the desserts she was holding, tears streaming down her face.

“Long live Romania!,” they said to her.

All communication throughout the country came to a halt. Nobody could reach anybody else. My mom couldn’t even speak to her sister to make sure everyone was okay back home. The only thing

coming from the radio was patriotic music on a loop. No newscasts, no bulletins to report, everyone was clueless as to what was happening. Only random spurts of gunfire could be heard from outside, that was all people had to gauge on what was taking place. I was only three at the time as both my parents became glued to their television set. They finally saw what all the commotion was about.

Nicolae Ceausescu's speeches were usually met with an anxious silence and stares from his oppressed people below the balcony he used as center stage. Not on that fateful day. What began as a few sporadic boos amongst the large crowd soon grew into a sonic assault on the stunned dictator.

The hail of gunfire right below our second-story window got louder and more frightening once nightfall came around. My parents and I laid down on our stomachs hidden away from any stray bullets that could potentially burst in through the glass. The next morning looked much the same. My uncle picked up my parents and I from our apartment. The car swerved in and out of the streets with people scattered about. Looking out through the window I could see tanks and soldiers from the safety of my backseat. The protesters held up the revolution's unofficial symbol; a Romanian flag with its coat of arms ripped out of the center, like a

hollowed sun surrounded by a glow of yellow hope. A new day, a new life—, the horizon was nearing.

They'd captured the president and his wife and were preparing for their sentencing which would surely end up in execution. The improvised courtroom was a single folding table at which Nicolae and Elena sat in silence while listening to the brutal charges being brought against them both. The soldiers brought out zip-ties which they tightened around Nicolae's hands. Elena was up next.

"Don't you dare touch me!," she yelled. "You will not tie those around my wrists!" She pleaded over and over until she too, realized it was useless. "I've treated you like my own children!" she finally gasped out in utter despair. The scene was being broadcast on a live feed to the entire country. The army readied their rifles, opened fire, and shot them both in the open street—, they collapsed like their regime. Laying lifeless on the pavement, blood slowly drained from the backs of their heads and dripped down through the sewer grates for the world to see. Romania's revolution was very much televised.

Of all the governments which were overthrown throughout Europe that year, theirs was the only one whose dictator ended up dead. It didn't matter much though, things were getting worse—, even

after the revolution, there was no certainty anymore. The protesters tried, in vain, to reclaim control of their country and establish democracy but were beaten to power by the communists' successors. A near anarchic atmosphere was slowly growing in the capital city and those surrounding it. Though the gunfire had ceased, there were no governing officials to reinstate order.

“We have to leave,” my dad finally said to my mom and I. They knew it wouldn't be an easy escape. Nobody was allowed to leave the country at that time without a valid reason—, even after communism had fallen.

Time slowly passed by as the moment finally arrived for the departure. It was unseasonably hot, even for August. The car's air conditioning was on full-blast when it reached Otopeni Airport just outside of Bucharest. Gabriela was getting ready to say goodbye to her family for the last time before eventually being reunited with Marcel and I in a far greater land. She gathered up her luggage and looked toward the backseat where we sat with the biggest hopes in our hearts for my mother.

“I love you,” she said to us all—, kissed everyone in the car, held me tightly for a few final moments, and she was off.

The building was heavily guarded, especially after the revolution had ended just a mere seven months

prior. In Romania at that time, you needed to have an inside person for everywhere you went, for everything you did. My parents had plenty of people they were in good relations with that helped out in a variety of ways; the butcher sold them the best cuts, the clothier held onto the finest garments for them to buy, and now that Gabriela was about to leave her home country for the last time, she needed a person who could expedite the process of getting her onto that airplane as quickly and seamlessly as possible. She saw her dark-haired friend from the lobby and walked directly over to her. My mom placed her two suitcases she had fit an entire life into down on the inspection table. Instead of unlocking them both and searching through every little pocket and corner for contraband, her friend simply smiled at Gabriela and let her pass through without the slightest bit of hassle.

She slowly walked through the spacious airport—, making sure she didn't look too eager to leave once and for all. My mom gave her fellow citizens one final look and thought to herself how she'd never return. It wasn't hatred for the country that she felt, but instead a sorrow for having to live under its past circumstances for so long that it forever tainted her experience there. Of course she'd made tons of memories that she'd never forget—, but they all paled in comparison to the new ones she'd make in

her new home. She snapped out of her daydreaming and came back into the present moment.

Upon reaching the right gate, she handed over her boarding pass and on her way through the connecting tunnel she went. My mom walked down the long corridor with confidence, she knew true freedom was mere hours away. Once in her window-seat, she held out her hands and noticed that even her palms were peeling from the stress she felt. In the chairs next to her sat two well-dressed American women who began speaking with my mom.

“We’re headed to Los Angeles, how about you?”

“New York,” Gabriela coyly answered. She’d reran the plan over in her head multiple times; once in the big city, she was to meet with Marcel’s friends, stay with them and wait for us to come three months later. That was the next step in her journey.

The moment the plane slowly lifted up and off the ground, my mom’s emotions came rushing over her as she suddenly felt like laughing, crying, anything, all at the same time. The land, much like her many memories of her native home started to shrink outside the small window—, further and further the plane pierced the atmosphere and slowly reached an altitude above clouds. There, Gabriela let out the long exhale she’d kept pent up from earlier that morning. My mom knew that she was headed for a foreign country—, where things were better, where

freedom and true democracy existed, and where she wouldn't be afraid to walk to work any longer. *I'll sweep the streets if I have to*, she'd thought to herself, willing to do anything it took if it meant starting over with fresh opportunity and a new life for her and her family. The plane soared through the air as she finally closed her eyes. Being too excited to sleep, Gabriela replayed all of the new possibilities she could eventually encounter in her mind as she was at last headed for America—, Land of the Free.

Chapter Five



As the plane's wheels finally made contact with the ground beneath, the slight bump startled my mom as she realized she was finally in New York. The flight had safely arrived at JFK International Airport and beyond her window stretched out a freedom only she can describe. What kind of existence would she now have? Where would she work? Who would she meet? She was overwhelmed with emotion—, scared to be too happy, too happy to be scared. Not knowing what type of life lay ahead, she took a deep breath and sat up from her seat, ready to exit the plane and enter a new home.

The receiving section of the airport was busier than anything my mom had seen back in Romania. Even though she'd visited the States before, this time her stay would be permanent. She knew a few English words, enough to get by. The line through customs was moving along slowly but she noticed that with each new person called forth, the officer in charge would shout out the same word, over and over. Gabriela gathered that it meant to go up and see him with her passport in hand—, ready to be

stamped entry into the country. When it was finally her turn, my mom heard him yell out that word again and she proceeded forward.

“Next!,” he called out, making it the first new English word she learned to start her journey this time around.

She passed through the building’s gigantic lobby and found Marcel’s friend who she’d be staying with while waiting for my dad and I to arrive three months later.

“There you are!,” he said. With that, they left the massive airport and walked through the glass doorway out into a new land. They drove the half hour toward her temporary home. The apartment laid within a concrete maze, full of cars and a beautiful chaos. My mom was finally among her new people. For the next few months, Gabriela worked at a photographer’s studio, much like she used to do when she’d help Marcel develop pictures back in Romania, she was now helping his friend file orders and fix cameras in America. At night, she’d stay awake and write to us back home. She’d look out through the kitchen window and have a perfectly framed view of the Brooklyn Bridge—, lit up and luminous in the darkness around it.

The months passed by one after another. Eventually, my father and I reached stateside and I still have fragments of memory when my mom saw

me in the airport and ran towards us with a new stuffed Mickey Mouse in hand. That was the beginning of our journeys together. The three of us moved to a small town in Michigan and there we'd stay for the next few years which were filled with more sorrow than anything else.

Gabriela enrolled me in the local elementary school and began walking me to the bus stop each morning, making sure I'd get on okay—, much like her father used to do with her so many years prior. I'd practice spelling words with my mom the day before my tests and always bring home an A. I couldn't wait to show her my grades. Those were some of the only times I applied myself and did well in school. Everything seemed to be going along smoothly enough.

Though happy for his new opportunities in America, my father mostly kept to himself. Marcel would smoke two packs of cigarettes a day. He set up a small fan facing the outside screen of the living-room window and would blow out thick streams of smoke like I'd do decades later in my own studio apartments. I rarely saw him drink but knew that when he could, he would, and it'd be a temporary escape for him. The habit was passed down and coiled itself around my DNA which contributed to much of my own personal undoing later in life.

My mother picked up the first job she was offered. Gabriela held her newly given dark green polo from a local fast food restaurant down the street from where we lived. She looked at it for a long while without knowing she'd be wearing it for the next three years, five days a week. *Better a cheap uniform in a free country than luxurious clothing under communism*, she thought. Her hourly wage was three dollars and twenty-five cents —, two hundred and fifty dollars every other week. When payday would finally roll around, my mom and dad would go to the local grocery store to cash the check and get whatever they'd need. Those are some of Gabriela's happiest memories, being able to buy what we'd want and not feel the pressures of living with little money to our name.

On top of all the normal duties someone in her position was asked to do at work, she was also put in charge of the salad station. For those next few years, not one shred of lettuce, cherry tomato, or olive was out of place. Everything was kept *just so*. She diligently wiped the stainless steel counter housing all of the vegetables every hour on the hour. The manager took notice. Her coworkers knew she was Romanian, and because of Dracula's lore, they figured she too had a vampiric soul.

"Hey Gabby," some would call out as they'd point to their necks in teasing motions, but my mom

never cared. She continued to do her job to the best of her abilities. Nothing ever stood between my mother and her perfectionist attitude toward work. She was always early for her shifts, stayed later than she needed to, and was a standout employee from the start. No matter how great her attitude was however, the days would always go so slowly. She couldn't wait until her break—, the half hour she had to herself when she could finally get off her feet. There was a small wooden bench outside the store that she liked to sit on. She'd place her food tray down and just breathe in the cool air, constantly checking the time before having to go back in. The second half of the workday was always worse than the first. Closing meant deep cleaning and the workers would stay a couple of hours after the restaurant locked up just to finish the job.

“Make Gabby do it,” some would say at day's end of the trash that'd piled up. So even through the heavy banks of freshly-fallen snow and with ice covering the ground, she'd trudge along with garbage bags in hand toward the outdoor dumpsters in the back. My dad and I would get into our car on nights she worked until close and patiently wait in the parking lot until my mom finally showed up well after midnight. She was tired and wanted to go home, but was so happy to see us just the same.

“Hi Puiule!” she’d say to me excitedly—, a cute name for a baby chick which she still calls me to this day. She’d always bring home the toy they were placing in their kid-meals that week. I had a box full of wind-up cars, plastic figurines, and pens of cartoon characters. My mom always held her family first in her heart, no matter what she did or where she went. I never once felt that I couldn’t get what I wanted or that I went to bed hungry. I was always taken care of so well by my parents. I look back on those years and wonder how she did it. I couldn’t be more blessed to have such a selfless and strong woman as my mother.

Meanwhile, my father began feeling worse and worse about his current situation. Gabriela remembered their past attraction. She would listen to him speak all night about politics or God or whatever else crossed his mind. My parents dined in the most elegant restaurants, more often than not shutting the place down before finally getting up to leave. Marcel’s writing was admired by even the most anti-social authors of his day and though completely opposed to communism, the government never realized that they needed to read in-between the lines of my father’s books to grasp his literal dissent. He was esteemed in Romania—, part of an exclusive writers’ circle where everyone respected each other, not knowing that years later

he'd become a dishwasher, still happy to be able to provide for his family. He'd spend long hours there behind the sink at a local Coney Island, coming home with wet clothes but also a paycheck nonetheless.

Though Gabriela and Marcel had fallen in love and witnessed their relationship flourish so long ago, once they reached their new home, things cooled down. They began to be something closer to roommates than husband and wife. In all the years of my living with my parents, I never once saw them kiss or at the very least, hold hands. They were courteous with each other and respected one another but they were no longer the couple they'd once been. Either way, they continued to grow together as a team for me if nothing else.

Life went on for all three of us. I made friends with a few people here and there. I was seven years old when a neighbor invited me to her birthday get-together. It was a pool party. The fact that I didn't know how to swim never crossed my mind in making the decision to definitely go. Getting there, I was the only boy present. I didn't want to be the sole person not in the pool so I slowly climbed in, down the steps, and into the warm water. I remember little of what I did or how the rest unfolded. There were people playing at the shallow end as I made my way into the deep. I must've lost traction with the

wet floor as I slipped and started to immediately panic. I waved my arms, I screamed, I kept going below and above the water. Nobody heard me. Every time I'd go back under, my screams were muffled and silent. That was it. I probably hit my head on something because the next thing I remember, I was coughing myself awake. Everyone there had gathered around me and some were praying that I'd regain consciousness. My neighbor was in the corner crying, trying to process the situation, hoping she'd have the chance to talk to me again. I heard distant sirens approaching. They got closer and closer until I finally figured out that they were for me. They strapped me onto the stretcher and slid it into the back of the ambulance. I'd never seen so many buttons and lights and switches before in my life. I was captivated.

“What’s this one do?,” I asked the paramedic. He told me and I quickly moved onto the next. “What about this one?” He told me that too. Then he looked at me with a wide smile.

“You’re a tough cookie, you know,” he said. I didn’t quite understand it at the time, but I get it now.

While I was being transported to the nearest hospital, my mom was in the back seat of a police cruiser who’d been sent for her. *Please don’t let it be anything serious*, she kept praying, over and over.

“Are we far?,” she asked the officers.

“Almost there,” they told her. Upon reaching the hospital, my mom ran right up to my room and saw me laying there in bed with the biggest smile on my face.

“Mom!” I was so happy to see her. I knew she’d be upset at the entire situation but we both kept our composure quite well given the facts. She stayed beside me all day and all night in a chair by the bed.

“Ma’am, you don’t have to sit here,” nurses would tell her, “there’s a couch right next door you can sleep on.” She refused. Nothing could pull her away from her son in a moment she thought she’d almost lost him for good. That’s the kind of mother she’s always been. We finally made our way home as things resumed toward a regular routine once more.

Back at her job, Gabriela was working her usual late-night shift the moment she started experiencing what seemed to be a hemorrhage. On the advice of her coworker, she quickly scheduled a doctor’s visit. Once there, he did the tests needed and came back into the room with a serious look on his face.

“You need to go to the hospital immediately,” he sharply said. “Your situation doesn’t look good.”

Upon reaching the University of Michigan Hospital later that night, my mom jumped out of the car and was rushed into the Emergency Room for

further testing and analysis. Hour after hour passed by when she was finally given the news;

“It’s cervical cancer,” they said to her. “You need to come back in three days for surgery.” Driving home with her friend by her side, they both stayed quiet and wondered what the upcoming operation would entail. Once reaching the parking spot to our apartment, her friend had already begun saying her goodbyes.

“You’re not coming in?,” my mom asked.

“I’m sorry, I can’t,” her friend replied. She’d later tell Gabriela how she couldn’t bear delivering the devastating news they’d just received to Marcel. She knew he’d be beyond distraught. So my mom gathered her things and slowly began the walk upstairs alone and afraid. What would happen now?

Three days slowly drifted by. The moment had finally arrived for her to be picked up by her friend and driven to the hospital once more. On the walk toward the car outside of our apartment, my mom felt a calming sense of peace and looking around her, she saw what can only be described as a divine presence following her every footstep, from the front door to the car and eventually, to the hospital.

Under the bright lights of the operating room, the surgeons got to work. They slowly used their scalpels and surgical scissors until finishing up the procedure. Afterward, Gabriela was transferred to

the ICU where she'd stay in recovery for the next few days. I finally visited with my dad and immediately saw her smiling as she looked up at me.

"Hi Puiule," she affectionately said. Even as a kid, I could feel the emotion beginning to swell up in my eyes but didn't want to show my mother my true feelings or worry her any further. I excused myself from the room and walked out into the hallway. I let the tears drop down my face and onto the floor below. From my peripheral, I could see a nurse walking my way and didn't want her to notice I was crying either. I was holding a small portable video game and pretended that it was broken—, a perfect reason for being so upset.

A few days later, my mom came back home. Of course, just as she was beginning to feel like her old self again, she began experiencing awful abdominal pain. Back in the doctor's office, they let her know that the cancer hadn't been fully removed and that it'd begun spreading to other organs.

Chapter Six



It was an average day when Marcel was taking the trash out. My mom sat at the windowsill and watched him from the apartment. His coughing had never been so bad and he began spitting droplets of blood onto the pavement. Gabriela knew right then that something was wrong. My dad made it half a decade in his new country before being diagnosed with lung cancer, not two months after Gabriela's own cancer was discovered. Though he'd have to miss many days of work due to his eventual surgery, he still asked his employers to hold his position in place for the day he'd be able to come back.

"I always admired him for that," my mom would tell me. They opened and sowed him back up, knowing there was little they could do. Over the next few months, his health slowly deteriorated to the point where my mom and I were at a dollar store and she bought a tension ball for him to exercise with. *What good will that do?*, I thought to myself. It didn't seem to matter—, it was so sad and depressive and final; a little stuffed ball of plastic.

As if a person who's sick could magically squeeze themselves back to health.

My mom began doing radiation for her second bout with the disease—, at eleven, nightly. She'd get home well after midnight. I've tried to imagine what that drive was like—, for her to be wandering through those streets alone. When she'd finally get home, she'd crawl into bed and pull the covers over her tired head, just to begin uncontrollably sobbing.

“I'd implore God to at least save one of us, either Marcel or I, for your sake,” she'd tell me years later, thankful that He'd heard her plea. Some of the neighborhood kids would climb the big oak tree in the front yard to reach our windows, stare at my dad laying in his bed, point and laugh. They'd cross out his name on our mailbox down in the lobby and write 'dead' underneath it—, even after my mom replaced it multiple times. Those were his last days —, and there he laid, nearly lifeless.

Good friends of my mom's came by to pick me up one evening to spend the night at their house. I thought it was just another sleepover, but it was really so my parents would have one final chance to figure things out in regards to where I'd end up and who would take me if neither of them should beat their individual battles with the disease. Since it was so late, I was rushed into getting ready to leave my

apartment when I realized I didn't have a prized possession with my belongings.

"Wait!—," I said, hurrying over to the living-room cabinet and opening the drawer. I rummaged around for a few seconds until finally finding a picture of my mom to bring with me. "Okay—, now I'm ready."

"You don't want that picture," Gabriela said, "it's of me in my work clothes, let me find another better picture you can take."

"No, this is perfect," I insisted, happy that I'd found any photograph at all. With that, I left with the friends, content and at peace that I'd see my mom and dad again soon.

While I drifted off to sleep in another home, Gabriela was pulling up a chair by Marcel's bedside and slowly taking a seat, knowing important matters needed to be discussed. The weight of the situation was too heavy to handle. My mom sat there in silence, as did my dad. Neither of them said a word —, they both just stared at the floor and wondered what would happen. The hours passed by like they once had so many years ago in Romania on the last night they thought they'd have together—, now, it was under much different circumstances. Everything was definitely quiet and the mood was more than somber. Eventually, sunlight came calling once more when they'd realized that their

last night alone had been spent in deep contemplation with no solution being reached. I came home later that day, completely unaware of all the emotions swirling around the room from the past few hours. I remained in my blissful ignorance while my parents returned to acting like everything was really going to be okay.

The hospital had sent a hospice to take care of my father's final needs. She was a nice lady who was soft-spoken but was thorough in her job. The pills were always taken on time, the coughing was always seen to, and my father's body would be comfortably taken care of as he laid on his back, labored breathing and all. A few days into her visiting us, she quietly asked my mom if they could go outside in the hallway to talk.

"Of course," Gabriela replied. They walked into a gray surrounding; dull carpets and old windows colored the stairway in drab tones. It set the stage quite nicely.

"Things..." the hospice started with a pause, "...happen. You have to be prepared for the worst." My mom shook her head that she understood.

"Is there anything we can do?," she asked.

"No—," the hospice replied. "There's no hope." Those words traced themselves on my mother's heart—, already etched there from her father's situation so long ago. Two days later, my own

father's spirit left his embattled body. On the morning he passed away, before ever knowing so, my mom put on her favorite dress she owned—, a long, flowing piece with a soft yellow fabric stitched throughout. He'd left us in his sleep. Gabriela's sister who'd been visiting from Romania heard him take his last big gasp of air before exhaling for good. I don't remember what his last words to me were—, I just hope they were somehow symbolic of his character. I'll never know for sure.

Walking into class at elementary school that day, I sat for a few minutes in my chair before the teacher went to answer a knock at the door. Through the glass I could see it was the principle and once they exchanged a few words, I saw her look over in my direction with the saddest expression on her face. Even before she called my name, I knew. They brought me out of class as my aunt and the church's pastor were already there at the school waiting for me.

“Something bad's happened,” my mom's sister said, gasping through heavy breaths. Looking back, I think she was more nervous of my reaction to the whole situation than I ever was myself. I got into the car and quietly rode home with them. Upon entering my apartment, there were a dozen or so people I'd never seen before surrounding the fold-

out couch that my dad had slept on and was now laying lifelessly atop.

“Andrei!,” my mom’s voice called out. I finally saw her sitting up in a chair in the corner of the room, tears streaming down her face. She too, was more worried about me than I was about myself. I could tell. I walked over to my dad’s body and let the back of my hand extend out just enough to graze his own cold arm. My reaction time was quicker than expected—, I staggered backward just as my mom began telling me to go into my room which was just a few feet away down the hall. Once inside, I sat on my floor just like Ioana must’ve done so many years prior back in Romania when she too felt beaten and bruised, but unlike the poor battered woman, I let out no whimper, no groan, nothing. I just stayed in silence, listening to the painful bustle right outside my bedroom door.

