

Twilight Too Soon



A Memoir
A Celebration

by Michael Burke

“Only God sees the sparrow fall; but even God doesn’t do anything about it”

-- John Steinbeck

For Christopher and Lia, who will never know their brother; for Matthew, may it help him remember; for the Colorado cousins, who knew Timothy only through the occasional photo; and for all those who did not know Timothy as well as they might have.

For Melissa, who challenged my doubt and differences with God; and posed the suggestion that God might have honored Timothy's prayers to go, instead of my prayers for him to stay.

This is a mostly-true story. I found as I was thinking back as I wrote this that my memory has failed me in some areas. I don't know if it is the span of time, my poor memory, or the fact that I was too panicked to remember details. In some places I may have left some details out; in others I may have added some touches that never really happened; I may have created conversations with people that happened with others. But, all of the characters are real.

Except for Grandma. She's a composite character made up of a number of people that I know, myself included.

I skipped the names of the doctors and nurses so that I don't risk slighting anyone. I will forever appreciate their hard work and true concern across those six days.

In one scene I reference a friend with whom I had a deep conversation. That friend is an invention, as is the conversation, created to catalogue the many conversations I had with people in the weeks and months after. It is true that times like these help you learn who your friends really are. You know who you are; and who you are not.

But, in the end, know that everything I feel, everything I say, everything I believe in this story is real. My heart is really shattered and my spirit is really broken.

And, my son is really gone...

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Preface

Thank You, Timothy

"Sometimes I feel like I'm so lucky
to have had the chance to love this much"
-- LeAnn Rimes

Hello. My name is Michael, and I am the parent of a deceased child.

There, I said it. I've seen these alcoholics' meeting portrayed on TV so many times, and that is how they always start. With someone admitting he has a problem.

In many, odd, ways, being the parent of a deceased child is like being an alcoholic. By that I mean, I will always be one. From what they say, once an alcoholic admits that he is an alcoholic, no matter how long he is *on the wagon*, no matter if he never even says the word *alcohol* again, he is forever an alcoholic.

Likewise, I will always be the parent of a deceased child. I can – and have – had other children since Timothy passed, but they will never, could never fill the void he has left; despite what others might think and have said. I would never place that burden on my other children, to somehow make up for the loss of Timothy.

When a child dies, especially one so young, that void can never be filled. Sure, I have my other children to play with, to walk the dog, or to watch playing junior league

baseball. But you will never know what that lost child could have grown up to become. No one can play a role that had yet to be written.

And like the alcoholic, everyone keeps imploring me to take things One Day at a Time. I just wish there were a 12-step program for grieving fathers; I wouldn't even be close to the first step.

Being the parent of a deceased child is forever. Until the day I die, like the alcoholic, I am marked.

I met a man in the cemetery while I was visiting Timothy in his new home. Timothy's Place, we call it. He told me that he lost his son at 18-months-old and he has never gotten over it. He lost his son 41 years prior. Like I said, this is forever.

I've heard all the clichés: *Everything happens for a Reason. There's a plan for everything; He's in a better place now; You should be comforted knowing he's with God.* He's three for chrissakes! He doesn't know who God is. The most beneficent being Timothy was aware of is Santa Claus. Now, there's all-powerful for you. No three-year-old belongs, or is better off in Heaven. Timothy belongs with me.

The Lord and I have serious issues right about now, if you can't tell.

I've never been one to believe that He's up there, making all these decisions on a day-to-day basis: who lives, who dies. It just doesn't make sense. I mean, the universe is large. He's got a lot of territory to cover. It just doesn't make sense that he's pulling all the strings, deciding if I should take a left or right onto Humphrey Street as I leave Blaney. That's what it would take, you know, if he were in charge of all these things. He would have to tell me to turn left, accelerate too fast, and tune the radio dial so that I don't see

that little boy chasing the ball into the street. He can't possible micromanage the world like that.

Nah, there is no plan. Can't be. Who the Hell would devise a plan where a perfect little three-year-old would pass out at day care, inhale mulch, be ignored by his teachers, have his throat punctured by a trained paramedic. Then, spend six days in the hospital torturing his parents only to die in the end. That's no plan. If that's His plan, then His plan sucks.

No, I've always believed that he started this whole thing rolling, umpteen millions of years ago, spun the globe and set things in motion. He handed us a list of rules to follow, easy ones: don't steal, don't kill, go to church on Sunday. And when you die, we'll talk.

Oh sure, sometimes he comes along and help out now and again, if you pray enough, I guess. *I'm not in right now. Leave a message at the tone and I'll get back to you.* As the Sisters at Sunday school said, sometimes the answer is No. He can't help out in every case. Like I said before, he has a large constituency. He's got people asking for help all day long. Help my sick kids; don't let them lay me off; let that putt drop in the hole; help keep mom and dad together; help the Red Sox beat the Yankees, I know they are down 0-3, but don't they deserve it? So, yes, once in a while, I'll admit. He does help out. But if you look down and see a sweet, innocent 3-year old lying in a hospital bed, why the Hell would you say No to his parents?

Yeah, the Lord and I have issues.

I guess I am here to tell a story. Not a very pleasant one, but it's all I have right now. The problem is, where to begin? Like so much in my life right now, it is all terribly

confusing. I am at a complete loss for words; yet, at the same time, I don't know where to start, as I have so much to say.

How can I describe the horror of watching my son as he lay in his hospital bed knowing that he was going to die in mere moments? How can I describe the agony of watching his short life slip away? How can I describe the immeasurable pain and anguish that has engulfed our lives like nothing I could have foreseen? I cannot.

How can I describe the devastation of watching his mother's eyes as her *Little Clamshell* slips away? Or watching her lying in her dead son's bed for days on end after we finally came home from the hospital without him.

And how can I describe the devastation of hearing my eight-year-old son tell me that he is sad, because "I miss Timothy; when is he coming back?"

I now start everyday, not waking my son from sleep with a kiss, but going to the cemetery to talk to the cold, granite stone that marks his new resting place. And when I get home from work, I am not greeted at the door by his smiling face, but an empty hallway and only the dream of his being there.

The joy that had been in our lives as of June 8, 2005 has been replaced by sadness and anger, tears and anxiety. Our life wasn't perfect – no one's is. But we were happy together, and Timothy was a large part of that happiness.

I still cannot believe, that morning when I left him at daycare, that he would be leaving me, never to return. I still cannot believe that when I saw him again that day, he couldn't see me; when I told him "I love you," he couldn't hear me; when I kissed his cheek he couldn't feel me; when I held his hand he couldn't hold mine back. I still cannot believe that he's gone.

As Timothy lay in his hospital bed, one of the many, many things I said to him was “Thank you.” Thank you for bringing 3 ½ years of joy and happiness into my life – into all of our lives. Every single day, Timothy brought a smile to my face and laughter to my heart. Those were the best 3 ½ years I have ever known; for that I will be forever grateful.

This is not a story about a long, drawn-out illness. Of the eternal pain and torture of endless operations, transplants, or chemotherapy. I've seen those stories. The parents who suffer along with their children for weeks, months, years, are heroes to their children; and to me.

No, this is a story about a light suddenly going out. As when the power goes out during a mid-summer thunderstorm, or when you flip the switch on the wall and -- pop -- the bulb flares out. Startling, sudden, and complete. This is the story of a seemingly-healthy child being quickly snatched away from us -- not by some pervert at a shopping mall -- but by fate.

To be sure, we had six days with him in the hospital. Six days that I will forever treasure, to what extent I can. How much we had of Timothy during those six days I will never know. How much was man and how much was machine is an algorithm that will forever remain a mystery. We had six days of clouds and rain, with an occasional rainbow popping up through the grey clouds; but never long enough for us to find the pot of gold.

We had the time to hold his hand; give unreturned kisses to his motionless lips; whisper I love you in his ear. Six days to play his favorite music in hopes that it would

spark something, anything. Six days when the best news we had was that his pupils got smaller when blasted with a flashlight, and that his foot flinched when probed with sharp objects. I will treasure that, if you can believe it.

I will also treasure my wife, and the six days she spent in the hospital, hardly leaving his side, only to catch a quick breath of air outside or to not sleep on a bed in the other room. I am not sure how much I will talk about her on these pages. This, I think, will be my story, and Tim's story.

Chapter 1

The Beginning of the End of It All

"This world was never meant for one
as beautiful as you."
-- Don McLean

It started out as a normal day.

The alarm clock started its knell approaching 6am. I strategically set the alarm to sound early so that I could hit the snooze alarm once or twice before actually having to get up. By the six or seventh time that the local sports radio cut into the morning light as it crawled around the blinds and room-darkening shades, a small voice from the other room told me it was time to get up.

"Papa," Matthew called, "time to get up. The lights are off." Each morning, my seven-going-on eight-year-old son would roll out of bed and peer through his window to see if the streetlights outside were off. That was his rooster's call. "Yoo-hoo! Papa! Time to get up." He would not get out of bed until I opened his bedroom door, but instead would call out incessantly on good days, kick and scream on bad. This morning was not a good morning.

Matthew started kicking his legs making an ungodly noise in the other room. “Papa, Papa!!” he called, louder each repetition. Quickly, the bed-kicking begat floor stomping before I could finally open the door. Inside, he smiled a bright, gap-toothed smile. His big, brown eyes sparkled with the refreshment of a long night’s sleep. His laugh was deep and hearty, for a child that age, and belied a devilish innocence that I could hardly be mad at.

“Let’s go, get up already,” I croaked. “Don’t wake your brother.” From down stairs came the metallic thud of the morning paper hitting the screen door and the rattle of the dog, as she desperately tried to protect the house from the 12 year-old on his bicycle. As Matthew headed for the stairs, he slammed the door as hard as his young muscles would allow; a spray of plaster tumbled from a pock-mark in the wall that was undoubtedly caused by Matthew’s antics.

“Lily! Stop barking!” he called down the stairs, imitating me and my short patience for the beast. As he clomped down the stairs, my radio burst on again, unleashing arguments about the Red Sox’ latest outing and their prospects for the rest of the season.

Through it all, Timothy slept.

Downstairs, the morning proceeded pretty much according to the script. Matthew, I will say by way of introduction, has Autism. Autism is an inexplicable neurological disorder that causes – among many other things – its victims to have a strange compulsion towards routines. Everything must go the same way every time for him to be comfortable, or so they tell me. I am sure that you can talk to any pediatrician about

Autism, and get far more detailed information than I can give. I don't understand it, don't have to; I just have to learn to deal with it.

Anyway, so Matthew, as he does every day, went trotting down the stairs, counting each step as he went. Oddly, the number of steps changes each time that he alights them; today, there were 17.

"That's funny," I laughed, "yesterday there were 12." Undaunted by the controversy over the number of stairs, Matthew bolts for the kitchen and climbs up onto the counter to get his cereal, Tasty-Os or something.

"Get my bowl, Papa," he called as he flipped on the radio.

"WLHM, Boston," crackled the radio. "Boston's #1 source for news, weather, sports, and commentary."

"I like when he says *WLHM Boston*, Papa. It's funny." As usual, I get the bowl down from the cupboard and pour him a bowl.

Right on cue, I get the milk and pour it in the cereal, which he will not start eating until his bagel is done in the toaster. Whatever. My favorite expression when it comes to Matthew.

"Look at me," I ask him, "I need to get your brother out of bed. We are running late today. When the bagel is done, can you get it and start eating?"

"Yup!" he has a gleam in his eye that comes from total innocence. One thing about some Autistic kids, they have not one iota of ill will in them. That's not to say that Matthew doesn't act out, but it's not due to ill will, it comes from a lack of impulse control. Not sure why I'm telling you this. Has nothing to do with Timothy's story, which this is supposed to be. I guess I mention this only because the incredible change that our

life is about to take has remarkably little affect on Matthew. He will soon lose his brother, his only friend, but it won't change him all that much. In a way, I am a bit envious of him for that.

Right on schedule, I head upstairs to wake the *Little Prince*. One of his daycare providers coined that nickname for him, Little Prince, mostly because he seemed to have such high regard for himself, and that he expected as much from anyone around him. Hey, he deserved it. He was a little prince.

Timothy was always in the same position in the morning; rolled over on his side, face pressed up against the mesh of the side rails of his bed. His blanket would be covering most of his midsection and maybe one leg.

"Timothy," I cooed with the softest of voices. "Time to wake up." He was not a morning person, this one. He refused to let wakefulness in, like the Hoover Dam refused to let the waters of the Colorado flood the Black Canyon. "Wake up, sleepy boy." I shook him gently on the shoulder, and pecked him gently on the cheek.

Timothy was a beautiful boy. I wish you could have met him. At 3 ½, he had a perfect, round – but not chubby – cherub face; big cheeks with high cheek bones; soft, warm, dirty blonde hair that changed color from brown to blonde depending upon the light; his eyes were an aqueous hazel green, spectacular in their blend of colors. He seemed to have a perfect smile that often liked to show off. An intelligent, outgoing, funny, proud little boy who seemed to have everything going in his direction. One of my favorite pictures of him had him lying back on the couch, his hands positioned behind his head, a slight smile on his face as he watched TV, wearing nothing but a diaper and his Boston Celtics ball cap. Absolute Timothy.

And as he rolled onto his back, and stretched his arms out wide, groaning slightly against the wave of light that flooded his room, one got the sense that he knew he was a superstar. He smiled warmly at me and closed his eyes again.

“Time to get going, Monster,” I told him, using my paradoxical nickname for him. “We have to get ready for school.” I lifted him out of bed. Even though he only weighed about 35 pounds, he could make himself feel quite heavy. I dropped him onto my shoulders, where he nestled his head into the crook of my neck. I could feel his warm breath on my skin and the softness of his hair on my neck. I breathed in his scent, a slightly sweet sweat from sleep. His deadweight felt heavy in my arms. This was my absolute favorite time of the day, carrying him downstairs. I knew it wouldn’t last forever; soon, I figured, he would spurn being carried by his old man – heck, I knew that soon enough he’ll pretend not to know me. But for the time, I relished in his need for me to carry him down. Already too heavy for his mother to carry him down the stairs, this was my exclusive joy.

Timothy, too, had his own rituals and routines. He liked for me to plop him down on the counter for breakfast. Again, his mother would never approve of his sitting on the counter to eat, so we just kept this between us boys. Breakfast would often be the same: frozen french toast sticks with a small bowl of syrup on the side. A glass of milk, which more often than not, would not be drunk, sat next to him.

“Where’s Mama?” he said with the sweetest little voice I had ever heard.

“You know she’s working.” I replied. “But she’ll be home soon, I hope.” My wife, Jennifer, is a Registered Nurse at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. She

worked a few nights a week, mostly weekends. It was hit or miss whether she would get home on time to see the boys on the weeknights she worked.

Matthew, at this time, was a second grader at the Hadley School, here in town – the same school I went to at his age; Timothy went to a pre-school program nearby. We had to leave promptly at 8:15 to please Matthew, and to get everyone to school on time. If Mama got home by then, all the better. If not, then hugs and kisses would have to wait until the afternoon.

We didn't talk much in the morning, us boys. I flipped through the Boston Herald looking at the headlines; Matthew incessantly played with his video player; and Timothy happily ate his french toast sticks, softly singing to himself, kicking his legs as they dangled off the counter.

When breakfast was done, it was time to shower the boys. "Can we take a shower together?" piped up Tim as they both undressed.

"Why not," I replied.

As the two boys peeled off their pajamas and night-time underpants, Matthew tossed his tops towards the laundry basket in the corner, followed quickly by his pants.

"You got a basket, Matthew!" Tim cried and proceeded to try his own cotton two-pointer, missed; the pajama bottoms hurled through the air; missed again, dropping into the dog's silver-tone water bowl. "Ohhh!" Timothy growled at his failures.

"Knock it off, monkeys." I admonished them, "No throwing clothes." Though, I knew full well they learned the trick from me.

Matthew pulled open the shower door, too far as usual as it crashed off the toilet with a metallic and plastic clang. The two boys laughed as the door vibrated its entire

length from the collision. “Easy, Matthew. Don’t want to break it.” As he insists he must do for everyone in the house, Matthew turned the water on in the shower to full blast; the two boys clambered around the open door and into the shower, slamming the Plexiglas door behind them. I could barely distinguish the two through the frosted glass of the door. It was one of those small, fiberglass deals, maybe three-feet by three-feet in size, being overly generous. Inside they wrestled each other for the bathtub crayons that were stashed in there: blue and yellow and red and orange wash-off markers for doodling and scribbling on the walls of the shower. A scattered multi-colored rainbow of lines and shapes in myriad patterns was quickly filling the walls of the stall. It was not a peaceful endeavor, as the two slapped each other’s hand away from the section of the wall each wanted to use.

“Matthew, I wanna draw there.” Timothy yelled. “You draw over there.”

“No, that’s my spot!”

“No it’s mine!” Slap. Push. Shove. Slip. Fall. Cry. The same pattern repeated every morning they got to shower together. It also signaled that play time was over and it was time to get to work washing.

When it was done, Matthew stepped out of the shower into a towel and I took his place with Timothy. Matthew could be trusted outside the shower by himself – most of the time anyway. But, Tim had to stay behind with me, a punishment he didn’t mind, except for the severe lack of space with me in there with him. Alone, without Matthew, he had the full range of colors to draw with and was gratefully humming to himself as he sketched a blue line on the wall.

“Look, Papa,” he called in his gentle voice. “I drew a face.” He pointed with pride at a series of lines and scrawls that a modern art expert would be hard pressed to identify.

“Hey, that looks great. Who is it?”

“It’s Mama!” he laughed, showing off his brilliant smile full of baby teeth.

I knew it was time to get out of the shower as the hot water quickly started to fade. I left the two in there by themselves too long again. I glanced down to where the water was always a few degrees cooler to see Timothy shivering slightly, his arms wrapped around himself for warmth. Tiny goose bumps started to appear on his arms and his lips were turning a pale shade of blue.

“Time to get out? Those blue lips don’t do anything for you.” A joke I tossed out there that I knew was over his head, but he smiled anyway.

“I’m cold, Papa,” was all he needed to say as I spun the spigot to off. As we got out of the shower, I grabbed the biggest, softest towel of all to wrap around him. As he hit the heat of the kitchen, the redness slowly filled his lips once again.

With all of the clean-up complete, I tossed a couple of outfits to the boys and they quietly dressed themselves. It was going to be a hot day, I could tell already, so it was shorts for all. One of the nice things about boys is that we don’t much care what we wear. Like many autistics, Matthew has issues with some outfits, as he cannot tolerate the feel or the sound of the material. He has a beautiful blue plush shirt that he cannot wear because of the rubbing noise it made whenever he moved – a noise that most would be hard-pressed to hear. Timothy would wear anything I grabbed from the drawers, usually – except today.

“No, Papa!” he exclaimed, looking at the t-shirt I pulled out of the chest for him. “I want to wear my Star Wars shirt!” A brand-new shirt that he recently got in the mail from his Uncle Tom and Aunt Astrid. A black shirt with the movie logo emblazoned across the chest with an image of Darth Vader looming below. Timothy swung his arms as if he were wielding a light saber. “Can I get a light saber, Papa? I want a light saber. Yah!” He lunged forward as if attacking his brother with the sword-like weapon.

His mother had introduced him to Star Wars movies, a series of science fiction films. He fell in love immediately with the battle scenes, outrageous characters, the flying ships, and the explosions. He used to love to imitate the heavy, ominous breathing of one of the lead characters, Darth Vader.

“But this is your favorite shirt, isn’t it?” I asked, referring to the yellow and blue t-shirt that he wore at least twice a week. It was plain and simple, with an image of a gasoline-gauge on the front, needle always pointing to the F. *Look, Papa, I am full!* He would exclaim each time he wore it.

“I want Star Wars!” he growled in this low voice that I should have been offended by (*Don’t you talk to me that way, young man. Use your nice voice*), but wasn’t because it was so cute.

“Oh yeah? Is that how you ask for things?” I tossed him the shirt and he slipped it on, looking down at the design with a smile.

“You used to wear anything – except a dress,” I told him and immediately thought of the morning a few weeks ago when I dropped him off at daycare to be greeted by dress-up day.

When we got there, all the kids were donning dresses, crowns, tiaras, fancy shoes, all decked out in finery as if they were getting ready to walk the red carpet at the Oscar ceremonies. Even Timothy's best male friend sported a pink, flowery dress with a touch of faux fur on the trim.

"You want to play dress-up, Tim?" I called as he ran to the deepest recess of the room.

"Nope," was all he said, without turning around. He went straight through the piles of cardboard bricks, around the plastic balls rolling around the floor, over a fire truck that was in his way, and finally found his favorite tool belt and hardhat. He slipped the tool belt around his waist, dropped the yellow plastic hat on his head, and was ready for work. It was technically dressing up, but don't tell him that.

Chapter 2

About a Boy

"I never pictured every minute
without you in it.
You left so fast..."
-- LeAnn Rimes

Timothy was a boy. And, boy, was he ever a boy.

He was into all manner of boy-things: trucks, trains, sports, dirt, generally rolling and tumbling and fighting with his brother. Timothy was very much a three-year-old boy. I recall one particularly warm and dry day in early spring – which in New England is a gift – when I took the then six-month-old Timothy to sit on the front porch and watch the world roll by. He was fascinated by everything around him: the early flowers coming to bloom in the garden; the buds beginning to appear on the skeletal branches of the trees; the coming and going of birds zipping past us in the sky; the chatter of squirrels coming out of their winter slumber to do whatever it is spring squirrels do. But most of all, he loved the trucks.

We lived on a relatively quiet side road, but on that day it was a thruway. For whatever reason, several trucks lumbered by: a small cube truck making a delivery; a

brown courier truck attending to his rounds; the U.S. Postal Service jeep; and, best of all, an oil truck. The truck pulled up in front of the house next to us and stopped. Timothy was thrilled. For just an instant, he stopped sucking on his binky and watched with rapt fascination as the driver clambered down and dragged the heavy rubber hose to the house. The engine and motors growled and clunked, and the truck gently shook as it pumped.

Timothy was so enthralled that we had to walk down and see it close up. Apprehensive at first, we walked slowly around the metallic beast, allowing him to take in the thing in its entirety. He stared at the large blue lettering on the side of the tank, looked with curiosity through the open passenger door into the cab. He smiled as he caught his reflection, distorted in the shiny front grill. Suddenly, the motors again clanged to life as the hose started reeling itself back into place. The driver smiled broadly at Tim.

“Like the truck, son?” he asked rhetorically. “All the boys do.” With that he drove off down the street and around the corner. The show was over, but Timothy watched every inch of the way.

It is somehow ironic, or should it be comforting, that he died at the hands of a truck. His last actions in life were buzzing around a play yard transporting garden mulch from one place to another in the back of a dump truck. It had become one of his favorite games to play. People tell me that my soul should be eased by the fact that he died while doing one of his favorite things. I suppose it should; but it doesn't. I cannot see a dump truck without thinking of my boy lying face down inside its bed.

Another of his favorite boy toys were trains. He was riddled with joy whenever he saw a train in action, whether in real life, on television, or in a photo. We had recently put

up a few posters in his room, one of which was a train that had “T” shaped markings on its nose. Timothy, naturally, decided that the T’s on the train were for Timothy, and that the drawing was of Timothy’s train. And, for all argument’s sake, it was.

We three boys, Timothy, Matthew, and I, used to love going to the local commuter rail station and watching the trains come and go. For boys with little patience in other arenas, they could wait an eternity to watch a passenger train rumble to a stop, disgorge passengers, and steam off on its way.

These trips were less than exciting for me; I never got much joy from watching a train roll by, having taken too many daily trips to college and work on them, but my joy came from watching the stars that lit up in both their eyes when the 5:53 pulled to a stop in front of them, or as the 6:20 express roared by in a blur with a rush of wind so stiff that it threatened to suck our hats off our heads.

The station had a long asphalt platform with a concrete handicap ramp at the end where folks who couldn’t manage the passenger cars’ steps could board. We often ended up waiting on those elevated platforms at the end of the station; they afforded a much better view. As the engine pulled into the station, it would generally stop right next to the handicap riser, so we wound up with a front-row view of the engine.

Matthew was, and is, fearless and would stand as close as possible to the edge of the platform when he saw the train come into view. Timothy, on the other hand, would always duck to the far side of the walkway and chide his brother into doing the same.

“Stand back!” he would growl at Matthew. “Just like the sign says.” Tim would repeat this mantra whenever we saw a train. Matthew would heed his brother’s advice far more readily than when I gave it, and he would step away with plenty of time to spare.

Inevitably, the engineer would blast the horns for the boys, which Matthew hated, covering his ears with his hands, but Tim loved.

“Toot toot!” he would shout and laugh. “Do it again! Papa, make him do the horn again.” Where we stood at the end of the platform usually gave us a close look at the engine. Tim dared not touch the filthy steel of the locomotive, but eagerly stared at the massive wheels and all the hardware that made the engine go. Matthew inhaled the fragrance of the train, a mix of oils, grease, fuel, dirt, and other elements that made a distinctive smell that he loved.

Riders would alight and pass us by with a curious glare, wondering why these three were turning their platform into an observation stand. From further on down the platform, the conductors waved the engineer on when all were settled into their seats and the beast would slowly grind to a start.

“All aboard!” Timothy and Matthew yelled in unison, barely audible above the terrible roar of the engine. As the train lumbered out of the station, the brakes would hiss, and the engine would growl to a roar as it slowly gained speed. Matthew would quickly plug his ears with his fingers and hum to himself to drown out the din; Timothy reveled in the audio assault, energized by the loud utterances of the train. They watched every second, not daring to lift an eye as the train rolled out of sight down the line towards Salem.

Timothy loved sports, too. Whether it was hitting a large plastic ball off a tee in the backyard, flailing away at a red golf ball at the mini-golf course, heaving a basketball part of the way toward the basket, or just watching it on TV, he loved the games.

“When I turn 4, I am going to play basketball,” he would frequently promise himself.

“I’m going to hit that ball far!” he’d shout as a swung at the tee-ball with an oversized plastic orange bat.

“Watch me kick the ball!” he’d cry as the ball bounced up the gentle slope of the back yard before rolling back to his waiting foot for another round.

We used to love to sit on the chaise lounge section of our couch and watch sports. When the Patriots were playing football, I would quiz him about what play was coming up next.