I never got the chance to make too many memories with the man I’d called my dad for just a short period of my life, though my mom would often tell me, “you two would’ve been best friends.” I wonder how we could’ve talked about writing—, if my personal style emulated his at all and in what ways. Again, I’ll never know for sure.

His funeral went as one would imagine; lots of mourning, crying, and an open casket that didn’t make sense to me at all. Gabriela wore only black for

the next few months. She didn't need to say a single word—, I could see the desperation on her face. *How am I going to survive in this foreign country now that I'm by myself with a nine-year old son to raise?* Thoughts kept telling her things were going to get harder before they'd turn around for the better. On top of leaving her with a single child to take care of, my dad also accumulated a couple tens of thousands of dollars in debt. This of course got passed onto my mom and her stress level increased that much more.

In a particularly desperate moment, my mom found herself at a friend of my father's house. Though they didn't have much in common other than Marcel, they still spoke from time to time about topical things, but on this specific day, Gabriela needed a shoulder she could cry on and someone who could give her some much-needed heartfelt-advice.

“What am I going to do with Andrei if I don't make it?—,” she began, trembling with sorrow at the thought. The reply was quick and without warning;

“Put him in the newspaper.” My mom's heart sank. Just thinking of such a thing brought her to tears—, as if she was giving away a piece of furniture, she should let go of her son to anyone who came along. With that, my mom left the

friend's home never to return and with those words echoing in her ears for years to come.

The grief was getting out of hand, Gabriela needed some solitude.

“You’re going to live with your cousin for a while,” my aunt eventually said to me. “Your mom needs some time to recuperate.” I packed my little luggage and was off to Queens, New York.

My cousin and her husband drove the entire way there with me in the backseat. They were a nice married couple who I’d be staying with for the next few months. Finally getting to their house in the suburbs, I became more excited about living there. We stayed in a small home on an average street. There was a bookshelf that I’d poke around, seeing what interests they had and trying to figure out why. We’d go outside every few days and I’d take in all there was around me with enthusiasm. As we rode the subways, I stared out their windows at all the graffiti written on the sides of buildings. We emerged from the underground and walked toward the intersections filled with cars and people. There was honking, loud chatter, sounds coming from every direction. With so much mayhem aimed at me, I suddenly felt at peace with everything that’d happened back home. I didn’t have time to think about it anymore—, I was in the city, the Big Apple, I quickly became accustomed to my surroundings.

My cousin wanted to stop by a local pop-up shop in a place that was on a lower floor somewhere. We climbed down into a den of confusing commerce one only finds in cities like New York. There were cheap sunglasses that came in neon greens and bright yellows on the folding tables in the center of the room, knockoff purses hanging from the walls—, it seemed that someone could get just about anything they wanted at a very discounted price. My cousin took her time looking around at all the knickknacks on the glass shelves but I was quickly getting bored. There was more commotion outside —, I wanted to be apart of it. Slowly, I backed away from my adult chaperone and started to climb the stairs toward freedom. I exited the shop and was back on the street. I looked around me and took in the atmosphere. There were so many skyscrapers—, each towering higher up than the last. The sun's rays reflected off the upper windows and blinded me from fully seeing the buildings' peaks. The cars two feet away weaved through the traffic like fluid. People passed by in large groups and they all seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere fast. I knew I was at home here—, not just in this specific city, but any city. I needed it; the beautiful frenzy which can only be found in downtowns the world over. Suddenly I felt a tug at my arm and was spun

around to come face-to-face with my cousin, who looked a bit distraught and very annoyed.

“Don’t ever do that again!” she berated me.

My mother and aunt came three months later to take me back home. We left the city on a train; the first of many experiences I’d have like it throughout my life. As the bright lights faded away into the background, I wondered if I’d ever see New York again, or if I’d ever be lucky enough to feel like I did out on those streets in the future. It hadn’t been a full hour and I was already missing the environment of my three month stay there.

I’d put all the experiences of my dad’s passing to rest and I was only moving forward from that point on. My mom and I were together and that’s all I needed at that age. I knew we’d be okay, I felt it, even then. What she’d just been through and survived was enough to know that Someone up in the heavens had our names carved onto the palms of Their hands. I laid my head on my mom’s shoulder and slowly let the thoughts of tomorrow take over. What would we do? Where would we live? How would our lives play out? I couldn’t let those things pass through my head without careful examination. In four short years, my mom went from escaping communism, battling two cancers, and watching her husband’s health decline until his untimely death. I was still too young to fully grasp everything she’d

gone through, but I knew I loved her and that was enough for me. Scenes from our eventual fates and destinies subconsciously played in my mind's eye; hundreds of long-stemmed roses, new skyscrapers whose rooftops I'd finally conquer, and holding my mother's hand as we'd walk down city streets and hospital hallways filled with similar types of shimmering lights. I twisted and turned each image over and around again; the what had been, what was, and what would still be all overlapped at the same time. Everything looped into itself and I knew my dad would be watching all of it from above. Things too heavy for me to comprehend kept coming back as the train continued rolling along its tracks until I finally drifted off into a gentle sleep.

Chapter Seven



We left the sad memories and moved to the beautiful city of Ann Arbor. I was too young to fully experience it at first, to truly treasure its cultural roots and unique style. The older I grew the more thankful I was to be living in such an open-minded place that accepted anyone. Those streets shaped who I was and still am to this day.

At night, I'd lay awake in bed and stare at the glow-in-the-dark stars my mom and I put up together on my ceiling—, I'd imagine I was back in a big city with the night sky directly above. I'd close my eyes and see different skylines of places that probably didn't even exist. I just wanted to be around an ever-moving lifestream again. I had no idea at the time how significant those dreams would become later on.

I went to school like everyone else, but never applied myself—, a mistake I wish I could change. My mom dreaded every time my report card came in the mail. She knew it wouldn't be good news. As a testament to her amazing character, all of my professors would eventually meet her at parent-

teacher conferences and realize what type of upbringing I had within me. When asked why I wasn't getting the grades they knew I could get, I'd reply with another excuse.

"I don't know—, I just..., can't."

"Can we talk man to man for a minute?," my favorite high school teacher asked me one day after class.

"Sure—," I told him.

"B.S.," he said to me with a nice dramatic pause in the middle. He tapped into my potential long before I ever did. Aside from skateboards and power chords, my time after school was mostly spent daydreaming. I was always wistfully remembering something, deep in thought. The moments all piled on top of each other, every one looking like the last and so forth. Nothing new would happen or pull me out of my regular routine—, something I'd feel more than once throughout my life.

While I floated through my adolescence, my mom kept working tirelessly. Gabriela would walk in through the front door exhausted. She'd head straight for her spot on the floor with the couch propping her up as she drank a full glass of water—, her first and most times, only one of the day. There she sat, gathering herself before getting ready to have dinner with me. I saw all of these things and took them for granted as 'everyday life,' not realizing

the amount of energy and willpower it took to work as hard as she did, week after week, year after year. Not until I reached high school did she even take a vacation.

“Ten years?!” her newest employer asked wide-eyed at how long it’d been since Gabriela took a break from the constant schedule. We were in Florida a week later.

The highways curved and wound along the palm tree-lined landscape. We drove further into the marshlands, taking in the environment as much as possible. A few drops of rain fell onto the windshield of our rental car—, but they were thicker than normal. They splattered into wide shapes of broken water. Here and there they splashed, randomly and sporadically. A few moments of nothingness passed by, no thunder, no wind, just the car driving down the freeway. Suddenly, like an inverted geyser, the sky erupted into a full downpour. The heavy showers washed out our windows from view—, we couldn’t see a foot in front of us.

“We need to pull over,” my mom hastily said. She slowed the car down to a crawling speed but kept pushing forward through the dense torrent. All of a sudden, everything stopped. Like a switch was flipped, the rain completely cut off. We realized we’d driven underneath a bridge. My mom made her way onto the side of the road and there we stayed. “This

is good,” she said, “we’ll wait here until it stops.” That’s what we did. Almost an hour passed by without the rain easing up in the slightest. Finally, my mom decided to continue on and drive until the storm got lighter up ahead, closer to our destination. She slowly pulled the car out from beneath the bridge and began driving through the thunder around us until clearer skies shined from above. Another hour later and we were nearing our home for the next week.

Naples was a stunning little city; right on the Gulf’s coastline. Its charming shops and boutiques filled the narrow avenues. Deeper into the suburbs were houses that emitted sheer grandeur—, each one larger than the last. We finally arrived at our picturesque condo. There was a shallow pool to the right of the front gate as we entered. Inside the two-story home, there was a sense of simple joy all around; bright sunshine burst in through the large living-room windows, the greenery outside grew up and above the brick walls, and the beach was a mere three blocks away. The famed Naples Pier was only a few hundred feet from our street’s entrance so we walked toward it every chance we could. It branched out from the shoreline with impressive style, beckoning its onlookers to come up to the very front ledge. The ritzy elders would gather together at dusk along its wooden planks and drink the champagne

they'd brought along with them. The sunsets were a watercolored canvas—, pink and orange tints painted the sky in smoky motions. A glimmering lemon drop hung in the heavens, slowly falling into the blue water below.

We climbed up the steps from our entryway and sat down on one of the benches overlooking the beach. On the sand up ahead, there were half a dozen dressed up people taking pictures. They parted like the Red Sea and there stood the radiant bride; beautiful in her flowing white dress. Her smile was as wide as the waterfront. She moved graciously with each new pose she took. The photographer stood and knelt, snapping the shots from every angle. All the best men gathered around the groom, popping champagne bottles into the air. They made celebrating classy.

“She looks so happy,” my mom softly said. I nodded in silent agreement. The entire scene remained in my mind for years to come—, envying it, wanting it for myself.

“I'd love to live here someday,” I mused aloud. We wouldn't ever move there though we'd visit another handful of times in the years to follow, and that was enough for me.

My mom and I shared such precious moments, making life-long memories and even within the commotion of our mutual realities we were happy,

together in our own world of Friday night pizzas, Taco Bell dinners, and all the movies we'd see at our favorite theater. We started becoming best friends even before I knew what that truly entailed.

We were blessed to travel a bit more—, we drank hot chocolate in Aspen, wandered the riverwalk in San Antonio, and strolled through Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles. Though the place we'd visit most often was Chicago. We'd go every summer. Like clockwork; once June rolled around, we'd start planning our trip. We'd walk the bridges built over the rivers, stay on the highest floor possible in our hotels, and take as many pictures as we could. At night, I'd stare out the window with my mom and people-watch from many stories above. We'd try to guess how their lives led them to this point, at this specific time—, where they were going or where they were coming from. We painted as pretty a background as possible for all we saw. Walking through the streets, I'd look at the high residential towers and wonder if I'd ever live there someday. I'd think to myself how amazing it would be to hop on a random L-train and get off at any given stop just to explore the area around it. Every time we'd leave I'd feel a knot in my stomach and try to hide my sadness. The trips were always fun but the drive home was a reawakening to reality for me.

My mom came into my room one day and nonchalantly said what every future groom wants to hear of their bachelor party.

“We’re going to Vegas.” A week later we were on a flight out toward the town. Upon landing, we drove past the motels and overnight wedding chapels, finding our way onto South Las Vegas Boulevard. Pulling up to the hotel, its absolute scope took our breath away. The Venetian was unparalleled in beauty and vibe. Walking in, we were transported directly to northeastern Italy. Block-shaped columns reached high up toward the curved ceilings where large paintings were displayed above. Gondolas glided atop the canals at every turn. The artificial sky projected light clouds against a darkening blue background—, dusk was everywhere. Though magnificent, we decided it was too important of a visit to just stay inside the whole time —, we needed to feel the pulse of the city.

My mom and I stepped out into a fluorescent labyrinth. The neon lights lit up the strip in an array of vivid colors—, bright and bursting with promises of endless fun and pure revelry. We walked from The Venetian up toward the other massive hotels slowly and carefully through the crowded streets. There was noise; lots of it—, from all different directions. In-between the metal links of the wired fences were folded up cards; advertisements for

local escorts with their phone numbers listed. Each one was different and there seemed to be thousands of them, all lining the railings up and down the avenue. We stopped to take photographs every couple feet. As smartphones were a few years away, people still developed their pictures. Those of our Las Vegas trip were full of wavy lines of light in the backgrounds of shots and blurry movements from our inability to stand still while taking them. They perfectly represented how I felt about the city; wavy lines of light, blurry movements, a sense of eternal excitement surrounding all other emotion. These were streets people made everlasting memories on, and my mom's snapshots of them reflected that in every way.

We finally reached the end of the strip and turned around to head back but decided to hop on a local bus that was coming in a few minutes instead of walk. There were three or so teenagers about my age standing at the stop with us. They wore ripped jeans that seemed too tight for their frames, torn leather jackets with studs, and had spiked hair that stood straight up. I liked punk rockers even back then. The bus eventually arrived and my mom and I boarded the near-empty shuttle and sat down in the back row. We stayed in silence for a little while, looking out the windows at all the staggering people walking by. The driver went down different streets

and passed casino after casino until the big bright lights became more spread out. Soon we realized that we'd been going the wrong way. We quickly pulled the cord to let us off at the nearest stop. We hopped off and noticed that we were in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing around—, not even a gas station we could go into and ask for directions. We walked a few blocks by ourselves until we came upon a lit up twenty-four-hour diner. We entered in through the front and the little bell attached to the doorframe chimed our arrival for all to hear. The patrons sat quietly eating their meals and exchanging few words with each other. We looked around to see who could help us with directions when a blond-haired waitress came up to greet us.

“Two?” she asked of our party.

“Oh no thank you,” I began, “we’re actually a bit lost and wondering how to get back to the strip.” She looked as if she wanted to tell us the best route but that it’d be too complicated to explain in such a short amount of time. Finally she said the nicest thing she could in her situation.

“You know what? I’m almost done with my shift, when I get off I can drive you back myself.” We were immediately grateful for the generous offer, seeing as she didn’t even know us. We were complete strangers yet she was kind enough to do this, so my mom and I took a seat on the bench by the waiting

area and began to take in the small-diner-atmosphere that surrounded us.

Silverware clanged against porcelain plates as omelettes were forked apart, soups were scooped up, and steak was intensely cut. I looked around at the people and wondered if they ever took advantage of the beautiful streets just a few blocks up—, if they loved visiting the strip just as much as tourists did or if they'd lived in Vegas long enough for it to become just as mundane as everything else. Maybe all the tourism was actually a turn-off and for us to ask for directions only implied that we were out-of-towners ourselves. Luckily, we'd run into the sweetest person that we could've found. She didn't give us her name, but I saw her hustling around the restaurant—, always quick on her feet, from table to table, never looking as if she needed to stop or take a break.

A portly man appeared from the backroom and called over the waitress. I couldn't hear exactly what he said but heard him end his speech to her with a "...and hurry up!" She nodded politely and went back to work. I didn't like him. I could tell he was on her case more often than not and for as nice as she was, she didn't deserve that kind of treatment from her manager. She came up to the cash register a few minutes later and punched out from her shift.

“Ready?,” she asked us. We got up from our seats and walked outside into the brisk night air. The waitress excused herself while she went to get her car and a moment later drove up in a dark blue Dodge Neon Sport. She already had an unlit cigarette in her mouth but asked anyway; “mind if I smoke?”

“Of course you can smoke!—, it’s your car,” my mom replied, putting the waitress at ease while she began puffing away. A few blocks over we started to see those bright lights again and like markers we followed them to our destination. She dropped us off right in front of our hotel and I asked my mom if I could give the waitress my spending money I had for the trip—, I felt for her and how hard she worked for a living. Gabriela nodded ‘no,’ reached into her own purse, pulled out a few bills, and discreetly handed them to the blond woman.

“Thank you so much!,” she said to us, “but you don’t have to do that.”

“No, thank *you*,” my mom replied back, “you saved us tonight.” With that we split ways and we’d never see her again, but I’d often think back to her every once in a while—, did she still have that job? Did her manager ever lighten up on her? Like always, I had many questions I’d never get the answers to. We walked up the massive staircase

back toward the front doors of The Venetian and reentered its permanent twilight.

Those were the moments I cherished most with my mom—, the new places we'd be able to visit and doing it side-by-side. Each held different adventures, no matter how small, they all worked together to give us some of the best memories we have. When we weren't out of town exploring new cities, we'd continue our routine of work and school at home.

The years passed by from my being a freshman in high school to sophomore and so on. I had an extreme case of senioritis and so rarely thought about schoolwork or what consequences that'd later have on my life. All I wanted to do was have different experiences. I tried smoking but it wouldn't click with me until years later. The only taste of alcohol I'd had was a shot at sixteen and hated it. Then I turned eighteen and everything changed. Before the party could officially begin, I needed to graduate first. I continued to barely get by with my struggling grades and all I needed was to last a little bit longer until the end of May. I'd ordered my cap and gown and was getting ready for the graduation. The day finally arrived—, I dressed up in my green and gold uniform and drove down to the service hall. I stood in the group with all the other hopefuls who were waiting in line for their

names to be called. Then, I heard my own. Walking up to the center of the stage, I almost lived out the moment in a perspective from above—, my principle was there waiting for me with an arm stretched out. I reached the front and shook his hand while being presented with my diploma. Unable to believe the reality of finally graduating, I looked up to the ceiling and mouthed two single words; “Thank you.”

After finishing high school, the time came for my mom and I to move again. We packed up all our belongings during the Winter of 2004—, ready to drive an hour or so out of town. We’d settled in a pleasant little city that had the types of suburbs one sees in the movies. Tall pine trees lined the long streets with houses that seemed straight out of a magazine mere feet away. They each had their own style and one after another, the clusters of homes exuded importance. I’d drive down the avenues in my spray-painted Nissan Sentra and feel as though it was an eyesore for the surrounding landscape. Nobody really stared, but I felt the attention all the same.

Unaware to me at the time, sprawling shadows hidden from sight stood in silence, waiting for me to cross their paths. My new terrain took on entirely different characteristics than I was previously accustomed to. Like being in a forest enshrouded by thick fog, I never saw it coming—, the presence of

uncertainty. It wrapped itself around my spirit like a veil altering my future outlook on everything. Neither my mom nor I caught it in time; my downhill climb had already begun months before we moved. I would've never predicted such a decline in my personal life a year prior. I thought I'd had it all planned out. Unfortunately, it doesn't matter how prepared one is, it still eventually rains.

Chapter Eight



Leaving Ann Arbor was challenging. I loved my hometown. All my friends lived there and all I knew was within those borders. I didn't want to stretch or change—, so I rebelled against it, hard. Though my new neighborhood was beautiful, it was full of kids who had too much time on their hands and who drove nicer cars than their school teachers did. So when they wanted to have fun, they could afford it. Strangely enough, it was easier for someone my age to get drugs than it was to buy alcohol so I went with the flow and followed suit like everyone else. I slowly became a statistic. I'd met dozens of other people in my same position—, lost and without purpose. *Just hang on until the next party*, I'd remind myself.

The downward spiral started long before I ever truly noticed. Maybe from back in Ann Arbor, when I'd drink the night away with good friends. Now all that surrounded me was plastic in nature; the people, the artificial sunshine, everything was pretend. We didn't know what real life entailed, we

just wanted to escape again. Inside, I'd feel myself forgetting who I truly was.

“Try this,” some would say, offering me more poison on a plate. The clothes got scrappier, the music got angrier, and like all things around me at the time, my antagonism for life only grew. Punk shows, spray-paint, and sarcastic attitudes toward existence were all I was beginning to know. Hooking up in the back seats of different cars downtown Royal Oak, watching movies while plastered in Birmingham—, it wasn't long before I stopped caring what I did or who I was with. Nothing else mattered—, just tonight. Tomorrow didn't exist. My complete disregard for all things truly important manifested itself in my inability to take care of myself any longer. I was a walking energy drink with pills mixed in for good measure.

Lighting candles in my room, I was preparing for an adventurous night with some new party favors I'd just gotten. It was a bleak evening out past my bedroom window, so I put on some music to match the mood. Popping all of my treats at once, I drank a full glass of water and just sat at my desk, waiting. Some time passed by when I realized the piece of paper I'd prepared earlier to write on was still blank. Slowly, I looked down at the empty white bars holding the page in place—, the only things keeping it from crumbling to shreds. Next to it laid my pen;

that syringe-like instrument which would draw my inner-plasma and inject it back onto whatever canvas I'd currently be using. I just needed something to spill my ideas on, something to catch my fleeting epiphanies and seal them up forever with a drug-laced kiss. *Pick it up and write*, a thought whispered.

"I can't...", I said aloud to myself and no one else. My own voice must've snapped me back into a strange reality as I suddenly looked around the dark room and noticed the flickering lights were no longer dancing atop the candles, but were barely lit. Maybe I got up to relight them—, maybe I got up to get another glass of water—, it doesn't really matter, as all I can remember afterward is laying spread out across my floor. I looked from side to side, seeing only underneath my bed. I couldn't get up—, couldn't move. It was getting so hot to where I couldn't breath anymore. I needed air. Slowly, I looked over to my shut window and began crawling toward it with all the energy I could muster up within me. *Just open it*, I thought to myself, over and over, trying to gain mental strength. Maybe I finally did, I don't remember that either. The next thing I saw was a big bright light in my mind's eye—, projected onto the screen of my psyche. I didn't know where it was coming from or how large it truly was, but I could tell it was something otherworldly. I

felt warmth radiating from it. I suddenly saw a man's figure right beside it—, I couldn't make out the features but I just knew it was my father. Below it was my slumped body. He was looking at it with deep sadness and conversing with the light about my very being.