“OK, are they going to throw or run this time?” Timothy would earnestly watch the screen, concentrating on the situation at hand, cock his little blond head to the side and answer incorrectly pretty much every time.

“Run,” he decides, only to watch the quarterback, Tom Brady, fade back and connect on a pass to his favorite receiver, Deion Branch.

“Oh!” he cried. “I was wrong again,” he’d laugh.

He was better at basketball.

When the Boston Celtics traded for Ricky Davis, I was concerned. Ricky Davis was one of those *talented-but-troubled* athletes who could be superstars if only they could find the right motivation to keep their action on the playing surface rather than beyond it.

But Timothy saw something in Ricky's twirling, whirling, driving play that interested him. He was elated whenever Ricky broke away down the court and slammed the ball through the basket.

"Yay! He got one!" he'd shout from my lap as Ricky dropped a 3-point shot from far outside the net.

Every time I put on basketball, any game not just the Celtics, Tim would be looking for #12.

"Where's Ricky?" he'd start moving his head around trying to get a better angle to see the players. "Is he playing?" As Ricky slipped in between, through, and around the other players, it would become a game of hide-and-seek for Tim.

"There he is!" I'd point to the white uniform bopping around the screen. "Near the top of the TV."

"Where?"

"Now he's down by the bottom."

"I can't see him. Does he have big hair or small hair tonight?" Tim would ask about Ricky's choice of putting his hair in cornrows or letting it loose in a tall afro.

"Right in the middle now. He's got the ball."

"There he is!"

"Shoot it, Ricky."

"Yay! He got it in, Papa!" Timothy would burst out in a smile and clap his hands.

"When I turn 4, I am going to play basketball just like Ricky."

In January 2005 we were hit with one of the biggest snow storms in years. We got nearly 30" of the frozen white stuff – a barely noticeably flurry to some, but a nasty trick of nature to us. The schools and daycare center were closed; many workplaces called it off for the day; no one was moving anywhere. Except for my boys.

They were both stunned by the amounts, as they peered through the frost-touched windows. Swirls of thin ice painted on in myriad patterns, sparking in the morning sun. They, too, were amused by the fact that the front door wouldn't open from so much snow, and door opened onto a roofed porch. Matthew's usual job of fetching the newspaper had to wait.

After I spent nearly 3 hours digging out of the mess (the snow was so deep and heavy that my snow blower decided to call it a day) it was time to play. As it was, it usually took more time to get the boys dressed in snow gear than they would spend outside, but even they knew this one was different. They'd seen snow before, but never at eye-level. There were banks and drifts of snow that went far over their heads, especially where I had been digging out.

The boys, barely able to walk, as they were covered head-to-toe in nylon and cotton: hats, gloves, jacket, snow pants, and boots. Jackets zipped tight against the cold winter's chill; their faces became nothing but eyes, a nose, a pair of red cheeks, and a mouth – a smiling mouth.

They slowly walked down the front steps to the brick walkway below, all the time staring around at the abundance of white. I crouched down to the ground to Timothy's level to get a better sense of how he saw the results of the storm. Piles of snow reached to the sky, well over his head. It was like walking through a canyon, with tall, steep walls on

either side, grown to heights unreachable. His eyes sparkled nearly as much as the snow itself in the glare of the sun; his mouth hanging slightly open in awe, clouds of white breath floating about his face.

We walked along the alleys between the snow banks that I cleared with a shovel into the back yard. The snow canyon followed along the edge of our deck, taking a hard left turn. Matthew and Timothy followed the path with little choice. The banks were so steep and tall that neither boy could overcome them to walk away. On the deck we looked at the thermometer hanging on the wall; it read all of two degrees.

“Now, that’s cold, boys!” I spoke into the chill, my words coming out in a puff of vapor. “What are we going to do now?” As the boys continued to investigate the wonderland, I grabbed the shovel and started digging at the base of a snow pile, carving out the mouth of a cave. As I waded through the snow to dig a similar cave on the opposite side of the pile, hopefully to meet in the middle without caving the whole pile in, Timothy crawled into the cave and lay down on the bare wood of the deck.

“It’s warmer in here, Papa,” he announced from his hiding place.

“Back off my friend, I am about to break through.”

Matthew was instantly interested, as soon as he saw what I was doing. Both the boys watched intently as I poked at the snow with the shovel trying to break the wall between the snow caves. “Can you see through, yet?” Timothy crouched down, despite the resistance of the bulky snow suit he was wearing to watch the head of the shovel poke through.

“I see you, Dad!” he cried in excitement. In a few moments, we had a complete snow tunnel. Timothy was thrilled, crawling through from one side to the next. Matthew,

on the other hand was less than enthused by the tiny tunnel. He moved over to the jungle gym to careen down the yellow slide into the snow with glee.

After several minutes of watching Timothy enjoy every inch of the tunnel, crawling through, bending down to examine the structure, and trying to use the adult-sized shovel to make the tunnel bigger, Matthew decided to finally come over. But, instead of going through the tunnel, he decided to become Godzilla, stomping over the tunnel, caving the snow in. Matthew laughed mercilessly as he fell into the snow, crushing all traces of the tunnel. Timothy burst into tears as he watched his brother crush his new play-thing. I had all I could do not to laugh, and tried hard to chide Matthew.

“Matthew! Why did you do that?” Snicker, smile.

“Because I did,” came the typical Matthew answer. I scooped up Tim and hugged him tight.

“Oh well,” I told him. “Maybe we can build another tunnel tomorrow.” He wiped away some tears with his little mittened hand. “We should be going inside anyway. You guys are getting cold.”

“Can we watch some videos?” Timothy asked through a snuffle.

“Absolutely,” I replied as we headed in.

Matthew and Timothy spent the rest of the day on the couch watching videos about trucks, airplanes, and trains. All was clearly forgiven.

Chapter 3

The Final Goodbye

"This time will be the last time..."
-- Waylon Jennings

As it was nearly every morning, it was difficult to get the boys finally out the door; June 9th was no exception. They were all ready to go, save for the Putting on of the Shoes and Socks ceremony that took place each time I wanted to go out. My boys had a way of making the simple difficult and the difficult nearly impossible.

Matthew ambled around the house aimlessly, his favorite portable video player in hand, not watching the show being played. But, of course, it was turned loud enough to hear it outside.

Timothy was lingering in the living room, parked in front of the TV set, using the remote control to flip between the SpongeBob Square Pants cartoon and the video music channels.

"Timothy, turn that thing off and come over here. You need socks and shoes."

"But Gretchen's on!" he snarled through clenched teeth. "I have to watch Gretchen."

"Oh yeah? Let me see." We both stood watching the pretty, long-haired country-girl, Gretchen Wilson, singing about her pride in being a redneck. Throughout the video she is shown doing various Southern things like driving her pickup through the river, careening through the

mud on a four-wheeled motorcycle called an ATV, and stripping down to nothing (with her back to us) to wash her now-dirty clothes. Less than perfect fare for a three-year-old; but he was rapt.

“All right, enough of that.” I grabbed the remote from him and switched off the set. “We need to get ready for school.” Timothy turned on me with a fury.

“Turn it on! I wanna watch Gretchen.” He gave me a shove with all the force his little body could muster, but it barely made me flinch. I reached down and grabbed him around the waist and carried him yelling and swinging to the couch, sitting on Matthew’s video player.

Timothy squirmed off my lap as I fought with the video player and grabbed the TV remote. The set popped back to life, this time with Sara Evans singing about a young girl who left suds in the bucket to run off with her boyfriend to get married at 18.

“Sara Evans, papa!”

“Fine. Leave it on; just come over here and put on your shoes, please.” He turned and ran at me with a broad smile on his face. He jumped into my lap and softly sang along with Sara as I put his shoes on. He didn’t know all the words, but he jumbled some sounds along with the tune and was perfectly happy.

The whole project took about 15 minutes to complete, but I got the boys, finally shod, out the door. In winter, we’d have to pad an additional 10 minutes or so for jackets, hats, and mittens. But this was June and the day was already hot. We trounced out the door and down the stairs to the car. Just as we were about to climb into the car and make our escape, Jennifer pulled up into the driveway.

“Mama’s home!” Timothy shrieked and ran after the truck. On the mornings after the nights she worked, it was a rare pleasure for the boys to see her. Timothy charged at his mother, nearly knocking her off her feet as he grabbed her around the leg in a clenching hug. She stood to

pick him up and he moved his grasp from her leg to her neck, wrapping himself completely around her.

“How’s my Little Clamshell,” she asked Timothy with a kiss on the cheek.

“We saw Gretchen and Sara Evans on TV, Mama. Papa tried to turn it off.”

“He did that?” Timothy nodded in affirmation. “That’s terrible.”

“And Matthew threw his video player and Papa sat on it!” He laughed gently at my expense.

“Sounds like you had a tough morning,” she turned to me with a kiss.

“It could be worse,” I shrugged, peeling Timothy away from his mother. But, he didn’t seem to want to let go.

Before we got into the car, Timothy had to peruse my music collection. I always brought a stash of CDs with me to listen to on the way to work. He flipped through the disks in my bag, settling on a Judas Priest album.

“This one, Papa.” He held the disc up to me, *British Steel*.

“Good choice. But let’s drop Matthew off first so we can listen to it loud.” Matthew did not like loud music; Timothy did. We finally pulled away from the curb with barely enough time to get Matthew to school before the final bell. I pulled up in front of the building and let him out. He reached up for his hug and kiss before waltzing off down the sidewalk in a skipping-gait that clearly showed how much he loved school. His arms were waving in celebration of the new day as he responded to the crossing guard’s “Hello, Matthew.”

I slid back in the car and looked into the back seat using the rear-view mirror.

“Are you ready?” I popped in the disc and turned up the radio a few notches. Not as loud as I usually turned it up after the boys were at school, but loud enough for a three-year-old’s ears. The slashing guitars of the two Judas Priest guitarists ripped into *Rapid Fire* at Timothy’s request, as we pulled away from the curb. The crossing guard’s look of scorn told me that she didn’t approve of my – rather Tim’s – choice of music with a young’un in the car.

“Turn it up, Papa. Make it louder,” he called from the back seat, already bopping his head in the back seat. He wasn’t quite moving to the rhythm of the fast-rocking song; I had just started trying to teach him about rhythm and beat. But, he did his best anyway. As we drove along, his arms moved, pretending to play the upright bass, as he frantically plucked away with his left hand, making chords with his right. I smile gently at him, as he was imitating an acoustic stand-up bass, which this band decidedly did not use; but who was I to correct him, he was clearly enjoying the show. “Make it louder!”

I turned the music up a notch, still not too loud for his ears, but loud enough for him. As we pulled up in front of the daycare center, he had switched from bass to drums, and now his arms were flailing through the air with abandon, slapping at his legs so hard that they started to turn pink from the impact. His face was snarled with a tough-guy pose that would make any hard rock singer shake his head in approval. He was a Rock God.

“Are you ready to go in?” I asked into the back of the car, knowing well the answer I would get.

“Wait until the song is done.” We sat in the driveway of the daycare center, a small dutch-colonial house that was converted from a home to a drugstore and then to a daycare center. Timothy continued to slap at his knees and I looked at the outdoor play areas and pictured him running around and playing with just as much energy and enjoyment as he felt listening to his

music. To the right was the play area he usually played in. It held a number of trucks and tricycles for the kids to use, and a large plastic house that they could move in and out of. He loved the playhouse. Picturing him playing in it reminded me of a recent trip to a large toy store.

An entire aisle of the store was lined with playhouses on either side of the aisle. As his mother shopped with Matthew for Christmas presents, Timothy and I spent a full hour going from house to house, cooking on the pretend stoves, using the play telephones, ringing the doorbells of each unit. Timothy was always a step or two ahead of me as it took me so long to get out of each dwelling, squeezing my large frame through the doors intended for bodies far smaller than mine.

I was snapped from my reverie by another glare, this time from one of the mommies dropping off her child. The song crashed to an end and I quickly turned off the car before the next song could start. I looked in the back and Timothy was all smiles and laughter.

“I like that song; that’s a good song.” He laughed. “Play it again, Papa.”

“No way. You need to get to school and I need to get to work sometime today.” We clambered out of the car and headed up the gentle slope of a ramp to the back door of the center. I looked off at the larger play area to the rear of the building. This was the play area generally used by the older kids in the program. Timothy rarely went into this area, but I could see him running around, kicking the play balls, climbing up the stairs to a small platform sitting in the middle of the yard.

“I’m getting to the door first!” I called.

“No me!” Timothy laughed and ran at the door. Naturally, he got there first, pulling the door open.

As the alarm on the door sounded, we stepped inside. Within, the boy who had just been running to the door was suddenly attacked by shyness. It was all an act, but I have to admit, he pulled it off well. Timothy grabbed hold of my leg with all the strength he could muster and held on, burying his face in my slacks. I hobbled in, pulling the 30-odd pounds of boy with me. I stopped for a moment at the mailboxes, rows of square cubby-holes hanging on the wall, usually stuffed with memos and messages about the fun projects that were upcoming on the calendar.

“Nothing today, Tim-O.” I called down to the child that was attached to my leg. Tim-O was a nickname coined by my sister’s then-fiancée, one that stuck quickly and eternally. It fit him perfectly, Tim-O. “Come on, my friend, walk.” I commanded, to no avail.

In one corner, a teacher sat with several students, reading a story about a frog; another teacher held the rapt attention of another throng of kids with an art project involving myriad color paints and uncooked pasta. Another gaggle of kids ran riot through the area playing all manner of toys: the girls were dressed up for the prince’s ball; the boys driving dump trucks around the floor; another group was kicking a ball up and down a ramp that connected two of the areas in the room. A pair of young ones played in a plastic vat that was today filled with water; any manner of material could be found in that vat on any given day from soil to uncooked rice to cooked but cold strands of pasta.

As we hobbled towards Timothy’s area, I had him put his lunch on the table where it belonged and tried to carry him the rest of the way. However, by this point, the other kids had seen him and he saw them; so he quickly turned off the shy-routine and dashed through the small, swinging door into the play area.

“Well, hello Timothy!” chimed his teacher. “Look everyone, Timothy’s here! Hooray!” I am sure that every parent thinks this, and the teachers admit this to every parent, but I had the sense that Timothy was one of their favorite students; making it all the harder to comprehend what was to come.

“Timothy,” she called out to him, “do you want to join in the art project?” She and a few kids were using small sections of sponge to paint on brightly colored paper. The sponges left behind fascinating patterns of ink and paper. “Look at what Becky has done, Tim. Isn’t it great?” But Timothy paid no heed to the art project and walked slowly into the pen trying to determine what to play with.

I looked over to see one of Timothy’s pals trotting up to him, all decked out in hardhat and tool belt. Timothy ran to the corner and pulled his favorite blue hardhat out of the bin and dropped it on his head; he reached back in and pulled out a tool belt, complete with plastic hammer, screwdriver, and wrench and wrapped it around his waist.

As I watched, I thought of all the times that Timothy asked for a blue hard hat. We got him a yellow hard hat from the toy store, but it was not *right*. He wanted a blue one, just like the character on that television cartoon he loved. So, it was a female character who wore the blue hat; he didn’t care. We never got him the blue hat. I didn’t know where to buy one. After he died, I went onto the Internet and found a blue hard hat online for five dollars.

“Hey, Tim,” I called, “I have to go. Can I have my hug now?” He didn’t respond. “You’re not going to let me go to work without a hug and kiss, are you?” Again no answer, he was far too busy driving a truck around the floor, propping his hardhat back onto his head every few inches of driving. “Well, all right then. I’ll just have to get two later when I get home from work.”

“Bye Monster,” I called across the room, but he still didn’t answer. Very typical of Timothy, once he got involved in something not to let unimportant things like saying goodbye get in the way. I started out towards the door and turned back one last time, flashing the sign-language sign for *I love you* across the room to him. I think he saw me, but quickly went back to playing. I smiled warmly at my boy, shaking my head softly about his non-response. “That’s my boy,” I whispered to myself and stepped out the door.

They tell me later that he said “Goodbye, Dad” as I left; but I didn’t hear his last words to me.

Chapter 4

He's Here (Part 1)

"No sooner than you say 'Hello'
Then it's time to say 'Goodbye'..."
-- ZaKk Wylde

It's hard to believe that such an easy baby came from such a difficult pregnancy.

Timothy proved to be difficult from the very start. In addition to the problems we had getting pregnant, we were all too concerned about staying that way. Two previous early-gestation miscarriages made us uneasy about whether Timothy would arrive at all. So much so, that not long after we got pregnant, we re-arranged our vacation to see Grandma in South Carolina.

We were originally going to fly, but with fears of pregnancy and high altitudes plaguing us, we decided to drive the 1,000 or so miles in a rented Dodge van, complete with all the amenities: captain's chairs in the back, VCR, leather upholstery, and a CD player. After two days of driving, eating at highway rest stops, staying in an unfortunate motel, and watching the same three videos over and over for twelve hours a day, we finally made Hilton Head Island. We were

greeted there by a week's worth of cold, cloudy, rainy weather; the April temperatures not getting much above the 50s and 60s. We could have stayed home for that.

While there, Jennifer started having *issues*, bolstering our fears of never meeting Timothy. After several days of too-close conditions with the in-laws, and the tension that can arise from it, we absconded from the south, back in the van for another 18 hours of driving home.

While none of this is Timothy's fault, it certainly was a bellwether for the turbulence that we experienced during the pregnancy.

Everything went fairly smooth, as I recall, until the 18-week ultra sound. The ultrasound tech moved her wand around Jennifer's growing belly, flashing distorted-looking black-and-white images on the screen, glowing brightly in the darkened room. Occasionally pausing to push a button or twist a knob, it truly appeared that she knew just what she was looking at.

The tech introduced us to our child, asexual at that time, pointing out his features. As she showed us his tiny face on the monitor, she joked about how he looked like me, already. The wand swirled over to the far side of Jennifer's abdomen. She tried to show saw his feet and toes, but I saw nothing but a blur. I nodded along, continuing to stare at the maze of images that represented my son.

When she came across his heart, chambers beating I could discern that on the screen. Because we were considered a high-risk pregnancy, having gone through fertility treatments, we'd had a couple of ultrasounds already. Even though I couldn't make out much of the images, I could see how far he has come from the cloudy clump of cells we saw in the first few weeks,

when he looked like a puff of a cotton ball with a tiny flash in the center that was his beating heart. She moved back to my side of my wife and noted the early development of his brain. She paused for another moment and pushed myriad buttons on her panel again. Her stoic expression belied nothing, until she turned back towards us, putting down her wand and offering a towel to Jennifer.

The tech assured us that everything looks great as she ducked out of the room to fetch the more expert opinion of the doctor. She left us alone in the room, both beaming with pride about our blur of light.

"I couldn't see a damn thing," I smiled to Jennifer, "but I wouldn't miss the ultrasound for the world." She smiled back and squeezed my hand tight. Our boy looked great.

It wasn't long before the doctor came back in the room, and appeared to look at all of the angles that the tech just examined. He picked up the wand and started perusing Jennifer again.

"How does he look, doc," I asked, certain of a positive outcome.

He paused, looking at Timothy's head on the screen, "there is one issue that I would like to talk with you about. Is it OK to talk here?"

"Um, yeah, sure," I replied, looking at Jennifer for confirmation; she nodded her assent. The doctor tapped a small, dark circle on the screen.

He slowly described a pair of cysts – collections of fluids – on his brain. The doctor brought his hand down to his chin, which he stroked for deeper thought. It was hard to see the expression on his face, due to the darkness of the room. Choroid plexus cysts, he offered, asking if we were familiar with them.

"No..." I shook my head.

Jennifer, the neurology nurse, was familiar, but unclear on their impact at this stage of life.

The doctor's concern was palpable, as he passively dismissed any threat for our benefit only, with a gentle: "Most likely nothing. But, it could be fairly significant." Great emphasis placed on 'could,' long and drawn out dramatically.

He explained about studies that have associated these cysts with a genetic disease called Trisomy 18. The research documents that about half of babies with Trisomy 18 have these cysts upon ultrasound. The caveat was that when these cysts are seen, there are almost always other abnormalities, particularly with the heart, hands, and feet. None of which he saw.

"What is Trisomy 13?" I asked incorrectly, more worried about what the disease is than its name.

"Trisomy 18," the doctor corrected. He explained that it is a rare genetic condition – extremely rare – that can lead to birth defects, and in the absolutely rarest of cases, the baby can die soon after birth. He tried to assuage by repeating that the cysts are, more likely than not, perfectly normal. They will clear themselves up in a matter of weeks and pose no problems whatsoever.

"But it could mean something pretty bad," I inquired, using my deepest knowledge of medical terms, *bad*.

"Yes," he replied tersely, as he offered to put us in touch with the Genetics staff right away, suggesting a blood test that is a more accurate indicator of things.

"Please," I said. "The sooner the better."

We sat in the darkened room in silence, waiting for word of what's to come next, not just for us that day, but for Timothy's life. After an apparent eternity, the doctor returned to the room, and led us, still silent, down the wide white halls of the hospital and knocked on the partially opened door.

We were invited us into a tiny office that reminded me of a storage space under a stair case; it was long and narrow, with her desk taking up much of the space in the room. Her desk was a clutter of seemingly disorganized papers, some floating loosely about the desk, others stacked high within folders. A corkboard on the wall was strewn with myriad postings and colored squares of paper.

"We need a blood test," I explained with great medical detail. The test, I learned, is called an Alpha Feto-Protein test. AFP is produced by the baby's liver and is excreted through the placenta into your blood. A blood test measures the AFP. If the fetus has a high amount of AFP in its blood, this may indicate a birth defect in the fetus. As she explained the test, she tried to reassure us with a statistic that most would find soothing. Even if the test comes back positive, the Genetics tech assured, less than 5% of fetuses will actually have a birth defect.

"With all due respect," I butted in, "we are not reassured by this 5% rule." We'd been on the wrong side of the 5% barrier far too many times to be comforted by this threshold anymore. We were in the 5% of couples who had fertility problems; we were in the 5% of that 5% who had problems getting pregnant a second time; we are in the 2% of couples who have had multiple miscarriages. And Matthew, he's in the 1% of children who get Autism, and even fewer of those who have accompanying seizure problems. So we've heard these reassurances before, and fell right into the category that we were told was so rare.

A positive blood test would be followed by another; a second positive would lead to a spate of other, more invasive tests: an ultrasound or an amniocentesis.

“What do we do if he has it?” I asked. Her answer was chilling, suggesting we may want to consider ending the pregnancy.

So, she drew a vial of blood from Jennifer’s left arm, draped a square of gauze over the site and taped it down.

We were escorted down the hall to a waiting bench. So we sat on the bench, Jennifer and I, and waited. As we sat, pregnant women of all belly sizes wandered past, smiling and laughing as they planned their future with Junior, knowing full well that all would be fine and there was not even a tick of concern on their faces. Mothers with newborns in tow, coming back for the inevitable 6-week postpartum checkup, coo at the little tykes in their carrier.

I dared not say a word. This just could not be true. In the past few years we’ve had two miscarriages, thankfully, very early in the pregnancy. One pregnancy, the egg never even took, and the other was what they called a blighted ovum and never had a chance from Day 1. But the experience opened our thinking to the unthinkable, that we could lose a pregnancy later on.

For most people, the thought of being losing a pregnancy is never a concern. You get pregnant, you have a baby; a perfect symbiotic one-to-one relationship. After getting pregnant twice and losing the pregnancy twice, we were forced to accept what others never even consider. As a result, there was a small voice in my head warning me not to get too attached to this baby until we knew he’s coming. It was as if I purposefully, necessarily, held some of our love back from Timothy, until we were more comfortable with the pregnancy.

We had gotten through the first couple of months in tact, and our confidence was starting to build. As Jennifer's stomach swelled, I couldn't help but slip into a greater and greater affection for him. With each passing day, I loved him more. And after having seen him, or what they tell us was him, on the ultrasound screen, and being told at first that everything looked great, I was fully engulfed in feelings for Timothy.

Trisomy 18 is also called Edward's syndrome. It occurs in about one in three thousand live births. We could live with a child with a disability, like Down Syndrome; we have a son with Autism, we understand disability. But, this is different. Trisomy 18 is usually fatal; most babies who have it die before birth; those lucky enough to be born usually live only a few days.

So, our growing confidence and certainty was just dashed at our feet with the news that he could have a fatal condition.

Jennifer, without averting her straight-ahead gaze questioned what we would do if he has it. I told her that I hadn't even thought of it yet. I wanted to wait for the tests results. Abortion, to her, was off the table. Yet, she feared how she would react should she meet him, only to lose him so quickly.

"I know," I replied, but I didn't know. No one can know the pain and anguish of losing a child until it happens. I am told, it is no different if your child is 33, 13, 3, or dies at birth. It doesn't matter if you know he's going to die or if it comes as a complete strike of lightning. It hurts all the same. Forever. "Look, let's get the results back before we make any decisions. We just don't know."

We sat in the hallway, desperate for news, feeling an anguish and sadness that should never be felt by someone who is pregnant. It is supposed to be a happy time, full of joy and

possibility, a time for picking names from a book, planning the nursery, picking out those first toys and the outfit he will come home from the hospital in. Not one of fear and dread.

After another eternity passed, the tech emerged through the swinging doors. The blood work was back.

We ventured back to the little office, still in silence. We sat back down on the same two chairs we occupied before and waited for the results; waited for the fortune teller to gaze into her glass ball, read the dregs at the bottom of our teacup, describe the lines on our palms: might we have a healthy baby boy or might we have a desperately sick child, a child with an always-fatal condition? Or, might neither of those eventualities happen and we lose a child we never knew.

She sat in front of her computer, punching in numbers. When she was satisfied with the results, she turned to us. The test results came back Positive. My heart sank to the floor.

“What does that mean?” I asked. What it meant was, our child has an increased risk of having Trisomy-18. But, she repeated, his chance of having it, given these test results, is only 5%. There was a 95% likelihood that he’ll be perfectly fine.

Because of this test result, she said, we would have to have more ultrasounds, in addition to this 18-week ultrasound, and track the baby’s progress. If he’s showing more signs of the condition, we were told, we might want to consider ending the pregnancy early. The tech pulled brochures from her top desk drawer with names like: *Pregnancy Cessation* and *Saying Goodbye Before Saying Hello*.

“It was really a 20-week ultrasound, not 18 week,” I tried to joke. Since we had fertility treatments to get pregnant, we knew exactly when he was conceived, and the date they had was off by a couple of weeks. Until now, it didn’t matter.

I explained that we knew his date of conception, and in reality we were at 20 weeks, not the 18, as she had just suggested. The tech turned back to her computer and typed some figures in.

If that was the case, she looked again at her calculations, the test is a negative. The numbers at 20 weeks work out to a negative. The numbers are 18 weeks, Positive; 20 weeks Negative. She looked genuinely perplexed.

“So what’s the answer?”

The tech confessed that she would have to talk to my boss and see what he thinks. But, he was out of the office at a conference for a few days. He’ll be back on Thursday.

“So we have to wait until Thursday to straighten this out?”

So, we left it at that. We spent the next few days in desperate paranoia about Timothy. Would he or wouldn’t he. We just didn’t know. And even if we did know, we wouldn’t know, at least according to the expert.

When Thursday finally came around, I called first thing in the morning; she, of course, put me off until later in the day when she could get to the doctor. When we finally heard, the doctor agreed that we should use the 20-week results, the Negative. Whether he agreed with us because it was clinically the correct thing to do, or just to get us to shut up, I do not know.

But, it was too late. The fear was out there; the thought was put in our minds. We would have to wait several weeks with the knowledge that Timothy may not make it to life. Fortunately, because we used fertility, we were considered a High Risk pregnancy and tracked much more

closely. We had more than one ultrasound ahead of us, yielding images that would reveal Timothy's fate. At least in this case.

In the end, all our fears were unfounded. The ultrasounds showed him developing normally – 10 fingers, 10 toes, and all that. No signs of Trisomy-18 or any other number. He would be born perfectly healthy, ready to live a long and prosperous life. Or not.

It was another perfectly normal morning when Timothy decided to emerge into the world. I was downstairs with Matthew, running him through his usual morning routine, with Jennifer upstairs, still in bed, as she was wont to do this late in the pregnancy. We knew the day was coming, soon. I had my pregnancy pager at my side at all times, so that she could reach me in places where my cell phone wouldn't operate. Grandma was on-call to cover the Matthew duties while we were at the hospital.

I heard her stirring upstairs, her footsteps rang loudly through the ancient floors of our near-century-old house. She creaked down the stairs and turned into the front hall. As I looked up, she seemed calm and serene, like nothing was out of ordinary for a Tuesday morning.

"Why are you up?" I asked, expecting that she was going to stay in bed for a while, like most mornings.

"My water broke," was all she said, with a flat monotone of someone who has been there before.

"Oh, OK. We should probably get to the hospital, then," I replied in a feigned calm. A call was placed to Grandma and the pre-packed bag was procured from the bedroom. She quickly changed into comfortable clothing from her pajamas, and we waited for the sitter to come.

Matthew continued to eat his cereal and bagel, despite all the clatter around him, as though his life was not about to change.

Grandma got to the house in quick order and we were off to the hospital. All was running smoothly until the Lynnway, a three-lane roadway that is the major artery to Boston from the North Shore. And on this morning, it was acting like the main artery with a clot. We came to a halt just outside the donut shop and started moving at a crawl.

From the WLHM Eagle-Eye traffic copter, the radio blared, a multiple-car accident on the Lynnway in Lynn...

Jennifer, knowing as only immediately expecting mothers know, told me that she was not going to make it if we stayed at this pace.

“What do you want me to do? There’s traffic everywhere...”

Call an ambulance. We pulled into the parking lot of a strip mall and dialed 911. In moments, a police car and a fire truck powered their way into the lot. In the distance, the mournful wail of an ambulance could be heard. A second police car appeared with the ambulance, as if this were the greatest crisis in the history of the City of Lynn. The EMTs quickly whisked Jennifer into the back of the ambulance and were off. Even from the start, Timothy was in a rush.

The rest of the pregnancy story is pretty mundane and boring, so I won’t dawdle with the details. Except that, as Jennifer related later, one of the EMTs spent the ride into the city grilling her about me. Apparently, I went to school with him, and he was in the mood to reminisce. Needless to say, Jennifer was not.

Timothy had a smooth infancy, no real issues to report, until he turned 11 months. At least I think it was then, I don't recall for certain – but it doesn't matter much to the story. He was young.

Timothy was a hearty little boy, always getting in tussles with his big brother. So, we were not surprised to see his forehead pock-marked by bruises. He was still new to walking and fell down often, so we thought little of it – until I was changing him one day.

I propped him up on the island in the kitchen that served as a changing table; Timothy was full of vigor, kicking and thrashing around the table, trying to roll onto his stomach and crawl away, not wanting to hold still for an instant to be changed. That he had a completely full diaper was of little consequence to him. I grabbed his leg firmly to keep him from dancing about too much; but when I let go of his leg, I saw five circular bruises where my fingers had been.

“Hell, Timothy,” I told him, “I didn't squeeze your leg that hard, did I?” As an experiment, I pressed into his thigh with my finger, again firmly, but not hard enough to cause damage. Sure enough, I pulled my finger away and a bruise appeared in its place on his leg. “Jennifer,” I called into the other room. “You might want to come and look at this.” I imagined the swirls and whirls of my fingerprint glowing through the bruise, leaving no doubt that I was the one abusing him.

When she came into the room, I continued my experiment of poking contusions into his leg. “That ain't right,” my expert understanding of medicine told me.

Jennifer agreed. I ventured off to work at her insistence and urging, with the promise that she would take him to the doctor later that day. Blood-work was done. The result showed that his blood platelet count was 1% of what it should be. His blood should have 300,000 platelets *per*

measurement; however they measure these things; his showed less than 3,000. Blood platelets, for those who do not know – and count me in that class before this -- are what get the blood to clot: causing wounds to stop bleeding and bruises to heal.

Another call to Grandma, asking that she come over the house quick and watch Matthew; I drove home from work at a hell-bent pace to the hospital. A practice run, as it would turn out.

Seven hours in the emergency room at Massachusetts General Hospital to learn Timothy's condition. It was late into the evening as we paced the tiny exam room where we were told to wait, Timothy slowly drifted off to sleep. Not an option for us. After an eternity of walking circles in the room, a doctor finally came back with the results.

The doctors addressed us in stressed and second-hand English, that Timothy has a condition called ITP, or Idiopathic Thrombocytopenic Purpura. Even Jennifer, who generally knows everything that medical people describe, was stumped on that one.

ITP, he told us in a tired professorial tone, occurs when a person makes antibodies that attach to the platelets in the blood. The immune system correctly eliminates antibodies, assuming they are bacteria. The problem is the platelets go with the antibodies. The resulting decrease in the platelet count is known as thrombocytopenia.

Platelet counts as low as Timothy's enormously increase the risk of internal bleeding and/or bleeding on the brain, intracranial hemorrhage. Either of these conditions can be life-threatening for a child – for anyone. Even an injury as innocuous as being tackled by Matthew – or having his leg squeezed by Dad during a changing – could cause fatal internal bleeding. The biggest clue, we were told, is petechiae, red spots on his skin. The spots are due to bleeding under the skin.

ITP can be caused by a virus, which could also explain his fever of a few days prior. It can also be due to medication, infections, or associated with immune disorders such as lupus or HIV infection. But, I would tend towards a virus.

“What does this mean?” we chimed in together in an un-practiced chorus.

The doctor replied that in most cases, some 85-90%, children recover quickly and without further problems. However, in some children, ITP does not go away.

This could be life-threatening, the ER doc continued; but only if he has an injury that causes him to bleed internally. But even then, the mortality rate from hemorrhage is maybe 1% in children. Here we go again with the small percentage of cases being dangerous.

The doctor scrawled his hieroglyphics on a pad of paper: an order for Intravenous Gamma Globulin to block the antibody that results in the destruction of the platelets.

Timothy, was one of those cases where he got treatment and the condition cleared immediately. His bruising stopped and faded away. Another scare survived.

But our luck would soon run out....

Chapter 5

The Call

"I was raised not to question
promises the Bible makes.
But how could the Almighty
have made such a terrible mistake? "
-- Allison Moorer

That June morning was starting out to be splendid.

I rolled down all four windows in my car and slid open the moon roof to let in the beautiful morning air. There was a sense of warmth in the air, but not the heat and humidity that can make a New England day insufferable. As I pulled away from the curb by the daycare center, I flashed the *I Love You* hand sign towards the building and my boy. I loved these mornings when I got to drop him off; if only to watch him play for a few minutes with the other kids in his group.

For a while when I was “between jobs” the previous summer, I would drive by at different times, and infuriate the drivers behind me by slowing down enough to watch for him running around in the play yards with his friends. It is magical to see a child that age interact with his peers; communicating on a level that adults could never understand; playing by a set of rules that only they knew or made up as they went along – definitely an odd paradigm for us

grown-ups, who have each rule and action mapped out well in advance. When kids play together all pre-conceived notions of reality are gone: stick become guns; proportion doesn't matter as big trucks roll along side of smaller trucks, operated by drivers that are too large to fit in either; cardboard boxes become houses; cops and robbers emerge just from the passing of a few words; but, most of all, everything is fun.

Timothy certainly had that quality, that everything is fun. As Jennifer and I reminisce about him, we are constantly agreeing that *Timothy loved to do that*, no matter what *that* may have been.

As my car slid down West Street, I knew he was in there right then, having fun. And what more could a parent want, other than to maybe be regaled with stories of all that fun at bedtime that night.

"What did you do in school today, Timothy?" I would ask as he sat in my lap absently watching the television.

"I played with dough and made a face," he might answer. Or, "I colored with finger paints; I played outside in the sandbox; I drew your picture with crayons; I made a snack with cookies and whipped cream." It didn't matter so much what he did. He was only three, after all. It mattered only that he had fun doing it, and that he told me about it, face still aglow with the excitement of the day. Seeing Timothy smile made all other worries fade away.

I was awakened from my reverie by the vibration of my cell phone in my pocket. I fumbled under the restraint of the seat belt to get my phone while driving through one of the busier intersections in town. Pulling it out, I quickly flipped it open.

"Hello?" It was Jennifer, sounding mighty tired from having worked the night before.

“Is everything OK?” Usually, I only got these phone calls if Matthew’s school called to tell us that he was having a *bad Matthew day* and needed to come home.

“Oh yeah,” she yawned. “Listen, are you going to get Tim’s helicopter today? The one he saw on TV? He was asking about it again yesterday.” Timothy had seen a helicopter being offered by a local gas station chain and had to have one.

“Yeah, I am planning to go to go out at lunch and pick one up, if they are still available. They sell out fast.” He’ll be really upset if you don’t get it for him, you know, she reminded me.

“Don’t I know it. The company’s website said that there are two or three stations nearby. I was going to call to see if they had one...”

“OK. I am going to bed now.”

“Good, you sound tired. Get some sleep. Maybe you can take the boys out for a walk. Go down to Poppo’s and get some hot dogs for supper. They like that.”

The phone clicked off. I knew that she would likely be too tired for walking; she usually was after working. Maybe I could sneak out of work a bit early today, I thought, as I slipped the phone back in my pocket. That would be nice.

The morning at my desk dragged on like any other. I sat, poking away at my computer keyboard surrounded by pictures of my boys. I used to be one of those people who flooded their cubicle with all manner of personal paraphernalia, stuffed animals from my wife, fast-food giveaway toys, text books from college, artwork, photos, any bit of something to declare who I am. But after getting laid off three times in recent years – I am in high tech, you see. Common occurrences are the *re-organizations* that ended various employment situations – I have taken to

taking but a few items to work for my desk. All I have now are the photos of my boys, and a pair of toys that Timothy loved.

As the clock was creeping towards 11, I decided it was high time to visit the men's room and refill the coffee. My office mate and supervisor was off at lunch, so I figured I would return to my desk, play some King Wilkie bluegrass loud enough that Timothy would hear it some 30 miles away in Marblehead.

As I was exiting the bathroom, completed my rounds, I was startled by my phone vibrating in my pocket and chirping out its ring. "Hello, Michael Burke..."

"Yes, Mr. Burke?"

"Speaking."

"This is the Marblehead Police Department calling. Your son has been in an accident...." My thoughts immediately rushed to Matthew. He had been having a rough time in school on and off that spring and I figured he was up to no good. But wait. The police are involved? What did he do and how the hell did he get to Marblehead from Swampscott? The towns abut, but how, why, who, what???

"What did Matthew do, officer?" I asked pensively.

"No sir," she replied stoically. "It's your son Timothy I am calling about. He had an accident in his preschool." My heart sank all the way down my legs, through my feet, and all the way down the six floors of my office building. I am sure that I went white as the wall I collapsed against.

“What happened to him?” I tried to remain calm despite the fact my entire body was in hysterical convulsion. My Timothy had an accident serious enough that the police were involved. He choked on his potato chips at snack; but he was fine after a few slaps on the back; merely precaution that the police got involved. He fell down the stairs in the play area and bumped his head; just a few stitches, but he’s fine; just wants to see his Papa. He was tussling with another boy and they banged heads; momentarily dazed, but both are fine now; just should get him checked out as soon as you can. Everything was fine.

“He stopped breathing,” the officer replied. And I did too.

“Is he breathing now?”

“I don’t know.”

“How long did he stop breathing?”

“I don’t know. I am calling from dispatch; I’m not at the scene.” The scene. She called it a scene. That has to be bad. The scene of the accident; the scene of the crime; the scene of the death. A scene is never good when it is described by a police officer. “The Advanced Life Services ambulance is there now taking care of him.”

“Are they taking him to the hospital?” When the ALS got involved, the hospital was a certainty.

“They want to, but we would like a parent present to take him. How long will it take to get here?” she asked expressionlessly.

“Jesus god, 45 minutes. Maybe a half an hour. Don’t wait for me just get him there...”

“We are trying to get a hold of your wife, but she’s not answering the phone.”

“She’s sleeping. She works nights.”

“If you know she’s home we can send a squad car over to escort her to the hospital.”

“Yes, yes. She’s home.” I said, really starting to collapse into a total body panic. What if they can’t rouse her? How can I get to Salem Hospital to meet Timothy? It will take forever at this time of day. I was suddenly struck by a moment of clarity. “I can call someone. She lives in Salem. She has a key and can get it and wake her up.”

“Please do that, Mr. Burke. I have dispatched an officer to get her. The call was filled with silence.

“Can I do anything else for you, Mr. Burke?”

“No,”

“I am really sorry about your son. I hope he is okay.” The line went dead, and I found myself sitting in a heap on the floor. Somehow during the call, I dropped to the floor without knowing it.

My Timothy is in trouble and I am too far away to help him.

Chapter 6

The Early Years

"Oh, how I miss those happy days..."
-- King Wilkie

The memories I have of Timothy as an infant are fleeting, like the photographs in an album or a slide show. I don't recall lengthy stories and adventures with him as a tyke, though I am sure we did have our share. No, when I look back, I see evidence of a highly domesticated bliss, adventures around the home, adventures in the yard, adventures with family and friends.

I think of that first Christmas with Timothy, all of two months old; the house all decorated and festive: every surface in the house touched by something yuletide and gay. Stockings hanging along the staircase, as we have no mantle to place them; Timothy's being the smallest of them all, glistening white in stark contrast to the red and green of the other three. I see his eyes ablaze as he stares at the twinkling lights of the tree; myriad orbs of color dangle from each branch; countless dolls and statues and figurines dance along with the colored bulbs; the plastic red apples that he would help hang the next year, waiting for the time when he would be old enough to hang the glass balls; presents stuffed in every available inch beneath the tree. He had no idea what the occasion meant, but he knew it was special and knew it was wonderful.

I think of visiting family at the holiday; knowing that no matter the presents given that Timothy was the best gift of all. I see infant Timothy crying softly as he is passed from person to person, like the plate of Christmas ham that would soon be passed at the dinner table.

Then, I think of the simple, happy days around the house; Timothy laughing wildly while bouncing on Mama's knee, signing a song aloud:

Timmy's digging a hole in the sand

He dug it so deep that he fell right in!

She would lower Timothy to the floor, landing on his bottom, smiling and laughing with all the joy in the world. From the floor, he leans over and tries to suckle Mama's toes, she playfully pulling her foot away before he can bite.

I see the celebration of every little tooth as it painfully breaks through the gums; little signs of aging that promise of things to come: sitting in a high chair eating bits of cereal; nibbling on tiny cuts of hot dog; sharing toddler dinners with his father, who couldn't resist the chicken stew.

I see Timothy sitting among the green grass of our humble back yard; picking blades and immediately moving them to his mouth. "No mouth, Timothy." I would plead in vain. Sticks, leaves, dandelions all going straight for the six-month old's lunch. Meanwhile, "No mouth, Timothy" continues unheeded.

I see him back on the living room floor, learning how to roll over from his back. His head turned just the right way and his legs and arms work furiously, somehow self-taught, to contort his body over onto his stomach; bursting out into tears when he gets stuck halfway over; erupting with joy when he finally accomplishes the feat, slapping his hands on the floor in celebration.

I see him slowly pulling his frame along the floor, trying desperately to learn auto-motion. At first, with the roll perfected, he learns that he can roll over and over to reach his

target. Soon, he understands that his arms can pull his weight along the floor. Eventually, he graduates to coordinating his arms and legs together in self-propulsion.

Not much later, he learns to grab onto the side of the couch and pull himself to his feet; then to move hand-over-hand, shuffling his feet as he motors around the room, reaching desperately for any surface that he can hang onto as he moves along.

Finally, like a little bird, he learns to fly, finding the bravado to let go of his couch-crutch and walk. His arms held up high, as a tightrope walker holding a balancing bar, he waddles in a side-to-side saunter around the room. Boom. He falls to the floor, landing hard, but proud. Bruises soon mark his forehead as badges of honor.

I can still hear those first sounds out of his mouth; the cooing, gurgling, singing attempts at communication as a newborn that gradually develop into discernable words like *Mama*, *Dada*, and *baba* for his bottle. The important things in his life are the first to come to his lips. Eventually, his vocabulary develops into an encyclopedia of his needs, though many of the words can only be understood by and need interpretation from his parents.

I see him standing there one day, showing off his font of knowledge. “Timothy what sound does a cow make?”

“Mooo,” a gentle utterance comes from his smiling lips. Soft, but assured in knowing he is right.

“What does the doggie say?”

“Woof-woof!” his whole body emphasizing each word.

“Timothy, where is your hair?” His hands quickly make their way to the top of his head where they indicate his sandy blonde locks.

“Timothy, where are your eyes?” His finger nearly poking himself in the eyes, which are squeezed shut to avoid the contact.

I see him each week in the community swimming pool, Styrofoam egg tied to his back for help, swimming about the pool with his mother towing him along; splashing eagerly to the songs of the mommy and child class, the twinkle in the teacher’s eye for Timothy, as though he were her most special student. I was lucky enough to work nearby the pool, so I could watch him often, and had occasion to slip into the pool with him. How he loved to splash the pool surface with both hands and kick away with both legs, his entire body participating in each activity.

And on that Sunday evening, when there was nothing we could do to soothe him, I dashed off to the store 10 miles away to buy him a baby swing. The same baby swing that could calm Matthew down from any irritation, where he slept so often, in peace and comfort. I got to the store moments before closing and was able to grab the swing, despite the evil stares from the employees who just wanted to close-up shop and go home. I stuffed the swing into the back of my sedan and somehow drove home with a large box poking the back of my head. At the house, I quickly assembled the swing, cutting a finger in the process. When done, we placed the crying Timothy in the swing and turned it on. As the chair sped up to pace, Timothy’s crying exploded into a wail. The swing was a bust.

I see him on his first birthday, beaming with pride over the attention everyone was pointing at him – a room full of people celebrating his life; the first in what should have been many birthday celebrations.

When he was three, he was so looking forward to birthday number 4 so he could join the basketball league and number 6 so he could go to *Matthew’s school*.

I can still remember that first one though, sitting on the floor in his mother's lap; she was wearing her favorite purple sweater and floral skirt, he in a non-descript child's one-piece outfit. Timothy opened each present with fervor, whether the package contained a light-up toy, a plastic drum, or a clothing outfit. Matthew hovered closely nearby, checking out all the presents, too, studying which ones he might like to play with.

I can still see Timothy standing at the edge of the dining room table, straining on tip-toes to see his cake and the wax #1 that is aglow on top. Again, Matthew sneaks in and blows out the candle for his brother; which is okay, because Timothy couldn't reach it anyway. Then Timothy, seated in a high chair, dives into a slice of cake, scooping up Winnie-the-Pooh's face in frosting and eating it whole.

I see us in a restaurant, ordering a batch of french fries, and squeezing the potato innards out of the fries into his toothless mouth.

Even in the simple things, like how easily he transitioned from bottle to sippy-cup, a capped plastic cup with a built-in straw mechanism. Matthew had such a hard time that we finally had to deprive him of liquids one morning until he was so thirsty that he had no choice – even going so far as encouraging him to eat a lot of saltine crackers. No such issues with Timothy, who couldn't have moved onto the sippy cup quickly enough or easily enough.

I see him as a two-year old, in nothing but a diaper finger-painting with Matthew, in nothing but underwear. Timothy pours red paint from a small cup onto the paper and smears it around the page in a magnificent design. When the cup was empty, he picks it up and presses it to his face, as though trying to take a drink, leaving a red circle around his lips. I see red paint all over his hands and forearms; a red mark above his elbow and on his belly. Matthew likewise covered in blue. A stealthy trip to the bathtub without touching anything in the house, including

the floors, to wash the colors off both boys and down the drain with now-purple bubbles. The boys splash in the tub together with squeals of joy. I see two proud boys as I post their finger-painted masterpieces on the refrigerator door for display.

In my mind I can still see the sparkle in his eye, the light of his soul. I still cannot believe that his sun has set and the flame is extinguished. I still cannot believe he is gone.

After all he just got here...

Chapter 7

The Race

"I prayed and prayed 'Don't let me lose
What my heart adores...'"
-- Allison Moorer

As I sat on the floor at work, just steps from the Men's room, Timothy's life passed before my eyes. Everything was swirling around, spinning, twisting, twirling, floating away, as if I just got off the Merry-Go-Round at the Topsfield Fair. In seconds that felt like hours, I climbed back to my feet and ran down the hall to my office, nearly knocking over four people on the way. I grabbed my work bag and pulled the plug on the computer to turn it off. I didn't have time to wait. I turned to my supervisor to tell her I was leaving, but she was not there.

"Dammit. Who am I going to tell?" Suddenly, I remembered that I have to call Grandma and get her over to the house. Now, Grandma used to be a business professional, and was definitely cool under fire. But, I recalled what happened last spring when Matthew had a near drowning accident in a pool in Florida where we were on vacation. She pounded on the door to our rented condo and was flush with panic. She could barely get the words out, she was so shaken by the incident. Not that I was any cooler when I saw the swarm of ambulances, police cars, and fire trucks by the pool. I had to pad the story somewhat.

She answered when I called; thank goodness she was home.

“Hi. It’s Michael.” She thought the same thing I did when I got the call from the Police, that Matthew was having trouble in school and needed to come home. It wouldn’t have been the first time I called her during a day after Jennifer worked to have her rescue our boy from school.

“No, Grandma. It’s not Matthew.” I paused, taking a deep breath. This Irish boy was not given the gift of Blarney; I was a straight-talker by nature and not great at lying. I can do it; it just goes against my nature. “It’s Timothy. He had an accident at school.”

I glossed over the What Happened part. She could find out how desperate it was when she got Jennifer to the hospital. I dispatched Grandma to the house to wake Jennifer and tore out of the office as fast as I could run in sandals, stopping for a flash to tell my manager what happened and that I was leaving.

“Why the heck are you still here?” he asked.

I practically leapt all the way down the five flights of stairs to the lower level. There was no way I was waiting for the elevators. Knowing my luck, and the reliability of those elevators, I would get stuck between floors somewhere. As I dashed out the back door of the office building I fumbled my keys; they dropped towards the ground and got kicked off my left foot as I ran, flying out in front of me, clanging onto the pavement, and sliding to rest under my car.

I dropped to the pavement, amongst the dirt, dust, grass clippings, oil stains, and who-knows-what to fish under my car to get my keys. They were in that perfect-for-them spot where I could just barely reach. Using my fingertips, I flipped at the key ring several times to get them to jump in my direction. I finally was able to snatch them and I quickly crawled back to my feet.

I jumped into the car, firing it up and slamming into reverse in the same move. Even though it was an automatic, the car didn't like that move and the engine shook and rattled to a coughing stop. Cranking the keys the engine growled and snarled, but wouldn't catch. "Godammit!" I yelled, the tears already flooding my eyes, fearing the worst for my boy. "Start damn you!" I cranked the keys again and the engine sparked to life, roaring as loud as the little motor could while belching an opaque puff of white smoke out the tail pipe. After a moment, I slowly dropped it into reverse and started out.

When I was a lad, I drove like a banshee, with utter disregard for speed limits, and the limits of good taste and safety. As I hustled out of the parking lot, I hoped that my skills of youth hadn't left me; I would need them today. Pulling out onto the main road, I started my Hell ride by cutting off a wide, yellow commuter bus as it lumbered along the Mall Road, a two-mile strip of businesses and red lights.

Fortunately, the traffic was not bad; unusual for a late Thursday morning. My lane rolled quickly up to more than 70, which should have been enough, but not this time. From the far left lane, I plunged over a lane, sped up in the gap between cars and ducked back to the left. Ahead of the crowd, I stepped it up to 80 again and started to cruise.

The highway takes a steep right hand sway at that point, making it hard to see what is coming. I hardly took my foot off the pedal as I swung along the roadway to the right to see brake lights in front of me. Overreacting, I panicked my foot from the gas to the brake and immediately I started to fishtail. Letting go of the brake, I got back under control and was able to jump over two lanes to avoid the slowdown. Now in the far-right merging lane, I sped around the traffic as it slowed for a tire changer and quickly stood on the gas pedal again. A mid-size cube truck started coming up the Salem Street on-ramp as I hurtled towards him rolling up to nearly

85; I was staring at the bolts on his tires as I slipped past the truck. His air horn quickly faded into the distance as I found a hole to get me back in the middle lane.