“What a waste—,” I felt him saying. I wanted to look back up at him, to make a plea for my life, that I had a grand plan all along and nobody really knew. But I couldn't—, because I didn't. I just laid there—, unable to make a case for why I was still alive. Slowly, I felt the light dissipating from my surroundings and so, I fell asleep. That, or was kept from a darkness I can't describe by Something beyond my comprehension. Either way, I awoke the next morning with a tear-streaked shirt and muscles too stiff to move about normally. I stretched my body to full length and slowly began my daily routine of getting ready for work or play or whatever I was doing at the time. I'd never forget that experience. Just like my candles—, I was kept lit—, barely.

I was out one night with a friend I'd recently made and on top of the normal drinking, we were on who knows what else. We sat on her front porch for a long while before finally going inside the house. We joked, laughed, wasted the hours away doing nothing. The next morning came around and she

reminded me of something funny from the night before.

“What’s that mean?,” I asked of the inside joke I no longer knew.

“You don’t remember?—, we laughed so much last night.” I just shrugged my shoulders and lit up another cigarette. She looked at me with slight pity. “Do you *like* living this way?,” she asked from the heart. Again, I had nothing to say. I didn’t know the answer myself. It wasn’t that I liked the lifestyle, it was just the one I’d gotten used to. We split ways and I resumed my aimless wandering of random streets and areas of the city.

I’d walk around my neighborhood and just look at all the happier people out and about. They’d be talking to one another, holding hands, and just enjoying life in a way I’d forgotten how to myself. Deeper thoughts than I was prepared for swirled around my head like smoke drifting through the atmosphere. *What’s this all mean? Where will I end up? How can I escape?* Things I didn’t know how to answer kept coming back like when I was much younger going home on the train from New York. Interconnectivity; it was everywhere. I felt it in the trees blowing in the wind, in the man or woman walking by, in the cars that drove on which streets during which time of day. Everyone had a very specific purpose to fulfill—, everyone but me, it

seemed. I knew there was a plan—, I'd felt it my entire life—, but recently, I'd lost touch with that inner-voice telling me that it was all according to Someone Else's will. I'd already given up my heart to foreign hands—, knowing it'd be safer there than in my own. Now all I had left was my hollow body. I fueled it with as much poison as possible.

The earth was shifting—, its core held a grasp on my spirit and I followed it wherever it went. Fire and brimstone, violins and cellos; opposing ideologies started to work together in making my journey as complicated as can be. I didn't know what to believe in anymore. I just knew that somewhere—, there'd be a way out. Years later, my mom would tell me how far away I'd drifted from her during that period in my life.

Everywhere I went, the haze followed. Something whose sole purpose was to see that I'd lose myself within its depths was always close behind. I'd hear it through depressing symphonies. I'd see it through the mist rising off the ground. Moreover, I'd feel it through the miserable dreams I'd have nightly. Just before waking, I could feel the real world coming back to front and center as I'd start tearing up—, both in my dream and on my pillow. Not even in sleep could I find any rest. Time became insignificant. What'd happened yesterday would loop around to tomorrow and I'd be stuck in-

between two bookends of bad decisions. Today wouldn't last long enough to enjoy the break—, it'd blend into the stream I was constantly in.

My reality slowly began melting, like my reasoning for being an individual—, I dripped with a self-centered depression, just like those around me. Yet, I was on my own journey. One into the very center of what it meant to be a human being who'd lost himself on life's path. What remained but dried up leaves—, fallen from trees which weren't in season? I was withering away. Like an out-of-tune piano, I was constantly trying to find my theme but getting disappointed in the process. Was this really who I'd become? Someone who couldn't even hold a decent conversation anymore? I floated through my days with no end in sight. Different people would drop into my life and then suddenly drop out, I didn't have time to make any meaningful relationships—, I just kept moving. At some stage within all of the constant commotion, I gave up on wanting to go any further. I eventually figured out what'd been in front of me all along; *what's the point?* My body finally gave out; too much rushing around, too little sleep—, I needed to rest and so my system would soon do me a favor and shut down on its own.

I was especially depressed one night and thought that taking more pills than I'd ever done before

would be a good idea. I swallowed the handful and sat down on one of my front patio chairs, waiting for them to kick in. The last thing I remember is listening to music on my phone—, and nothing after that. From upstairs in my mom’s room, the windows just so happened to be cracked open that evening. Though nearly asleep, she began hearing my voice from downstairs—, like I was talking to someone, but the speech sounded too slurred to make anything out clearly. Worried that I’d wake the neighbors, she crawled out of bed and made her way down the steps and toward the front door. I must’ve been leaning against it with my entire body because upon my mom opening it, I fell backwards and there I stayed, sprawled out on the floor inside, not knowing what was going on. She helped me to the living room couch and dropped me like dead weight. Though very annoyed and disappointed, she figured she’d talk to me about this in the morning, knowing I was too blasted to handle a talk right then. My mom turned to walk back up the stairs, but midway, she noticed my breathing was especially labored. Gabriela turned around and placed her ear right above my face, listening closely. She immediately grabbed the phone and called the only person that’d answer that early in the morning.

A half hour or so passed by before seeing a good friend’s face looking back at me.

“Hey...,” I barely got out.

“Hey man—, it’s time to go to the hospital, okay?” The car ride over was a complete blur. Once inside and on I.V.s, I was given liquid charcoal to drink. Everything I’d swallowed earlier came rushing back up.

“It’s a good thing you came in when you did,” the doctors would go on to tell me. “Had your mom gone to work today, your liver would’ve completely shut down followed by the rest of your organs.” Afraid that this all may have been on purpose, they cautiously put me on antidepressants. They worked for a small while but against all advice, I began taking them with large amounts of alcohol. Their effect backfired. I suddenly became worse than I’d ever been before. Thoughts swirled around my mind that maybe, this world would be better off without me in it at all. I crept up dangerously close to the edge—, something called me up to it and back down below its cliff. Further into the blazing fire, further into the lonely shadows I went. A flow of thick, dense fog permeated my immediate presence, clouding my ability to reason properly. Things got out of hand.

On the day I dove straight into the ground—, the leaves outside were eerily still and there was no wind rustling a thing. All was quiet. I stared down at the source of my existence; something so tender and

fragile and vital. Innocent wrists that deserved better. I closed my eyes. Visions of lightbulbs burning out—, of darkness filling a room with no view—, of doctors rushing toward me—, of stitches, stains, and sadness. Visions that made no sense to my chemically-addled consciousness came crashing in like waves onto once-sunny beaches now devoid of any brightness whatsoever. It was over—, my eternal summer had come to a quick and hectic end.

After sobering up and restored to my full reality, I couldn't comprehend the consequences of living so loosely for the past year plus. EMTs again re-entered my path and proposed to go with them until I regained some type of stability.

“Do I really have to get on that?,” I asked the paramedics at the outpatient facility, looking down at the yellow stretcher they'd rolled up to me.

“Unfortunately, yes—,” one of them answered. “It's the only way we can bring you in to the hospital.” I nodded that I understood, climbed onto its topside, and gave up my headphones which had been blasting angry music for months. Now, an unsettling calm came over everyone who I'd make eye contact with—, they pitied me without even knowing why. *What did I do?* The words echoed throughout the hollow corridors of my mind. I was left completely alone with all of my decisions and began to feel the weight of true freewill at last.

Eventually, I was placed in a hospital, a rehab, and finally, a halfway house located in a dreary corner of Michigan. My days of reckless abandon were over and reality swept over me like a flood out of the Old Testament. I sat in circles with other lost souls speaking on what brought them there, what kept them in constant cycles of self-destructive behavior, and what dreams they'd almost all but given up on. I became part of an organism too tragic to hold underneath a microscope. All I knew was that everyone had a room they'd go into after all the meetings and mealtimes and drift back off toward a subconscious escape. We'd finally found our collective sleep.

Rehab was a large cafeteria room with tables and chairs set up and two long hallways that met in the middle at a small medication dispensary. The men would sleep on one end of the first hallway, the women on the other end of the second. That still didn't stop so-and-so from hooking up in the bathrooms whenever they could. There were lots of meetings. Many of them blended into each other and I'd leave feeling the same way I came in. At night, I'd lay awake and think of all the mistakes that'd brought me there. The horrible attitude I had toward life a few weeks ago was improving but I still felt the fire of rebellion burning deep down inside. I started writing out my thoughts. Slowly I filled an

entire journal's worth of opinions and wannabe op-eds during my two-week stay there. I didn't know how my mom was holding up. I knew she'd moved into an apartment in Troy, one city over from our old condo. I called her for Thanksgiving as the holidays were approaching. I didn't know how to feel other than complete self-pity which took hold of me every new day I'd wake up. I missed her. There were no words to describe how I'd felt for what I'd done. I couldn't say a single thing other than "I'm sorry."

When I wasn't in meetings or asleep, I'd play cards with the other people in the lit up hallways or eat the cereal that was constantly set up in the cafeteria. Finally it was visiting day and my mom planned to come and see me. Upon watching her enter through the cafeteria doors, I immediately jumped up from my chair and went over to greet her. We walked back over to one of the tables to talk.

"How're you doing?," she asked me.

"I'm fine—," I said, but cared more about her wellbeing. "How're *you*?," I asked back. She just nodded her head and slowly looked down at the table in silence. We didn't know what to talk about. There were so many feelings swirling around each of our hearts that it was hard to pinpoint any one in particular. It felt like an emotional tornado of

regret, repentance, and forgiveness all wrapped up into a chaotic funnel of forced empathy. Time ticked by slowly as we had less to say than expected. Of course we wanted to share everything that was going on in our lives, in our separate living situations, but we also wanted to cherish the moments we had left together. We sat in a tense quietness, knowing we didn't want to part from one another anytime soon. However, it was nearing time for the families to say goodbye to their loved ones and leave once more. We got up from our seats and slowly walked out into the main hallway. My mom and I hugged and for a brief period, time stood still. There were no more people around us, no twelve steps to memorize, no lonely nights away from home—, I felt at peace within her warm embrace.

“I love you,” she quietly said.

“I love you too Mom.” I looked in her eyes and saw the watery film start taking over. “Don't—,” I said.

“I won't,” she replied. With that, we parted ways as she walked down the corridor, out of sight, and waited to get in her car before letting out what she'd been holding back for so long.

A girl with short brown hair who I'd become friends with stood a few feet away from us, staring. Once Gabriela was gone she came over and shot me a serious look.

“That just gave me chills,” she said of our goodbyes. The days kept rolling by with nothing unusual happening. There was a thin woman among us who I’d noticed at meetings. She had a depressed look on her face every time I’d peer over. We started talking and sharing our back stories. The moment finally came for her to go back home but she still wore that look of desperation.

“I can’t go home,” she protested, “I’m going to use if I go back there, I know it!” I felt horrible for her. The problem was insurance—, she technically lived in a lower-income county than most others there. If her house had been two or three blocks over, she would’ve been in the well-off county instead. Because of her situation, she only had a certain amount of days she could be in rehab for. I asked to speak with my personal counselor in hopes of doing what I thought I could.

“Am I able to give up my insurance to cover her?” I asked. He looked at me slightly confused.

“That’s nice of you, but no. That’s not possible.” I tried advocating for her, for the rehab to do anything they could to keep her there longer, but it was no use. We said goodbye to one another later on that day and since then, I often wonder if her life somehow changed, or if she ever did begin to smile. So that was it—, my two-week stay had finally come to an end. The van transporting me to my new

destination slowly pulled up out front and I hopped in, not knowing what else might lay ahead for me.

Chapter Nine



We drove about an hour out of town until reaching the halfway house I'd be staying at for the next month. It was a two-story home with a front desk and a room by the entrance they'd use to drug test us every time we'd come back in from the outside. There was a couple from rehab that had made their way into the same halfway house as me so I knew someone I could talk to before mingling with the rest of the people. They were always together. It was so sweet how even though they'd bicker between themselves, they always sat by each other in group gatherings.

A beautiful woman of about forty began sitting next to me in the circle at our daily meetings and always stared down at the floor in deep contemplation. She had dark brown eyes and crimson lips and would awaken anyone with her allure. We introduced ourselves and slowly began a tight-knit friendship that'd last the rest of my stay there. We'd pass notes to each other on a regular basis. They were about our pasts—, things we

experienced, loves we had, moments of hardship. We bonded through our shared-heartache.

“We should get out of here for a day,” she eventually said to me.

“That’s a great idea,” is all I could think of saying. We’d planned on meeting outside by the bus-stop.

“Let’s go around six,” she suggested. Dusk would be coming soon—, my favorite time of day. She signed herself out of the house at around five and I did the same a half hour later. We met up exactly where we said we would. The bus pulled up and we entered with confidence, knowing it was our escape vessel for the moment. We sat in the first two empty seats we saw with her by the window. She stared at the passing stores and homes, probably wondering if she’d ever live that type of life again—, where she too, could enjoy the simpler things like shopping or strolling around beautiful neighborhoods. The bus rolled past the busy streets off Woodward Avenue as we watched—, waiting for the right time to get off, cross the street, and get back on. We weren’t headed anywhere specific, we just needed to get away for a while. I could tell she was deep in thought. We didn’t speak. The people entered and exited the bus at random and still, we sat silent, not noticing anything outside ourselves. Finally, she parted her pursed lips;

“He hit me so hard once that he broke my jaw.” I didn’t know who she was talking about nor did I need to, I understood she only wanted someone to listen—, though she spoke no more. Moments of nothingness passed by. Then;

“I’m sorry,” I said. Her eyes had already watered over and were glistening in the late afternoon’s sun. We just needed an outlet to purge our emotions through—, this bus ride was perfect for putting distance between our temporary home and heavenly freedom. The bus slowed to make a stop in Ferndale and we figured that’d be a good place to get off. We got up and left the seats we’d made ourselves so comfortable in. Once outside, she turned and gave me her signature look.

“That was my first time on a bus,” she said. “Thank you.”

“For what?” I asked honestly.

“For everything.”

That was all we needed—, to temporarily run away. Finally back at our halfway house, we hugged and went inside to resume the monotony of life therein.

A tall man walked into my room one day and introduced himself as a new roommate. He had small dreadlocks and a deep baritone voice that sounded assertive when he spoke.

“You read the Bible?” he asked me one day while reading it himself.

“Sometimes,” I replied, though “rarely” would’ve been a more accurate answer.

“Some good stuff in there,” he said. “He’ll prepare a feast for you in front of your enemies, you know.” I hadn’t heard that before so I stood there wide-eyed at the thought of such redemption. With being so down the past few weeks, I took to the idea quickly.

“Really?,” I asked. He nodded his head and pointed on the page to the verse itself. I hadn’t read much Scripture throughout my life but I’d later find out how true its words are.

My roommate and I were out one evening exploring the area around our halfway home. The sun had already set and soon we’d have to turn around and go back. First, we wanted to make one last stop. Walking through the neighborhood at such a late hour was exciting enough, but we were headed toward the center of the city. We needed to remind ourselves what normal people did on Saturday nights. We walked through the crowd and looked at the glammed up people waiting to get into different bars and clubs. They represented freedom for us; freedom from the mundane meetings we had to go to, freedom from the problems we’d created for ourselves prior to coming to the halfway house. They were who we used to be, only they hadn’t

reached our stage yet. Maybe some would, others might keep the party going until either their bodies gave out or their lives imploded. It didn't really matter—, for that moment in time, we envied them.

There were spotlights coming from a club a few feet away that pierced the windows and shined onto the pavement outside. We walked over and put our faces up to the glass; staring, wondering how it felt to be amongst those mingling inside.

“I've been here before,” my roommate said of the club. In a way, we both had—, being inside those same spots that served courage per ounce and blared music so loud you could hardly hear yourself think. I missed it but I understood why I needed to find new outlets for releasing my energy. We traveled the short way back to the house and went up to our room, full of hope for the future.

Christmastime came around again. I was rereading the scribbles on the bottom of the upper bunk when the halfway home's night orderly walked in.

“Time to go downstairs,” he said about the living area where we'd play cards, hold meetings, and have morning group. He knew I didn't really want to go, like always.

“Really?” I asked while hesitating to get up from my bed.

“Yes, really.” I didn’t like meetings and stayed up in my room on the second floor whenever I had the chance, but this time the staff came searching for me. Something was different. Maybe they’d had enough of my mischief. I rolled out of the bottom bunk but he signaled toward the messy sheets anyway. “Make it up first,” he sharply said. So that’s what I did.

I followed some feet behind him, through the curved hallway, down the narrow staircase, and was expecting to walk into the same old space I’d come to know for the past four weeks. Instead of chipping walls, folding chairs, and chatter from the house pay phones, I entered into a fully-Christmas-decorated room with tinsel flowing from corner to corner, cookies and desserts atop the tables, and everyone gathered at the opposite end looking directly at me.

“There he is!” shouted a fellow friend. The housemates parted and through the crowd it was my mom that slowly came into view with the widest smile on her face.

“I wanted to spend Christmas with you, so everyone here helped me do this,” she said.

“This is what selflessness looks like,” the night orderly chimed in. I didn’t have a clue as to what I could do, so I just let out a laugh of disbelief. That’s the type of person Gabriela is. I pushed all depressive thoughts aside, walked over to take a

chocolate orange, and split it into slices to share with my mom.

The day I was leaving at last came. As Gabriela and I left through the front door for the final time, I could see the car parked in the street and immediately became more excited about going back home. We buckled ourselves in and I looked to the house only to see my forty-year old friend in her bedroom window, staring at us. She made a heart with her fingers as the car pulled away. I waved until I couldn't see her anymore and by then, noticed the tears in my mom's eyes. She told me how badly she felt for my friend, having to know she was staying while I was leaving.

We eventually settled in the industrial city of Troy for a couple years before we'd part ways and move out to different places. I'd go to therapy sessions down the street from a bridal shop. It was by appointment only so each time I walked by, the doors were closed and no lights were on. With skateboard in hand, I'd stare through the window at a gorgeous gown. Satin-stitched designs reached down the see-through sleeves and toward the wrists. I imagined the woman wearing matching gloves with silken seams.

"She looks so happy," I remembered my mother saying of the bride back on the beach in Naples. Again, I nodded in silent agreement. At home, we'd

stay up late nights watching Seinfeld reruns, talking about faith, and healing from all of the mistakes I'd made a few years prior. I'd calmed down a lot and in the evenings, would walk the neighborhood with my mom, around the block and back to our front door.

"Where do you think I'll end up?," I'd ask her sincerely, not being the least bit sure of my future.

"Wherever God wants you to be," she'd reply. All throughout the problems she'd faced in the years beforehand with her husband, with me, with working herself into the ground, she'd never once wavered from her faith. It was the most inspiring example of someone staying true to themselves I'd ever seen.

A good friend had recently moved to Houston and upon hearing of my hospitalization, he told me to stay in constant contact with him.

"I want a weekly update—," he said over the phone to me months ago. Now that I was back home, we decided it'd be a good idea for me to fly out and visit him for a little while—, to get my mind back on track.

"Let's have an entire week where we just write songs, drive around the city, and explore," I said. So that's what we did. I flew out to Texas and as soon as I saw him we gave each other a big hug.

"It's good to see you," he said, looking at me with a wide smile.

The first thing I noticed was the humidity. I'd always heard that Houston was hot—, but I had to experienced it for myself. We got into his truck and he showed me why they say “everything's bigger in Texas.” The highways were huge and held up by giant columns of concrete, they reached and wove through the sky at high altitudes. Driving on them, we could see the rooftops to nearby strip-malls and houses as we continued on toward my friend's home. Once there—, we walked to where he had his drums set up with a couch nearby that I'd sleep on for the next few nights. I picked up one of the guitars and happily slung it over my shoulder. We bought a diaphragm microphone from a music shop that we started using to record different songs through. After all the turmoil of the past year, I was finally starting to re-find myself again.

“So how've you been holding up?,” he asked me in quieter tones.

“Good man..., good,” I said. “There's just so many things I don't understand.” He gave me a serious look.

“Write about it,” he said. I knew he was right—, that's where I could find healing and closure. Still—, I didn't take his advice for many years to come.

I'd been there a few days when he decided to show me one of his favorite spots. We climbed into his truck and drove the short distance to a bar

nearby. Walking in, the thick smell of cigarette smoke hung in the air. We approached the bartender working that day—, a blond woman whose hair hung down through chopped bangs.

“Hey guys—, what can I get you?,” she asked us as we took our seats on the barstools. We ordered a couple of drinks and just sat, taking in the atmosphere. It was what one would expect; flickering neon signs, pinball machines, and a jukebox in the corner. There were bikers, business men, and scantily-dressed women all around. Everyone was in their own world and had their own agendas for being there so early in the day. The men were trying their best to hit on whoever was close enough to hear their pickup lines, the bartenders were pretending to be interested in the patrons’ stories, and all I could think about was how best to stand out from the crowd. I didn’t want to be another statistic anymore—, I’d already lived that life and it brought me nowhere. Now, back at the bars and of legal drinking age, I was becoming just like everyone else around me once more.

“So you guys come here often?,” the blond bartender asked. We explained the situation—, that I was just visiting town from Michigan and she continued the conversation, steering it in a more serious place. “Nobody here really knows me,” she said while looking down at the bar.

“Like how?” I asked sincerely.

“They just come in and assume I’m a certain type of person because I’m a bartender but they don’t know who I really am—, I have so many things I wanna do, you know?” I agreed with her, that it’s tough being put in a box or having a label slapped on by people who didn’t really know you. I briefly went over my own story; mostly to put her at ease that she wasn’t talking to anyone judgmental or critical, that she was talking to someone who was in a lot of ways like herself.