As I could finally allow my mind to focus on something other than driving, I immediately thought of Timothy. He must be laying on some stretcher somewhere, driving like a hell-hound to the hospital. At least I hoped they were driving fast. My cynical mind saw the paramedics declaring him dead at the scene, and beginning their slow, somber roll to the hospital.

“Jesus, God Almighty!” I screamed to my voice’s breaking point. “Let him be OK. You let him be OK! You hear me? Don’t take my son away from me! I need him, dammit!” It would be the first of countless prayers and requests of Him. I hope others will be more eloquent. “Don’t take my boy from me!” The tears started rolling down my cheeks, making it hard to drive; but that did not slow me down as I tore along the roadway looking for my exit. I didn’t even know if Jennifer were awake and knew what is going on.

As my exit approached, I rolled over the two lanes to the exit lane. I pulled onto the straight-away, still going a solid 65. The easy part of the journey complete, I now had to drive the five miles along urban and suburban streets to the hospital, which was centered deep within the confines of Salem, completely inaccessible from the highway.

The rest of the ride was a blur of merging cars, red lights and pedestrians. As I sat stalled on Washington Street, waiting for the light to turn green, an elderly couple entered the crosswalk from a donut shop. The light changed, but we sat, waiting for them to traverse the lane. By the time they got to the safe shores of the traffic island, the light returned to red. “For Chrissakes! Come on!” I slammed my hand into the steering wheel with painful force.

I screeched down Marlborough Road, a residential side street, nearly taking out the mail truck that had pulled over to shove the usual assortment of bills, flyers, and catalogs into a

roadside mailbox. At the end, I sat again idling, my face turning redder than the signal light with anger. As it turned green, I sliced along to the left and headed down the final stretch of Highland Ave, a straight-way of retail, residential, medical, and countless other dwellings.

I tore up to nearly 50 along the only open stretch of the road and passed through the yellow light. Up another small hill to the final red light. I sat right next to the Salem Hospital, with its gothic-looking main building. As I watched down the road, a Swampscott Police car pulled out of the parking lot by the Children's Emergency Room. Somehow, I knew Jennifer had made it. As the light changed I drove with a renewed sense of anxiety down the small incline to the entrance of the hospital. I would soon learn the state of my son. What would I hear? Did I want to know? Is he OK? Is he brain-damaged from not breathing? Is he even still alive? I had no idea.

I rolled through the parking lot looking desperately for a space. "Come on, where is there a space? Dammit! Handicapped; Handicapped; Doctor's Only; Doctor's Only." As I lurked up and down the rows of cars, I was tempted to pull out front and dare them to tow me when I saw a mirage ahead. An empty space.

I pulled in the space and turned off the engine. As I sat in the car, my head spinning, I looked up through the moon roof to see Salem's one hawk, a red-tail I believe, perched atop one of the light poles in the parking lot, leering down at me with a vulture-like gaze.

It wasn't me he was looking for; I made it. Without getting pulled over; without getting killed. The first miracle. I was hoping for many more. "Thank you," I told my car, rubbing the steering wheel, grateful that my old steed came through in the clutch.

Now, all I had to do was go inside.

Chapter 8

Wicki-Wacki Woo

“Back in Nagasaki
Where the brothers chew tobacco
And the women wicki-wacky woo...”
-- Django Reinhardt (via the Red Stick Ramblers)

Of all the things he loved, the one that made him Timothy, to me, was his love of music. It was more than just a love of music; he seemed to understand music. He understood the subtleties and minutia of the songs he was listening to. He loved music of all kinds from my country and hard rock to Mama’s dance pop, he loved it all with few exceptions.

He used to meet me at the door everyday when I got home from work, not to say *Hello* or give me a hug *Welcome Home*, but to ferret through the CDs in my workbag. I used to haul a number of discs around to listen to at work and in the car, and Timothy would just help himself to a couple, pop them in his portable CD player, and *tune-out* to the music in the headphones.

His favorites were the Old Crow Medicine Show, a modern-day country string band that sounded like it could have come out of 1920’s Georgia; King Wilkie, a traditional bluegrass band that would have been right at home in the 1940s and 1950s with the likes of Bill Monroe and the

Stanley Brothers; the Red Stick Ramblers, a odd combination of Cajun, Texas swing, country, bluegrass, with heavy inspiration from the French jazzman Django Reinhardt; BR5-49, a hillbilly honky-tonk band from straight out of the clubs on Lower Broadway in Nashville; Big and Rich, a pair of country-rockers who embodied both the sublime and the ridiculous all in one. He loved rock-and-roll, too. He was into the fierce hard rock of a band called Godsmack; I can still hear him growling from the back seat along with singer Sully at the beginning of the ironically titled *Sick of Life*; and screaming along with the thrash-metal band Pantera's iconic lyric, *You talkin' to me?!?* He liked the 1980's heavy metal of Judas Priest and Iron Maiden. But beyond that, he loved Alicia Keyes, a brilliant soul singer and piano player; he grooved to the lightweight soul of a singer called Beyonce; and he bopped to the dance pop of a 1980s band called Snap.

He was comfortable singing along to OCMS's alternative-country single *Wagon Wheel*; listening to the complex Cajun/jazz rhythms of Red Stick Ramblers' *Tchvalo's Swing*; singing the song's chorus of Beyonce's *Crazy in Love*, (*Uh-oh, uh-oh we're gonna*) as loud as possible from the back seat of the car; banging on his knees like drums to Judas Priest's *Rapid Fire*; singing the sometimes-bawdy lyrics of the Dixie Chicks: "mattress dancing" to *Sin Wagon* with its "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!" chorus, or helping to say goodbye to Earl; emulating Toby Keith's gun-toting police detective impersonation in the *Beer for Your Horses* video; laughing hysterically to the chorus of Django Reinhardt's *Nagasaki* ("...where the women wicki-wacky-woo") as I changed his diaper; or, just sitting back and relaxing to a Beethoven piano concerto.

He understood the dynamics of songs, too. He understood the difference between slow and fast tempo songs. He knew to sing along quietly to Big and Rich's sad epic *Holy Water*; he knew to belt it out to *Who Stole the Train*, a song from a local country outfit the Twilight

Ranchers; and he knew how to scream and growl along with Sully and Godsmack. When we danced around the room, with him held tightly in my arms, he would instruct me to dance slower or faster, based on the song.

“This is a fast one, Papa. You’re going too slow.” Or “Dance slow to this one. It’s a slow song.”

He was starting to learn about the different instruments and was good at naming at least the basic elements of country music: fiddles, banjo, bass, Dobro, guitar, and pedal-steel. He could hear a song and discern which instrument was playing lead. Once while listening to a song by the Dixie Chicks, he gave his mother a lesson.

“That’s a Dobro, mama,” he called from the back seat as the band’s Emily led into her lead break. The Dobro, or more appropriately the resonator guitar, is a guitar with a large metal plate, or resonator, in the center. The instrument is played horizontally, using a slide or a steel bar moved along the strings on the neck.

“What’s that, honey?” she called from the driver’s seat.

“That’s a Dobro; she’s playing a Dobro.”

“She’s playing what?”

“A Dobro!” he was clearly getting agitated and growled in his little voice the way he did when he got mad. But, the song ended and so did the discussion, until the next song.

“That’s the banjo – and there’s the fiddle, Mama. And the bass!” He raised his hands up in imitation of someone playing the stand-up bass. The fingers on his right hand, held above his head, making mock chords while the fingers of his left hand, down by his waist, plucked imaginary strings.

When they got home, Timothy dashed to the entertainment center and pulled out my Dixie Chicks concert video. Mama popped in the disc, and Timothy forwarded to the song where Emily played the resonator. “There it is,” he announced. “Dobro.”

“Wow,” she remarked. “My three-year-old son knows things that I don’t know.”

After I showed him that you could play music CDs in the DVD player and have the sound come through the television, he quickly mastered the DVD remote control so that he could pop a disc in anytime and remotely repeat his favorite songs over and over as he and his remote control partner danced, shook, and swirled around the living room. Blaring music for all to hear was far better than selfishly hording the songs through a pair of headphones. At least that’s what I figure he was thinking.

Timothy and our adventures in music are some of my fondest memories of him. We traveled all over Massachusetts and southern New England to find bands that he liked to hear.

One hot summer day when Timothy was just shy of 3, we drove 2 ½ hours to Greenfield, in the far western part of the state to see Old Crow Medicine Show play at the Green River Festival. The festival was in a large park near the community college. The rolling hills of the Berkshire Mountains made a picturesque backdrop to the day. The sun rolled high in the sky and the temperatures followed. But the heat didn’t stop Timothy from running riot throughout the festivities.

We visited rows of tents set up by vendors to sell music, t-shirts, hemp-based clothing, incense, candles, and food from around the world. He ran across the wide open fields, rolling down a gentle slope and playing in the grass. He insisted on riding on a motorized train that ran in a large circle in the pasture. He was too small to go alone, and I too big to ride with him, so I walked around the circle along side of him and the train. Tim was holding fast to the rail in front of him, excited and frightened all at once by the ride.

Throughout the day, older kids with handmade papier mache costumes roamed about the grounds. A two-person, yellow horse attracted Tim's attention and he followed it around the grassy field.

But, best of all was the double-decker English bus that was converted into a traveling ice cream shop. We got ice creams outside the bus and ventured in to eat. The lower level was the coolest place in the park, but Timothy insisted on climbing the circular stairway to the top of the bus. There were a number of small, round tables set up. Though you had to squeeze by people to get to a table in the rear, it was a wonderful place for an ice cream. From the heights, I could see the stage easily, local singer-songwriter Lori McKenna played her set; Timothy was oblivious.. He spent a solid 30 minutes walking up and down the spiral stairs of the bus, going outside the bus and making a complete revolution around the vehicle each time.

When it came time for Old Crow to take the stage, it was clear that someone had too much sun. He was panting and pale, finally giving into my pleas for him to drink some water. I sought out the only shade in the place, conveniently right down in front of the stage. As we sat, in what was actually a walkway for people to pass-by the stage or to get close-up photos, he immediately perked up as the band slowly assembled on the stage.

“Is that Old Crow Medicine Show,” he asked, pronouncing “medicine” with great difficulty, mashing the syllables together, *old cwow meshishin show*.

“Remember what we practiced in the car on the way here,” I whispered in his ear. Tim looked at me with misunderstanding. “When the band comes out, what are you going to yell out?”

“Wagon Wheel” he remembered. “And I say it loud, too!”

“That’s right.” The boys in the band, dressed in long cotton shirts and blue jeans or slacks struck up the music. When the first song ended, right on cue, Timothy stood up.

“Wagon Wheel! Wagon Wheel!” he shouted with all the volume he could muster. “Play Wagon Wheel!” He smiled broadly and the sparkle returned to his eyes. This persisted for the entire set, with Timothy standing and calling for his favorite tune. Finally the guitarist, David Rawlings, waved his hands in front of him, urging Timothy to stop.

“We’ll get to it, don’t worry,” he called down from the stage. I just shrugged my shoulders.

“He likes the song, what can I say.” I tried to call back, but was drowned out by the next song. They finally did play his song at the end of their 45-minute set. Timothy was elated and sang along, echoing every word of the song with the band’s singer, Ketchum Secor.

As we drove home, Timothy had me play Wagon Wheel 10 times in a row before he finally nodded off in the back seat, falling asleep with a contented smile on his face.

A few years later, I saw OCMS again. I snuck backstage after the set to thank them for all the joy they had given Timothy, mentioning that afternoon in Greenfield.

“Oh yeah. I remember that kid,” came the reply. Timothy was suddenly famous.

Timothy was adamant about hearing his favorite songs when we saw bands play. Another time, I snuck Tim into the bar of a restaurant down the street to see a local band, the Twilight Ranchers. It was the eve of his third birthday and I wanted to make it special. Little could I have dreamed it would be his last birthday.

He loved several of their songs and we approached the band before the show. We had seen the band play before, and knew one of the members by name.

“There’s my friend, Rob,” Timothy said of the singer/guitarist. Tim loved to look at the CD insert and point out each picture of his *friend*.

“Let’s ask him to sing a song for you, huh?” We walked up to the crowded area of the bar that served as a stage. The room was cramped. The bar stood along the wall with barely enough room for the bartender to do his bidding. Like most bars, the rear wall was crowded with liquor of all kinds from cheap mixers to the finest single-malt scotch. Wine glassed hung from a rack in the ceiling, allowing easy access to serve most customers of the up-scale joint who seemed content with their pinot grigio, merlot, and chardonnay. I stepped up to the stage with a glass of bourbon in one hand and Timothy in the other.

“Excuse me, Rob? Hi, do you remember us?”

He replied with a smile that matched well with his cowboy attire. A warm, wide smile that would befit a true southerner, which he is not. Rob remembered seeing us at a Fourth of July performance outside the restaurant. “Is it Timothy?” he was looking at me.

“Well, he’s Timothy; I’m Michael.” Clearly, he remembered Tim and not me. “My friend here wants to hear a song. It’s his birthday tomorrow.”

“Well then, we’ll see what we can do. I think we can play a song for his birthday. What do you want to hear, Tim?” Timothy looked at me, terrified that Rob would speak to him directly. He looked down towards the floor, shyly avoiding the question. I had to prod him some, but eventually he spoke.

“Drivin’ 45,” he whispered, barely able to be heard above the din of the bar.

Rob told us that they planned to play that one later, in the second set.

“Any way you could bump it into the first set? I hate to impose, but I don’t think he will last much longer than the first.”

“For a birthday boy, I don’t see why not!” Rob moved over to chat with his band mates about changing the set list. About halfway through the set, Rob came to the microphone.

“We’re gonna sing this next one for a little boy whose birthday is tomorrow.” The band briefly jumped into an impromptu version of Happy Birthday, joined in tentatively by the crowd, who was a bit off-put by seeing such a little one in their pub.

“And now, for Timothy, we are going to do Drivin’ 45.” They launched into his song and he was thrilled. We walked the five minutes home after the set and I lay down with Timothy in his bed.

“Did you have fun tonight?”

“Yeah, I like Rob. He’s nice.” He nodded his head with conviction. “When can we see the Twilight Ranchers again?” He said it with a slight lisp on the R, like Twilight Lanchers.

“I don’t know. We’ll have to go on the computer tomorrow and look at their schedule.” Timothy closed his eyes and slowly fell off to sleep next to me.

Needless to say, I guess, we never saw them again.

One of his favorite bands was an old-time bluegrass outfit called King Wilkie. We had the pleasure of seeing them twice. The first time was two-hour-plus road-trip, this time to Brunswick, Maine for the annual Thompson Point Beach Bluegrass Festival. Thompson Point is a campground that for years has held this festival. Three days of bluegrass bands were augmented by late night pickin' parties as the audience got to make music of their own. It was a simple campground with rows of lots winding into the woods, mobile homes, campers, and tents mingling with the dense Maine forest. People wandered about, carrying banjos, guitars, or mandolins looking for someone to play with. A large crowd gathered by the stage to hear some of the best local and national bluegrass bands play.

There, we sat under a tent, lessons learned from Green River, and ate lunch while listening to strains of the New England Bluegrass Band. Timothy and I rotated listening to the music with trips to the playground they had there, to the little rec room with video games where I introduced Timothy to pinball, and down to the beach to stick our feet in the sand. But, Timothy would not settle for just dragging his toes in the sand, he wanted to go in the water. Having never been to this festival, I didn't know you could access the beach and still hear the music play, so I didn't bring the swim gear. But, even knowing his mother would never approve, I stripped Timothy down to his diaper so that he could venture into the warm waters of the bay. For Down East Maine, the water was surprisingly warm and calm. He splashed about until his diaper was ready to burst from all the ocean water it absorbed.

As the time neared for King Wilkie to play, we got changed and moved toward the stage area. We watched as they tuned up and passed by us on the way to the stage. Timothy had not yet heard them play, but listened intently as they did. He heard the other bands with passing interest, but King Wilkie caught his fancy. As the band jammed on their instruments and sang in that high

lonesome three-part harmony, Tim was a converted fan. We watched from off to the side of the crowd where we had plenty of room to dance. I picked him up and held him tightly in my arms as we swayed to the sorrowful tale of “Lee and Paige.” I spun him around in a circle during our dance.

“Go slow, Papa,” he reprimanded, “this is a slow song.” I slowed my pace down and gently twirled him around. He laughed loud. When the band kicked into an up-temp instrumental, I kept dancing slowly.

“No, Papa. This is a fast song. We have to dance fast.”

When their set was done, so was he. He lost interest in the next band. We ended our day by sharing a cup of homemade blueberry ice cream. We slowly walked to the car as the music floated away behind us. All the way home, we listened to more King Wilkie, and he fell asleep clutching the CD case in his hands.

One of our last musical adventures was probably my favorite. We took a short trip to the Sheraton Hotel in Framingham, MA in February for the annual Joe Val Bluegrass Festival. The festival could attract some big names, but that year, 2005, one band in particular caught Timothy’s attention.

“King Wilkie?” he exclaimed as I read the names on the docket for that year’s show from the website. “King Wilkie are coming? Can we see them? I want to see King Wilkie!”

“Yup. But look who else is coming. The Hunger Mountain Boys; you know them. Ricky Scaggs; you’d like him; the Bluegrass...”

“I want to see King Wilkie.”

“But we can see all of them...”

“I want to see King Wilkie!”

“OK. Then we’ll see King Wilkie.”

“Can’t wait to see my little Sally Jo!” Timothy sung his favorite KW song and played the air-bass. “OK, let’s go!”

“We’ll its not today; it’s not for a few weeks. I don’t even know if there are tickets.”

“Let’s go see King Wilkie!”

“Later, my friend. Not today,”

I laughed and paid for two tickets on-line. Because the band was coming on Saturday, the most popular day of the festival, I had to buy tickets for the whole three days even though we could only go to that one day.

It seemed perfect. Timothy’s band was coming on stage in the late afternoon. We head out after lunch; hang out and hear a few bands; when King Wilkie was done I bring him home; then I get to head back and catch the rest of the evening’s show. If I get lucky, I can see King Wilkie’s evening set too. But someone had other plans.

We got to the festival in the early afternoon and the parking lot was packed. We found a parking spot near a drainage ditch by some old abandoned railroad tracks.

“Look, Papa! Train tracks!” the show had already begun and we hadn’t left the parking lot. It was a frigid day, but Timothy didn’t mind as we walked around the building looking for the entrance. It was easy to find. Just follow the people carrying instruments.

Bluegrass festivals tend to be unusual scenes. Half the fun of attending is in the impromptu jam sessions in hotel rooms, in the lobby, off the elevator, anywhere there is enough room for a half-a-dozen or so musicians and any lookers-on that might be in the area. People

were streaming everywhere and the strains of acoustic music could be heard. A small band was playing right there in the lobby, just inside the doors.

“Look, Tim, at the band playing.” I drew his attention to the group. “See the fiddle, the banjo, the bass...”

“And the dobro!” he exclaimed.

“This way Tim,” I instructed; I was carrying him in the crowd, so my instructions didn’t matter much to him.

“I want some water,” he announced, seeing the barker selling bottles near the end of the hall. The sounds of the band in the lobby started to fade and you could hear the strains of the amplified acoustic bands coming from ahead.

I shelled out \$3 for a bottle of water for us to share, spun the top off, and handed it to him. He took one sip as we turned the corner to the real center of activity in the show. There, in the vestibule area outside the function rooms and grand ballroom were countless people mingling, buying, talking, listening. Four long tables were set up on either side of the space, with each table manned by the performers themselves, selling everything from CDs to t-shirt to bumper stickers to rubber bottle openers emblazoned with a band’s name. Immediately, I recognized the Hunger Mountain Boys chatting with the crowd, shaking hands with anyone who approached them. They dressed in their stage gear of old-fashioned brown suits that made them look rather like a gangster out of a James Cagney movie. Timothy stayed motionless in my arms with the water bottle perched on his lips. He dared not move for fear of missing something.

“Howdy,” I reached my hand out to greet Ted Weber of the band. He responded with genuine warmth, looking up at Tim who quickly ducked his head into my shoulder.

“This here’s Timothy. He’s a big fan. He loves Katie Dear. Plays it over and over again.” It is a song from their second album, about two lovers who commit suicide because her parents won’t let them marry. Rather a grim song for a little boy. He didn’t know what the lyrics meant; he just liked the song.

Tim asked if we liked their set. They had just got done playing.

“No, darn it all, I hoped to get here on time to see you guys, but just got here. Are you playing again this weekend?” The singer told us that they were done for the festival.

“Maybe next time, huh? Take it easy; see you later Tim. Nice to meet you,” he called as he walked away.

“Well, how about that. We’ve been here five minutes and you’ve already met one of the bands.” He picked his head up from my shoulder.

“Where’s King Wilkie?”

Timothy listened with passing interest the band that was on stage. He watched the people on stage, although it was hard to see the details from so far back, he immediately recognized his favorite instrument.

“He’s playing the bass!” he exclaimed and briefly pantomimed playing along.

“What other instruments are they playing?”

“Guitar, fiddle,” he paused for a moment to look at the entire scene. “Mandolin!” his voice rising with excitement. As the band finished their set, the room stood in applause and whistles. Timothy enthusiastically clapped, his entire body seemed to participate in his ovation. “It’s King Wilkie’s turn!” I don’t know if he was clapping for the band or the fact that they were done and his band could come on.

“Let’s go down front,” I told him and headed towards the stage. We were greeted with countless smiles as the people processed out towards the hallway to stretch between acts. We maneuvered between people as we swam upstream of the general flow of the crowd until we got all the way to the front of the room.

The stage was low, so Timothy could see everything that was happening as the crew prepared for the next set. There was surprisingly little turn-over as the crew needed only to swap out microphones, add a few new mike stands, laid down a printed set list at the spot where each band member would stand, and various other tasks. A few members of the band sauntered on stage to tune up and generally make sure everything was set.

“Hey look, there’s Reid,” I pointed Tim’s attention away from the tumult of stage prep to Reid Burgess, the King Wilkie’s mandolin player and one of their singers. “Excuse me, Mr. Burgess!” I called. Reid came over and crouched down to greet us. Reid is a tall, lanky fellow with long curly hair tumbling down towards his shoulders. “My name is Michael and this here is my son Timothy – he is a big fan.” I bounced Tim in my arms gently.

Reid smiled pleasantly. He smiled broadly, his soft brown eyes conveyed a warmth and friendliness that even Tim found inviting.

“Sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you could play a song for my friend here.”

“Number 2,” Timothy said softly, with a bravado that surprised me. I didn’t think he’d talk to Reid. The singer didn’t know Tim’s code and he turned towards me for an explanation.

“It’s Been A Long Time,” I revealed the song’s title. “He calls it number 2 because it’s the second song on your album.”

“Or, number 5,” Tim piped up, referring to the same song on a different King Wilkie disc, an early independent release. Reid grimaced slightly.

The singer looked down at the set list on the floor and told us that another member of the band came up with this list and didn't think that they could fit Timothy's request in. He assured us that the song is definitely in the band's second set. King Wilkie was scheduled to play twice that day.

"Yeah," I sighed, "that's a bit late for this guy to hang around. Don't know if he will make it that far."

Reid promised to see what he could do with the set list. He stood up, looking immense from our perspective. "It was nice to meet you, Tim."

As they were getting set to play, Tim and I went to find some seats. About halfway back in the room we found an empty row. The seats were empty, I assumed, because you had to shimmy around a tall speaker stand that protruded from the floor. High atop, some 10 to 15 feet in the air was a speaker pointed out into the crowd. I nearly tripped over the wires at the base of the stand, but managed to get in.

"Can you see OK from here?" I asked.

"Oh yeah," Tim replied, bouncing in place with anticipation. In moments, the emcee came on stage to introduce the band. The houselights dimmed as they launched into their first song, a slow, melodic number I hadn't heard before. I was worried that Tim might not be interested in new songs, but he was rapt.

"There's Reid!" he exclaimed as the singer stepped forward for a mandolin solo.

"Is it too loud for you here?" I whispered to him, afraid of the volume from the speaker so close.

“Nope,” he shook his head. “I want it louder, Papa!” The band rolled through their set to thunderous applause between each song. They sang songs of heartbreak and woe, songs about returning back to the old homestead, songs about death and redemption – solid fare for a bluegrass band. But no *Number 2*. As the band closed their set to a standing ovation, Timothy looked stunned.

“They didn’t play number 2!” he pouted, a slight growl in his voice.

“I know. Sorry bud.” I kissed him softly on the cheek in condolence. “Did you like the show anyway?”

“Yeah!” The smile was back, brighter than ever. “I liked the bass, dum-dum-dum-dum...”

We stalled around for a while, looking at the booths back out in the main hallway. There was another act coming up that I wanted to see, but Timothy seemed content with just the one band.

“Let’s go see what’s downstairs,” I told him, watching people file down the stairwell. The stairwell was large and open, serving as an entrance to the grand ballroom. It featured a two sets of stairs, along each wall, curving gently around to meet at the bottom. The stairway was reminiscent of what one might see on a brownstone in Savannah from the 1800’s, with one set of steps for the men and one for the women. Tim was thrilled to walk down one set of stair and up the other for a while, so that was what we did.

As we were playing on the stairs, Reid came through the doors from the hallway.

“I hope you know,” I approached him at the top of the left stairs, the men’s side, I believe, “that you broke my son’s heart.” I smiled, trying to convey that I was joking, but I don’t think he got the humor. He seemed genuinely bothered by having disappointed someone.

“You didn’t play his song,” Reid saw Timothy coming up the steps and instantly recognized him.

“Right, Number 2,” he laughed, explaining that the others in the band wouldn’t let him change the set list. I picked up Timothy so he could see better. It’s tough being less than three feet tall. Reid promised that they would play Timothy’s song later.

“I really should get him home.”

“Well, I tell you, if I had the other guys here with me, I’d play it right here for Tim.” He looked around to see if any of his bandmates were around.

“Oh, god no! I wouldn’t ask you to do that – as much as I would enjoy it. I was just giving you a hard time. He loved your set even without *Number 2*.”

“Did you like the show, Tim?” Reid asked looking right at him. Tim nodded slowly. “That’s great. Hey look, I have to meet someone or I’d hang around and chat. Maybe we’ll see you again, eh Tim?” He trotted off down the stairs.

I know I’ve said this before, but Reid never got another chance to see Tim. King Wilkie played in Boston in the fall, after Tim died. Reid did sing Number 2 that night, and dedicated it to Timothy.

We did end up hanging around for the band’s evening set. Timothy would have it no other way; he had to hear *Number 2*. Downstairs in the hotel we found an actual string bass that

he could pluck, a banjo that he could hold, and plenty more music to listen to. The function room was filled with vendors, as we perused racks of CDs, looked at pristine instruments, and countless pictures of legendary bluegrass musicians.

“That’s Bill Monroe,” Tim said proudly, as he recognized a photo of the Father of Bluegrass. “Can we buy that picture?” It was a classic pose of Monroe in his later years; a black-and-white profile shot of him with his signature fawn cowboy hat perched on his head of wispy white hair, and thick lamb chop sideburns taking up much of his cheeks. “He sings John Henry!”

As we waited, Timothy peeked through every open door to see amateur jam sessions, bluegrass movies, and music lessons. We ventured through the long carpeted halls, in and out of the gift shop, and up and down the elevators. He laughed when the doors of the elevator opened to see impromptu jams going on in the elevator lobbies on nearly every floor.

For supper, we ventured across the street for Mexican, where he ate rice and quesadillas to his heart’s content. And, of course, guacamole. He loved the odd green sauce, dipping tortilla chips and munching away. Guacamole. I often think he liked to say the word more than he liked to eat the stuff.

Promptly at 8:30 we wound up back in the ballroom, the same row of seats was still available; folks still didn’t want to shuffle around the speaker pole and picked seats further away from the stage. The hall was more tightly packed and as the band came on, fans flooded the room, taking up all of the seats and standing along the walls on either side. Tim sat quietly in my lap, one tired little boy. He let out a big yawn and settled in to hear the show.

It took them several songs, but King Wilkie finally played *Number 2*. Timothy sat up straight from the opening notes of the song.

“Number 2!” he called out with a sudden burst of energy. He sang along softly to the words he knew and played the air-bass some more. When the song was done, so was he. “Let’s go now.” He turned to me with certainty in his eyes.

“But the show’s not done yet.”

“We need to go home now.”

“Don’t you want to hear the rest of the songs?” He shook his head, No. So we left.

Back in the car, Timothy fell asleep before we hit the highway and slept all the way home with a smile on his lips and a song in his heart.

Chapter 9

No Reason

And he can see no reasons
'Cause there are no reasons
What reasons do you need to die?
-- The Boomtown Rats

The revolving door spun slowly as I entered the Emergency Room at Salem Hospital. So slowly, that I nearly ran head-long into the glass. When the doorway opened into the lobby, I dashed through to the front desk. The security guard at his post behind a desk on the left watched me with curiosity. A stoic-faced woman sat staring at a blinking computer screen. She looked tired and haggard, although it was only 11 o'clock in the morning. She turned slowly toward me to reveal a Volunteer badge on her scrub jacket.

"Can I help you?" she asked in a soft and calming tone that actually made me few degrees less hysterical.

"I am looking for my son," I replied. Or at least think I did.

"Is he a patient here?"

"I don't know. He was supposed to come in an ambulance. I don't know where he is, what's going on, if he's still alive..."

She slowly punched his name into the computer, one finger at a time. As she typed, I took a moment to look around at the lobby. It was a compact area with countless chairs set up for visitors. A crowd of people sat, paced, or stood in place. Some with a tired look of desperation and exhaustion, others laughing and happy, as if they were in the lobby of the Four Seasons Hotel. A large fish tank dominated the middle of the room. Myriad creatures darted around the tank, effortlessly swishing their way through life, ignorant of the crises that were taking place just outside the safety of the glass. A small boy, with closely-cropped blond hair stood poking at a clown fish. I gasped audibly until he turned around and wasn't Timothy.

The woman at the desk told me that Timothy arrived a little while before. She picked up the phone and dialed into the back. The little blond boy roamed away from the tank and landed in his father's arms with a squeal of delight. I could see them talking, but could not hear a word. But it was happy talk.

"Go through the doors, I am sure that they will explain it all." Already bad. Whenever a hospital allows you to wait in an area that is not with the general waiting population, it's bad.

I moved through the doors with an anxiously hurried pace. There in a small waiting area they were, all awaiting any inkling of how their boy was doing. Jennifer paced in place with a dire look on her face; Grandma worked her cell phone ferociously; Grandad sat quietly, a look of stone on his poker face. Two of his teachers from school paced out in the hallway, segregated from my family.

"What's going on?" I nearly screamed. "Is he still alive?" Jennifer turned in my direction, tears welling in the corner of her eyes. The first of many to come.

"Yes," was all she could muster, barely audible.

“What the Hell happened? I didn’t get any information on the phone. The police said that he stopped breathing...”

A voice from behind, asking if I were the father. I turned to meet the eyes of an older woman in a blue scrub suit, a paper mask pulled down around her throat, a blue cotton surgical cap on her head. Her feet were covered in blue cotton as well.

“Yes, yes I am. Where is my son? Where’s Timothy?”

She explained that he was being worked on right now. He had a *bad accident*.

“What, what, what...” She waved her hands in front of herself, urging me towards calm.

The blue scrub suit continued. He was found face-down, passed out, in a pile of bark mulch that he had in the back of a dump truck. It looked like he wasn’t breathing.

“Where was he?” I pleaded. “What was he doing?” They told me that he was in a playhouse, a wooden structure that was built under a set of emergency egress stairs from the second floor. There were two red, wood walls with a window cut in one and a door cut in the other. The wall of the building and the stairs served as the other walls.

He was in there, playing with his favorite dump truck, said the scrub blue nurse, the teachers could see him through the window one minute; then, he wasn’t there.

I would tell the rest of the story, but I am not sure it really matters. He went down and somewhere in there stopped breathing; now, we are here.

I turned back into the waiting room and looked at Jennifer. She sat stone-faced, a blank empty expression filled not just her face, but all of her. Her entire body exuded fear, apprehension, terror, defeat. Maybe it was that she had only slept for two of the past 24 hours;

and having been awakened from that sleep by the police pounding down the door cannot have been easy. But, I believe that most of her aura came from knowing. Knowing deep down inside that, despite what those around her were saying, Timothy was lost; he would not wake up. And if he did, he would be an empty shell of what he was. What didn't kill him would devastate him instead. At first, I believed – wanted to believe, needed to believe – that it was her natural pessimism that brought about this wave of negativity. Before long though, I acknowledged to myself that she simply knew too much. As a nurse in the neurosurgical intensive care unit, she'd seen first-hand the kind of damage that anoxic injury can do to a person. The simple deprivation of oxygen to the brain, for a matter of moments, can turn that most miraculous of organs into a lump of useless tissue. She'd seen gold-tongued politicians reduced to mutes from a stroke; a mother delivering a baby losing the ability to read due to an aneurism; young adults in the prime of their lives turned into quadriplegics from one ill-advised stunt; she's seen perfectly healthy people die on the spot from an hemorrhage in the brain. She'd seen too much to be able to believe that Timothy would cruise through this untouched by the fates. She'd seen far simpler problems leading to the worst of all possible outcomes. I could see it in her eyes already. *He's not going to make it.*

I sat down without saying a word.

“You got here quick,” Grandma managed to say.¹

“It's a miracle that I made it here at all, the way I was driving,” I tried to smile. “I better not use up too many miracles. We might need a big one here.”

¹ For the purposes of my story, *Grandma* is a composite character. Timothy had four loving grandparents. But here and throughout, I am using the character of Grandma to embody many people, many individuals who have said many things. Grandma is my repository for everyone who said well-intentioned, but naïve, things to me. Grandma will perform roles that his grandmother(s) actually did and didn't do, but others did. No offense is intended to Timothy's real grandmothers; it seemed a good device to encapsulate some negative behaviors without naming anyone.

“You can’t talk like that,” Grandma rejoined. “He’s going to be fine.”

“We don’t know how long he was down, Grandma,” Jennifer croaked, barely lifting her head.

“They said he was only down for a minute or so...”

“They don’t know that,” she corrected. “That’s a problem.”

After what had to be just short of an eternity, a doctor poked around the corner. He was dressed in the same blue smock, the same cone-shaped paper mask dangling around his neck, and the same little blue booties as the nurse I met before. The entire room or people, who had just been sitting stone motionless a moment ago, leapt to our feet. A name badge hanging on a cotton chain around his neck announced his name.

“Are you with Timothy?” he asked knowingly. Matter of course to ask, as he was escorted here by the nurse. Twins in blue scrubs. “I don’t have the words to say this gently,” he started before getting interrupted by Jennifer.

“Just give it to us straight. I’m a nurse.” Code-words between medical professionals that it is okay to lay it all out there with no saccharine and sweetness.

“OK,” he looked down at his feet for a moment and caught a breath. He told us that he is not used to dealing with such small children. This was hard for him to say; yet, nothing compared to how hard it was to hear.

“Is he still alive?” The nurse/mother queried.

“Oh, god; of course he is. I am sorry. It’s just...” he paused again looking for the right words. “Timothy is a very sick little boy.”

“We gathered that; it’s why we are here.”

“Enough out of you, Jennifer. Let the man speak,” piped in Grandma.

The doctor replied with acceptance of Jennifer’s terse reply. He announced that Timothy would be better served in a Boston hospital, better suited for his potential anoxic injury.

“Especially where we don’t know how long he was down,” the doctor continued. “We did a CAT-scan of his brain, but nothing appears to be damaged.”

“You can tell that from a CAT-scan?” Grandma prodded.

“Yes. Brain injury would appear, ah, as a different color than the rest of the brain...”

“So you didn’t see any discoloration; he’s OK then...”

The doctor rolled on through his dissertation as if he were giving report to other medical people. Timothy was showing some early signs of brain injury. Only slight edema at that point, but there were other symptoms we are watching. Grandma cocked her head sideways, clearly showing that she didn’t understand. Some brain swelling. If he had significant brain injury, his brain would have much greater swelling. But he would need to be watched over the next few days to see if there is any additional swelling.

“And that is why you want him in Boston?” Jennifer jabbed. There historically has been tension between the Boston hospitals and those in the suburbs. Suburban doctors would band together to try and block patients from going into the city, promising that the local hospitals are just as good. So when an Emergency Room doctor at a suburban hospital recommends going to Boston, it is another sign that things are bad. “Because he has some edema?”

“Not entirely,” the doctor cautioned. “It seems that he has a hole in his trachea, his windpipe...”

“What? How the hell does that happen?”

When Timothy was being revived; someone may have performed CPR too strongly or the paramedics may have punctured his trachea while intubating him on the scene.

“They insert a breathing tube, Grandma,” Jennifer interpreted, sensing the question. “It’s rare, but it happens.”

Timothy had a pneumothorax -- some air in his chest. They inserted chest tubes to drain the air and any excess fluids. And that provided something interesting, the doctor stated. “While we were tubing him, we pulled out some brown material. We’re not sure what it is...”

Mulch, I told them knowingly. They pulled some out of his mouth before giving him CPR. He was face-down in it. He must have inhaled some when he collapsed. Suddenly, I was struck with a feint ray of hope. “Does that indicate he was breathing while he was down? That would mean less time that he wasn’t breathing...”

“I can’t say that for certain,” the doctor replied. “But, I can say that I am encouraged by what I am seeing in him. I am a little worried about the swelling; I wouldn’t think that I would see any swelling this soon after an injury, especially in a child. But once he’s stabilized more, they can do a more thorough assessment of him. Do you have any questions?” Jennifer had turned away, already done with the suburban doctor, readying her verbal exam for the doctors in the city.

“When can we get him to Boston?” I asked. “We would prefer Mass General. We more familiar with that hospital. Heck, Timothy was born there.” What is the possibility that he would come into and leave the world from the same hospital?

We all collapsed back into the waiting room, not sure what to say.

“Well, we all just have to pray that the good Lord takes care of him, that’s all,” Grandma finally broke the silence. After her comment, the room lapsed back into a cell of solitude.

A touch ironic, I thought. Just a few months before, Matthew was in the hospital for a lung infection, an abscess. I went down with him to the PICU, as they call it, for some tests. I remember seeing the beds full of seriously ill children, so comforted that Matthew was not among them. Little could I conceive that we would be returning there, this time to admit Timothy.

I felt better knowing that they didn't see any signs of significant brain injury. I dropped my comment into the room. And the mulch they found mulch in his lungs could have been a sign he was breathing when he was face-down, and then when he was turned, maybe some mulch got lodged in his throat and he stopped breathing then, meaning he didn't stop breathing for long. I was trying to be a paragon of the positive. It is not my strong suit. I was grasping at those old straws on the bank of the pond, trying to pull myself out to safety. But these straws were the hollow, plastic kind; not good at all for grabbing onto. I started to slip into the morass as I thought of the tear in his trachea; that worried me a lot. It would be a huge surgery to fix.

Jennifer drew her mobile phone from her purse and dialed Mass General, trying to get Timothy quick-stepped through the Emergency Room and straight up to a room in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit.

"Well," Jennifer announced, closing her phone, "he's all set. They know he's coming and should get through E.S. quickly. I asked about getting him a private room, but that is all they have on the PICU is private rooms." That's my Jennifer, always thinking ahead, connecting all those little dots, watching out for her boys above all else.

"He's going to be OK?" I asked of Jennifer, as an expert witness for the medical community.

“I hope so,” she replied softly. “I don’t know. I’ve seen these kinds of cases come out fine and others not so well.”

“He’ll be fine,” assured Grandma.

“We don’t know that,” the witness continued. “He could come through fine; he could have some neurological loss; he could be a vegetable; he could die. We just don’t know right now.”

“Oh, don’t talk like that,” Grandma retorted. “We have to remain positive.”

“Why? Easy for you to say.” She’s definitely seen too much.

“God won’t let anything happen to Timothy. He’s special.”

“Yeah, well,” Jennifer argued. “If he is so special, then why allow this to happen in the first place?”

“Well, we can all pray anyway, that He will help.”

“If seen plenty of people on their knees at the side of a hospital bed, praying for a dying relative. It doesn’t always work.” We were saved from further conversation as the nurse came back into the room.

“He’s ready to go now. Mother, are you going with him?”

“Yeah,” she replied started looking for her purse. After a moment, she realized it was not there. “I left the house so fast, I didn’t even take my purse.”

“I’ll go home and get it. Is there anything else you need?” She rattled off a list of several things she wanted in order to feel somewhat human, after only two hours of sleep.

“We’ll pick up Matthew,” offered Grandma. “Can you call the school so he knows were coming instead of Mama?”

“He kick up a fit if he doesn’t get a warning,” Mama admonished.

“I got it.” The clatter out in the hallway indicated that he was rolling though. We stepped out into the hall, but I couldn’t get a good glimpse of him as his bed was surrounded by a swarm of medicine men and women. Someone punched a large, square button by the doors and they swung open to expose the ambulance bay. The hope was that he could be flown to Boston in a helicopter to save time; the original plan had him going there from the scene, but the threat of thunderstorms kept the flights grounded then as now. The Med Flight ground team quickly opened the doors to the ambulance and rolled the bed right into the truck. The legs on the bed collapsed instantly, like they were never there to begin with and the crew alighted with him. One of the crew took Jennifer by the hand and helped her in. The driver swung closed the doors, jumped off the dock and dashed into position in the driver’s seat. The lights and sirens blasted to life, filling the bay with a strobe-like burst of red and white lights, the blare of the electronic horn echoing off the walls of the bay.

As the ambulance rolled through the parking lot, it seemed like the world around it froze in place as cars came to a quick halt, pulled over, and got out of the way; pedestrians jumped out of the crosswalks, yielding right of way to the emergency vehicle. We all stood on the platform and watched as the ambulance drove out of the parking lot, turned left onto Highland Ave and roared up the slight hill. A blast of the horn got them through the red light, much as I had done to get here. In a literal flash of light, it was gone over the hill.

“It’s weird,” I muttered, almost to myself, “the last time she was in an ambulance was when Timothy was being born.”

“The circle of life,” Grandad replied, trying to lighten the mood.

“Circle? Timothy’s circle of life is a goddamn period. Not big enough for a circle.”

As we all turned to head back through the Emergency Room to head out, the doctor turned to us.

“I think he will be all right.” He nodded his head in confirmation of his own opinion. “I see no reason why he won’t make a complete recovery...”

Chapter 10

Soup in a Bread Bowl

"I can't let go, so please forgive me
God only knows all I've lost..."
- Rick Trevino

In addition to all our adventures together, I recall just as fondly the mundane tasks that were just as much fun, and just as memorable.

Simple things, like the trip to the supermarket one evening after Matthew went to bed. It was just Timothy and I; as a treat, we trekked across the parking lot for the special shopping cart with the pretend fire truck built into the front. We never got to use this cart when we went to the market with Matthew, as he always wanted to push the cart; and with the large plastic, red addition on the front, it was too hard for him to steer without hitting something or someone.

Timothy climbed into the front seat with glee and pulled down the yellow lever that represented the door. I would strap him in using the little plastic "seat belt" inside and off we went. Timothy was spinning the steering wheel furiously and tooting the little horn. All was well until we turned down that aisle with the cookies and crackers in it. Countless boxes and bags of delights that must have seemed miles long to his small perspective.

“Stop, Dad,” he called from the cab. “Unbelt me.” I dutifully unbuckled the strap; Timothy opened the “door” and climbed out into the aisle and straight over to a blue sack of chocolate-chip cookies. He found the biggest bag on the shelf; the package looking huge in his tiny arms. He reached as high as he could and drop! The bag went right into the basket. Satisfied, he climbed back into the cab. “Don’t go,” he admonished, “until I close the door.” Down came the yellow lever. “OK, Dad. You can go now.”

We strolled a few more feet down the aisle, into the cracker region. “Stop, Dad,” he called from the cab. Timothy opened the door and climbed out into the aisle and straight over to a white box of fish-shaped crackers. He pondered for a moment the various choices: a collection of snack-sized bags, an assortment of varying sizes of bags, a couple of boxes; one color, multi-color; small fish, large fish. He settled on a large box of multi-color fish and drop! The box went right into the basket. Satisfied, he climbed back into the cab. “Don’t go,” he reminded me, “until I close the door.” Down came the yellow lever. “OK, Dad. You can go now.”

We turned into the cereal aisle. Again, “Stop, Dad!” emanated from the fire engine. He climbed out and surveyed the various sugar-enhanced offerings before settling on a box of chocolate and peanut-butter flavored puffs. But, before he could reach up and drop the box into the carriage, I reached down and picked him up.

“OK, enough of this,” I told him. I want to get the shopping down sometime tonight. I dropped him into the child seat in the carriage and strapped him in.

“But I want the fire truck!” he squealed in protest. “I want the fire truck!” His squeal turned into a low growl.

“You can ride in the fire truck,” I bargained, “but you can’t get out. You need to stay in the seat. It takes too long for you to get out all the time. You understand?” He nodded his head aggressively in agreement, a small pout on his little lips. “Will you stay in the fire truck?”

“OK,” he relented, with less than total enthusiasm for the deal. I placed him down on the floor and he scampered back into the cab. “Don’t go,” he warned. Down came the yellow lever. “OK, Dad. You can go now.” We moved on slowly to the toaster pastry section, looking for Mama’s strawberry-frosted.

“Stop, Dad!” came again from the cab. He lifted the gate and stepped out into the aisle, right over to the pastries. Before he could reach out for a box, I grabbed him and forced him into the carriage seat, squishing and squirming like a snake in a snare. “NO! I WANT THE FIRE TRUCK!”

“No deal, kid. You blew it. We didn’t go 20 feet and you got out again.” I told him. “I appreciate your helping; but you need to stay put!” Eventually, he relented, knowing that the ten-cent candy samples were stashed in the next row and he needed to be good if he wanted one. Timothy and I snacked on dime caramels the rest of the way, and all was happy.

Saturday mornings were another time I recall fondly. After Timothy went to swimming lessons at the local center, we would sneak onto the gymnasium floor, which was always empty. A barrel full of basketballs stood in the corner. Timothy, Matthew, and I each grabbed a ball and ran up and down the floor; the boys tossing the ball at the pint-sized basketball hoop and I at the regulation hoop. Timothy held the full-size ball in his hands and lifted with all his might; he heaved the ball towards the hoop. Clang! Off the front of the rim. “Argh!” he snarled in

frustration. He chased after the ball, a ball that nearly came up to his knees, and tried again. Another miss, as the ball came nowhere near the hoop. It bounced off the wall and back at him. Timothy put his body in front of the ball and it bowled him over. Climbing to his feet, using the ball as a crutch; again he lifted the ball, looking like Atlas holding the world in his hands, and heaved. The ball bounced off the backboard, onto the rim, spun for a moment, and dropped in to slowly make a sound. "I got it!" he shrieked, his voice echoing throughout the empty gym. After a few minutes of playing, we were sweaty and satisfied.

After the games, we always went to lunch at a chain sandwich shop in town. Timothy always got the same thing: a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, with a bag of chips, and a pickle. Each week, he would insist that I get soup in a bread bowl, a sphere of bread with the insides dug out and replaced with soup of some kind. After I finished the soup, he would help me eat the soup-soaked bread until we were gorged. At the end of the meal, Timothy full and happy, his pickle would be left untouched. And, each week I offered it to Matthew.

"Are you done, Timothy?" He would nod in reply. "Do you want your pickle?" He would shake his head, no. "How about you, Matthew? Do you want the pickle?" As Matthew reached out for the garnish, Timothy would swipe out and grab it, take one or two spite bites and put it down.

"It's my pickle," he cried. And each week I would have to back to the counter and get Matthew a pickle of his own. Don't ask why I didn't get Matthew a pickle of his own to start with. It was a tradition; I didn't mess with it.

Even a trip to the pharmacy turned into a day at the amusement park for my boys. It was just the local chain pharmacy; not like it was something ambitious like a Super WalMart. Any errand to pick up a single item turned into an excursion as we had to peruse almost all of the aisles. Timothy wanted to meander in the candy aisle, looking up at the shelves of chocolates, chewy and hard candies. The entire row smelled of cocoa as he reviewed the offerings, Matthew eyeing the Reece's Peanut Butter Cups. Then, it was off to the food aisle, where Matthew was always quick to point out his favorite cereals (Frosted Flakes and Cheerios) then Papa's oatmeal, and the big bags of potato chips. From there, Timothy would take us to the toy section, where I always had to draw a "T" using the Etch-A-Sketch, leaving Timothy's mark behind.

If we were really lucky, the pretty blonde supervisor would come over to say *Hello* to the boys – I knew she was not saying Hi to me. Timothy would burst into a smile and instantly play shy: hide behind my leg, duck his head into my shoulder; anything to look coy. Even at his age he knew when he was beholding beauty.

When we finally examined all the aisles in the store and made our purchase, it was mandatory that we walked the entire strip mall, checking out specific stores as we went.

Into Trader Joe's, a local organic food outlet, where the boys would simply walk the aisles, point out Papa's bran cereal, and be ready to go. We would pass by the counter in the corner where they handed out samples of food in the store. It was a bonus when the offering was a pizza slice or ice cream scoop. Papa would get himself a shot of free coffee as we headed towards the door. A couple of free balloons in hand we were off to our next destination.

The flower shop was the next stop, where the boys would dash to the back of the store to cool themselves in the chiller. Timothy would pick out a flower and declare, "Mama would like that!" It was usually something purple, her favorite color.

“There’s the bread store,” Matthew would call out as we passed the sandwich shop where we ate on Saturdays, with the peanut butter sandwiches and bread bowls of soup.

“Panera!” Timothy would correct his big brother; Matthew had a way of using nicknames to describe stores, rather than use their names. Walking still we passed the Friendly’s ice cream shop – no longer there. “We should go there and get some ice cream, Dad,” Timothy would wish. I always meant to bring him there for a kid-sized sundae and french fries for Matthew. Now both the store and the boy are gone.

Nest stop was the “card store,” a Hallmark store, which sold greeting cards, gifts, and the like. Up and down the rows we would walk, looking at the cards, Timothy seeking out the Charlie Brown cards or cards with Sesame Street characters. Matthew content to smell each of the candles on the Yankee Candle shelf. A dispute would always emerge at the music display. A display wired for sound, it played sound clips of the various CDs that the store offered. Timothy would go for the disc of women’s bluegrass singers to hear Rhonda Vincent or Alicia Nugent fill the store; Matthew would quickly tap the button to play the kiddie music CD, with its strains of The Itsy-Bitsy Spider.

The final stop on the whirlwind tour was the now-defunct camera shop at the very end of the row. We would march back to the video rental section and again stroll the aisles, looking at all the titles they had on display. Both boys liked the children’s section and ogled the Blue’s Clues videos, or SpongeBob, Charlie Brown, and Elmo. Usually, we would stop for refreshment, buying sacks of potato chips or over-sized packs of Reece’s to bring home and savor.

I recall other side trips that we took.

We used to board the train in town and ride out to the North Beverly train station. A 15-minute or so railway adventure, just long enough for Matthew who preferred looking at trains to riding them. Timothy was enthralled with riding the rails; perched on his knees he stared out the window, watching the world roll by. In fact, Grandma was supposed to take him on an Amtrak train ride the very day after his *incident*. How he would have enjoyed that.

But on this trip, our destination was the McDonald's restaurant down the street from the station. On the weekends, the return train came by at just over an hour later, allowing us more than enough time for burgers, chicken nuggets, and fries for all. After lunch, we cautiously walked back down the busy Enon Street, a two-lane thoroughway with retail and commercial establishments crowding both sides of the street. Back on the train platform, the boys squealed with joy watching the train pull into the station; we got back on, usually greeted by the same conductor who let us off, and we went home.

I can never forget the chilly Spring trip to a tiny beach in Marblehead. I never knew the name, right at the corner of Beacon and Norman Streets. It is more of a boat launch than a swimming beach, completely consumed by water at high tide. But it was a perfect place to feed the ducks; or so we thought.

After a trip to the "fruit store," as Matthew called The Fruit of The Four Seasons produce shop (another Timothy landmark, also gone), where Timothy had another admirer in the prettier of the couple who owned the store, we went to Shubie's Market for a loaf of bread and off we went.