“If you know that you’re more than this—, then you shouldn’t care what other people think,” I said to her, surprised that I still hadn’t taken my own advice up to that point. We kept talking well into the evening. Eventually, we exchanged contact information and would continue to stay in touch for a couple years afterward. We’d speak about how things had changed in our lives and where we still wanted them to go, in what direction, to what end.

I finally flew back home and was again reunited with my mom, continuing our new chapter together. I started a million projects in our apartment but never finished any of them. Books, music, it didn’t matter—, I just needed to stay busy, keep myself creatively awake. I was always spray-painting something in my room or trying out new riffs on my sky blue Tom DeLonge signature Strat. Friends

would come over and we'd walk the streets of random downtowns together, making our way to wherever we were headed. My mom continued to work hard. She'd leave in the morning and get home in the late afternoon. I'd drive to Ann Arbor for our favorite pizza and back—, two hours in all. We started little traditions; cooking together, watching *Lost*, anything to forget about the last couple of years.

The day eventually came to move out into separate cities. We made a dozen trips back and forth to my new apartment in a suburb of Rochester Hills while she was moving to the quaint city of Franklin, dubbed “the town that time forgot.” She wiped away a tear as we hugged in my doorway. After going through so many things in the past few years—, this moment was more than meaningful. I'd finally be able to show her what I was truly made of, what I could do on my own.

A few months into my new move, my mom called asking for directions.

“I'm headed to the citizenship ceremony,” she said with excitement. I guided her over the phone, road by road until she reached her destination. While she was on her way to the courthouse, I stayed behind in my apartment, knowing it was too soon for me to apply for myself. Looking back on that day, that's the one thing my mom would've

changed. “I wish I would’ve had you there by my side,” she’d say.

Gabriela navigated the streets of downtown Detroit with confidence on her way to City Hall where she was finally going to be sworn in as a United States citizen by the best country in the world—, a dream coming true in real time. She was rehearsing the National Anthem in her head when God winked at her once more as the Star Spangled Banner started playing on the local radio show she was listening to. The smile she felt taking shape across her face let her know that everything was going to work out just fine.

She reached the building with enough time to spare so sat in the car silently and prayed for the entire experience to go smoothly. Inside, the tall American flags framed the scene on either side of the lobby as she passed through the metal detectors and was on her way with the rest of the hopefuls obtaining citizenship that day. Entering the designated courtroom, her excitement only grew as she wondered how she’d feel after the ceremony was over. What a difference a mere hour would make. The wooden bench she sat on was full with people she’d be sworn in beside. Everyone there knew that this was a new beginning for themselves, a fresh start to further opportunities and bigger dreams.

The judge entered the room to hushed voices and much anticipation.

“All rise,” the bailiff said, and with that the entire assemblage stood at attention. One by one, each person was called to the front of the courtroom to be presented their citizenship diploma. It was a different type of graduation. My mom sat, not hearing her name. There were only a few people left when the bailiff finally called out;

“Gabriela Carlan.” She walked over to receive her papers. While shaking the judge’s hand, he smiled to her and said the golden words my mom had waited so long to hear.

“Welcome to the family.” With right hands covering their hearts, the group sung the National Anthem in unison. Another dream had been fulfilled. My mom’s emotions rushed over her as she realized she’d finally been accepted by her adopted country. The next day, even mere colors seemed to be brighter and more vivid. Since then, she feels an extreme pride every time she looks at the American flag. She soon after visited her family in Romania and upon reentering the States, she heard the words that brought tears of honor and joy to her eyes;

“Welcome home, Ms. Carlan—, welcome home.”

Back in Rochester Hills, I’d met some amazing people but my new atmosphere was already getting to me. Even though I was giving it a decent chance

as the years slowly rolled by one after another, I began feeling a sense of stagnation. I'd stare at the posters of Quentin Tarantino films taped to my walls and wonder when I'd leave my own mark on a fading generation of yesteryear. The fiery passion I'd had growing up was getting blown out by the constant winds of real life. There was little accomplishment. Moving out didn't count, everyone was doing it. The days passing by got increasingly predictable. Everything I did I'd done a thousand times before. Nothing was new, excitement for tomorrow vanished—, only my DVR stayed active recording shows every few days. They kept me interested to go through the next half hour but it was never enough. Friends would come over and see me in my impassive state.

“Let's go out tonight,” they'd say. We'd try the few local spots around us but they all blended into the same vibe eventually. The job was stable, the girlfriend was gorgeous, but the fervor for life dwindled. I started losing sense of my inner-self.

“I hate when you're like this,” a good friend would say whenever he'd see me detached and deep in thought, hovering over my drink when out. I couldn't help it—, the emotion just seemed to stick. He preferred the person everyone knew I could be when I wanted to; the lively, laughing boy who joked about everything. Still, I was less and less like my

old self. My situation slowed to a crawling pace. I was growing old going nowhere but grocery stores, fast food chains, gas stations, etc. Finally, an idea surfaced. A fresh thought crossed my mind and I visualized it coming true. I didn't need to know that it was the right move anymore—, it was a move in and of itself and that was enough for me. All I cared about was change and this would provide me the ultimate opportunity for it. I called Gabriela as soon as I figured out the logistics.

“Mom, I think I wanna move to Chicago,” I said over the phone. Unexpectedly, she answered in a much more positive tone than I'd thought she would.

“Okay..., I think that's a good idea.”

“Really?,” I asked.

“Yeah, I think you need a change of scenery.” She was never more right. A few weeks later, I was packing up my things in boxes and selling off furniture that wouldn't fit into my new studio apartment. I was about to replace all my past mistakes with a million better memories. I was finally getting excited about life again.

Chapter Ten



Gabriela and I took the seven-hour train into Union Station. Once there, we exited onto the concrete platform and headed up the steps toward the front doors with the entire Windy City waiting for us on the other side.

“I’m home,” I said with a widened smile. The sun shone down on our shoulders and life was everywhere. The people circulated throughout the city’s streets and back alleys like blood cells do within pulsing veins. The buildings all seemed to grow taller towards the sky the closer we’d get to them. They surrounded us in a way only a downtown metropolis could. The commotion coming from all angles sounded like an industrial symphony—, gorgeously layered and strangely peaceful. With all of that around us, I was most excited I could live out the experience with my mom by my side. The L-trains thundered on their tracks up above—, sparks flying off in all directions. We climbed the stairs toward the Brown Line and were on our way to the northern neighborhoods.

Lincoln Park was just as beautiful in person as it was in all the pictures I'd looked up the months before. Anything I'd need was a stone's throw away. I could finish all of my errands within a single city block. One-off shops and chain stores were scattered throughout the streets, bikes and cars intermingled in a way I hadn't seen back in Michigan, and people of all types walked in flowing waves of movement. I knew I'd found my element. Far from the rehabs and halfway homes of a near-decade prior—, I was finally feeling pure happiness.

My mom and I walked down Diversey Parkway with our suitcases in tow and reached our destination within twenty minutes. What was once a rundown hotel with people overdosing in its hallways was renovated into a brand new apartment building. A small two hundred-square-foot studio on the fourth floor is where I'd sleep for the next year of my life. We got the card-keys from the front desk, rode the elevator up a few flights, and walked into an empty space smaller than the size of most kitchens, let alone a full living area. There was no furniture so we each took a corner and slept on the hardwood floor that first night. It was truly one of my favorite memories we'd ever make. The small radio we had with us played Top 40 pop songs as we disinfected everything we could before finally ordering dinner and letting ourselves enjoy the rest

of the night and week afterwards in the big city. Gabriela left shortly thereafter with a tearful goodbye and I was back to being by myself in a new home.

From one room over, I'd hear my neighbor singing show tunes. On Wednesday nights, the walls would shake from the powerful music down in the bar below. Things were tight in that small studio. The tiny closet was overflowing with clothes, underneath the bed slid a case full of shoes, and the desk-shelf combo took over half the room. The near-claustrophobic conditions made moving around tough, but once I was on the other side of my front door, I'd walk down the hall toward the elevators with confidence. I was still living in my dream city. No matter how small the space was where I slept, showered, and ate—, I'd do it all with a smile.

I started getting used to my situation. The twenty-four-hour store right across the street was perfect for late-night ice cream runs. The cleaners around the corner began knowing me on a first name basis. Everything was as it should be. Slowly, I learned the layout of my new surroundings. I'd be able to stop and get groceries or pick up new bedsheets at the major chains or a pack of cigarettes from the liquor store all while walking home from the L-train. Everyone I'd pass on the street seemed to have the same type of smile—, deep down, they

knew everything was interconnected somehow, in someway; the check-out ladies, the taxi drivers, the servers, bartenders, and beggars—, we were all apart of it. An energy that was always right beneath our feet, trapped under the concrete like a circuit encompassing the entire city, we felt its hold on our lives as we continued sailing through the waves and ripples of our everyday decisions. *Which corner should I turn down? Which train should I take home? Who will I sit next to and what conversation may spark up which could possibly change my life forever?* These were the types of questions which ran through my mind and I loved every minute of it. Fate had brought me here and I felt its grasp on my heart with each choice I made.

I was sitting in my studio one night when I decided to go to the convenience-store opposite my building. I made my way downstairs, through the lobby, and past the front doors at a bit after midnight. Crossing the street, I could already see a woman standing at the store's counter talking and laughing with the worker. I walked in and the woman immediately looked my way. Her layered blond hair spun through the air in slight slow-motion as she turned in my direction. She was taller than me, had a wider smile than mine, and I could tell she was fun even before she spoke.

“You like their food here, right?,” she asked me as if we’d already been talking.

“Love it,” I truthfully said. The question made me want to buy a few frozen burritos to stock up my fridge with and a pack of cigarettes on top of that.

“Mind if I have one of those?,” the woman asked as I was unwrapping the small box.

“Of course,” I answered, handing her a couple. We went outside to sit on a cement structure housing plants and trees while we smoked and spoke some more. We introduced ourselves and after telling me her name, she sat quietly, looking at me as if I should say something.

“Do you know who I am?,” she asked sincerely. I didn’t, so just shook my head slowly. She smiled and quickly changed the subject. “What’re you doing tomorrow night?”

“I don’t know—, nothing I think.”

“Meet me back here at eleven,” she said. “We’ll go somewhere good.” So that’s what I did. The next night we met up and took a taxi down to the bustling clubs of Ontario Street in River North. Suddenly, it became a tradition for us. We’d start our evening at the lavish Sound Bar with its violet spotlights encircling us, then cross the street and head downstairs toward Spybar for the rest of the night. She always walked to the front of the line, whispered something to the bouncers, and got us in

ahead of everyone else plus free drink tickets wherever we'd go. I never asked her how or what or why, I was just appreciating the new environments.

When we weren't out at the clubs, we'd walk around the neighborhood while sharing cigarettes and stare at all the beautiful buildings.

"This is going to be a church once it's finished," she said pointing to a piece of land still in development. She knew what every house was on every street in every area. There was something about her that made me feel secure. I'd soon find out why. "Do you know how old some of these buildings are?," she asked. "Very old—, and there're spirits attached to each one." I looked at her with skeptical eyes. "I'm serious," she said. "I can sense them sometimes." I didn't know what to say so just kept silent. We walked down another block and before turning around to go home, she stopped me, pulling my arm. "Let's not go that way," she said, staring off into the darkness as if she'd just seen something distressing.

"Okay...," I said, not really understanding, but following her intuition all the same. We circled around and came back to where we first started.

"Tomorrow?," she asked before heading back home.

"Tomorrow, for sure," I replied. With that, we said our goodbyes and split ways. I laid awake for a

while that night wondering what she'd seen that made her want to turn away. I wondered who she truly was and if I'd ever get to really know.

Her building was right down the street from mine so before going out the next night, she invited me up to her place so she could grab some last-minute things. Heading down the hall to her apartment, I began thinking of the evening which lay ahead, where we would go, who else would be there, etc. We got to her front door and as she was unlocking it, I spotted a discolored shape above the doorway, almost like someone smeared something onto the wall. I looked closer and realized it was actually a cross. My friend noticed me staring at it.

“Holy water,” she said. Then opened the door, walked in, and never brought it up again. We went back out and enjoyed ourselves once more. The tradition became routine though a few months later, she'd be moving to New York City. We made the most of the evenings we had left before parting ways one last time. I never did get to ask more about her story—, who she was or why she wanted to move. I just knew we clicked and made each other laugh. That was enough for me. Similar to a lot of others made in a big city, our friendship lasted only a short while. Like revolving doors; people walked in and out of each other's lives constantly. The relationships I'd make there however, held some of

the best memories of my entire life, even if for a few moments at a time.

Things were beginning to fall into place—, I was finally becoming who I thought I should be. One night while out, a bouncer with broad shoulders at a nearby place looked closely at my ID and asked me what my background was.

“Romanian,” I told him. He then said he recognized the name. I gave him my dad’s pen-name and asked if he knew who that was.

“I do,” he replied with a slight accent I hadn’t noticed before.

“He was my father,” I told him proudly. He then bowed his head and led me inside the front doors. I never expected that reaction and was the only time in my life I’d felt that way. I was the son of an author. I didn’t walk, talk, or act like one—, but that still didn’t change who I truly was. The thought that I’d never written something myself bothered me day and night. I knew writing was in my blood but everything I’d start, I’d eventually give up on.

Walking by the riverfront, I’d stop and stare at the elegance of the Tribune Tower and daydream about being published myself someday. Making my way down Michigan Avenue, I’d pass by the building and look at all the stones from other parts of the world placed within its outer walls; Paris, London, Tokyo, etc. Once I’d be back in my studio

apartment, I'd look out the window and wonder when I'd be able to have my own collection of souvenirs from other places around the globe. On my mom's suggestion, I decided it was time to try my luck at getting some type of advice for a future career. I dressed in some of the nicest clothes I had and hopped on the bus toward downtown. Once there, I walked up to the front doors of the Tribune and waited—, for someone, anyone to go through either in or out. A gentleman wearing a suit and eating the last bits of his lunch finally approached the doors to go inside. It was now or never.

“Excuse me sir,” I started, “I don't mean to bother you but I was just wondering what's the best way a new writer can land a job upstairs?” He gave me a smile and probably saw himself from years past standing in my very position now.

“Well, the way most people start here is by sending their work through our website,” he said. “I know it's tough but keep at it, it'll pay off.” I thanked him profusely for his time and he was off, through the doors and elevators and back to work on the higher floors. I looked up to the top of the structure, knowing it had a rooftop patio with undoubtedly amazing views.

“One day—,” I said to myself, hoping to see it in person.

Even though I was getting accustomed to my new surroundings, I still maintained my Michigan connections. Good friends would come out and see me every so often and I'd show each around as much as possible. Their presence always made me miss home, but to have them in this new environment was so good for us. My mom would either fly out or take the train every couple months to see me. If she couldn't make it, I'd go see her instead. Rarely did more than three months pass by without the two of us reunited in the same room again. Half a year into my move, we'd learned where our favorite restaurants were, which movie theaters had the reclining seats, and all the best views of downtown from the lakefront. We made it a tradition to go to The Edge every time she'd visit. It was a local bar and grill that never closed—, ever. Not on Thanksgiving, Christmas, or New Year's, it stayed open for all to come in and eat whenever they'd please. It became our home away from home. I ended up making memories within its walls with each one of my friends that'd come to see me—, both old and new.

I picked up a job back in retail and began selling expensive shoes to privileged college students and their parents alike. It was the type of place where I'd dress up in nice shirts with a tie to match. The store stood right in the heart of Lincoln Park—, where

Diversey Parkway, Clark Street, and North Broadway all intersected. Floor to ceiling windows lined the walls and we'd always feel as if we were apart of the constant movement happening right outside our front doors. Every time I'd walk in there'd be a different vibe depending on who was working that day. Everyone had their own personalities that made them fun to be around, but there was a gentleman in particular who was in his last year before retiring that I especially took to.

“So you're my replacement?,” he said smiling when first meeting me. We both laughed while shaking hands. “Just keeping it light, that's all.” A few minutes passed by before he leaned in closer and said what'd probably been on his mind all along. “So—, are you a believer?,” he asked respectfully.

“Oh yeah—,” I said. “Definitely.” I'd gone through my own journey with God up until that point and while I couldn't have possibly known what'd still lay ahead, believing in Him went without saying. From that day forward, my new friend became my spiritual mentor while I lived in Chicago and long afterwards. His words were a beacon of hope for me as I walked those lonely streets on my own many months later. We'd talk about faith, the deeper unanswered questions we'd each have, and

Scripture which applied to us every chance we could.

“Someday, after we’re all gone, we’ll still be characters in Dre’s stories,” another older employee said one afternoon, knowing I liked to write. I smiled at the thought, not taking it to heart. I figured I’d met everyone who worked there until a delivery man dressed up in a brown uniform walked in during my first week and went straight to the back of the store. Everyone greeted him like he was a regular staffer and I introduced myself as the newest hire. He was a bit older than I was and over time, he grew to know some of my music tastes so started calling me Westside. I held the name in the highest admiration, just like I did his own character. He always made everyone around him laugh and feel good about themselves—, I took to that kind of attitude. Every time he’d walk in, the store would brighten up. That was the type of presence I wanted to have myself.

Over time, I began feeling comfortable in my new position. My co-workers all taught me different sales techniques. I had an arsenal of good advice at the ready for any circumstance—, until a mother-daughter duo finally walked in one night.

“I’m looking for something new to run in,” the woman said with a heavy accent. I showed her to the

athletic section as I noticed her adult daughter was speaking my native language.

“Are you Romanian?” I gently asked.

“Yes!—, are you?” I nodded my head and we started talking about my new move into town and how I was liking it so far.

“We were actually at a Romanian Writers Conference before we came here,” the mother told me. I immediately knew to ask if they’d talked at all about Marcel.

“Yes they did!,” she said, surprised that I even knew who that was. I felt a smile slowly taking shape.

“He was actually my dad,” I humbly said. The lady stood there amazed at the fact and didn’t know what to say next. She quickly asked her daughter to take down my information but that’d be the only time I’d ever see them. Naturally, I told my mom about the conversation later that night over the phone.

“See—?,” she started to say through a bit of crying, “he’s still remembered to this day.”

Work went on and I was beginning to live a normal routine once more. It was a lovely summer day when a woman in her mid-to-late seventies with short platinum-blond hair walked in and immediately started chatting me up.

“You know, this is the nicest corner of the nicest neighborhood in the city,” she said. “You’re very lucky to be working here.” She then tried to rest her fold-up mobile grocery cart against one of the chairs inside the store. It started tipping over until it eventually fell onto the floor. They weren’t that well-made but everybody had one tucked away inside their apartments somewhere—, they were invaluable for when you wanted to do more shopping than usual. She wasn’t as grateful to have hers. “I hate this thing—, I wish someone would just steal it already,” the woman said. I knew I liked her right then. We spoke for a few more minutes about my newly made move into town and I could tell she was taking a liking to me—, not in any romantic sort of way, but like a long-lost son or something. “Let’s have lunch sometime,” she suggested.

“I’d love to,” I quickly replied. I had nothing but respect for her and truly valued her experience and potential friendship. I had no idea what a fascinating person she’d turn out to be.

Chapter Eleven



The next day my new friend and I met up at The Edge of all places and sat outside in the shaded section of the patio.

“So tell me about your mother,” she quickly started. We spoke at length about my upbringing, being a single child, and having to lose my dad at such a young age. Memories you wouldn’t normally talk about over a light lunch but she wanted to dig into deeper things. Suddenly, we became good friends. We started going grocery shopping together and I’d help her walk back home with the heavy bags. We began going to different neighborhood antique stores so she could teach me what she knew.

“This is how to spot good silver,” she’d say, holding up little trinkets or dinnerware. She proudly showed me all her tricks.

One day I called her to see how she was doing.

“Are you free tonight?,” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then we’re going someplace special.” That was it, we hung up our phones and I met her downtown later on that night. We walked into the glitzy John

Hancock Center and rode the elevators to the ninety-fifth floor. There, we went straight and entered The Signature Room. We took our seats near the windows as we surveyed the city dozens of flights down below. Tiny specks of light lit up the land like punctured holes in a stretched-out canvas. “This is such a beautiful place to live,” she said. I agreed wholeheartedly and with that, we ordered our drinks and sat with a spectacular view in front of us.

A few days later, we met up in a donut shop and she pulled out a measuring tape she’d brought along with her.

“Hold out your arms at your side,” she suggested before starting to take measurements. “Let’s go downtown today and buy some new clothes.” That was all she had to say, we got right down to business. She pulled out dark nail polish from her purse and unscrewed the top off. She started painting her fingernails with the deep carmine color right there in the restaurant. “Can’t go downtown without looking my best,” she said. I respected that. No matter the age, she liked taking care of herself.

We rode the 151 bus toward Michigan Avenue and got off at our stop. Upon entering the ten-floor department store, I immediately saw her change and adapt to the high-end atmosphere. She was back amongst her own people—, those dressed-up-

at-all-times-of-the-day people. She walked over to the nearest sales associate and introduced herself.

“Hello dear—,” she began before telling the assistant exactly what type of makeup she was shopping for. We stayed a good hour before heading upstairs toward the men’s section. Once there, she held up a shirt much too out of my price range and told me why I needed it.

“Yellow’s a good color—, it doesn’t go out of style.” I appreciated her fashion advice but couldn’t afford much more than another tie or so. With that, we left the store to head back toward our homes. She sparked up a cigarette and two seconds later saw the bus coming down the street. “It never fails,” she said, putting out the lit ember. We said our goodbyes and knew we’d see each other again soon.