We climbed the rickety stairs down to the rocky shore of the beach and started tossing chunks of bread to the ducks, who were swimming there in droves. But, the ornery seagulls, considerably larger and meaner than the ducks, butted in and stole the bits of bread as they floated in the bay. We ran up and down the beach, trying to manage a better angle to reach the ducks; the gulls invariably swooped in and scooped up the bounty.

“No, seagulls. No!” Timothy cried, inching as close to the edge of the water as he dared, in order to get the bread right in front of the befuddled ducks. “Come on, ducks! Get the bread!” a frustrated Timothy called out. “No seagulls!” The gulls screeched and howled, scaring the ducks away, garnering all the freebies for themselves.

When we realized that our efforts were futile, we put the bread away for another day and took to tossing rocks into the sea. Timothy watched his brother as he bent over in search of just the right rock to toss. Small stones flew through the air and plopped into the ocean with a splash, sending tiny waves of water in rings out from the point of impact. The fool seagulls would swoop in, thinking that more bread was being offered, screeching in frustration as they learned the truth.

As our hands turned red from the chill in the air and the coldness of the rocks, and our cheeks turned a bright ruby from the wind, it was time to pack it in and head for home. I still drive by that beach once in a while, and can’t help but think of Timothy chastising the seagulls for stealing from his ducks.

Or, there were our trips to the Beach Street Café, a small sandwich shop in Manchester MA. There was nothing particularly enticing about the restaurant that would compel us to drive

the 20-odd miles up the coast on a Sunday morning; the food was always good, the service excellent. The atmosphere was unspectacular; the store appears to have been converted from what was once a home. Not what one might expect from the tony enclave of Manchester-by-the-Sea.

But, it wasn't the food, service, or the restaurant's décor that we would go for. Rather, it was the restaurant's location. The boys liked to go for one reason: trains.

Right outside the front windows of the shop was the Boston commuter rail line, where the tracks sliced across Beach Street as they pulled into the Manchester station. This crossing came replete with gates and lights, bells and alarms to protect and warn motorists of an impending locomotive. From the well-windowed side room of the restaurant – what appears to have once been perhaps a porch – my boys would get an entire show, as the red lights started glowing on and off, the bells started pealing, and the gates dropped to horizontal. The passenger train would slowly emerge from behind the building next door and lumber up to the platform. As it passed, Timothy and Matthew would jump from their seats and dash to the front window of the place, much to the dismay of the folks sitting at the tables along either wall, and squeal with delight at the sight. Matthew flapping his arms and standing on tip-toe because he has to; Timothy flapping and standing tip-toe in imitation of his big brother. The people would get annoyed at these rude little boys; but I never cared, because my boys were happy.

After the meal, which was usually a plate of chicken fingers and french fries for each; Matthew not eating much because the chicken fingers were not the same as McDonald's and the fries might be cooked darker than his liking; Timothy would eat most of the fries on his plate, and many from mine, along with a chicken finger or two. His face would be coated in a combination of salt from the fries and the sweet and sour sauce that his chicken required. We

cleaned up the mess and Timothy would proudly carry the check and a \$20 bill over to the counter to help pay, and we would leave.

Each trip would work out the same way. We would venture across Beach Street to the station, which was little more than a black-top platform with a metallic lean-to as cover on either side of the rails, and look at the schedule for the next train. In a few minutes, the 12:20 would be rumbling through on its way to Boston. Timothy and Matthew would start a footrace to the handicapped platform at the end of the station, for the best view of the engine as it rolls into the station. The boys again treat me to their dance as the front car comes into view around the corner, crossing Sea Street on its way into the station. After disgorging and engorging a few passengers, the train would slowly grind its way along the south-bound route, across a small wooden bridge and out of sight.

After that show, we crossed the street to a playground; the two boys running amongst the slide, the swings, and any other device that caught their fancy. The park offered myriad toys for the kids to play on, and a spectacular view of Manchester Harbor and the sea beyond for the parents.

When Dad tired of waiting, we would venture down onto the floats in the harbor and walk among the few boats that would tie-off on the piers. The floats would rock gently on the waves, as we watched countless seagulls and ducks float by.

And no trip would be complete with out a trip to Captain Dusty's for an ice cream.

Another venture that Timothy loved was the movies. We started taking him to the movies early, and he quickly learned to love everything about the experience. Rare was the time that he could control his energy long enough to watch the entire film, but he loved it as much as any.

We would purposefully arrive just on time for the show, to limit the time that we would have to sit. We never feared for our favorite seats being taken, even though we arrived after most people; we preferred to sit right in the front row. The front seats were better for Matthew: no distractions in front of him, and he could get up and wander a bit without disturbing anyone. For Timothy, he never knew anything but looking almost straight up at the giant screen; he never experienced sitting in the rear of the theater, looking at a perspective-shrunken display. He only knew big.

We would sit, with our bucket of popcorn, packs of chocolate, and the tub of drink and watch. Watch and eat. For as soon as the snacks were gone, so was Timothy's attention. When the food was gone, so were we.

I can remember sitting through several movies this way: *Monsters Inc.*, *Spiderman*, *Ice Age*, *The Incredibles*, to name a few; and of course *Madagascar*, which we saw the Sunday before his accident.

Matthew and I still do many of these things, but they are not the same. He still loves Beach Street and its trains, but I can't go without seeing Timothy there as well. Matthew doesn't have the same interest in the movies as his brother did, but rather goes along for the experience. The market is not nearly as fun without watching Timothy from his perch in the carriage slapping at Matthew's hands as he tries to push the cart; and Matthew never pulls things off the

shelves when we go, the way his brother used to. We still go to the pharmacy and still walk the same route, but it feels a bit more empty now. And I haven't had soup in a bread bowl since. I probably never will again.

Chapter 11

He's Here (Part 2)

"Have you ever seen a soul as it lay dying
While what's left of it's life slips away..."
-- Dwight Yoakam

The front of Massachusetts General Hospital is an imposing structure.

It starts as you pull into the dark and dank always-overcrowded concrete parking garage out front. When you are lucky enough to find a parking spot among the maze of ramps and spaces, it is a fairly steep uphill or downhill walk to the elevators. As you stand and wait for the elevator car to bump and rattle its way to your floor, you are almost guaranteed to be kept company by an abandoned wheelchair sitting idle on the platform. You will notice that the elevator car is too small for its use as you squeeze in next to someone, sneezing, spreading god-knows-what nature of germ into the stagnant air. At the bottom, you egress into a cold, uninviting lobby, deficient in directions to the main doors of the hospital. Following the crowd, you emerge onto a narrow side street, with countless cars passing in both directions, going far too quickly for the environment. A gust of wind invariably blasts down Fruit Street from the cold Charles River and the ocean beyond.

Crossing the street, you emerge into a bustle of activity at the entrance to the hospital and Emergency Room. Innumerable people moving in all directions mingle with ambulances, their drivers jockeying for position near the ER doors; taxi cabs with their drivers ignoring every law and rule of courtesy; and personal automobiles with their drivers concentrating on the business of picking folks up or dropping them off. Pedestrians on foot, on crutches, in wheelchairs that will soon be abandoned by the parking garage elevators refusing to yield to traffic of any kind. It's a 50-yard dash from the parking garage to the revolving doors of the main entrance, replete with dangers of all kinds.

As you look up at the buildings, you see a strange blend of the old and the new, with gleaming new skyscrapers growing out of concrete and granite buildings that are ages old. The 20-odd story Ellison Building dwarfs the 4-floor Vincent-Burnham Building, with the 14-story Blake Building lingering behind, stretching to reach the heights of its younger brother, Ellison. The White Building, the gateway to the labyrinth, blocks the view of the ancient Bullfinch building.

At the front desk, three harried-looking young women poke at their respective computers looking for information, handing out complex directions, and trying to get folks to their destinations.

"I am looking for a patient, Timothy Burke. Not sure if he's still in ER or he's gone up to the floor." She punches his name into the database, searching for my answer.

"I'll call over to the ES and ask if he's still there." She picked up the phone and dialed. As I stood, I saw another little blonde-haired boy walking hand-in-hand with his daddy as Timothy and I did just a few months back when Matthew was admitted here. *Carry me, daddy.*

The father picked up the boy in his arms, and he grabbed his father tightly around the neck and held on with a smile. A voice broke my reverie; my son is in the PICU. Do I know where that is?

“I think so,” I replied. “Ellison 3?”

I started down the hallway, merging into the pedestrian traffic. The flow of foot traffic is strange in a hospital. White-jacketed medical staff walking double-time, working hard to avoid the slowed pace of patients with walkers and in wheelchairs. Elderly visitors block the way of the younger, faster legs. As you make your way along the main corridor, you have to avoid the people ducking quickly left to get to the telephones or the ATM machines, the people ducking right to get to the stairway down to the cafeteria, and the people with trays of food coming off those stairs. Just at the turn of the hallway, a line inevitable forms by the coffee shop, which you must scoot around. Normal routines that I may never know again.

Down the hall, I take a wrong turn and pass by the chapel. I pause there for a moment, gazing through the open doors at the spectacular colors of a stained glass window over the altar. Shimmering colors of blue, red, orange gold and white. *Whoever will, may enter here* carved in gold just inside the door.

“Please don’t take my boy from me,” I spoke in silence into the chapel. One of many prayers to come. “I need him more than You do.” A tear formed in my eye, also one of many. As I found my way back to the elevators, I mixed into the crowd in the lobby, all inching towards the doors of the car they think will get there first. The doors of a car opened and I stepped in with the throng to meet a throng already on the elevator. I squeezed in next to countless people, trays of food, and containers of medical equipment. “Three please,” I called to the person nearest the panel and we were off.

The doors opened on the third floor and I stepped off into the lobby. The doors closed smoothly behind me, leaving me alone in the hallway. I looked across the lobby at a sign pointing to the PICU; I was struck by the gravity of the situation. My three-year-old son is in the intensive care unit. He is so sick that he had to be hustled out of one hospital to another, preferably by helicopter. Driving would take far too long. I stepped slowly down the long corridor past the neo-natal intensive care unit which hosted babies, preemies, sick infants. This was getting far too hard to bear.

On the right was a small waiting room empty now -- unknown to me at the moment, would soon be filled with friends and family as they would stand vigil waiting for news of Timothy. At the entrance to the PICU, I glanced to the right to see another waiting area, larger than the other. I could see a small kitchen area and a trio of bedrooms toward the back of the room. A television set droned on invisibly. In the room, sat a half-a-dozen people, all looking tired and worn; the stress was as evident on their faces as the tears. One man, tall, heavy-set, with close-cropped hair and a kind face turned away from the TV to meet my eyes.

He uttered a quick hello in my direction. He knew I was more than a visitor just by looking into my eyes. He knew I was one of them.

I turned away and pressed the button on the intercom by the doors of the PICU.

“My name is Burke. I believe my son is here, Timothy Burke.”

“He’s here,” a voice squawked back. The doors to the PICU swung open wide, inviting me inside.

My little Monster is in the intensive care unit, I thought again, and stepped inside.

I walked along the corridor into the PICU. The walls were decorated with various art works that children would like. A framed print of a painted clown handing out balloons hung next to a photo of the Boston Red Sox' Trot Nixon in full swing. At the end of the short hall, the unit opened, with the nurses' desk on the left and a row of beds on the right. The beds were out in the open, separated only by a curtain that could be drawn over or opened up, depending on the level of privacy needed. The floor was abuzz with activity; people of all stripes moving about at individual pace. Medical staff were hustling from patient to patient; parents sat, whiling the time away until their loved one could leave – either to another floor for more waiting or to the morgue, if the waiting were over. I tried hard not to look, but couldn't help peering at the kids as they lay in their beds and the parents as they wallowed in worry. One parent had climbed into the bed next to her son, both to take a nap and to be close as possible to him. The windows across the unit yielded no view at all, looking only into the bricks of the building next door, only inches away.

"Excuse me," I asked of the first person I saw sitting behind the desk. She looked up, with a somewhat annoyed cast to her eyes. "My son is here; Timothy Burke." She glanced over her shoulder at a large board with the names of all the patients in the unit marked in dry erase marker for quick and easy removal, whether transferred to another unit or not; no one was sent home from the PICU.

She pointed to a room directly across from the desk

"In that first room, there?" She nodded in reply. "He's in a room, not in one of these open beds? Why?"

"He's not my patient, sir. I'm not sure why." As I approached the room, several medical people lingered about the doorway, consulting in low tones, looking over an already thick

clipboard of the papers and charts that described by son's condition. I noticed they had paper masks pulled down about their necks. I stepped into a small vestibule separating Timothy's room from the main corridor, a space for supplies and hand washing. A box full of the paper masks sat on the counter next to the sink.

I parted the heavy, blue curtain that enclosed his room to see a mass of people scurrying about, doing their various tasks, each wearing head-to-toe protective gear.

A voice told me to put on a mask before coming in – a voice that belonged to a woman who turned out to be his primary nurse.

I snapped a mask around my head. I always hated these masks; they make it so hard to breathe. I have no idea how anyone can work with these things on. I pulled the mask down around my throat. "Look, whatever he's got, I don't mind getting; I can't wear these things..."

Meningitis, said another absent voice. *I don't think you want that.*

"He's got meningitis? What type bacterial, viral, what?" I knew little about meningitis except that there are two kinds: one bad and one terrible.

We don't know for sure, came another voice. They would have to rule it out – prove he doesn't have it.

"Guilty until proven otherwise," I mumbled to myself, I thought, and slipped the mask back on. My face grew hot and damp with my every breath, which was getting faster and shallower with each step into the room I took. I still could not see Timothy, but I did catch a glimpse of Jennifer through the crowd. She sat with her mask in position, looking blankly at the goings on.

“You must be the father,” said the now embodied voice a doctor – Infectious Diseases – that would be checking Timothy or any kind of virus, bacteria, or whatever it is that caused him to collapse. He offered his hand and I shook it.

“How is he doing?”

“Well, I am not the one to answer that question,” he replied, deferring to the doctor in charge of Timothy’s case. “If you’ll excuse me.” He slipped out of the room. I turned to watch him take off his mask and confer with the gaggle of doctors stationed outside the room. I inched forward and saw Tim’s feet, or rather where the blanket rose where his feet would be. I recalled seeing him in bed that morning, blanket askew on the bed, not covering one inch of his body. Now he lay here covered head-to-toe in a blanket; he wouldn’t like that.

I caught Jennifer’s eyes, now silvery with tears, before I was able to get into a clear spot to see Timothy. A lump caught in my throat and tears swelled in my eyes as I looked down on my Beautiful Boy.

He lay in bed motionless, already seeming already lifeless. Tubes and wires flowed from various parts of his body out to various machines and devices. A thick, clear tube ran from the corner of his mouth, pulling the right side of his mouth into a half-frown, to a breathing machine. The machine gasped and sighed in rhythmic patterns next to his bed. A thin tube ran from a jack in the wall to his nose and off the other side of his face. Two heavy tubes ran from the sides of his chest down underneath the bed. Various liquids of differing colors gurgled in the tube. His arms were injected with plastic hosing that ran to bags hanging from a pole next to his bed. Countless wires ran from his chest and head to a large monitoring device on the other side of his bed.

But, most striking of all was the thin metallic probe that stuck out of the top of his head by six inches, like an antenna or the horn of a unicorn.

He was passive and pale; his body seemed empty and unused, just laying there motionless. As I watched, the staff pulled the blanket down around his knees to allow them to work; I could see that he was wearing a diaper. He would be fine with everything they were doing to him except for the diaper. He had just completed potty training and was so proud not to be in diapers again. I thought immediately of Grandma's pool.

We had used the promise of the community pool at Grandma's condominium complex as a reward for potty training. They would not allow a diapered child into the pool, so Timothy had to content himself with the small, plastic wading pool in the corner while his brother swam in the big-people's pool. In typical Timothy fashion, he understood the restriction and made himself happy in the kiddie pool, splashing Grandma with a big bucket of water -- horseplay that would never be allowed in the adult pool. But this summer was to be his big chance to swim with Matthew, diaper-less. But here he was, lying in bed, wearing a diaper again.

"You must be the father," the nurse broke me out of my daydream and slammed me back into the hospital room.

"Um, yeah."

"His nurse² introduced herself and said she would be taking care of him. "At least until 7pm anyway." She tried on a small smile to see my reaction. I didn't smile back.

"Is he going to be all right?"

² Forgive me. I don't remember your name, the wonderful woman who was Timothy's primary nurse. You played such an important role in those days, but I don't recall your name. For the rest of this story, I will call you *his nurse*, meant as a title of honor.

"I don't know, honey. I sure wish I did." She jotted some notes on a clipboard and hung it back at the foot of his bed. "The doctor will be back soon to talk to you. I believe he's already talked to your wife." I turned to see Jennifer standing there, and I grabbed her hard in a hug. She pushed me away.

"That won't help Timothy," she snapped, and moved closer to the side of his bed, holding his limp hand in hers.

"What is going on? Is he going to be all right?" Jennifer shook her head solemnly.

"I don't know. He's pretty sick."

"I know that. Why did he pass out? Why did he stop breathing? How long was he down? Does he have any brain damage?"

"I don't know," she repeated. "They have to do tests, a lot of tests. Right now they are keeping him sedated so that he stays calm. They want to keep the pressure in his head down."

"What's the pressure in his head from?"

"He has some edema of his brain, some swelling."

"I thought the docs at Salem didn't see any? What happened?"

"They were wrong, I guess."

"He'll be OK?" Again, I didn't know much, but I knew that swelling of the brain can result from anoxia – a lack of oxygen – which can also lead to brain damage. And with brain damage there's no way of knowing the extent of the damage until he's awake. And that wasn't going to be for a while. "What can I do?" Again, she shook her head.

"Nothing. Just wait." She wiped a tear from her eye. "Don't you want to say *Hello* to your boy?"

“Goddamn yes,” I answered. She moved away from Timothy and I took her place. I bent over to kiss him, having difficulty finding a spot clear of equipment to do it. “Hi, Monster. What happened to you, buddy? Why did you fall down?” I didn’t feel it, but I saw a tear drop from my eye onto his cheek and roll off onto the bed. “You’re going to be all right, my friend. I just know it. I couldn’t handle it if you aren’t.” I stood up and watched his artificially sleeping face. The room was filled with the sound of mechanical breathing, the bleating of the monitor, and the turgid gurgle of his chest tubes. But, not a sound from Timothy in reply.

Chapter 12

The Night Before

"Godspeed, little man.
Sweet Dreams, little man.
My love will fly to you each night
on angel's wings.
Godspeed. Sweet Dreams... "
-- Dixie Chicks

As was our tradition on the nights when Mama worked, the boys and I would go out somewhere. In the interest of full disclosure and honesty, most of these ventures were intended to tire the boys out so they would go to bed more easily. But, as they often turned out, these trips were wonderful bonding experiences for us boys. We didn't do anything special, most of the time. Nothing that would merit photographs for the myriad albums that sat on closet shelves back home. We usually wound up doing things that mama wouldn't care for.

Our most frequent trips were ventures to the local commuter rail station to watch the trains come and go.

It was this experience the boys wanted to replay on that June night, little more than 12 hours before Timothy would lose touch with the world. However, I had different plans. It took some conniving and convincing, but we set our sights on the oceanfront and a trip to throw rocks

into the sea. It was a tiny bit of a lie, the promise of throwing rocks, as I didn't know the state of the tide at our beach. Had the tide been at its highest, there would be no rocks to throw; heck, most of the beach would be obscured by water. But off we went.

My two little monkeys would walk at very different paces. Timothy, though he could fit nicely into the stroller, refused the ride, insisting on getting there on his own. It was a short walk, a half-a-mile at most. As we poked along, Matthew would steam out in front, insisting on hitting every milestone first; Timothy would lag behind, both due to his short legs and tiny feet, but also due to his interest in looking at everything along the way. I spent most of our treks trying to keep the boys as close together as possible.

"Matthew slow down; Timothy get moving." The boys wouldn't alter their pace a bit. "Matthew hang back a bit; Tim, move them feet! Let's go!" With a little prodding and some occasional pushing and pulling, we all arrived at our destination together.

It was a nice walk. We would head down Farragut Road, passing the large colonial where I grew up.

"That's Papa's old house," Matthew would report with pride for having remembered, despite not having been there for years. Of course, Timothy would always try to top his brother.

"Those windows on the top," he pointed to the eave on the third floor of the house, a pair of simple, wood-framed windows, "that was Papa's room when he was a boy."

As we shuffled along down the gentle hill at the start of the road, we got to the part of the town they call the Monument Area. This area is essentially a long, wide strip of grass, bordered on both sides by a street that stretches nearly a quarter-mile to the ocean.

"There's our church," Timothy pointed out.

"The church is closed now," observed Matthew. "But on Sunday we will go."

Here, the road leaned upward a bit as it headed towards the sea. Halfway up the hill stands a short stone retaining wall. Matthew quickly scaled the three-foot barricade and catwalked along the top. Timothy, of course, had to follow, but had less success. A quick boost and both boys inched along the top of the wall. At the end, Timothy burst into a big smile, as though that were the first time he had accomplished the task.

When we finally reached Humphrey Street, a major thoroughway that divided the town from this beach, the boys took off in a dash toward the crosswalk, eager to be the first to press the Walk button. It was a tie, both boys reaching out for the button at the same time; they started jostling to get into position to push, but Tim reached out with his free hand and swatted Matthew's hand away and quickly pushed the button.

"Papa!" Matthew almost literally cried, "Timothy hit me. I want to be first!"

"Don't worry, Matthew. You can push the button on the way home," I promised, and that seemed to quell his mood for the moment. As we waited for the lights to change in our favor, I thought about my two boys. Matthew was nearly twice the size of Timothy, but Tim already figured out that his brother was incapable of fighting back. Violence as a means to get your way just wasn't in Matthew's nature; it was in Timothy's. "Just you wait, Matthew, until Tim gets bigger. You think he's trouble now." I said to the boys, but more to myself than to them. The light changed and I grabbed Timothy's hand and we crossed towards the beach.

"No going swimming, boys," I admonished, wishing we had brought our swim suits. "If it's nice this weekend, maybe we can go to the beach; Mama's working." Jennifer wasn't the biggest fan of the beach, being more of a pool person. At the water's edge, we dipped our feet in the foamy sea, greeted by surprising warmth for early June in New England. The ocean generally didn't get to swimming temperature until late July, unless from a May hot spell.

“Where am I going,” Matthew teased looking longingly at the rocks that clung to the seawall.

“Go ahead.” And Matthew was off. He and Timothy loved to throw rocks into the water, whether it was the ocean, a pond, a pool, or a puddle. There was something about the splash that made it exciting, I guess. As Timothy and I tiptoed in the waves, allowing the water to roll up around our shins, I watched a young mother and her son, about Timothy’s age walking among the tide pools looking down for crabs. Unable to find any, they soon wandered off to explore the rest of the beach.

“Come here, Tim,” I called. “Let’s check something out.” We wandered over to the tide pools, small puddles of water left by the retreating sea, to find signs of life. Often small sea creatures would get trapped in these pools until the tide came back in and rescued them. We looked down near our feet and spied countless hermit crabs scuttling along the bottom of the pool. The hermit crabs, with their pilfered shells on their backs, waddled sidelong in the water.

“Look at that, Tim. See the hermit crabs?” I bent to pick up one of the small creatures so that he could see. “You like that?” Timothy ducked behind my leg, clearly concerned about the critter.

“It’s OK.” I laid it in the palm of my hand and we watched as the crab recoiled into its shell. “See, he’s afraid, too. He ducked back into his shell. Watch this” I placed him back down into the tide pool, apart from the others, and we watched as he slowly emerged from hiding. Timothy laughed at the crab as he slowly poked his head out and crawled away. Feeling some bravado, he stepped around and looked at the scores of hermit crabs toiling in the shallow water.

“Matthew! Come over here and look at this!” I called to Matthew who was several feet away on the rocks, looking for stones that he could chuck into the brine. After a few minutes of

crab watching, Timothy and I wandered over towards Matthew who was getting deeper into the rocks.

“Matthew, not so far away. Come closer.” For some reason he complied and lumbered over the rocks in our direction with a fist full of pebbles to throw. I noticed a trickle of blood coming from his big toe.

“What happened to your foot?”

“I got a cut.”

“I see that. What happened?”

“I got a cut on the rocks.” Most likely he cut his toe on the barnacles that clung to the rocks he was walking on. The little dried shells of the dead barnacles can be almost razor-like. He seemed totally unconcerned by the injury. The boys spent the next several minutes tossing rocks at the sea. I turned and looked across the beach at the mainland, and noticed that the sun was beginning to change from a fiery yellow to a glowing red as it made its decent towards Lynn. In an hour or so, it would come crashing down on the homes and businesses in that worn city, only to emerge from the ocean the following day. I thought of our trip to Florida again, standing on St. Petersburg Beach with Timothy, watching the sun slowly set into the ocean. Twilight was nearly upon us.

“Come on boys, let’s get going.” As we made our way back up the beach and fetched our shoes, Matthew pausing on occasion to toss a stone he found in the sand, and watching as the stone fell further and further from the tide with each step. We grabbed our shoes and carried them back to the wall.

I took my bottle of water out of the stroller and used it to clean the sand off our feet. Matthew slipped his shoes back on, as he always did, with great effort, as he refused to untie the

laces. Timothy sat in my lap and leaned his head back on my shoulder as I put on his shoes. I could feel the soft tickle of his short blond hairs on my neck. I squirted the last drops of water onto my feet before slipping my sandals on, but there was not enough water to do a good cleanse, so I just went barefoot. Tossing the empty bottle in the trash, I sat back on the bench with Matthew at my side and Timothy in my lap and savored the moment; me and my two monkey boys. Just looking out over the ocean, watching as people walked by on the walkway, some in clumps, others alone. Walkers, joggers, roller skaters, and bikers moved by; old and young alike.

“Well, boys,” I spoke, “how about some ice cream.” Timothy was delighted; Matthew was less than thrilled. The story of my life, right then; trying to find a balance between frick and frack, yin and yang. “We’ll get you a bottle of water, Matthew; how does that sound.” He nodded in agreement and smiled that crooked smile of his – his mouth a combination of baby and adult teeth that made his smile seem uneven and out of balance. Timothy slid off my lap and we walked up to the ice cream stand.