My mom came out to visit me and planned to meet my new friend as well. When I saw her walking up the street from the taxi I quickly went to give her a huge hug.

“Hi Mom!—, I missed you so much,” I said to her earnestly. Gabriela and my friend went out to lunch together at The Edge while I worked. On my break I walked over and saw them sitting opposite one another at a table inside. I kissed both of them on their cheeks and sat down to my already-prepared omelette.

“Your son has been so wonderful,” she said to my mother. She made me feel like this was the best place I could’ve moved to. I was meeting new and exciting people, they liked me, they didn’t hold my past against me. “You two have such a beautiful relationship,” she said to my mom and I. “Cherish each other, always.”

My friend and I planned to meet at our local donut shop one morning and I woke up an hour early to get ready. I walked the few blocks from my studio and sat down in one of the chairs inside—, and waited. I waited and waited but she didn’t show. I never saw her again after that. I got a new phone and my number changed shortly afterward so we never had the chance to reconnect, though I think back to her quite often. I wonder if everything went as planned for her. I wonder if she still paints her nails before going downtown or if she still circulates throughout the neighborhood antique shops on the hunt for good silver. The truth is I miss her and probably always will.

The holidays were here again. My mom came out to see me and we immediately knew where we needed to go first. The Magnificent Mile was lit up on both sides of the street—, white lights wrapped themselves around the snow-covered trees like thin strips of fine linen. It was Black Friday and we decided to stay out well past midnight. People were

everywhere and everyone was holding at least two shopping bags in each hand. We entered department store after department store—, all adorned with beautiful decorations, embellished trees, and ornaments galore. The remixed holiday music blared through hidden speakers above. We exited back out onto Michigan Avenue and decided to have hot coffee while watching the snow fall like intricate ash from the night sky. An image of pure happiness remained in my mind for many months afterwards.

Time passed by, the job was secure, and I was meeting new people everyday. I started to date a lot more than I ever did back in Michigan. A couple months here, half a year there—, the deeper relationships were sporadic but each seemed to hold special lessons I'd always learn too late.

I especially loved one of my longer-term girlfriends. She was so sweet and charming and bright. I'd bought a brand new guitar with the paychecks I saved up from work a couple of weeks before our first date. Afraid that I wouldn't have enough money to pay for the dinner, I returned the sunburst-orange acoustic and had a great time at the restaurant with her instead. I didn't regret the decision—, she was worth it. The relationship was a battle of wits—, and I always lost. I told her repeatedly how smart she was. I only hoped she

knew for herself. When we weren't watching our favorite movies or showing each other songs we liked, we'd go to coffee shop patios and write short stories out on the spot—, reading them aloud afterwards. She was the type to sit alone at five-star places, eating the expensive meals while reading her book of the week. I adored her personality, but eventually, she too tired of the same old problems I'd bring to the table.

I woke up earlier than usual one morning as we'd be having a store meeting at my job and every employee needed to be there. Even walking up the street I sensed that something wasn't quite right. I entered through the front doors and while there were donuts and coffee awaiting us, I just took a seat in the middle of the main room. The manager walked in a minute later. Everyone sat in a circle as he began explaining the situation.

“So, the neighborhood's changed—,” he softly said. “It's gotten younger and people aren't buying the same types of shoes they used to when we first opened.” The implication was clear. We'd be closing soon. “We're looking at another month or so,” he went on. Everyone's futures suddenly became uncertain in a matter of moments. I had many opportunities open to me around the same streets; restaurants, movie theaters, etc. It was the older folks I'd felt sorry for. We all got up from our seats

and my mentor said something about going down to The Edge.

“Can I join you?,” I asked.

“You want to have lunch with me?,” he asked back, surprised that I didn’t want to just head home.

“Of course,” I said. We walked the short distance to the restaurant and sat inside by the front doors. I ordered my coffee and felt honored to be having this opportunity to chat with someone I so looked up to. His food arrived and before taking a single bite, he bowed his head in prayer. I greatly admired that and made the habit my own. “Can I ask you something?,” I said. “How do you think this world feels to someone who doesn’t believe in God?” He thought a few seconds before answering.

“Foreign,” he replied. I understood better than I thought I would. “I imagine that it feels very unfamiliar and distant.” I slightly shuddered at the thought. We exchanged ideas for another half hour before splitting ways. We’d have a month left at work—, after that, who knew what would happen.

My lease was almost up toward the end of my first year there so I started looking around for slightly larger studios. After numerous visits to different buildings in the area, I’d found a perfect spot down on Deming Avenue right across the street from a beautiful church. I was already sold on the

place when the property manager said the magic words;

“Wait until you see the rooftop.” We climbed a few floors until reaching a door on the side of the stairwell, he opened it slowly and there on the other side stood the entire city. It was a stunning view of the downtown skyline. I knew this is where I’d spend the next couple years of my life.

I’d walk around the lower side of the neighborhood connecting it to the Gold Coast and marvel at the beautiful brick townhouses. I imagined that’s where people moved into after living in smaller studio apartments—, after they’d married and settled down. I tried to picture the different families in their separate condos and how they must feel whenever they’d step out into the tree-lined streets. *How charming*, I thought while daydreaming of my own potential future amongst the buildings one day.

Back at work, we were readying for a permanent close as shelving came down, stock got shipped, and the clearance racks grew to take up half the store. The company had a go-to guy who took care of all the loading and unloading, dismantling of displays, and other odd jobs that needed to be done. A type of mechanic that was more scruffy than everyone else, he rarely spoke without a cigarette balanced in his mouth. I offered to be his helper. I wanted to learn

from him as much as possible, I could tell he knew things that I'd never get the chance to know again. We would pile shelves in the back of his white van and drive to the other neighborhoods toward our designated warehouses. Over and over this went. We'd go to scrap metal yards and transport decades-old files from storage unit to storage unit. I always felt like I was on a certain type of mission while out with him. The van would drive down the streets with both of us exhaling cigarette smoke in the front seats and I suddenly felt more important than I ever did back in Michigan. Something exciting was taking place, I was finally living out an adventure—, even if it meant cleaning out a shoe store.

“My cousin is buried three plots over from Al Capone,” he said to me while talking about deeper things than usual. “They tried to get me into that life, but I never paid it much attention.” His story made me want to ask a million questions that I knew I shouldn't, so I didn't. Though I was absorbed by that lifestyle, I already knew it'd never be for me, despite trying to live it out later on in my journey.

Closing day finally came and as the last of the displays were being carried out through the front doors, a small congregation huddled in a quiet, reflective circle. The owner stood contemplative, looking through the empty showroom which he'd called his second home for so long. He peered past

the drywall and wooden pillars which had held his store in such high esteem for more than half a century. His father had established the empire seventy years prior. Photographs taken at the opening in 1944 capture a much different era; Sinatra stars in his film debut, Poland's army begins its Warsaw Uprising abroad and distinguished men wear herringbone tweed suits with hats to match. It's no wonder that a place such as this exponentially grew in reputation amongst its following.

As the newest hire and having lived in the city a short while, I had no prior knowledge of the company's culture and influence which it held in the minds of so many Chicagoans. Throughout my year there, I heard stories of different times. Of when customers would go the extra mile for superior quality—, from both product and service. Of when shopping itself was more of an experience rather than chore. Most importantly, I was able to witness firsthand what many retailers strive to get from their clientele—, loyalty. Countless occasions occurred when people wearing bright smiles walked through the front doors and were greeted on a first-name basis. They'd walk straight to their favorite salesperson and spark up a conversation much like old friends catching up. It's something that can only

be found in the independent shops that have built a real history of integrity and customer devotion.

Indicative of the surrounding neighborhoods' modernity however, shoppers traded in personalized service for high-speed e-commerce, quick one-stop shops which may have added convenience but swapped it out for quality and so, the youth which moved in didn't bother adapting to long-standing traditions. Patrons which had lived in Lincoln Park and nearby neighborhoods would often say; "It seems you guys have been *the* shoe store for ages."

I wondered if the days of such brand-loyalty were gone forever, or if they'd just become harder to find. If shopping had gone the way of so many other daily experiences and was now a tedious exercise of clicking, webpage after webpage. If the physicality of holding onto a newspaper, flipping through the pages of a book, or touching the Italian leather of a shoe between index and thumb had become a thing of the past. Technology made so many things easier for the modern consumer and in the same breath, had taken a certain intimacy away which can't be replaced by smartphones and tablets.

During the store's last few months, nearly every customer who entered replied in shock, anger, or disbelief regarding the announcement to permanently close up, particularly at how such a

neighborhood staple could suddenly vanish after seventy years on the same corner. Though no longer there, the famous royal blue awnings still stand in the memory of many commuters for a time when neighborhood pride trumped all else.

Now, there were only three of us left inside the vacant store; the owner, the mechanic, and myself. It was the last time I'd see any of them. The owner knew I liked to write so I asked him his opinion on something that'd been weighing on my mind.

"I'm sure you've had many articles written about you before," I began, "what's the most important piece of advice you can give me?"

"Be direct," he said. With that, we all walked out the front doors for the final time, locked them up, and went our separate ways.

Months would pass by and I'd eventually change jobs, women, and my aimless wandering of different streets and back alleys. There was a new convenience store to get used to, other restaurants to try out, and different bus lines to memorize. Things were looking pretty from the outside in, and I was starting to believe my own persona.

Walking up the main avenue one day, I stopped to rest on a bench when I heard loud honking and looked up to see my old delivery friend driving down in his work truck.

“Westside!” he yelled out while pointing at me through the open door and smiling. Even though the old store had shut down, he still had his route to maintain and I still lived near it enough to see him once in a while. I was glad we’d be able to catch up every so often.

There was a full moon out on a night I was walking around the neighborhood, trying to find something to do or some place to go. There were random stores lining the boulevard but most of them were closed, between those were restaurants but they were all packed. Down the block a bit, I saw people standing in a line that led out into the street. Figuring it was either for an upscale club or a bar, I almost passed up the opportunity to check it out, but curiosity still peaked my interest enough to go see what it was about. Following the people up from the end, I looked at everyone standing there and liked what I was seeing; bright blue mohawks, gold-plated nose chains that reached the ears, band patches stitched onto jeans and jackets. The further I walked, the more unconventional the looks got. Finally, I reached a point where the line curved around a corner and led down a dark alleyway. I couldn’t make out much other than an open door on the side of a building beyond some trash dumpsters and a headless mannequin propped up beside it.

“Where’s this lead?” I asked the first person I made eye contact with. The woman in a light blue Little Miss Muffet outfit pointed up to a brick wall behind me. On it were the letters N-E-O spray-painted in pink. I’d walked by the alley many times going up and down Clark Street but never noticed there was a club tucked away within it—, hidden from the mainstream in ways I was yet to find out.

Naturally, I walked to the back of the line and waited for my turn to pay the cover and go inside. I began hearing deep pounding bass from outside the doorway. I peered through as beyond the darkened entrance were flashes of spotlights and strobes. Making my way into the main room, I was enshrouded in neon. Black-lights flickered from the ceiling above. The speakers were nearly bursting apart from the surging music. The bar served a single brand of beer and that was it—, cash only. Each of the club-goers around me had their own style from head to toe. The city’s outsiders were all gathered here in one place at one point in time and it was glorious. I felt at home amongst my own people—, punks, goths, and ravers alike. I lost myself in the pulsing blue and green lights surrounding the dance floor—, moving like my mother used to so many years before I ever showed up. I’d finally found my own personal Paradise.

Weekend after weekend passed by; there was either Frank's down the street with a giant portrait of a young Sinatra, trendy Mother's downtown or when I needed a break from the regular routine, there was Neo. I'd go there with a good friend—, both wearing our buttoned-up dress shirts which made us stick out in the crowd. I didn't mind. I just wanted to be apart of the atmosphere.

I'd made new friends along the way and began having them over more often than not. We'd sit on the benches on my rooftop. The skyline glowed a gorgeous amber throughout the blankets of night. I slowly blew out thick streams of smoke and stared out at the dozens of structures just a mile or so down from my studio apartment. The spot served as a perfect vantage point for surveying the concrete land I'd come to call home. The lights inside those rooms all looked so bright. They illuminated so many different types of lives living within those walls. Who knew what those people loved or felt or dreamed of for their futures? One thing was certain; we were all in the same boat—, one made of pavement and emerald trees that glimmered along, alone in the vast open sea. A city separated by borders and boundaries of surrounding towns that paled in comparison. Chicago was exuberant.

I remembered all of the nights I'd spent lying awake in my bed back in Ann Arbor. All of the

dreaming I'd done suddenly washed over me and I understood that God had fulfilled the promise He'd placed deep inside my heart so many years ago; the stars above shimmered like mine used to up on my ceiling and the outline of tall buildings was finally realized.

On the streets eight flights below moved the shifting midnight shadows of drunken socialites. They'd holler up to my friends and I watching the back alleys while perched on our peaks like stoned gargoyles. The fire-escape ladders provided an ideal position to take in the entire city up ahead as well as the ground down beneath. When we'd get low on cigar papers or drinks, we'd do a quick run toward the center of the neighborhood. I'd walk to the twenty-four-hour convenience store and intermingle with all the people I'd pass by.

"Have a good night," we'd say to each other. Either the store clerk selling me cigarettes or the high girls giggling to themselves on the corner, we were all apart of this living organism. Though I was in my element, I was slowly falling back into a routine; work, play, sleep, rinse and repeat. No matter how many new people I'd meet or where the next party was, the feeling that I was getting tired of it all was ever-present. Like so many times before, I needed to shake things up—, a new job or hobby or perhaps a different place to live within the city itself.

I expected anything except what eventually came calling.

Chapter Twelve



It was 2015, Springtime—, the trees were sprouting leaves, the L-trains were slowly repopulating, people no longer needed to dress in dozens of layers. I had lived in Chicago for almost two years when one average afternoon, I saw ‘Mom’ flash across my cellphone. I answered and within a minute she was relaying the news.

“They found something,” she quietly said, referring to a recent mammogram. I consoled her as best I could, reassuring her that it was “probably nothing.” All the while, hoping to believe my own words that I was trying so hard to convince her of. I told my mom that I loved her as usual, ended the call, and sat in silence for a few seconds before giving a kick to my wooden bed frame in despair, splintering it in two. An x-ray and ultrasound later; lung cancer and Hodgkin Lymphoma—, her third and fourth cancers, respectively.

I’d been walking down the main street from my second studio apartment a few weeks prior when I noticed a boutique selling fashionable shoes and thought to apply for a position within. I entered and

a well-dressed man of about fifty stood up from behind the desk in the back of the shop.

“Hello—,” he said.

“Hello, I was just walking by and saw your store,” I said, looking over the small space. There were random boots hanging from the ceiling, boxes piled on top of each other, and shoes of every kind displayed all around. “I was wondering if you needed any help,” I continued, hoping for the best. He did—, and gladly told me to come back in a week for training. We’d become good friends in a matter of a month when I told him about my mother’s diagnosis.

“What type of cancer does she have?,” he asked. I told him though couldn’t help but ask what was really on my mind.

“Have you ever heard of someone beating it more than twice?,” I said, thinking of her third let alone fourth onset with the disease. He looked at me quietly before lowering his eyes and shaking his head “no.” I didn’t know what I could do—, I felt helpless and hopeless. The thought of my mom having to go back through all the treatments enraged me from within and only added more fuel to my ever-growing fire. With nowhere else to place the hatred—, I began blaming God. It was the worst decision I could’ve made. Instead of running to Him with my worries and placing them in His hands, I

pushed away as hard as I could, knowing I'd rather be on my own than with the uncertainty of a higher power healing my mother once more. So on my own is how He let me be. The world began seeming colder and stranger—, things which used to make sense were no longer logically sound. Life and death; the journey we all take once were chosen for it now seemed pointless. Pain and suffering; the feelings we all go through once we're given free will now seemed cruel. Everything was finally foreign. Without the guidance of my heavenly Father, I was an orphaned adult searching for meaning within a chaotic existence. I wondered what my spiritual mentor would've said to me during those days. The thought of calling him crossed my mind several times but I couldn't bring myself to dial the full number—, I was too embarrassed of my thoughts.

I began making poor decisions—, story of my life. The people I was hanging around changed, the drinks I was downing got stronger, and the recklessness of casual hooking up was reaching new heights. I hid all of my feelings deep beneath the surface. Keeping a smile on my face at all times, some of my closest friends could tell how fake it truly was.

“I don't need to know everything to know you're going through something,” a good friend said. She could feel the desperation I exuded with each new

step I took. While I tried in vain to hide my situation, it only got worse. My soundtrack escaped through speakers submerged underwater—, somewhere far below, I could still make out the beats counting my seconds like a muffled metronome. The stars in my sky whirled above, leaving lines of fading light behind like a shot with the shutter permanently opened. The days' edges began blurring into one another. My new pattern; an old kaleidoscope.

Riding around in the passenger seats of a hundred different cars, I leaned out the windows and closed my eyes, breathing in the stiff night air. I was filling my lungs with more fumes than oxygen and coating their blackened corners with more tar than anything else. The convoys would crawl along the streets in slowed convertible movements—, accented by the thumping sounds of pounding subs coming from out the dozens of duffle bag-sized trunks. My life began looking like the video for 'Jump Out the Face' in every way possible; melodic strings set the mood in minor tones, trap drumrolls resembled our rapid heartbeats like spinning revolvers, and lines of thread on the wall connected everyone and everything together like a collage of chaos. These were the memories I made during the last summer I'd spend in the city; a swirl of seedy streets, strangers in the night, and singing along to

chopped and screwed remixes of A\$AP and Thugger. The coastline parted its lips and in-between them they swallowed my inner-pulp whole. Its hair cascaded down in rivers of hearses and taxicabs. I was the unmoved mover; affect without cause—, nor emotion. *Keep going*. I couldn't think of anything else but how to get through the very next second. If I could just make it through the night, I'd be okay. *If I can just make it home*, I'd think to myself. The ground opened up and I fell in toward a darker reality. I was numb. The crowd got increasingly perilous. Our energy streams flew through the air as we signaled in a secular cryptography. I was finally exposed to a new type of lifestyle. The city's grid took on entirely different dimensions; I saw limits I'd never noticed before. I looked around me as often as I could, trying to find something that reminded me of home—, of my mother's warmth and loving nature—, there was nothing. I was in another world.

“Have you ever had a brother?,” I finally asked someone, still reeling from the realization that I'd lost one of my closest to me.

“I've had many brothers,” they somberly said. I didn't know if they understood my despair, so I just nodded my head and went about my business. My place started having all the hallmarks of a life gone

awry; nothing in the fridge, doors off their hinges, and a heater than never worked.

“Your spot is definitely a trap house,” another person said. I didn’t know if I should laugh or shake my head in personal disappointment—, so I probably did both. The sun’s rays would come calling me forth. Up and ready for another bout with fate. Where would I land on today’s wheel of misfortune?

Back in Michigan, it was Mother’s Day when my own was to have her right lung’s upper-lobe surgically removed. By her bedside, we prayed as much as we could and though I felt the sting of walking so far away from God, I still pleaded with Him that everything would turn out well. I kissed her forehead and left to go sit in the waiting area with the rest of the people who had loved ones in surgeries that day. There I sat, listening to my headphones and at the same time, not hearing a thing. I was gone—, lost—, hardly present at all. Hour after hour passed by, thought after thought of what was going on entered my mind and created a whirlwind of fear and worry. Suddenly, I felt a deep nausea take hold—, I quickly headed to the restroom and puked my guts out from the stress I was feeling that day. The doctor finally called me into a small room where he laid out the details of the surgery.

“Everything went as planned,” he said. “We believe we’ve removed all of the lung cancer and though she may have a harder time breathing normally, she’s as stable as possible for now.” I thanked him as much as I could and continued to hope that the Hodgkin Lymphoma would be taken care of just as easily. Gabriela eventually shaved her head in anticipation of the upcoming chemo treatments.

“You’re so beautiful Mom,” I’d say to her as often as possible. I took the next train to Chicago and wondered what’d come next.

I arrived back home and sat quietly on my bed while staring at the inside of my front door. I’d found a piece of paper with Romans 12:2 from long ago that I taped to it after I’d moved, wanting to read it every time I left to go outside. Recently though, I just let my eyes graze over it without much thought. I didn’t want to conform to the ways of the world—, but found it much easier to do so than anything else.

Back at work, the store owner could tell I was deep in my own head more often than not. He’d try and pull me back into reality every once in a while.

“So what do you write about?,” he’d ask, knowing I had a passion for it. I never knew how to answer. He probably asked me half a dozen times and for

each response I just shrugged and went back to work.

I was staring at my ceiling one night when I suddenly wanted to be back outside. Needing to be around people, I immediately jumped up from my chair and began getting ready to leave the studio apartment. I walked out into a comforting lifestream. Instead of watching the dust settle inside, I was back in the constant flow of why I moved to the city in the first place. Knowing exactly where I wanted to go, I walked toward Clark Street and turned right, heading south. The line was already longer than I'd ever seen it before. It was well into the next street up from the club.

“What’s going on?” I asked someone in front of me.

“It’s Neo’s last night,” he said.

“Last night?” I didn’t understand.