“What kind of ice cream do you want, Tim? I am thinking about cookie dough.”

“I want Superman ice cream,” he replied, referring to an odd concoction we got down in Florida. His favorite ice cream down there was a turgid swirl of colors: reds, blues, yellows, and greens, all mixed together in a batch called Superman. It was merely a blend of vanilla ice creams that were tinged with different food colorings, but he didn’t need to know that. And, it was far better, he told me without having tried it, than the Spiderman ice cream’s blend of red and blue vanillas.

“Sorry, pal. They don’t have Superman ice cream here.”

“I want blue ice cream.”

When our turn came I ordered the ice creams for Timothy and me, and a bottle of water for Matthew. Fortunately, it was the right brand – rather had a familiar label – or he might not have drunk it, no matter how thirsty he was. We got two orders of blue ice cream, Crunch-a-Saurus, which was similarly tinted vanilla with some crispy candy bar bits mixed in, topped with rainbow jimmies (multi-colored sprinkles to those of you outside of the northeastern United States), in a cup.

We sat at a table over looking the beach, and I watched a young couple playing with a dog; no kids in sight, and thought how lucky I was to have my two sons to share this evening with. There was nothing in the world I would rather be doing at that moment than sitting with my boys, watching Matthew try to fish his straw out of a bottle that was too tall for it, and Timothy sitting quiet, picking the multi-colored jimmies off his blue ice cream with a small plastic spoon.

“Are you all done?” I ask Timothy as he took one last bite of the blue stuff. He nodded Yes, and pushed the ice cream away from him. “Well, put it in the trash, then.” He picked up the cup in his two small hands and carried it over to the barrel. Matthew opened the flapping door on the barrel and Timothy dropped the trash inside. Matthew let go of the door and watched it flap in place for a moment or two.

The next part of the evening went without much excitement. We walked home, at Matthew’s insistence, following the same path we used going out. Down the same street, crossing at the same place, walking on the wall as before but in the opposite direction, back past our church, up by Papa’s old house, and back home again. Matthew got into his bed clothes and got off to bed after watching the frantic introduction to the Simpson’s cartoon on television. As he drifted off to sleep, the sky grew quickly cloudy and dark.

With nothing on the television, Timothy and I sat on the front porch swing to watch as the clouds burst forth with a torrent of rain. We live on the backside of a small hill, the street was quickly consumed by rainwater both falling from the sky and rolling down the hill of the adjoining street. The rain water started in the gutters, then quickly overfilled them and took over the entirety of the street. Grant Road quickly turned into Grant River.

Off in the distance a peal of thunder rumbled across the sky, shaking everything around. Moments later, the air was filled with a flash of light followed by more grumblings from the weather gods. Flash, crack, boom, the cycle continued.

"I'm scared, Papa," Timothy announced from his position on my lap with a weak and quivering voice, when the thunder blasted from the heavens. He wrapped his arms tightly around my arm, holding fast for security and safety.

"It's just thunder, Timothy," I explained, trying to comfort him. "It's just noise." A blast of lightning blazed through the sky, lighting all around as if it were day, tricking the streetlights into turning off. Slowly the streetlights blinked back on when they realized they had been fooled and it still is night, when a clap of thunder shook the house enough that even Timothy could feel it.

"I'm scared," he repeated.

"There's nothing to be scared of, my friend." I kissed him on the crown of his head. "The thunder is far away. Watch for the lightning. I'll show you." In a moment, another crackle of lightning ignited the night air. "Now count," I slowly counted. "1, 2, 3, 4, 5..." Kaboom! The house again shook mightily from the blast. "The more time between the lightning and the thunder, the further away it is." I had forgotten the exact formula, 1 mile for every second or 5

miles for every second. I am still not sure. “We got to five, which means the thunder is far away.”

“I’m scared, Papa,” he insisted still. A quick look at my watch told me it was time to head inside, anyway, being nearly 9:00.

“What do you say we head inside?” I asked, almost rhetorically, as another bolt of lightning flooded the sky, casting shadows across Timothy’s face that showed his true fear. I quickly carried him inside before the next roll of thunder made its way down our street.

Inside, we made quick work of putting on his pajamas and getting ready for bed.

“I want my puffs cereal,” Timothy requested. Every night before bed, we would pour a cup full of his favorite sugar-cereal, a chocolate and peanut butter concoction rolled into little spheres. We pulled a tall plastic cup off of the pile and filled it halfway, with a sippy-cup filled to the top with milk. Although he didn’t need the cups with a built-in straw at any other time during the day, at bedtime it was always a sippy cup of milk. We tried a number of experiments with regular cups at bedtime, but they always ended up with one or both of us wearing spilled milk.

We moved into the living room and sat with the television. Another routine with Tim involved television news shows. Whenever he didn’t want to sleep, we put on a cable television news talk show; knocked him out every time. This night, I went straight for the cable news without hesitation. He sat with me on the chaise lounge and ate his cereal and milk.

“I want to go to bed,” he reported, rubbing his eyes and yawning big. I carried him upstairs and laid him down. I pulled the blanket up to his chin and kissed him on the forehead.

“I love you, Timothy,” I told him. “Now go to sleep. I will see you in the morning.”

“I am going to school tomorrow,” he announced.

“Yes, you are.” I rubbed the hair on his head, and again kissed him goodnight. As I watched him close his eyes, I could never have known that tomorrow I wouldn’t be able to tuck him in bed; I had no way of knowing that this would be the last time I would say Goodnight to him. That tomorrow my world would end. “I love you, Monster. Forever.”

I stepped out of the room and closed the door.

Just like any other night.

Chapter 13

The PICU Society

"Well, I may not be crazy;
But I've got one Hell of a start.
Somebody pick up the pieces,
I think I'm falling apart."
-- Willie Nelson

"I need to work with your boy for a few minutes," Timothy's nurse told us. We should probably leave the room.

"Whatever you are doing to him," I stood firmly, "I can handle it." Jennifer grabbed my arm and started to usher me out of the room.

"Let her do her job," she whispered softly, absently. We stepped slowly out of the room. I pulled my mask off and tossed it into the barrel standing by, hoping not to need it again. The nurse's station was a throng of people, all busying themselves in attempts to save the un-savable. The gaggle of doctors still held their huddle outside the room, throwing passing glances at us as we walked by, as if they knew something they didn't want us to know. We passed in silence by the row of exposed beds, some hidden behind a drawn curtain, others open for viewing. An older boy, perhaps a teenager, lay in one bed; a younger girl, maybe 4 or 5 years old, lay in another bed. Everyone was surrounded by friends and family, staff in medical clothes, equipment of all

kinds. Low murmurs between parties, too soft to hear as I went by. I looked to my left to see the guy who I met outside in the hall on my way in. He held firmly his young daughter's hand and listened intently to what the doctors had to say. We passed by the Red Sox player and the clown on the wall. I punched the large, square button on the wall and the doors parted. The hallway was cool and quiet as we looked for a place to wait out Timothy's treatments.

Across the hall from the PICU was a small waiting area. Inside the room, a pair of smaller bedrooms, a kitchenette, and a sitting room. All the discomforts of home right there in the hospital. We landed hard on one of the couches, overlooking an older model color television whose ability to display colors properly was clearly wearing out. The man on the screen was tinged slightly orange and the sky behind him was as red as dawn in the middle of the day. Some nature of news program droned on about a championship spelling bee that was taking place somewhere in the world.

As we sat in silence, looking around the ten-foot by ten-foot sitting area, a young woman came into the room and sat on the chair across from us.

"Hi," she spoke after a lengthy period of time, knowing that we were new there. "Your child in there?" I nodded my head.

She told me that she had been there for awhile, and you get to learn that particular look in the eyes of the parents. She couldn't describe it, exactly, but assured me that we had that look.

"What look is that?" A look of terror, hope, despair, fear, she explained. I nodded again. She was there with her nephew's. Been there a while now, she said, not sure how long he's got.

Her nephew has been here a couple of times before, she explained; a heart problem. Although he had problems with his other organs, too. His kidneys kept shutting down; he was on dialysis. Always goes home. But, each time he comes here could be his last, she figured.

She sat up in her seat, adjusted her shirt, and slouched back down, moving her feet around as if she didn't know what to do with them, all the while biting on the knuckles of her left hand.

"I'm all he's got, you know." His dad left before he was born and his mother died young. Cancer. Her parents took him in, but soon got tired of caring for him. So she took over about 10 years ago. "I spend most of my free time caring for him."

I shared Timothy's story with her of how he passed out at school and stopped breathing.

She just nodded her head and reached down next to her for her bag, and pulled out a mass of yarn and a pair of knitting needles. She quickly got herself situated and started spinning away with the two sticks. She was making a sweater for her nephew, trying to stay positive. As she spoke, the fellow I'd seen a few times came in and popped open the refrigerator. He pulled out a can of soda and popped the top, watching it foam over the top and spill on the floor. Quietly, he grabbed a towel, and cleaned the mess without a complaint.

"Least of my worries," he smiled in my direction. He came into the waiting area and sat down on a couch against the wall. He leaned forward with his arms resting on his knees, dangling the can between his legs. He introduced himself as Jon³, reaching out his hand, which I took. He shook my hand heartily. Jennifer kept her hands by her side, not wanting to shake.

"That's OK," he told her, though I think his approval meant little to her at the moment.

"Forgive her, she's a bit tired. Only got a couple hours of sleep," I tried apologizing for her, and got a cross look from Jennifer. She doesn't like it when I do things like that.

"I know the feeling," said Jon. He hadn't slept well for weeks. "Tough place to sleep, here." I spun my tale again, another of countless times I would repeat it and still do.

³ Names changed to protect the innocent. You know the drill.

“He was at pre-school. I was at work, just dropped him off a couple of hours before. He seemed perfectly healthy.” I shook my head in disbelief that we were here, and I was having this conversation. It was early afternoon. I should be at work, looking forward to the end of the day so I could go home and see my boys. Maybe go for a walk to the train station or something. “We just don’t know what happened.”

People in these situations tend to come together, almost as a little society. Because we are all confined together in the same area for the same reasons, you start to develop a small bond, if only over the well-being of your respective loved ones. You celebrate their victories with them, and pray that they will soon celebrate yours; you endure their bad news with them, and pray that it won’t be you who gets the bad news; and as I found out, you mourn with these folks when the worst happens to one of the society.

I have lost touch with the others that shared that week in the PICU. I have asked after them once or twice when I had the occasion. Found out that Jon’s daughter eventually left the PICU and went home. I was happy for him, although it made my loss somehow more intense. I couldn’t celebrate his happiness with as much fervor as I might have if things worked out differently for us.

I don’t know if any of those folks will ever see these words, but if you do, thank you. Thank you for helping, or at least trying to help me and my family endure those long days at the hospital. Somehow, it was better knowing that I wasn’t alone in worrying over a sick child. And I am glad to know that of that group I am alone in mourning for a lost one.

Chapter 14

When I Grow Up

"For all the things that might have been,
God, forgive me if I cry."
-- Hank Williams

It was with great pride and excitement that I bought Timothy his first *concert* tee-shirt. It wasn't truly a concert shirt, but it's what I call any shirt with a band's name on it. I wore these shirts almost exclusively when I was young and wanted to start Timothy off right.

The shirt was for a country-rock outfit that he loved called Big & Rich. They were party boys, proudly called themselves a part of a Freak Parade, and generally sang songs that 3-year-olds should not be exposed to. But, they were flashy and dynamic and Tim liked several of their songs. Besides, it was the only concert shirt I could find in the child's small size.

I bring this up not because it was his first such shirt – one of I hoped many others that we would collect together – but because of what the shirt said:

When I Grow Up I Want to Be Big & Rich

As I bought the shirt, I had dreams of him growing up to be a big-time music star, seeing him on TV in my mind being interviewed by some correspondent.

“So, Tim-O, what do you owe all your success to?” she would ask, buttering up to him by flashing here eyelids and slinking around provocatively, like they often do.

“Well, Candy,” he’d reply, “I owe it all to my Dad.”

“Your Dad?” she’d coo.

“Yup. He taught me from early on to love music; to love all music as long as it was done with intensity and emotion. I think that is what I bring to my music, and if it weren’t for my old man, who knows?”

“Wow, he must be some kinda guy!”

“He sure is,” Tim-O would reply.

Then I woke from my reverie and clicked **Complete Transaction** on my computer and the shirt was on its way.

I waited eagerly, checking the mail each time I got home from work, hoping that it would come in the mail before our trip to Florida so that he could wear it right away. It was early spring, and t-shirts would not be allowed until May or June, I knew. Well, it came just days before we left.

Tim was thrilled as he opened the package and recognized the logo immediately. He had to put it on right away and even though it draped off him, hanging almost to his knees, sleeves down to the elbows, we had an impossible task to get it off him. It became a pajama top that first night.

When I Grow Up I Want to Be Big & Rich

Little could I imagine when I ordered the shirt, when he first wore it with such pride and excitement of his own, that not only would he not grow up to be Big or Rich; he would not grow up at all. All I have now is a single photo of him wearing the shirt on the beach in St. Petersburg,

digging in the sand with his brother. If it weren't for that trip, he never would have worn the shirt outside. I pictured him wanting to wear the shirt to school everyday, once the summer time came; now the shirt is packed away with all the other things of his we kept, things that didn't get given to St. Vincent De Paul himself or thrown away.

He often talked about the things he would do when he grew up. The usual stuff of little-boy dreams: firefighter, truck driver, pilot, space shuttle astronaut, the works. Oddly, though, for someone who loved music as much as he, Timothy never spoke of being a musician. Perhaps music was so magical for him that he never considered that he, too, could create music that would make others happy.

"When can I drive a truck, Dad," he once said while pushing a toy truck around the floor. It was a small-sized 18-wheel car carrier, bright blue cab emblazoned with the logo of the gas station it came from. A long, silver, two-tiered carrier was hauled behind it, unencumbered by cars. I think that it was a present for his brother that Matthew never used. Timothy took right too it.

"I think when you turn 18," I replied, probably watching something on the television.

"When do I turn 18?" He barely looked up from his truck, which smashed intentionally into a wall.

"A long time from now," I answered, "but you'll get there, soon enough."

"I wanna turn 18 so that I can drive a truck; and fly a plane, too!" The truck suddenly became aloft and zoomed around in Tim's hands. "Vrrrooom!" he laughed and landed the truck safely back on the rug.

On that trip to Florida that came so close to the end of his life, we had the chance to give him a glimpse into his dreams. Although it was a long car ride, especially with the near constant construction on the I-4, we had thoughts of taking him to Cape Canaveral. He had just gotten into space shuttles, having seen a movie with a shuttle, called *Armageddon*, with his mother. He even picked out a toy space shuttle for himself in a St. Petersburg gift shop. But, we didn't buy it for him.

We'll get to Cape Canaveral another year, we told ourselves, knowing how much Timothy would love it. If Matthew is right, Timothy is up in the skies somewhere.

"Timothy is in Heaven," Matthew told me a few years after Timothy died. "Heaven is in the sky. I can see his eyes." I hope you are right, Matthew.

Chapter 15

The Calm Before the Storm

"Are miracles old-fashioned news?
No healing hands were ever used.
Faithfulness was my excuse.
Tell me what was Yours?"
-- Allison Moorer

We had gone through several days of nothing new.

Timothy lay in bed, hooked up to all his devices with little change. The lack of change, they told us, was good. The plan to this point was to keep him as stable as possible, monitor the pressure in his head – the inter-cranial pressure or ICP – and once they are convinced he is stable, the surgeons would repair the hole in his trachea.

It was now Tuesday, and the only real developments were coming from doctors determining what didn't happen to him. They told us that his team determined that he had no meningitis, no encephalitis, no herpes virus, or any other virus that might cause swelling of the brain. The cardiac team told us that they had found no defect of his heart that might have caused him to collapse, no sign of heart palpitation or defect that might have led to someone passing out. The neurological staff told us that after an EEG and other tests, there was no sign of stroke, and another possible cause of his falling was ruled out.

When the time finally came for Timothy to have his thoracic surgery, we all waited in a little waiting room down the hall from the PICU. We watched him rolled down the hallway with all his machines in tow, surrounded by a posse of medical staff. After the eternity that only a hospital can change time into, the surgeons came by our little waiting room, quite pleased with themselves and the outcome of the surgery. We all huddled around as his surgeon spoke a solid English with a gentle German accent.

“Everything went very well,” he said rubbing his golden hands together. They were able to suture up Timothy’s trachea. It was a difficult procedure, but they thought it went well. A sigh of release emanated from the waiting collective.

“He had quite an extensive injury, you know,” the surgeon both assured and bragged in the same sentence. Usually with a surgery such as this, they *shut down* one of the patient’s lungs, allowing him to breathe with the other. In Timothy’s case, the incision was such that they could not do this. We were forced to alternate his breathing. They would give him a breath, do a suture, give him a breath, do another suture, and so on.

Once they get him settled, the doctors promised, they could continue monitoring him to make sure that he again stable. Once stable, they could start getting a bit more aggressive with his treatments – and his diagnosis.

As Jennifer and the doctors talked among themselves for a few moments, the mood in our little waiting room lightened considerably. Everyone seemed to breathe a collective, silent, sigh of relief at the news that the surgery went well, and that the doctors could proceed with the treatment course; he will “oxygenate” better, the doctors promised, which will be better to keep

the brain swelling down. Then they would start to run a battery of tests to see what happened to cause the fall in the first place. We allowed ourselves a faint glimmer of hope. I stepped out into the hallway, hearing the voice of my new friend Jon echoing down the hall. I couldn't quite grasp what he was saying, but from his tone, it was clear that it was not good news.

"Well, that was good news," I started as Jennifer sat back down in the room, "Maybe now, they can start to work on what happened to him; start to back off the sedation and allow him to start to wake up a bit." I started having visions of Timothy slowly squirming in bed as the sedation wears off, as if he were shaking off the shackles of sleep on any given morning. I see his eyes flickering open; a terrified look exploding on his face as the strangeness of the room comes into focus; then, his face bursting into a smile as he sees us leaning over his bed; he tries to climb over to us, brushing aside the tubes and wires that remain connected to him, desperately seeking out his mother for a reassurance embrace. His nurse and we gently lay him back in the bed, trembling slightly, still in fear and shock. A gentle kiss on the forehead settles him slightly. *Hello, Monster*, I say; and he smiles.

I saw us wheeling Timothy from the ICU, moving him to a regular pediatric unit to complete his recovery. As we left the unit, Jon stood over his daughter, a tear in his eye; it was not going well. She was, by my eyesight, not leaving the ICU soon, if ever. I patted him on the shoulder as I moved past; Jon managed a smile that implied *Congratulations on your good news. May he continue to recover.*

I was immediately consumed with form of guilt that I had never before known. Why was Timothy recovering and doing so well when Jon's daughter had turned so far away from health? Why was my son leaving the ICU while she was forced to stay?

I was awoken from my reverie by the voice of Jon, again rolling down the otherwise silent corridor. He is not yelling; he is not screaming. It is a more of a voice of concern, a strong-sounding call that could somehow help his daughter in its intensity alone. My joy was quickly subdued with thoughts of him and his daughter.

Survivor's guilt, my therapist would call it later. But, it was an ill-placed feeling; the eggs were tallied, but the chicks were not close to breaking through the shells.

"How about some ice cream," Jennifer asked from across the room. "I feel like a sundae." Jennifer hadn't eaten much over the past few days, much less a treat like an ice cream sundae. Usually, she looked at a rainbow and saw only the rain; today she is seeing the pot of gold. If she is encouraged by what the doctors told her, then I guess I should be too.

I headed downstairs to the ice cream station in the cafeteria. I smiled my way down the hall and ventured down my stairwell, hearing the door slam behind me as usual.

"So," I called to the heavens. "You finally let a bit of good news slip through. Does this mean you are granting my wish? Answering my prayers?" As I dropped down the stairwell to the first floor, I looked up again. "Thank you," I whispered.

We sat in the waiting area, eating our ice cream and feeling pretty good about ourselves. Gentle talk entered the room that had been hard to come by the past few days. Talk about the Red Sox' chances this year.

"So how are the Red Sox doing these days?" asked Jim, my sister's fiancée.

“Pretty good, I’d say,” I responded. “Hopefully, they can win it all again this year. “After 86 years of nothing, to win it twice in a row. That would be pretty funny.”

“It would make up a bit for last year, for me,” I continued. “I was sick as a dog during that series with the Yankees: when the Sox came back from 3 games down. I was too tired to stay up and watch most of those games. I feel gypped.”

Jim laughed, recalling how slugger David Ortiz single-handedly keeping the series alive. Timothy loves David Ortiz, I recalled. “Here comes Big Papi, Dad,” Timothy would say, using Ortiz’ nickname. “He’s going to hit another homerun.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Jennifer quipped, with a smile. “Talking Red Sox when your son is in intensive care.”

“But they just told us he’s doing great,” I replied, scooping a big bite of Death by Chocolate.

“He said the surgery went well; he’s still a very sick boy, you know.”

“Yeah, but now they can find out what’s going on and how to make him better. The surgery was the first step – a huge step.” As we bickered across the room, we often bickered about things we agreed on, for some reason. As we bickered, his surgeon leaned into the waiting area.

“Mr. and Mrs. Burke,” he paged, “I would like to speak with you in private for a moment, if I may.” We immediately stood up and entered the hallway with the surgeon. He told us that before Timothy’s surgery, they did a CAT scan of his brain, and followed up with another one after, to see if there were any changes. they did see something in the scans that causes us great concern.” He paused for a moment, searching our faces before proceeding.

“We saw diffuse edema of his brain; he has suffered a great trauma to his brain.”

“What does that mean, *profuse edema*,” I cautiously asked Jennifer and the doctor, my eyes darting between the two. “But, when we left Salem, they told me that they didn’t see anything that concerned them.”

“That is not unusual to not see swelling that early – quite the opposite, actually, the surgeon reported. They would expect not to see any swelling at that point. They looked at the Salem CAT scan, and did see some areas of discoloration, that is how you know there is swelling; the edema is a different color than the rest of the brain.

“But, his ICPs have been fine since we’ve been here, doesn’t that mean that his swelling is minimal?” Not always. His ICPs may have been artificially lowered by the medications he has been taking. Lower ICPs doesn’t always indicate a lack of swelling.

“So what does this mean?” I asked, a lump forming in my throat and a tear rolling in my eye. “Does he have brain damage?”

“We won’t know until we can back him off the sedation and see how he responds. Again, this is not my specialty, so I would not want to offer too much information to you.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Jennifer sighed. She and I looked deeply into each other’s eyes. She had a look of knowing, of certainty that this was not going to end well. One way or the next, something bad would result. Together we walked back into the room to face a collection of worried faces.

“When a doctor calls you into a private talk,” assessed Lori, “that can’t be good news. Do you want to talk about it?” I swallowed my tears hard.

“They saw massive swelling of his brain on the CAT scans they did today. Since there was little swelling on the initial CAT scans, it means his brain has swollen tremendously since

he's been here." Which could mean, I explained, that he has massive brain damage; that he may never be the same again – assuming he ever got out of there.

"Don't talk like that," Grandma snapped, "he's going to be fine."

"We don't know that Grandma," Jennifer retorted. "I see this all the time in adults; and it's never good."

"But children heal so much better than adults," Jim offered.

"Let's hope so," I sighed. I picked up my sundae and spooned a scoop. "Suddenly," I lamented, tossing the cup into the trash. "I just lost my appetite."

Chapter 16

Happiness Ends

"Oh how I miss those happy days..."
-- King Wilkie

Our life was not perfect; but we were happy.

We truly were happy, Jennifer and I, with our two monkey-boys. Sure, we were rushing towards middle-age. We had the smallest house on the street; the smallest house on the street was in need of repairs and updates. We didn't have a lot of money to throw around – constantly being chided by our financial advisor that our credit card bills were so high and our retirement accounts were so low that he didn't want to do business with us anymore. Imagine being fired by your financial advisor; I thought it was supposed to be the other way around.

And of course, our older son, Matthew, being diagnosed with Autism. He is one of the sweetest kids I know, but the hardest to deal with sometimes. But, that was OK. We were a family, and we were happy. Finally.

Jennifer and I met back in our college days. We were both fiercely independent, but found something in each other that we needed. In a sentence, she was a person who wanted to be

needed by someone and I was a person who needed to be wanted by someone. She needed to receive love and I needed to give it.

For years, we filled each others needs and we were satisfied with where we were. Staying up to the early morning hours and sleeping until the late ones. We went to nice (but not too nice) restaurants; went to see the movies frequently; took nice vacations; sort of minor-league yuppies, we were. We never had the money to be full-fledged yuppies, but we tried our best.

But despite all that, we were not completely satisfied with life; we were content, but not truly happy. Something was missing.

Both of us had good jobs, but neither of us were career-types. We put in our eight hours and went home to watch a stack of rented movies together on the couch. We were never the type to work 12-hours a day. Something else was calling us, but we did not know what.

Until one eventful St. Patrick's Day when a friend of Jennifer's had a baby. A little girl, Amanda. All it took was one touch of that baby and Jennifer was hooked. This child was positively contagious, or should I say addictive. Jennifer knew what she wanted and what would make her life whole.

But, the fates wouldn't let us off so easy. We tried for months without success, despite ovulation kits, basal-body temperatures, and 28-day calendars that marked the exact moment that should prove most fruitful. None of it worked. Finally, medical science finally had to take over, and the above tools were aided by injections and ultrasounds helping us along. But still nothing.

Finally, the good doctors had to do what nature should do for itself. I found myself in a little room with funny magazines trying to procreate with my wife many miles away at home. Life is odd.

Well, it worked, and Matthew was born on a hot July day in 1997. The very day that the U.S.S. Constitution would sail proudly into Marblehead Harbor. We had water-side seats for the event at a friend's house, but we ended up watching the historical event on a grainy hospital television while cradling a new baby. We didn't mind.

Instantly, we both knew that this is what we were born to be: parents.

Some parents take to the job with trepidation and fear, especially the daddies. I always think of the old movies where the father is pacing the waiting room or holding court at the local tavern waiting for the phone to ring before he can start handing out cigars with the appropriate-colored band. I could think of no place I would rather be, or nothing I would rather do than be there the instant that Matthew Sean entered the world.