“Yeah, they’re closing it down tomorrow.” I was in shock. It’d been open for over thirty-six years and in a few short months, I’d already made a handful of memories myself. Open since 1979, it was the city’s oldest nightclub. Now, it was my last chance to enjoy its unique feel before having to say goodbye forever. I stood in line, waiting to enter the alleyway and head down toward the open door on the left. Finally, I arrived at the side entrance. I paid the cover and entered into strobe-filled scenery. It was

packed—, shoulder to shoulder. The vibe was slightly downhearted, everyone knew they were in their final hours to forget about tomorrow and party the night away. I made my way down to the dance floor. People of all types moved with the rhythms of the booming music, making the most of the time they had left. From the corner of my eye, I spotted long, crimped hair I thought I'd recognized. I walked up to the blond woman and sure enough, it was who I'd expected; a past co-worker.

“Hey you—,” I called out over the loud noise. She looked up from her elegant dancing.

“Hey!,” she exclaimed. We hadn't seen each other since I switched jobs a few months back. She'd invited me over for a dinner party at her place and we'd always had fun during work swapping stories of shows we'd gone to. I never expected to see her here though. It was a pleasant surprise.

“You made it!,” I said of the club's final few hours.

“I couldn't miss it,” she replied. We took a few pictures and moved well into the night. I don't remember the last song the DJ played but toward the end of it, everyone had their arms raised and clapping. Some were crying, some hugged each other. It was a bittersweet moment I got to share with hundreds of strangers. Piling back out into the alley, everyone had saddened looks on their faces. They were grieving of a time gone by—, the decades

that'd passed, the memories they'd made. We all took one final look inside and made our way down toward the street out front. Splitting ways, there were honking cars pulling out of parking spots, people hugging goodbye, and groups going in different directions. Each person had their own after-party to get to. All the while, it seemed like everything was coming to an end.

Back in Michigan, my mom was finishing up another round of radiation. I walked into the building with her, arms interlocked, as she took baby steps toward the front desk. After her appointment the secretary congratulated her and handed us a certificate and a teal wristband with the word 'Strength' written across it in big block letters. I smiled that my mom would have something to remind her of how far she'd gotten. Getting back in the car, she opened the glove compartment box and placed the wristband inside.

"You don't wanna wear it?" I asked.

"I've never liked jewelry around my arms," she said, "it's just uncomfortable." I thought about it for a split-second before asking;

"Can I wear it then?" I knew it'd always be a reminder of how strong Gabriela truly is and would help me keep moving along throughout my own journeys.

“Of course,” she said, taking it back out and handing it to me. I slid my hand through and stared at it with pride.

Even though I was doing a decent job at hiding what was really going on with me, I still couldn’t fool everyone.

“How’s she doing?,” friends would ask of my mom. I didn’t have the energy to tell them the whole story, so I just kept it as surface-level as possible.

“She’s doing better,” I’d say—, hoping that even hearing those words would make them come true. I’d see her everywhere—, on each street, standing there, healthy and full of life. She’d smile and extend her arms out to give me another hug. Of course, the closer I’d get, the more I’d notice it being a mirage. Things wouldn’t make sense without her by my side, without knowing she was just a phone call away. I’d spend each train ride to and from home looking out the window at a world blurring by which I didn’t understand anymore. There were still so many memories to be made, so many places to travel to together, so many coffee shops to try out and things to laugh about. Every second spent trying to figure out why everything was happening the way it was, I’d grow further apart from the real world. Somewhere in the back of my mind though, I still begged that she’d be okay. I still believed that she could be healed—, once and for all.

I was at the lakefront one day, back in Chicago, taking pictures of downtown from the south side angle.

“Doesn’t this all seem pointless?,” a friend asked out loud. She was verging on a philosophical talk that I wasn’t truly ready for, but I responded all the same.

“Like what?,” I asked.

“Like the whole rat race of life—, doesn’t it all seem so insignificant in the end?” I couldn’t help but think about what Gabriela would say. What her thoughts on the matter would be now that she’d lived through a communist upbringing, a life devastated by cancer, and having a son who barely represented her values. I was sure she would agree —, it was all pointless in the end. Maybe I was right so many years ago after I’d moved out of Ann Arbor. I couldn’t help but think about mortality on a personal scale, like I’d used to after my dad died. Now the thoughts swirling around my head were of my best friend—, nothing made sense and everything seemed lost, including me. The more I let the thought linger, the worse off I was becoming.

Back at the job, I was restocking the shelves and replacing the shoes to their corresponding displays when through my peripheral, I saw someone walk into the store dressed in all brown.

“Westside?—, you work here now?,” the man asked. I already had a smile on my face before turning around and shaking his hand. The new shop was a stop on his delivery route and not only did he know the owner but they were good friends. Even in a big city, it still felt like a small world. We caught each other up on everything and I told him about my mother’s situation, hoping he could keep her in his prayers.

“Man—, I’m really sorry Dre. My pops died of cancer so I know how it can be,” he said to me in a serious voice. He saw that I had changed since we first met. I spoke differently, moved differently, I wasn’t the same person as before. “God doesn’t put more on you than you can handle,” he said. “Remember that.” I told him I’d keep him in the loop on everything but like most people during those days, I sadly lost touch with him too.

Someone who I’d become close friends with was over one night—, I knew he was as far from a believer as possible. A near anti-theist. We were watching music videos when he nonchalantly asked me a question I’d never expected from him.

“So what do you think about the Holy Spirit?” I couldn’t believe it—, I was the last person he should’ve been asking at that specific point in time. Of course I still believed, but I’d grown so cold toward everything that I was hardly in the position

to give out spiritual advice. Nevertheless—, I needed to be as honest as possible.

“Well—, I think there are certain divine truths that we can only understand through the Holy Spirit. It’s kind of like a telephone between us and God, connecting and translating those feelings for us to fully grasp.” I didn’t know where those words came from—, they just seemed to flow out through my mouth. My friend just looked at me for a little while without saying anything.

“I’ve never heard someone speak like that before,” he said, probably referring to most other people’s judgmental ways of spreading their beliefs. I was more careful, trying to explain what I believed while respecting his own opinions. He eventually got up to leave and right before exiting through my front door, he stopped to read the Bible verse written there—, standing a moment or so before finally saying goodbye. I wondered what he thought about it, though I’d never really know. Besides, all I could think of was when I’d get to see my mom again—, and in a week’s time, I was on a train to do just that before coming right back just a couple days later.

Chapter Thirteen



Upon returning to Chicago, I walked into my apartment to see three or so strangers standing around in a semi-circle. All had their own drinks in hand; water, beer, etc. They turned around to look at me but none knew who I was or that it was even my place they were in. I didn't care—, I actually enjoyed the company. Those days were difficult enough, I didn't want to be alone for too long to process them.

“Hey,” I said to everyone. They all sounded back in their own ways and went on with their conversations. Even though I'd moved into a larger space, there still wasn't much room for so many people in the studio at once. I sat down and just stared at the walls, trying to seem in the moment, though I was a million miles away. I tried listening in to the random talks around me when something specific caught my ear.

“Yeah...,” one of the guys said, “you can actually pray for Michael to protect you.” I didn't know much about angel hierarchy, but asked anyway.

“Archangel Michael?” The guy looked up and brushed his light brown hair aside to see me better.

“Yeah, do you believe?” he asked back. I knew I was a believer, but didn’t know how much of the spiritual realm was real and how much was made up.

“Kinda—,” I said. He explained more of what he knew and we started becoming friends. I admired his knowledge and insight, he admired my being an Aquarius. On top of knowing much about theology, he was well-versed in astrology too.

“My girlfriend’s an Aquarius,” he proudly said. “They’re special.” I didn’t know about that, but I smiled at the thought.

Over the next couple months, I started meeting more and more people—, most of whom were extremely creative and kept me inspired to be the same. I wanted to group together, to have a base of operations we could construct projects within. There was so much negativity flowing through and around us that I knew we had to get that energy out somehow. I wanted to begin something which provided us the perfect type of outlet to be ourselves and make something significant in the mean time. I thought about my own emotions during those days —, what came of their presence in my life. *You’re either going to create or destroy*, thoughts kept telling me. I was already doing the latter more often

than not and I knew many other people were in the same type of situation I was in—, mentally at least. They told me stories that I couldn't believe—, I couldn't let my feelings get the best of me however, so I pushed them down as far as they'd go. I needed to be numb to handle some of what was going on around me. I could no longer let sympathy get the best of my reality—, I needed to harden my heart as much as possible. It was a mistake. Ultimately, I lost touch with who I was and why I'd become the person I was becoming. I never let my true thoughts shine through anymore—, the truths that I'd always known, I kept to myself. If there was an opinion thrown out in a group of people, I just stood there in silence, knowing there was no possible way that I'd be able to change anyone else's mind but my own. I said what everyone expected me to say—, I acted the way they expected me to act. Everything began being premeditated down to the smallest degree. Either way—, I knew there was more to each person than they'd let themselves believe. I knew that deep down, each had something valuable to contribute.

“We should start something,” I said to my astrological friend. What I had in mind was some type of art collective or team that'd stick by each other no matter what—, much like a family. I was so scared of losing the only one I'd ever known that I badly needed to begin another—, grassroots and all.

He liked the idea though saw me beginning to have a negative outlook—, to lean toward the destructive side of things. I couldn't explain that it was just my reaction to what was going on around me; a reflex.

“Whatever you start, from here on out,” my friend advised, “make sure that it's based on something positive.” I had so much pent up within me that I didn't even realize how numb my emotions were getting. The need to show my mom what I could do took over all other concerns. My friend and I began talking about our beliefs and he opened my eyes to something I'd never thought of before. “You know, sometimes God'll put someone in a dark place just so they can infiltrate it and set off a glitter-bomb of light all around. Kind of like a spy.” The thought lasted with me for a long time afterward—, appreciating its subtle beauty.

“Should we go to the roof?,” I asked him.

“Let's go—,” he said. While riding the elevator up with drinks in hand, he began talking about things that I didn't even know I was feeling up to that point, but he had me right all along. “Listen man, I have to tell you—, any person you've ever known that may leave us and ascend toward a higher place —, they're still going to stay with you, they'll always be with you—, now and forever.” I turned away, trying to hide my true feelings. We exited the lift and walked through the rooftop door—, taking in

the splendor of the city lights once more, trying to forget all of the heartache. I eventually went over his apartment a few days later while he sat on the floor, packing his bags.

“Are you going somewhere?” I asked him.

“I’m moving out today—,” he said, “but I have nowhere to go.” I knew he was living with two other roommates and I figured he couldn’t maintain it anymore. I felt bad for him, especially since we’d become good friends. I immediately had an idea weigh on my heart.

“Come stay with me—,” I said. His eyes widened.

“Are you serious?” he asked. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.” I knew he only needed some shelter and a place to sleep when he wasn’t at work, plus I needed the company so it worked out both ways. He arrived at my place later on that night, giving me a big hug once I opened the downstairs door for him.

“Thanks again for letting me crash here,” he said. “I don’t know anyone else who would’ve done this for me.” We walked back up to my studio and I blew up an inflatable air mattress I’d had from previous visits that he could use. We talked well into the night until finally falling asleep.

A few days passed when we thought to order some drinks from the local liquor store down the street. They’d deliver just about anywhere and we

figured that was as good an idea to pass some time as anything else. Drink after drink, my friend and I sat and spoke about anything that'd cross our minds. Finally, evening rolled around and we each laid down on our mattresses to rest. The room was spinning and I felt an intense vertigo whenever I'd close my eyes. I already knew what type of night it'd be. I pulled up the garbage basket and placed it near my bedside. Every ten minutes like clockwork, I dry-heaved into it with every muscle my stomach could convulse with. We had the window cracked open and the air blowing in made the place colder than it should've been for that time of year. We both stayed underneath our separate blankets, trying to get some sleep. I continued my battle with keeping down even the smallest bit of water when my friend sat up and came over to give me his blanket as well, seeing my body shivering from both the cold and the toxins.

“Thanks man,” I got out before letting my head fall back onto my pillow. He tucked me in like a worried parent and went back to the air mattress in hopes of falling asleep once more. That was one of the worst nights I'd spend in the city—, physically, mentally, and emotionally. I was a mess—, inside and out. There was nowhere I could find relief—, not in my studio in Chicago, not in my mother's home in Michigan, I was floating through life without a place

to call my own, without a spot to pull the covers over my tired head and just rest until I'd finally awoken from this long, ongoing dream.

A few days passed and I knew there was nowhere else to go but back to a lonely studio apartment. Instead of locking up and leaving work like I'd done so many times before, I found myself shutting off all the lights after closing and taking a seat in the back of the shop—, thinking of who knows how many strangers were over my place and how I was so much more fractured than anyone around me could've guessed. I just sat there in an empty shoe boutique with my head on the desk, in the dark—, and surrounded by it.

I was becoming restless. I'd find myself traveling from one end of the city to the other just to pass some time. When I needed to be around people, I'd head downtown and walk the streets without a purpose, with nowhere to go, nowhere to hide from my problems. Since I'd moved, my L-train station was no longer Diversey but a stop before it, at Fullerton. I switched to taking the Red Line from there on out as it conveniently ran at all hours of the night. I'd wait on the platforms with hands in my pockets, looking down the empty tracks with nothing in sight. Finally, it'd arrive and being so late in the evening, there was usually no one else around. I'd enter the first car I saw and again—, I'd

be completely isolated. There'd be nobody there but me and my reflection in the train's windows. I'd sit anywhere and just stare out at a light-filled oil painting. I'd pass over the Chicago River and see the magnitude of the Merchandise Mart still standing, guarding the city from the opposite side.

"Grand..." I'd hear the automated announcer say of the upcoming stop. Its voice would echo throughout the deserted car like someone calling out for help in a ghost town. I'd continue staring past the fiberglass to my side—, thinking, wondering about anything and everything all at once. With so many souls in such a big place, how was it that not one understood what I was going through? It didn't make sense, but I had to keep going on my own personal journey.

"Chicago..." the announcer would chime in again. The gloomy nature of things began altering my daily perceptions of the world around me. I spoke in lower tones, nothing could hold my attention for longer than a few seconds at a time, and the abstractions of all things macabre took over. The same sprawling shadows which I'd felt so many years back had once again found my happiness and were intent on destroying every last ounce of it.

"Clark/Division..." time was passing, I was still moving. *Always keep moving*, I'd remind myself. To stand still for too long meant coming face-to-face

with what was really going on; every bad decision, every bad medical report, every bad thought that'd pass through my mind. Things got to a point where I stopped caring what'd happen to me. If our fates were already sealed, I couldn't do much to change it now.

“North/Clybourn...,” I was getting close—, I could sense it. I was about to take my worst fears head-on and hopefully still come out the other end to capture the emotions I'd gone through. That's all that kept me going—, the hopes that one day, my journey may help someone else on theirs. Life; it seemed so temporary, so momentarily important. My mom explained to me multiple times, how it was like a roll of thread—, we'd keep pulling and pulling and one day, when we'd least expect it, the thread would reach its last bit and we wouldn't be able to pull anymore. Life, life, life—, and then? Who knew?

“Fullerton...,” my stop. It'd snap me back into the present and I knew I'd have to exit the car and again, it'd be vacant. No more of my thoughts swirling around it with the negative energies they'd brought along with them. I was leaving—, heading back to a home I hardly knew anymore.

Some of the friends I'd made in the past few months were influential in their own neighborhoods. Some lived right down the street from me. Either way, they began circulating in and

out of my place like a gear that kept turning. Rain, sunshine, it didn't matter—, there was always someplace to go, someone to interact with. Like many months ago with my old job's mechanic, I was always on a mission. On a particular evening, I was to meet someone of high importance in the area—, someone who most everyone knew. I walked the few blocks over from my place and met him outside of a lively bar on a busy street. We went down into a darkened alleyway and once there, we spoke at length about how we'd been holding up. We quickly exchanged product and I was on my way back to the apartment. Once there, I greeted whoever was over at the time and took a seat next to a little wooden nightstand I had. I poured out the goods I'd just gotten and began chopping it up—, just like I'd done years prior to ever moving out into the city. Line by line, I divvied up the substance and prepared it for my guests. Nobody partook, so I just shrugged and bent my face down toward the table, inhaling every last flake. I looked back up and the room was suddenly in extreme focus—, the walls were crisp, the appliances were exaggerated, everything seemed like I was peering through a fish-eye lens. I wiped my nose and headed into the bathroom to wash up. I'd never been more tired in my life—, I was simultaneously passing out and wired like I hadn't been in months. My body didn't know what to do.

My phone rang in the living room and I asked a good friend to answer it for me. I was too exhausted —, mentally and physically. He handed me the cell and the man on the other end wasn't too happy with me not answering myself.

“Why did he just answer your phone for you?!” he said, frustrated. I didn't know how to tell him that I couldn't even talk anymore—, I'd already been up for days and my head was spinning at that point.

“I'm sorry man, I can't make it right now,” I said. He too, knew of my mom's situation and the fact that I was so stressed must've set off some empathy as he agreed that I should just get some sleep and that was it. That'd be the last time I'd ever see or talk to him.

I was starving one night and found myself at a local fast food restaurant right down the street that always played classical music through its speakers. I didn't have much money at that point—, just enough to afford a sandwich on their dollar menu. I took my tray to the nearest seat as I couldn't wait to unwrap the paper and devour the meal. I suddenly felt complete gratitude take over—, even for the little bit of food I had. I remembered my mentor from months ago and so, I bowed my head in silent prayer, thanking the universe, thanking what was left out beyond the planets and stars and if it *was*

something like God—, then at least He'd hear my attempt at some type of reconciliation.

Up on my rooftop was a little square smoke-stack made of bricks that I sat propped up against. I faced downtown while above me hung a perfect harvest moon—, full and magnificent. I stared at it a long while without moving. Finally, I started feeling tears drop down my face.

“Please give me enough time—,” I both whispered and begged. My mother's tired eyes were all I could see. I couldn't give in to the thoughts of never having had the opportunity to show Gabriela who her son truly was. A fear so real took over my entire body and I knew at that moment I'd never felt so lonely before in my life. Even through all of my mistakes and self-induced misery, Someone still loved me, Someone still hugged me from a different realm—, but I could barely feel it now. I wondered what my father would think. All of the sacrifices he and my mom made for me—, to do what? To waste away in pity? I didn't know what else to do so I just replayed all of the happier moments I'd made with my mother in my mind before getting up and returning inside my studio.

Back on the roads, I moved around the city the same way I'd walk around my neighborhood streets —, aimlessly. The music was always louder than the other cars' that'd pull up alongside us at red lights.

The smoke escaping through our cracked windows always smelled extra sweet. Everything coasted onward though it quickly became what my friend had mentioned earlier—, pointless. All of it meant nothing and I was beginning to think of just running away to a foreign country somewhere on another continent—, far from the smoky spotlights of darkened clubs I'd come to know as my home.

My friends from both Michigan and Chicago began worrying about me and wondering if I'd completely lost my mind during the past few months. Nobody understood what I was doing—, that I just needed an outlet to vent my frustrations through.

“It's hurting my heart to see you like this,” a good friend said to me.

“That's all you've become Dre; partying, smoking, and trying to be something you're not,” another good friend told me one sunny afternoon. We sat on a bench while I tried my best to explain what was really going on. I truly valued her opinion and could tell she genuinely cared.

“I promise—,” I began, “this isn't the real me. I just need to be this person for a little bit longer.” It was useless to try and explain my recent actions. Only I knew the truth and started caring less and less who accepted me anymore. Only a handful of people mattered to me. They too—, eventually

drifted away. I was left completely alone—, maybe for the best.

About that time, I was traveling back and forth between Michigan and Chicago every other week. Visiting my mom took priority above all else, though I still held down a job while juggling a pretty hefty smoking habit—, anything to ease the pulse of reality just outside my immediate bubble of haze. Constant movement meant that I didn't have the time to stop and let it all sink in. Gabriela began chemo again. Her coughing was getting worse. Eventually the daylight crept in and the real world welcomed me again in its grasp, realizing I needed to move back home, permanently.

Chapter Fourteen



I entered the hospital room with my duffle bag still slung across my chest—, I'd come over directly from the train station. My mom was asleep and looked as if she'd just gotten back from World War III. The light shining on her face was making shapes I didn't understand, lacking geometric sense. Even that worried me. What was going to happen tomorrow let alone a month from now? There was no stability. I myself was an outlined contour of a person barely getting by with a slight heartbeat.

The I.V.s were stuck into my mom's arm and as she moved in her sleep, the monitor's beeping began to wake her up. She looked at me sitting by her and tried as best she could to make out a smile.

"Hi Mom," I got out myself, choking back emotion. The nurse walked in and began the breathing treatments—, mask and all. Seeing my mother so helpless and fallen overcame any willpower I was storing up. We didn't have much to talk about; the situation spelled itself out. I was just as fragile as she was, not knowing what to do or say to comfort her spirit. I wanted to lift her up, to let

her know just how great everything was going to be after the treatments and physical therapy, but I hadn't the slightest clue as to what was going to happen. All I could do was hope for the best.

Outside the hospital, I stepped back into crisp autumn air, it'd always been my favorite season before, but now, it just *was*. In the passenger seat of a good friend's car, I tried in vain to explain the scene back at Beaumont Hospital.

"She's just..." I'd trail off. "I don't know, she's..." I couldn't get out a single sentence. I just placed my fingers over my shut eyes, pushing the tears back in. My friend pulled the car over and put his hand on my shoulder in solidarity with me.

"It's going to be okay Dre," he said. "I just know it is—, your mom's too strong to let go." So it went that with each new day that'd pass, my friend's words became more and more true. Gabriela would wake up and begin her regimen of medicine, meals, and making sure I was okay. She was eventually released from the hospital and came back home for a while. She couldn't walk on her own so I held her arm closely before setting her down on the couch so she could let out the stream of tears she'd been holding back wash over both her cheeks.

"Mom, I'm here for you," I reassured her once more.

The days quickly passed by and soon I found myself riding in a car with a much greater man than me. I felt a strong need to ask him something that I'd been thinking about for a long while. I valued his opinion above all else so I knew I could trust him with anything.

“Sir, I was wondering; which needs to come first —, confidence or success?” I knew they were both important in a person's life, but couldn't pinpoint which preceded the other.

“Success,” he said. “No one's just born confident.” It made sense. I'd hardly known either in my own lifetime so I figured I had to get to work on something, anything, to get myself feeling like I knew I should deep down in my spirit. The thoughts from Chicago came back, that if I just had some writing to my name, I could show my mom and be happy. I would finally know that all of my past experiences weren't in vain, that I did something of value with them, and most of all, that Gabriela could finally see her son set off on his own path. Unfortunately, I had nothing—, yet. I knew there was a calling to capture everything my mother had been through, before the cancer, before the hospitals, and before escaping to America. I saw the thread of her existence connecting all these events together. There was a story waiting to burst out, I could feel it.

Back at the doctor's office, my mom and I took a seat on a couch inside the large lobby while we waited for her appointment. There was a coffee table placed a couple of feet away. It was a short cylinder with a rounded marble top. The sides were made of strange metal shapes between the ends. I looked closer and realized that one of them was actually a large V. Next to it was another V and an I. So it went circularly around the table until the Roman numerals reached twelve. A clock. All it was missing were the two hands atop the piece pointing to the right time. I stared intently at it, letting my imagination take hold. *How much time was truly left? How many months or days or minutes did I still have?* Gabriela meant everything to me and I knew we'd both fight this thing until our last breaths. Finally, we got up knowing the appointment wasn't far off and started walking toward the designated doorway. We went down the hallway, into the office, and up to the front desk to sign her in. We got the next batch of paperwork that needed filling out and took two seats to do just that. Once inside her room, my mom sat in silence waiting for some type of reassurance that everything was going in the right direction.

"I'm going to fix you," my mom's oncologist promised her. She held back emotion as hard as she could, wanting to believe in nothing else more. We

went to and from different clinics, always just one step away from complete healing. Like so many years prior, there was an angelic presence watching over every move my mom would make. Even though it seemed to be an uphill battle, she never let her circumstances deter her from keeping as bright a smile as possible on her face. It was contagious. Whenever I'd start feeling down, there she'd be; a portrait of pure optimism.

"There are so many people praying for you," Gabriela's closest friends would tell her. My mom's good friend came visiting her back in the hospital one day.

"These are the best you can get," she said of the new headphones she'd brought my mom. The building was constantly buzzing and Gabriela's friend knew it'd be hard for her to get any good sleep. My mom was still laying in bed, barely able to speak when she parted her lips to finally say something. Her friend leaned in to make out what she was saying.

"Andrei..." she slowly got out before trailing off. Tears ran down her cheeks and my mom's friend followed suit. She placed her hand atop Gabriela's forehead and brushed her hair to one side.

"He's going to be okay," she said to my mom. "I promise." Down on the first floor, my friends would come visit me in the hospital's food court and buy

Gabriela flowers to bring upstairs when they'd see her. I'd always appreciate their support and be forever grateful when they'd pull up a chair beside my mother's bed just to talk and spend time with her. These were true friends who never let their love toward me grow cold, even when I later started losing myself in random bottles and with a rampant self-pity.

Between home and hospital rooms, I began sifting self from body. It was a way of escape that didn't yet involve poisonous firewater or worse. I let myself walk the hallways through plenty of buildings but wasn't ever really there. I'd be present, but so far lost within my own mind that I didn't know what up from down was. Eventually, I stopped hearing that still, small voice telling me to stay in faith and that everything was part of a higher will. Instead, it was the world I heard—, an ambiguous choir sang in minor keys wherever I went. I couldn't escape the constant imagery of depressive episodes they'd project inside my mind's eye. It didn't take long for me to reach back to an old friend with a bottomless pit ready and at the willing. I'd unscrew the lids off and slowly pour out the liquid into a thousand different cups. *Do it*, I'd hear myself think. *Pop the top and swallow the fluid. Keep it down, don't go throwing up all that sewage.* So I did and so it went. Night after night; I'd escape into a haze

of lost moments and perceived realities that weren't anything more than fleeting thoughts of forced happiness. Of course, the joy didn't last. The mornings were harsh. The pounding in my temples would wake me back up to the truth surrounding my immediate presence; puke and poured out bottles that'd been sitting empty for some time now. I knew it was a horrid routine but I didn't want to face what was truly happening. I didn't know whose arms to turn to except those that'd always been there for me in the past—, worldly ones with a tightened grip.

“Think of me when it snows,” my mom told me from her hospital bed. A premonition of future events that hadn't even happened yet brought tears to my dried, bloodshot eyes. That's what I started to do—, at home while looking out the windows, I'd see her. A smile so wide that nothing in my peripherals could ever hide. She was laughing like Marcel never liked her to do, she was dreaming of plans that were yet to play out, it was snowing outside and she was very much alive.

At night, I'd lay down on the living room couch and look at the opposite wall while my mind wandered in different directions. I'd eventually see my mom's bedroom door, shut with a light escaping out from underneath. It was from the TV she'd left on. I knew she wasn't there, that she wasn't in her bed watching all of her favorite shows, healthy and

whole. She was gone; alone and confused—, just like I was. It still didn't keep me from pretending she was just a few feet away. I watched the light change brightness, turning into blues and yellows and whites. Closing my eyes, I'd trick myself into imagining everything was okay again. *She's just in the next room over*, I'd think to myself. I knew better, but I preferred the make-believe. Daylight would eventually wash the glimmering lights away. Just like it'd eclipse the idea that my mom was finally back home—, the sun would cover all hopefulness of the night before.

Every time I'd lay back down to rest, I'd see small bits of teal enter my line of sight. I was anything but strong during those days. Still—, the wristband served as something almost holy—, like a guardian angel that was always watching over me, no matter how far I'd fallen at that point.

I'd often walk down to the single gas station in town to buy cigarettes—, two packs at a time. They'd see me so much that they started ordering my favorite brand and type. I always showed up, like clockwork, every few days. On one particular occasion, I was feeling especially depressed about everything and the lady behind the counter saw it on my face.

“Everything okay?,” she asked kindly.

“Yeah..., it’s just that, my mom has cancer and...” I tapered off, realizing how inappropriate this conversation was getting for a light greeting between patron and person behind the cash register. “I’m sorry,” I said, feeling a bit embarrassed about the reply.

“That’s okay,” she said to my surprise, “you’re getting it out.” I still remember that as being one of the nicest things anyone said to me during that time. She somehow understood my sadness, maybe from personal experience or from stories of loved ones who’d gone through similar situations. Either way, it meant something to me.

One night when I was more miserable than usual —, I’d found a near-gallon of whiskey and began downing gulp after gulp. Unaware at how much I was truly consuming, I eventually started passing out from all the poison in my stomach. I called a good friend with the last bit of energy I had and he could immediately tell I was worse off than ever before.

“What’s your address again?,” he asked worriedly. I could barely speak.

“Two...,” I slowly got out, “...six—.” After that, I shut my eyes and don’t remember anything else. An hour or so must’ve passed by before I was awoken to about seven or eight paramedics in my room, all standing around the bed I’d collapsed on.

“Hey—,” one said, “we’re here to take you to the hospital, okay?” I just shook my head in disbelief. I slowly asked if I could smoke one last cigarette before being hauled off again and they agreed—, seeing how badly I must’ve needed it. Lighting up, I heard one of the EMTs say something about how hard this all must be for me, knowing my mother was in the hospital for her own treatment.

“What do you know about darkness?,” I nearly lashed out. They all looked at me with pity, seeing my sickly-yellow face with tired eyes to match. I still didn’t know how they got into the apartment or who called them, when one of them finally said what I’d already felt all along.

“You have a really good friend who called us for you.” I knew he was standing in the living room a few feet away but they wouldn’t let us talk to each other.

“Can I just powwow with my friend for a minute, please?,” I asked.

“I’m sorry, you have to come with us now.” With that, I put out the cigarette and was transported to the nearest hospital by ambulance. Upon getting to the Emergency Room, I was pumped clean once more of all the chemicals that’d been in my body. The doctors gave me some water to drink and I was brought out into the main waiting hallway with other patients until my BAC went back down to

normal. One of them must've seen my wristband I was still wearing when he looked at me with slight sadness.

"I know how it is," he said, "I had a close friend who I'd worn the same wristband for years ago." I nodded and appreciated his empathy. I was on the bottom floor and I knew my mom was only seven stories up from me. We were in the same place at the same time for very different reasons. Once stable, I had my I.V.s taken out and dressed back up in my street clothes, ready to leave the hospital. Instead of the front doors, I headed straight for the elevators. I took them to the eighth floor of the South Tower, knowing my mom wasn't far away. I could already feel her presence and warmth surrounding me, I badly needed to see her after the night I'd had.

"Hi Mom!" I said, walking into her room.

"Puiule!," she said, surprised. It brought back so many memories of her in the hospital on other occasions, but I was never more glad to see her than in that exact moment. I couldn't bare telling her about the last few hours—, that I had just been a few floors beneath her, almost unconscious. We talked and caught ourselves up with everything that was happening back home. In the corner of the room was a small fold-out bed that she said for me to sit on. I laid my head down and shut my eyes for the

first time in a long while—, feeling a deep sleep taking over me. Gabriela was only a few feet away now, I was safe once more.

My friends from Chicago heard about my recent near-overdose and one of them called after I got back home to check up on me.

“Aren’t you worried that you’re gonna like—, die?,” she asked sincerely. I didn’t know how to answer her. I just sat in silence. “If I woke up tomorrow and found out that you weren’t here anymore—, that’d just, I don’t know...,” she let my imagination finish the thought. I tried to console her that it wouldn’t happen again and that I still had my wits about me, but deep inside, I was just as lost as ever.

Back in our routines, my mom would come home for a brief while before going inpatient again. One doctor’s visit after another and so it went. Day after day, the thought of potentially losing my mom to this unrelenting disease would take new ground in my heart. After her bone marrow transplant, she started long stretches of living within the off-white walls of medical rooms. Hospitals, nursing homes, cancer clinics; it all blended together. She never asked “why?,” always kept praying, and her smile never disappeared.

“Let’s go to the prom,” she’d like to say, clutching my arm with one hand and the I.V. monitor with the

other. My mom took baby steps as the bottoms of her bright yellow hospital socks gripped the floor underneath. The hallways of Beaumont shimmered with shining fluorescent lights akin to the city streets of Chicago's Magnificent Mile where we'd been side-by-side just a year prior. Now, instead of pea-coats and patent leather purses, she wore a tied hospital gown and a couple thin blankets around her fragile shoulders. We walked slowly, but together—, never letting go of each other's arms.

“There she is!” the nurses would call out from behind their workstations whenever they'd see her up and about. They liked seeing movement, attempts at some type of exercise, even if it was just a little bit at a time. That's one thing I grew to greatly admire about Gabriela; her determination to get well again and live out her life as healthy as possible never once wavered. Throughout all of her trials and treatments, she stayed as strong as any substance this world could possibly produce.

Though my mom was doing as well as she could in her current position, I was still reeling from my depression. My mind began to slowly deteriorate due to the constant worrying and little activity I was doing. I did anything to numb what was going on inside my heart. I couldn't bare knowing Gabriela was in the hospital by herself, but I didn't say much when I'd visit either. I felt a pang of guilt whenever

I'd come back home knowing my mom laid there in her bed without me standing by her side. I needed to occupy my free time with something, anything to get my mind off of what was happening around me. I soon took a job at a local pizzeria as a dishwasher. No longer did I need to dress up in suits and ties like I did back in Chicago—, from here on out, I would go to work everyday with the thought of my dad. *If he could do it, I can do it.* The people there were nice enough to understand why I was so quiet and kept to myself rather than go to many outings or house parties with them.

“We want to put you on the line,” the manager said to me. Not a second passed by before I turned down the offer.

“That’s nice of you, but I’d rather get really good at the job I’m doing now than to step up further,” I said in return. Really, I just didn’t want anymore responsibility. I was comfortable doing the mindless work of washing, rinsing, and putting plates away. It was just enough for me to keep going. I was working for fifths and cigarettes and not much else. Week after week—, I drowned further down into my ditch of deepening loneliness.

On an afternoon I was off work, I found myself at a coworker’s place. I began downing shot after shot, no chaser. Thoughts started to swirl around my head; stress, worry, fear, desperation. It all seemed

to blend into a singular voice whispering to me, “you’re not worth sobriety.” I slowly fell back onto the bed and let my mind’s circuits rewire themselves as they saw fit.

“Do you *want* to quit?,” another coworker asked me. I sat up and thought about it for a few seconds before answering.

“Ninety-nine point nine percent, yes,” I said. Immediately I heard the words I’d let take root in my heart to this very day.

“You need Jesus.” At that moment, I knew—, *this* was the perfect time to stop, once and for all. As of this writing, I’m four years free from all alcohol, drugs, and even cigarettes. I couldn’t be happier to say so. I never thought it possible, but sober life truly is wonderful and I am very much worthy of it.

Chapter Fifteen



“A new day, a new life,” my mom would say. The sunlight let us know how true Gabriela’s words were. We began a normal routine again, slowly but with confidence that everything would go back to normal sooner than later. I was starting my new journey of being completely clean from all the things that’d put my life on hold for so long and I couldn’t have been more grateful that I was able to do so with my mom by my side. Unfortunately, we were home for only a few weeks before my mom’s breathing became so labored that she had to call her doctor.

“Go back to the E.R.,” he told her. With a look of desperation, Gabriela started to pack her bags for what would undoubtedly be another long stretch away from home. We arrived and were quickly admitted to the main section of the large hospital. There she stayed, and would stay, for another three months. Everyday I was there, I’d go down into the cafeteria and get us coffee. I started reading the Bible more often, afraid to try getting back into God’s good graces but more afraid to not try. I

began praying more regularly—, something I'd almost forgotten how to do. There was a Bible course that I started a few months back which I stopped doing, just like everything else. I picked that back up and began my studies again. There was a chair in the corner of the hospital room that turned into a little bed—, on it, I'd flip through the pages in my booklets I had and started making sense of flawed heroes who were still people after God's own heart. That was always a comforting thought.

Walking those white hallways, I always thought of how lucky I was to be mobile and active and young enough to still be able to change the course of my life. A lot of other people I saw there weren't as fortunate. This time, I was sober enough to truly appreciate my situation and how blessed I was to even recognize it as so. I saw the hospital through new eyes; what I'd fought so hard against before now was restoring life to those in most need. The random sounds of a medical room no longer seemed cold and mechanical but rather full of hope and even slightly melodic. I didn't enter my mom's room with the dread of losing her anymore but exactly the opposite; I was thrilled to see her doing better than she was the day before. The I.V. monitor didn't bring up bad memories but instead, began resembling a staff for her to hold. This went on and

on until the darkly-tinted glasses I'd worn for so much of my life were finally taken off and shattered against the ground beneath my feet.

Week after week passed, month after month. I began to keep a daily record of my mom's strengthening. She was so tired that all she could do was fifteen minutes in the wheelchair at a time. The physical therapists came in and did little exercises with her as I recorded her progress throughout the stay. They did more tests and found that the lymphoma was no more. She'd beaten her fourth bout with the illness. Though ecstatic about the news, she'd soon have another mountain to climb on her way back to full-health again.

The nurses were doing their daily evaluations when they noticed a decent-sized bedsore on her lower back.

"Oh no..." they said, "you're probably going into a nursing home until this clears up." Just when Gabriela was getting excited to go back home, her situation called for another few months away. They lifted my mom's stretcher and clicked it unto its tracks inside the back of the ambulance as I hopped in the passenger seat. We'd eventually go to a couple of nursing homes, each different from the other in terms of people, vibe, and surrounding stores. I'd push her wheelchair down the bleak corridors as she worked on regaining strength in her legs.

“A few more steps and you’re done,” the physical therapist would tell her as she held my mom’s waistband, making sure she wouldn’t fall. “Good job Gabriela!” they’d collectively say. Everyday, a few extra steps. She’d always been a fighter and everyone was beginning to see it.

I’d walk the hallways of the nursing home slowly, stopping and staring at the randomly placed paintings on the walls. They were of better scenes; valleys full of flowers, mountaintops, and palm trees from random locales spread across the planet. All were from such different places and I wondered how the people there lived. If they too, came down with the same types of illnesses the patients in these rooms were dealing with. If they too, had nursing homes like this one which their families could rely on when needed. Or if they too, felt the desperation of being left there alone and completely forgotten. I’d eventually look away from the pretty pictures when my mind would travel too far out into the stratosphere above. I’d reel myself back in and continue the lonely walk into the living area where an electronic keyboard had been set up, but was never really used. I sat with its black and white keys in front of me and slowly let my fingertips glide across the silent teeth. I left it turned off so they never made a sound, but in my head, elaborate melodies played. I’d pretend I was the one who

wrote them, though they came out of nowhere, from a nothingness. In the corners of the room were big bookshelves housing different volumes of prose and poetry behind thick sheets of glass that'd have to be opened gently. I reached in one night and took the first book I saw. It didn't really matter what it was or which stories were in it, I just wanted something to read while sitting by the dimly-lit desk light. I started flipping through the pages and wondered who wrote these words I was barely skimming. Who were these writers and where did they end up in life? Did they have mothers and fathers who like mine, came down with sicknesses and did they eventually write about the experience? I knew I wanted to do that for myself—, to capture my mom's journey and her bout with the illness but couldn't think of a single sentence to start with. I was still too close to the process, living it out in real-time. *Write about it.* I thought of the advice my friend had given me in Houston so many years ago. I always knew that I would. That I'd take all of my mistakes and misfortune and most importantly, my mother's own story and let it flow out onto the page one day. I just didn't know when it'd happen or where I'd be when it did. I closed the book I was holding and went back toward Gabriela.

The alarm clock on my phone was set to go off every two hours—, that's when I'd be able to go and

rotate my mom from her laying down on one side to the other so she wouldn't develop another bed sore. It was a strange schedule to try and sleep through—, just when I'd begin drifting away, the phone would go off and up I'd jump. No dream lasted until the end, they'd all be cut just short of full resolve.

The people there broke my heart—, some were dropped off by their families and forgotten for good. The lucky ones saw their loved ones once or twice a year. Then there were those who still mattered to their sons and daughters, who would be visited on a regular basis. I made a promise a long time ago that I'd never put my mom through that treatment, but now it was more real than ever. I walked past the gathered wheelchairs by the nursing station on the way to the vending machines and looked over the faces of those whose families were who knows where. I thanked God I was able to be near my mother and that she'd never feel as lonesome as some others who weren't so fortunate. There was a girl around my age who came every single night to visit her grandfather. He didn't speak very well, but there she'd sit, in a chair right next to him as he watched the TV screen, deep in his thoughts.

There was a woman next door to my mom's room who was having a birthday. She was turning one hundred years old. Her nephew had bought her a beautiful bouquet of one hundred long-stemmed

red roses and placed the large vase holding them upon her windowsill. People were streaming in and out of her room, wishing her a happy birthday. I wanted to at least meet her so I slowly walked over to her open door. I was a bit hesitant as I didn't want to disturb her if she was asleep or relaxing. To my surprise, she was just finishing up talking to another woman who'd passed through when the birthday girl raised her eyes toward me. I walked over to her wheelchair where she sat, near the window so she could see outside.

"Hello ma'am, my name's Andrei," I introduced myself, "I just wanted to wish you a happy birthday." I slowly shook her frail hand and gently brought it up to my lips to kiss.

"Thank you sweetheart," she gracefully said. I looked at her in amazement—, thinking of how much she must've been through. She'd probably forgotten more experiences than I'd made at that point in my life. I wanted to ask her so many questions about so many things, but didn't want to keep her too long, I could tell she was getting tired and just wanted to shut her eyes.

The days continued to roll by, one after another. Gabriela was getting stronger with each new sunrise.

"Hello Ms. Carlan," a woman said while walking into my mom's room one day. She wasn't dressed in

scrubs like the other nurses or carried a clipboard like the main staff. After introducing herself she told us she'd be my mom's new physical therapist during her stay. She had jet-black hair that reached down to her shoulders and deep craters around both eyes. I immediately took to her thick accent. Over the next couple months, I'd come to learn more about her and how she'd visit her family back home in India as often as she could. We briefly spoke about Bollywood and how the India-Pakistan border held ceremonies of friendship and community. "You should travel," she said to me one day. I quickly took her advice to heart.

While I daydreamed like I used to do so many years prior, my mom was accomplishing her own set of goals in the real world thanks to our therapist.

"Good job Gabriela, just a few more steps," she'd say to my mom every time we'd all walk together down the long hallways and around the physical therapy room. She wasn't bossy but she was direct. I liked the passion she brought with her to work everyday. Not only was she helping my mom come back to full-strength, she was inspiring me as well. Finally, a thought passed through my mind and I couldn't let it linger for too long.

"Can I read to the people here?," I asked the head nurse. I wanted to do something for them but I didn't know what. There weren't many things I was

good at but I was already reading aloud to my mom everyday so I figured that was as good as anything else.

“Of course,” the nurse replied back, “we can set up a time to do it in the next couple days.” Eventually the moment came and I was standing outside the front doors on a beautiful summer afternoon. With about a dozen or so people—, my mom included—, staring at me, I rose up from my seat and stood front and center. I didn’t know what was best to read but I figured something inspirational and with positive energy would work. A Joel Osteen book was perfect. I flipped to the chosen chapter and began reading. I saw expressions of happiness on their faces—, the little bit I could do, I did. That was enough for me, to try and change their outlook on the day by even the slightest degree.

Back inside, my mom and I would try everything we could to make the best of our situation. The food there wasn’t great so we’d buy fruit and chocolates from the nearby stores and place them on the single table in the new room she’d been assigned to. It was large enough to house two patients, but there was only my mom’s bed and an empty floor next to it. I took it as my own and laid down blankets to sleep on before buying an air mattress I’d lay atop. I felt happiness, even within a nursing home, because I

was near my mother. I could witness her progress in real time, we could pray together every night before sleep, and I'd be able to take authentic Jerusalem oil and make a cross on her forehead with it. Everything seemed to be working together; the past and the present, both laying foundations for a brighter future than either of us could predict at the time.

It was her birthday when my mom finally got to go home. The nurses surprised her not with one cake, but two; chocolate and vanilla. Everyone sat around a few foldout tables while celebrating the event. My mom wished everybody the best of luck.

"I hope you all get to go home soon yourselves," she said. We packed up our belongings and piled the car to maximum capacity. I began pushing her wheelchair down the long hallway toward the front doors as every nurse and assistant stopped to say their goodbyes to her. I wanted to thank Gabriela's physical therapist one last time but she was off that day so I'd never get the chance. We approached the house with excitement. My mom began tearing up knowing she was finally going to sleep in her own bed again, finally get to have her favorite coffee in the morning, finally be back home.

Things slowly picked back up from where they'd left off. We started watching our favorite TV shows again, started cooking dinner, started our lives over

once more. I'd hold out my arm so she could interlock it with her own and slowly walk together from the living-room to the kitchen and back, up and down the hallway, throughout her bedroom. I wanted her legs to come back to full-strength. We needed to move around as much as possible. We couldn't let the mistakes of the past take hold of our hearts again. We pushed all the pieces of negativity out of our daily routines and our lives overall. Only positivity remained. Gabriela needed more of that than anything else. I tried my hardest to make sure I stayed in a healthy state of mind—, not letting it get hung up on the past or worried over the future. I tried to stay present in everything I did. My friend's words from Chicago came back like a boomerang; "Cherish each other, always." We started going back to the movies, to the grocery stores, we started having our old lives back.

It was a cold night out when we decided to head toward a favorite store of ours so we could get some hot soup to warm up with. Upon reaching the parking lot, I suggested to head inside myself, buy the dinner, and come back while my mom sat inside the car. That's what I did and though it didn't take longer than a few minutes, that's all it took to get the night going in the completely opposite direction. I got back inside the car and though I didn't notice

anything immediately off, I did note that my mom was strangely quiet—, barely saying anything at all.

“I got you minestrone,” I said to her cheerfully. She slowly nodded but not much else. I figured she was just getting tired so I took off the lid to the soup, handed Gabriela a spoon, and was about to give her the container as well when I realized she wasn’t holding the spoon quite right, like she was trying to grasp it correctly, but couldn’t. “Mom, are you okay?,” I asked, slightly confused. She just sat there, looked at me for a few seconds, then looked away again, as silent as can be. “Have some soup,” I suggested, thinking she was just light-headed from being hungry. Again, she gave me a strange look then stared off into the parking lot. She tried speaking, but was only getting out a word or two per minute. I began cautiously worrying, hoping it was nothing serious, but the feeling wouldn’t subside. A couple of phone calls later and I could hear an ambulance racing up the street, heading straight toward our parked car.

Chapter Sixteen



The EMS personnel quickly started doing tests on my mom right there in the parking lot. They decided we'd have to be taken to the nearest Emergency Room in case this was a stroke. Once there, a team of nurses and doctors rushed to Gabriela's bedside while they wheeled her into a room full of monitors and computers. They rolled up her sweater sleeves and went to work. As soon as they stuck their needles into my mom's arms, she let out a scream I'll never forget. It was piercingly loud. I couldn't imagine the pain she must've been experiencing as later she'd describe to me; "it felt like they were scraping my bones." This happened over and over, at different spots. Once they finished with one arm, they moved onto the other.

"No!—," my mom shouted. It brought tears to my eyes, knowing there was nothing I could do to calm her down. Everyone kept her arms and legs as stable as possible as they continued searching for blood-clots.

"Breathe through your nose," I tried telling her to no avail. She couldn't keep her concentration

focused on anything longer than a few seconds before screaming again. Minute after torturous minute passed as Gabriela tried as hard as she could to escape from the pain of another poke. Finally, as the nurses were finishing with their last set, I felt someone quickly walking up to me.

“Excuse me sir, would you mind stepping out into the hallway with me?” a doctor with a long white lab-coat asked me. “There’s a treatment we can give your mother that’s like a clot-buster, if there’re any blood-clots, this’ll take care of them. But there’s a high risk of bleeding on the brain that may occur, and we only have a ten-minute window to administer the treatment if you choose to go ahead with it.” I stood there, shocked and confused.

“What’s your professional opinion?” I asked her.

“Well—, these are life-changing choices. She may end up in a semi-vegetative state.” I didn’t know what to do. Of course I wanted to make sure that whatever this was could be taken care of, but I didn’t want any risk involved with the treatments either. My heart began racing. I looked at the clock —, time was running out to make a decision. Neither clots nor bleeding on the brain were good options. I was stuck looking down two very unpleasant routes. The thought of never being able to communicate with my mom again flashed through my mind and the realization that this was all happening so quickly

made each second ticking by all that more precious.
What to do? What to do? Just then;

“We only have a few minutes left,” the doctor reminded me. She must’ve seen the desperation on my face but knew that I was the only person who could make the decision.

“I don’t want bleeding on the brain—,” I finally said. “The risk is too high, let’s hold off on the treatment.” She nodded her head that she understood and was in agreement with me.

“We’ll just have to wait and see how this plays out then, if she’ll regain her speech and motor skills.” With that, the doctor shook my hand and I went back to sit down on a seat in the corner of the room. A very close friend to my mom and I sat beside me as she had followed the ambulance to the hospital and stayed with me throughout the entire ordeal. Her presence there helped me handle everything happening. I thanked her for her support.

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be right now,” she sincerely said.

Something like an hour must’ve passed by—, each person entering the room was either taking my mom to a new section for testing or bringing her back. My stomach would twist every time someone new would come in—, fearing that they may have brought bad news along with them. After Gabriela was back, and the commotion quieted down a bit,

she laid her head down and closed her eyes, absolutely exhausted from all that'd taken place. A short while later, a gentleman with a laminated piece of paper with drawings and words on it came in. He held up the page in front of my mom's face and gently asked her if she could say one of the words written on the paper.

"Jan..., u..., ary...", she replied. My head shot up and I looked at her with the widest, most hopeful eyes. An excitement washed over me that she'd finally be okay again. She read the rest of the list and described in detail what was happening in each picture the gentleman held up.

"Beautiful job, Gabriela!," he said. With that, he exited the room and my mom would be admitted into the main hospital for the rest of the night and most of the next day for close monitoring. She came back home and was quickly scheduled for another visit with her oncologist. Back at his office, he relayed the results of all the recent scans my mom had gotten done.

"I'm sorry I don't have better news for you, but it's back." Hodgkin Lymphoma. Again. Her fifth fight—, already underway. She began another round of radiation. Every weekday for a month. Finally, a few weeks later, after it was over with, the doctors wanted to see how the lymph node responded to the treatment, so they ordered another CT Scan that

would show everything up to the current moment. My mom arrived at the hospital an hour early. She drank the contrast. She did the test.

“It shouldn’t take long for the results to show up,” the nurse said. The evening passed as did the next and finally on the third day, I woke up extra early to check the phone. There across its screen—, a notification which read ‘You have a new test result.’ I quickly sat down and sent up a little prayer before opening and reading it. I knew anything smaller than 10mm would be amazing. What I read was 5mm, and the words ‘now normal size,’ written right next to it. I quickly went to wake up my mom and upon slowly opening her eyes, I stood there with the biggest smile.

“It shrunk!—,” I said to her, over and over.

“It shrunk?—,” she asked back bewildered.

“By half!” It was unprecedented—, she was fully recovered and stronger than ever.

“You’re officially in remission,” my mom’s oncologist finally told her. “Start enjoying life,” he said. We took his advice to heart. We started praying like never before—, thanking God and praising Him for all He’d done in healing my mother for an unbelievable fifth time. Things like this didn’t happen very often and we were humbled by the power of positive thinking and faith itself. We made prayer lists and added all of our loved ones to

them. The names grew into pages of people who we'd known for years and those whom we'd just met days earlier. We weren't saints, but we tried not being sinners either.

The holidays were on their way again. We began preparing for our annual Thanksgiving dinner. We never liked cooking it ourselves so we went to various hot-bars at grocery stores instead. Scooping up mashed potatoes, turkey, and gravy, we filled a few containers with food.

“Let's get some for that man who's always on the corner,” my mom said of the beggar by the bus-stop right down the way. We'd hand him extra money when we'd have it laying around the car but this would be special—, it was Thanksgiving. We packed a brown bag with all of the holiday staples, some drinks, and some small bills as well. We were both so excited to drive down to the little hill he'd stand atop with his handwritten sign that was just a discarded piece of cardboard. Upon making our way to the spot, we found it abandoned and empty. He'd already left for the day. We were slightly heartbroken because he was always there, except for when we wanted to see him most.

“Let's keep driving,” I said to my mom, hoping we'd eventually find someone to give our bag to. That's what we did—, up and down the main streets, turning down side roads, and slowly riding through

strip-mall parking lots. There was nobody. Finally, an idea—, the local twenty-four-hour grocery megastore. It always had people sitting outside of its front doors, either passing the time or on break from work. We drove to the nearby place and immediately spotted an elderly woman gathering up the shopping carts left outside. Carefully, we pulled up alongside the lady and I leaned out the window just a bit.

“Excuse me...,” I said.

“What?,” she answered, not sure why we stopped to talk to her. I held the bag up and out of the car for her to take.

“This is for you,” I said. She accepted the small gift and we were already off when she happily opened it and looked inside with wide eyes. Immediately, she started walking back towards the store to take her break from the long and cold day at work. Gabriela and I had accomplished what we’d set out to do. “Mom—,” I softly said, “this is my favorite Thanksgiving.” It wasn’t just helping someone out in a dismal parking lot, it was the fact that we were both back home. We were reunited for the holidays and everything seemed to look brighter than ever before. After what she’d been through, my mom deserved to be as happy as possible, and like my dad so many decades ago, helping other people is what made her smile the most.

Christmastime came around once more and like so many before it, this holiday season was especially precious. My mom and I bought a small potted tree that we placed lights on and kept in the corner by our living room windows. I got her a beautiful snowflake ornament with the words ‘I Love You, Mom,’ engraved in its center—, it summed up all of my feelings as well as anything else could’ve. I remembered my mother telling me the story of my dad dressing up as Santa Claus when I was three—, I remembered my mother surprising me in the halfway house when I was twenty—, and I remembered my mother and I walking down the snowy streets of Chicago just a few years prior. All were Christmases I’d never forget.

Throughout this entire process, my mom had a good friend who’d taken care of her when I was away. She’d bring Gabriela soup everyday from the hospital cafeteria and cater to her needs when I couldn’t.

“You know, I’ve got some family in Brazil—, if you’re ever interested in visiting,” she’d said to me. I immediately thought back to my mom’s physical therapist and what she’d mentioned to me months ago.

“I *should* travel,” I replied to Gabriela’s good friend. The seeds were planted. I wondered what the future held for me after my mom would regain her

full life again—, if I'd realize anymore of the promises put deep within my heart. God already took me to my dream city and nightly showed me the most beautiful skyline imaginable. What'd come next only He could know. Where I'd end up, who I'd meet, what streets I'd explore from here on out were in His hands. I already felt a strange pulling toward other places—, distant lands that I hadn't even heard of yet with rich histories and interesting people. Something magnetic. I knew I'd eventually find what I've looked for my entire life; adventure, purpose, redemption. I just hoped it'd be something worth writing about.

After countless MRIs, CT Scans, and x-rays, my mom's health is finally back on track; physically and emotionally. She isn't just who she once was, but an even better version of herself—, the best I've ever seen. I knew something meaningful was taking place, something that would mend two broken hearts from a lifetime's worth of mistakes. My mom truly was, is, and forever will be my hero.

I looked at her and saw a spiraling silhouette taking shape—, up to and beyond the ceiling, through the air outside, and past the clusters of clouds. Her labored breathing was suddenly improving in real-time as the woman and a girl appeared standing side-by-side. What once was, would be again; youth, lungs expanding with ease,

no more illness of any kind. A double-helix stamped into the sky showed an infinite life lived and living again through another Gabriela, soon to be. Lines of ethereal mass moved over and around, representing a duality I'd never seen before—, my present mother and my future daughter, holding each other's hands, removed from the chains of linear time. Memories started intertwining and replaying on continual repeat until these earthly days would be no more—, laughter that outlived this block-universe, unrestricted by its limited space. This was the moment it all came together and I felt an inner-peace that everything which was, always will be and everything which will be, always was. She is alive—, now and forever.

These past few years have been a whirlwind of emotions; from the initial diagnosis to the treatment and testimony of my mother beating these illnesses once more to the extreme gratefulness we feel whenever we're able to make more memories together. One of our favorite traditions is to have coffee in the morning and talk about our past experiences, present thoughts, and future plans. Those are some of our most cherished times spent with one another, and it's in those moments where my mom tells me about the most vivid memories of her life. As the steam slowly rises up and above our dark roasts, we start our daily ritual of planning out

our day. More often than not, we get sidetracked into a conversation about how things used to be when she was growing up in Romania or what I remember about my dad. We talk openly about what she went through in her life, in her marriage, and in her battles with health. We then talk happily about where we want to eventually travel to, what the Scripture means when it says what it says, and how many dreams we still have yet to see come true. I not only value these moments more than any other, but I thank God I'm still able to share them with a person whose been through so much more than I could ever go through myself and still came out on the other end with such a beautiful smile on her face. No matter what the future holds, I couldn't be more proud to be her son.

Looking back over my mom's life, I stand in complete awe of just how strong her spirit truly is. Knowing how much she sacrificed for me and my future used to sadden me when I'd feel like I hadn't done anything with my life but now it all seems brighter than ever before. I know her journey wasn't all in vain, that she didn't endure so much for so little in return—, it's my responsibility to make good on the promises I've made to her throughout our lives, that I will stop at nothing to finally make her proud of me. She isn't only my mother, she's my best friend.

Back at home, we decided it was the perfect time to take a vacation. We cleaned the whole apartment in a couple of days. We wanted to come back to as clean a place as possible. While emptying out old containers from the hallway closet, I saw a small piece of folded up paper at the very bottom of a blue bin I'd kept my belongings from Chicago in. I reached for it and upon unfolding the tiny note, there was my mentor's name and phone number—, clear as day. Even though we hadn't spoken in years and I'd changed phones multiple times, now I had his contact information again right before my eyes. I couldn't believe it and so I handed it over to my mom sitting a few feet away.

“Wow—,” she said, “if this isn't a sign—,” she didn't need to finish, I already knew it was. I reprogrammed the number in our phones and couldn't wait to reach back out to him. A few days passed and I decided to text him a message. He quickly called back.

“Hello?,” I answered.

“Dre?—,” he asked. “Oh my goodness, how've you been? I've thought about you from time to time these past few years, hoping you were alright.” I couldn't bring myself to tell him the whole story but went over my mom's battles and how I'd fought some spiritual struggles of my own.

“Like the Prodigal Son—,” I said, “I’m finding my way back.” He understood where I was coming from and told me he’d keep my mother and I in his prayers. We planned on meeting again in the future at some point.

“We’ll have a long friendship,” he said, “there’ll be time to figure things out.” With that, we reconnected and would go on to send each other hand-written letters exchanging more ideas and thoughts and questions. We’d picked right back up from where we left off.

In the meantime, my mom and I continued getting ready for our upcoming trip. Packing our bags, we felt a renewed sense of excitement we’d almost forgotten about. We weren’t headed to another hospital or nursing home or doctor’s office. We were headed back to a place we’d once made many beautiful memories in, and we were determined to make many more.

We drove to the train station at dawn. The sun was barely coming out when we’d reached the parking lot to the Troy Transit Center. We stayed in the car drinking our hot coffee we’d made earlier at home, waiting for the time to get closer to our train’s arrival. Getting to the platform, my mom was helped up the steps by a gentleman in a conductor’s outfit and cap. Our luggage was stowed away and we sat down in our seats with the windows to our right.

The trees began to blur by as the train took off and reached higher speeds.

“The final stop on our trip is Union Station, Chicago,” the conductor said a few hours later over the loudspeaker, “Union Station, coming up in fifteen minutes,” she repeated herself. My mom and I finally felt like we were headed back into our element, back to our old streets and stomping grounds. Once there, we grabbed the first taxi we saw to our destination. We left the luggage in the hotel room and immediately took to the liveliness outside. Though we were walking a little bit slower and with a little more caution than before, we were still back in our favorite city and followed the flow of people bustling up and down Michigan Avenue.

From shop to shop, we’d stop in for a quick minute and look around again at what they’d be selling. We went to our favorite pizza restaurant, ordered the deep-dish naturally, and ate until we couldn’t get another slice down. At night I’d lay awake in my bed and look out the window toward the honeycomb towers more commonly called Marina City down on State Street. The rounded balconies encircled the twin buildings and some of them still had Christmas lights hanging from their railings. Warm blues and soft whites mixed with the sirens and other noises of downtown lulled me off into a deep sleep.

“Let’s order breakfast,” my mom said the next morning as soon as she saw my eyes opening. We called in room service and minutes later we were enjoying our hot coffees while looking down at the people below our window. We decided to buy two tickets to an attraction we’d been wanting to experience for some time. We left the hotel room later that evening and eventually made our way down by the riverfront. The boat would be coming soon. Ten minutes later, the vessel showed up and docked at the designated gate. People piled out from the previous expedition and slowly my mom and I boarded as the first new passengers to Chicago’s famed Architectural Boat Tour. The skyscrapers all drifted by in the fading dusk’s sun. They pierced the clouds with lights atop their roofs and shimmered the sky alive. It was too cold to sit outside on the top floor so we climbed the stairs down into the saloon instead. A hot chocolate and cola later and we were sitting side-by-side watching the skyline rolling by through the thick windows as the announcer upstairs told us about the history and use of more than ninety buildings in total through the ship’s loudspeaker.

More memories were made—, restaurant after movie after store after street. One night we decided to hail a taxi on a whim and take it up to Lincoln Park. We arrived back on Diversey Parkway and got

off at the Clark and Broadway intersection. The first thing I noticed was that The Edge was no more. The windows were boarded up, the sign was dismantled, and all the memories we'd made there seemed to suddenly be in a permanent past. Walking toward my old job, we saw the corner was no longer empty as there in its place was a new coffee shop. Of course, we entered in through the front doors and while my mom took a seat on one of the comfortable armchairs, I walked up to order our drinks.

“How long have you been open?” I asked the barista.

“About a year,” she said. “This used to be a shoe store.”

“I know,” I said smiling, “I used to work there.” Looking around the newly-renovated space, the same windows lining the walls brought back memories of what used to be. All the nights of vacuuming the carpets, rearranging displays, meeting and speaking with new customers—, it all worked together to make my first year of living in the Windy City one of my favorite years I'd had. Mostly, I missed my mentor who'd strengthened me in my faith so many times without him even knowing it. I wondered how he was and when I'd get the chance to have lunch with him again. The barista placed the two cups of coffee on the counter and as I walked with them toward my mom, I

suddenly remembered my small two-hundred square foot studio of a few years ago. I'd lived through such great moments in that tiny place and I was now moving onto other chapters of my life. I knew that wherever I'd end up, this neighborhood would always be here to welcome me back with open arms.

We'd spent another week and a half in the city and were readying ourselves for our trip back to Michigan. Repacking our bags in the hotel, I wondered when we'd be back.

"Want to visit in summer?," I asked my mom.

"Who knows what we'll be doing by then," she aptly said. Once downstairs, I hailed for a taxi and we were off toward the train station. After boarding the Wolverine Line, my mom and I sat in our seats and each let out a long exhale. We'd made it. We'd escaped the hospitals and nursing homes of the past few years and made it back to Chicago to see and reminisce about what used to be and more importantly, what would eventually be again. I couldn't help but think of everything my mom had gone through—, not just with her latest bouts of illness or her recovery process but everything that'd come beforehand; the upbringing under communism, the less-than-perfect marriage to my father, and all the extremely hard work she had to put in week by week after coming to America to help

support me and keep me as happy as possible. I thought about her plane ride over and how it must've felt for her when the wheels finally made contact with American pavement. I thought about how her emotions must've been so bottled up and finally spilled over the day that my dad died. I thought about how she'd driven through so many unexpected thunderstorms on her journey in life, always pushing forward—, no matter the amount of rainfall. I applauded her in every way.

Suddenly, my mind came back into the present moment, realizing we were leaving again. We weren't sure of when we'd come back or visit for whatever reason, but we knew—, it'd happen. Eventually, we'd take root here once more.

At last—, complete happiness. I could rest. *Nearly every loop is closed*, I thought to myself. I'd finally come to understand my mother and her journey—, now all that remained was to understand mine. The story will undoubtedly write itself. The train pulled out of Union Station with powerful motions that moved us forward and through the city. We watched as the skyline slowly disappeared from view while industrial buildings and tall grass took over. Everything passed like a dark cloud.