Some people come to be known by the jobs they do: Michael Jordan is a basketball player; Tiger Woods is a golfer; the guy down the street is a lawyer; the neighbor next door is a cop. But, I think if you were to assign one word to best describe me, it would not be technical writer (which I am and a fairly good one, I gather), but *Dad*. First and foremost, I was someone's Dad and Jennifer was someone's Mama. And we wouldn't have it any other way.

I think that's why losing Timothy has been such a torment for the both of us. Not that all parents don't mourn the loss of a child. I just think that we lost more than just a child; we lost a huge part of our identity. We lost a major part of who we are. We will never get this piece of ourselves back. We will forever be lesser parents.

We were still parents to Matthew, who I must thank vociferously, because without him, we might not make it through all this. He helps us cope every minute of the day without even knowing it; even if that just means his being such a handful that we can't dwell on Timothy. Losing our child, our youngest child, was something that tore the insides out of the both of us.

Timothy was our chance at normalcy. Raising an autistic child is a very isolating experience. When others talk about their kids, for example, our version of the story is very different, almost unrecognizable to others.

Did I tell you my daughter is going to be the lead in the school play?

My son just made the youth league football team – as starting quarterback.

My twins just got a national award for scholarship.

Me, I'd think, but dare not reply, my son went through the entire day of school without taking off his clothes during a tantrum.

For Matthew, we had to learn to develop a whole new set of standards, a new cache of expectations. No longer could we think about having a valedictorian, we had to think about having a child who was academically a few grades behind his peers. But that's OK. We understand that and are happy with who Matthew is.

But, Timothy, he gave us a chance to be *normal* parents and have *normal* parent experiences. With Timothy, we were looking forward to being able to say all those things, go to the school play, work with him on school projects, coach his basketball team. We believed that we could do all those typical things that most parents take for granted. But no longer.

I guess you could say that as people who felt born to be parents, having a special child like Matthew should be a reward. Here is a child who is certainly in need of extra parenting. But with Timothy, the rewards of parenting were so much more immediate and open.

One of our favorite times with Timothy was in the evenings after Matthew went to bed. Timothy would become so much more animated and dynamic with the house to himself, as it were. He would become the leader, the king, the man-in-charge of the house with Matthew out of the way.

But when it came time for sleep, the routine was carved in stone. He would get a plastic cup filled with these little spherical chocolate-peanut butter cereal bites, and a sippy-cup with cold milk. Even though he was far old to use a sippy-cup during the day, he would insist of one at night. He'd climb onto his Dad's or his Mama's lap on the lounger, and watch TV until he fell asleep. Usually, we had to put on something boring like the FoxNews Channel to lull him to sleep.

Now, before the child-raising experts get into a huff and explain that we were doing it all wrong having Timothy fall asleep with us, we did it from the start so that a crying infant Timothy would not wake up Matthew, who would never go back to sleep. Before Tim died, we were starting to transition him to falling asleep on his own, and like everything else, he was learning quickly.

As he sat, chomping on his cereal, he would often turn his face up to us and say four simple words that will forever ring through my head whenever I see a picture of him.

I like you, Dad.

I like you, Mom.

That was all he had to say, with his soft sweet voice, gentle green eyes, and content smile. It was absolute Nirvana. We never heard such words from Matthew, because he is not capable of expressing himself in such a way; not that the statement doesn't hold true for him, it does.

I like you, Dad.

I like you, too, Timothy, if you can hear me now. And I truly did like him as much as I loved him. I really believed that we were good friends to complement our father/son ties. I really did like his personality. He was a wonderful boy to hang out with and do things with.

Jennifer used to joke that my best friend was a 3-year-old boy. After he was gone, I realized she was right.

Chapter 17

A Vigil Interrupted

So now you're sleeping peaceful,
I lie awake and pray
That you'll be strong tomorrow and we'll
See another day and we will praise it
And love the light that brings a smile
Across your face...
-- Sarah McLachlan

That final night, even Matthew couldn't sleep.

Grandma was good enough to pick up Matthew after school that day and keep him through dinner.

"Why don't I stay at your place tonight," she offered to put Matthew to bed so I could stay at the hospital as long as I needed. "Stay all night, if you want." The offer was much appreciated, but not accepted by Matthew.

Jennifer and I were left alone with Timothy, as everyone else reluctantly headed home after the dinner hour. I think Jennifer knew this was the end, or very near to it. Timothy had come back from his thoracic surgery earlier in the day, but was not much more stable than before. In fact, the medical staff was having a more difficult time controlling his condition post-surgery.

Not entirely unexpected, as his surgeon predicted. I am not sure whether I believed him or not. Timothy's ICP fluctuated more than the doctors liked to see; his blood pressure and heart rate were in constant flux, also; he spiked a fever.

Jennifer sat by her son's side, almost as motionless as he, gently stroking his wispy blonde hair. His nurse came and left the room working her magic with the bags and tubes that fed and nourished our little patient.

"Timothy would not be pleased to know that his brother has been getting french fries and chicken nuggets every night, while he has been getting clear liquid through a tube for a week," I tried to joke, but failed.

"He will soon be stealing his brother's fries again," his nurse started, while hanging another bag of the fluid. I could see from the look on Jennifer's face that Matthew wouldn't have to worry about that happening.

The doctors conferred, researching the scrawls on Timothy's clipboard, looking at the lights and lines on his monitor, investigating the tubes and wires that came and went from various parts of his body.

They could get him *under control*, the doctors promised. "The surgery today went very well; now that we are clear that hurdle, I truly believe that we can move forward."

"What if we can't get him under control," I asked to the room.

"Craniotomy," Jennifer offered, never taking her eyes off Tim. A craniotomy is a surgical procedure where sections of the skull, called brain flaps, are removed. This allows the brain room to swell. The theory is, if the brain swells, because there is no room inside the skull to expand, the swelling goes downward into the base of the brain, a *herniation*, which is devastating. "It's pretty much a last-ditch effort," she continued.

“Yes,” his doctors agreed, a craniotomy is certainly something they would only do if absolutely needed. Deciding to wait on any decisions and see how he does during the night.

“Tonight will tell us a lot.” They finished his rounds and left us in silence.

“We should probably get something to eat before the cafeteria closes.”

“I’m not hungry,” Jennifer announced. She had picked lightly at the dinner tray that was automatically sent to each patient’s room. But, she told me to go. And, though I didn’t want to leave her at that moment, even for a moment, I reluctantly made the walk out of the room into the chaos of the unit.

Jon was sitting with his family as they talked quietly among themselves. He caught my eyes and waved passively, knowing that I was probably in little mood for such greetings. I waved absently back.

Past the Trot Nixon and clown prints on the wall, out through the swinging doors, and into the hall; I made one final trip to the hospital cafeteria.

I got dinner, but not eaten much. Jennifer and I sat in Timothy’s room, watching the lights and hearing the sounds of the equipment that was keeping him alive. It was nine-thirty or so, nearing 12 hours since he came back from the thoracic surgery, and the medical team was working hard to keep him stable and in control.

“Why don’t you call home and see how Matthew did going to bed,” Jennifer ordered, more than asked.

“Oh, I’m sure they did all right; Grandma and Grandad are good with Matthew. Besides, I think he was tired this evening, from the sounds of things.” I had called home earlier and

Matthew was lying on the couch, a blanket over his head. All the confusion and chaos of the past few days seems to have had their affect on Matthew as well. "But, I'll call to make sure." I left the room and walked out into the hall. Hushed voices and stifled sobs came from our little waiting room as a new family was just beginning their ordeal. A new member to the society; just as we were less than a week in.

"Grandma, it's Michael," I spoke into the phone.

"Hi, Papa!" the voice laughed through the other end of the connection.

"Matthew? What are you still doing awake?" The sound of a telephone striking hardwood echoed through my ear. "Matthew! Are you there?" A tired and frustrated Grandma came on the line.

"Grandma? Why isn't Matthew in bed yet?" They had been trying for two hours to get him to sleep, but he wouldn't settle down.

Matthew got his clutch of nighttime pills that slowed him down enough to sleep. It doesn't seem to be working, though. He was up there for over an hour and a half, jumping on the bed, stomping on the floor, yelling and screaming. Grandma sounded almost on the verge of tears. To us, this was the typical bedtime dance for Matthew; but I can see how it might upset someone who was uninitiated with his antics.

Despite it all, she assured me that she could handle Matthew on her own. "What do you mean *your own*? Where's Grandad?" Apparently, he left about an hour prior, saying it was bad for his heart, all the stress of dealing with Matthew. Her voice tailed off as she spoke. "We've never seen him this bad before." Somehow, I thought, even Matthew knew. They say that brothers have a connection that parents can never understand. Maybe Matthew perceived the inevitable, and protesting the outcome in the only way he knew.

“I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

Jennifer was less than pleased with my report. “Two grown adults, who raised how many kids, can’t get a single eight year old to bed?”

“One adult now. Grandad went home an hour ago.”

“You can’t leave! What if something happens during the night?”

“Grandma will just have to come back. Maybe I will have her stay and after I get Matthew to sleep I’ll come back,” I offered. It was pretty much all I could lay on the table.

She relented, or wanted me to believe, telling me to go home and take care of Matthew. “I am sure Timothy will be all right until the morning.” I wasn’t sure I believed that she backed-down and was comfortable with my going home; rather, knowing Matthew as we do, she knew that it had to be done.

“Maybe so, but will you be OK?”

“That, I don’t know.”

I got home around 10:30; Matthew was back in bed. As I opened the door, I heard him calling from up above.

“Papa! Yoo-hoo! Papa! I am not sleeping, Papa!” Grandma stood in the living room with her jacket on and ready to fly out the door.

“Thanks for watching him,” I said quietly. “Sorry he was such a pain.”

“Not your fault,” she replied; everyone was all stressed out – not acting ourselves. A clear shot at Grandad, who was not around to hear it.

Stomp! Stomp! Stomp! came noise from upstairs, followed by a hysterical laughter that belied Matthew’s total exhaustion. It was easy to forget the physical and emotional toll this week must be taking on him, too. He is someone who shows limited connection to the external world. Watching him lightly through the course of the day you might not notice any change in him from the week before, when Timothy was still home with us every day. But, if you look closely, it is obvious that he is distraught, albeit in his own way.

“What are you still doing awake?” I snapped at him perhaps a little too loudly.

“Papa has to say *Goodnight Matthew*.” In Matthew-speak, he tells me that he misses me, and misses my putting him to bed that night.

“Why didn’t you go to sleep for Grandma and Grandad? You made them very upset, you know.” He fessed up to kicking the wall and pointed with mixed pride and shame at the pile of plaster sitting on the floor that was once part of his wall.

“We’ll clean that up in the morning, champ. Now, it is time to knock it off and go to sleep.”

“I wanted you to come home from the hospital.” And here we see the base of the problem: he was afraid that I wouldn’t come home from the hospital either.

“Of course I was coming home...”

“Timothy and Mama are not coming home.”

“You know that Timothy is very sick, and the doctors need to keep him in the hospital to take care of him, and make him all better.”

“When he’s all better, Timothy will come home.” He nodded in certain affirmation.

“That’s right, and Mama will come home too. She has to stay there to keep Timothy company. Timothy would be scared if Mama isn’t there.” We didn’t tell Matthew that Tim was not conscious. He probably imagines Timothy awake and watching TV all day the way he did in the hospital only a few months ago.

“We’ll talk all about this in the morning, OK?” I lay his blanket over him and kissed him on the forehead. “Now, it is time to get some sleep. You...”

“I have school tomorrow! I have to go to gym and reading and PT and earn outdoor recess.”

“That’s right. Now you need to get some sleep. You are always a nicer boy when you get good sleep. And you know how much I like nice Matthew.”

Matthew reaches out his arms to grab me in a bear hug; he needed his nightly hug and kiss, that night more out of reassurance than routine.

“Now, go to sleep.” I leave the room and head down the stairs. In the living room, we have a monitor to listen in on Matthew to make sure he’s sleeping. We needed a monitor for our eight-year-old, but not for our three-year-old. As I flip it on, I hear the deep and rhythmic breathing that tells me he fell asleep.

The phone rang. I bolted up in bed, head spinning from sleep and the bourbon that helped bring it on. As the phone chimes, I see that it is well short of five o'clock in the morning. It can only be one person, and there could only be one reason.

"Hello?" I crackled into the phone. It was Jennifer, telling me that Timothy was going to have the craniotomy.

"When?" I figured they would schedule surgery for first thing in the morning, nine or ten, plenty of time for me to...

"Now," she replied flatly, both from lack of sleep and from desperate concern.

"Now? It's that urgent? It's bloody five o'clock." She told me that they couldn't keep him stable at all last night. His ICP was up and down all night. They did every thing they could, but nothing worked.

"OK, I'll get there as soon as possible." I replied, stunned at the turn of fate over the past twelve hours; it seemed world's away from our relief of his successful thoracic .

"He's going to die, you know. He probably won't make it through the day."

"That's not true," I pled, sounding a lot more certain that I truly was. Who did I think I was talking to? As a nurse, Jennifer has seen this procedure done countless times, and knows far better than I what it means. "This surgery will help him..." The line went silent for a moment.

"Easy for you to say from home; you should try being here. I was up half the night in his room. I couldn't sleep."

"I'll bet," I could think of nothing else to say. I wasn't sure whether he would live or die, but somehow I was starting to believe that he wasn't coming home. "Let me call grandma; I'll take a quick shower and be right there."

"No shower. Just get in here."

Chapter 18

Words

Strangers come to greet me,
they only mean the best for me.
I keep them at a distance.
It's not the time for me to let them inside
-- Grey Eye Glances

There really are no words.

That's the honest truth. There is nothing that anyone can say that makes this feel any better or the pain less. Nothing.

Perhaps, and I know this from experience, hearing from someone that they, too, lost a child is somewhat comforting; but the comfort is only in knowing that I am in the presence of someone who truly understands. It does take losing a child to understand what it means to lose a child.

We have a good friend who lost a parent at a young age; I know it affects her deeply, profoundly. To grow up without a parent who died must be one of the hardest things you can ask a child to do. I can't imagine the loss of safety and security that one must feel when losing a parent. I know, as a child, I saw my parents as an absolute presence; people who would never leave me, would always be there when I needed a hand. To have that taken away quickly, or to

watch a parent die slowly, must be so distorting, so confusing, and create such an imbalance in a child's life, one that I cannot imagine.

Likewise is losing a child; yet somehow, dare I say, worse. Because where the parent is the protector of the child, I imagine it far worse for the guardian to lose its charge, than the other way around. In most cases, when one parent dies, there is another to assume the responsibility of both. The protection is still there, albeit changed forever. So, too, can another person assume the role (but never take the place of) a lost parent: be it a new spouse, or maybe another relative.

When you lose a child, there is no one who could ever take his place; there is no one who could fill that role. Deeper still, at least for me, because I should have been protecting him, I am crippled by a sense that I let Timothy down; that somehow, it is my fault. I believed that with conviction for months after he died – that it was in some way my fault. After all, I dropped him off at school that day; I transferred responsibility to the professionals. If I had just kept that responsibility to myself, where it belonged, maybe he would be alive today. In a larger sense, I think I was the one who pushed more for Jennifer to not work every weekend. She could have worked every weekend and spared Timothy of the need for daycare. Was I too lazy to care for both my boys all weekend, every weekend? Or did I just want some time with all four of us around. I don't know. But, certainly, I held a majority stake in the position that Timothy go to daycare.

There are so many other places along the road where I felt that I should have seen something coming; I was the primary parent the weekend before he died. I saw that he was sick; why didn't I call the doctor's office? Why didn't I lobby to keep him home? There are myriad brushstrokes in this canvas that I could have changed to arrive at a different picture – a masterpiece rather than a flop.

There are no words that could convince me otherwise; and, for certain, folks tried. It took many weeks of soul searching and a posthumous call to the doctor's office to convince me that there was nothing I could have done differently that would have changed the outcome of all this. There truly are no words.

Countless times, people have asked me what can they say, what can they do to help? With all honesty and candor, I always reply *Nothing*.

The best thing you can do for a person who lost a child is show consideration. I know it is asking much, and I am not certain if I would be able to show the necessary consideration to others, but simply put, think before you speak.

I find that people who approach me either dance tip-toe on sheet glass or come barreling through as thoughtlessly as a ball through candlepins. I've even had people look away, duck my eyes, to avoid acknowledging me and my pain.

I've heard all manner of thoughtless and insensitive remarks made to me – things that could be said with no meaning at all to just about anyone else. But I am in a new class now, a special group of people to whom certain casual idioms and remarks are deeply painful.

I was fetching coffee for myself at work when someone came swirling into the break room, all a-glitter with happiness and smiles. When I asked how she was doing, she replied "Great. Life is sweet. My belief is not to let the little things get you down. Life is just too short, you know?" I nearly dropped my cup of coffee. "I know better than you realize," I replied; and she knew immediately what she said wrong.

Another time involved the company softball outing, which took place about a month or so after Timothy died. I was one of the few who was left sitting at my desk as the office cleared out to either play or watch the game.

“Why aren’t you coming,” he said in passing by my office.

“Just don’t feel much like playing softball, these days,” I answered, not looking up from my computer.

“Oh, come on. What could be that bad?” He skipped off to the game; I never knew if he realized what it was that kept me from joining in.

Another time, about two weeks after he died, I was visibly shaking with anxiety. Since that day, I have been wracked with obvious anxiety attacks, which come out in my entire body shaking momentarily.

“What’s the matter?” the conversation started innocently enough.

“Nothing, just an anxiety attack,” I replied.

“Oh, you too. How long have you had anxiety?” I turned to the person and looked him straight in the eyes. He was someone who should have known I been affected with anxiety before.

“About two weeks,” I spoke coolly. He immediately knew the source of my anxiety.

These things are not said with malice or ill-intent; they are simply products of a lack of consideration, someone not thinking about what it is he or she is really saying and to whom.

There was one person at work who truly got it. He really seemed to understand the terror that I have been through these past few months. His gift for me was not knowing how much pain I was in, but acknowledging that I was in pain. I dealt with him often for my job, but once in a while, he would place his hand on my shoulder and shake his head slowly.

“I can’t imagine what you are going through,” he’d say, pretty much the same way every time.

“And I never want you to,” was my automatic reply; he knew that there was only one way to truly understand this and I wouldn’t want that for another soul. If Timothy were the last child ever to die so young, his loss would not be in vain.

“It’s amazing that you get out of bed every day and come in here.” He’d audibly sigh. “You take care, man.” With that, he would walk away.

I couldn’t ask for more than that from anyone.

One thing I’ve noticed through all of this is that death hits us all in different ways. And not all of the ways that one can react to death are always so warmly received.

Having a loved one die, especially so out of order, can turn people inside out. Some people collapse inside of themselves, hiding from the outside world, shutting out all attempts at consolation, no matter how well intentioned. Other people turn outward, and battle to keep the loved one alive through philanthropy of action. You see this, often, when someone is murdered. The family rallies hard to get laws changed and perpetrators punished. Other people meet death with a seeming indifference. These people try to bury the loss deep inside themselves and not show any hint of despair to others. They try to stagger on as normal, as though nothing has really happened.

I lie somewhere in the middle of all that. At home, I am allowed to fall apart and often do; I am encouraged by Jennifer to talk all I want about Timothy; she is a willing participant in any such conversation.

But at work, I am often forced to swallow my pain and carry on, as if nothing really happened. That is until someone remembers my loss and tries to find words of consolation.

“I don’t know how you keep going on everyday,” he might say. To which I need to come up with some light-hearted quip.

“They wouldn’t pay me not to work; I already asked.”

So many people don’t want to talk about death, especially about the death of a child. It brings up too many issues: their own mortality and the knowledge that it could happen to their child, are among the reasons why people tended to walk away when I mention Timothy’s name.

“Yeah, my Timothy used to like that movie.”

“Oh. Look I have to get back to my desk.”

I understand; I truly do.

But, you can talk to me about Timothy. I still like to. I enjoy it; I need it.

I mean, there was the whole Christmas-thing. We decided not to do the holidays that year because we couldn’t bear to celebrate the holiday without the person in the house who loved the day the most (but more on that later). That would have made for an interesting conversation, but it did not.

“So what are you doing for the holidays,” someone certainly asked me during the holiday creep-up.

“Nothing,” I replied, having practiced my response for minimal impact. “We decided not to celebrate this year in deference to Timothy.” That was an invitation to talk, not a termination request.

In this day-and-age, especially where I have another child in the family, to not celebrate Christmas at all should make for interesting conversation fodder.

“Yeah, I guess I understand,” he might proceed. “Timothy, did he get Christmas last year; was he old enough to understand? I remember my kids, about that second or third Christmas, they really got it.” And there you have the beginnings of a nice conversation.

Or maybe, “Yeah, I guess I understand. How does your other son feel about this? He’s older, right? Won’t he be upset?” They could launch us into a discussion of Matthew and Autism and how last year, he had no inkling that it was anything but a typical Saturday.

But most of the time, I would get, “Oh. I see.” And the person would turn to leave. “Well, see you around.”

Strangely, perhaps, one of the hardest questions I encounter is “How many children do you have?” The answer is easy: two. I will always count Timothy. Where it gets tricky is the inevitable follow-up questions: *How old are they? What did they wear on Halloween? Was Santa nice to them?*

The age question is easy to answer for Matthew; but, what about Timothy? Do I tell them that he is dead and potentially freak these people out? Do I report Timothy age as 3 ½ forever or do I age-progress him to where he would be, should be?

People don’t always want to hear the truth, especially my truths. I don’t always want to tell the truth when it comes to Timothy. Over time, I crafted three or four different stories about what happened, from not mentioning that he’s gone to the whole 5-minute recitation of facts. Which version came out all depended upon whom I was talking to and how much I wanted that person to know.

I don't want people to feel pity for me, or think that they have to treat me with special care. Just know that I am carrying a heavier burden than most right now. That's all I could ask for. I don't want special treatment, just special consideration. I think I deserve it.

Such as, when I mention that I am not celebrating the holidays this year, a simple "I understand" would be a perfect response. "That makes sense to me." I've had people challenge me on issues like that, as if I hadn't thought things through. *Why not? Are you sure that's the best idea? You can't be like that.* It's better to just nod your head and pretend to understand than it would be to argue with me.

Just allow me to wallow in my sadness and misery for a while. I deserve it and will wear my sorrow with pride. As Waylon Jennings said, I'm *Lonesome, On 'ry, and Mean*. Just deal with it.

Chapter 19

Dawn of the Day

The snow falls round my window
but it can't chill my heart.
God knows it died the day you left.
My dream world fell apart.
-- Hank Williams

The dawn of a new day was beginning; the twilight of my son's life was ending.

Everybody talks about their Twilight Years with great affection: retiring to Florida; playing golf every day; not having to deal with the grind of work. The Twilight Years. For Timothy, the Twilight Years came far too soon. They were pretty much all he had.

Grandma came over and staked out a place on the couch for more sleep.

She didn't sleep well last night, she reported quietly as she lay down, as though her experience was different from mine. Matthew wouldn't be awake for a good hour or so, enough time for a quick nap. "Please call when you have some news."

There was a strange chill in the air for a June morning; maybe it was always there, I was not used to being awake at this hour. A neighbor jogged by and waved a good morning through panting breath as he passed.

The route into the city passes by the beach, and I paused at the stop sign for a moment to admire the sky, as the sun was just starting to peek out of the sea. The sky was a brilliant blend of yellow, orange, purple, and black, as the light faded quickly from the horizon to the starry sky. There was little traffic as I went, stopping for coffee and muffins at the donut shop on the Lynnway.

“That will be \$4.95 honey. From a ten.” She told me as we traded cash for coffee.
“Here’s your change, honey. Hope you have a great day.”

“Oh, I am sure to,” I replied flatly as I placed the coffee on the floor and pulled into the thin morning traffic.

The morning talk radio was the usual blather about the latest outrage of the day, something about which I was unaware, as I had not paid attention to the news.

I popped in a CD and hit random; country singer Buddy Jewell sang with love and hope of his four-year-old son.

It's times like these that I realize they don't stay little long.
You blink your eyes an' turn around,
Before you know it, they're grown up an' gone...
...Make the most of every moment,
while we still have times like these...

I popped the disc out of the player and tossed it hard out the window; but the window was closed and the disc ricocheted into the back seat. I drove the rest of the way in silence.

I stopped in traffic at the tollbooth for the Tobin Bridge. I rolled slowly to the booth in turn and had my money ready for a quick transaction.

“Looks like it’s gonna be a beautiful day,” the toll taker smiled down at me.

“Something like that...” I replied as I pulled away.

In short time, I pulled into the garage at Mass General, which was becoming oddly familiar. I pulled into a spot and climbed out of the car; the slam of the door echoed through the empty halls of the garage.

The security team was starting to take down the stanchions in the lobby that are put in place at night, so that they could check the purposes of every after-hours visitor.

“My son is in the PICU. He’s in surgery at the moment, I am going to visit.”

“Only if you leave the coffee here,” laughed a jovial guard behind the desk as he let me pass.

Back up the elevator to the third floor, as I had done so many times during the past week. The doors rattled open and my footsteps could be heard rolling down the empty halls.

Jennifer, it appeared when I got to the little room she has been calling home, finally was able to sleep. So, I took a seat outside her room and stared blankly at the television set hanging from the top of the wall as it loomed over the room.

“In other news, a Brockton man and his 12-year-old son were arrested yesterday for torturing a neighbor’s dog. Police say that the man was so enraged by the dog’s constant barking that he enlisted the help of his son, doused the dog in gasoline, and set him on fire. They will be arraigned separately today....”

“Great,” I mumbled to myself, as I burned the roof of my mouth on a sip of coffee. “That jerk gets to keep his son while my son is dying. Sounds fair to me.”

After awhile, Jennifer awoke and staggered out of her room, sitting down next to me on the couch. She asked if I had heard anything as I handed her a coffee and a chocolate chip muffin.

“Nothing. Should I go ask?” No, she assured, they’ll come out and get us when he’s back from surgery. She looked absently at the TV, thanking me for coming in so early.

“Don’t thank me; thank Grandma for coming over so early. If it weren’t for Matthew, I would have stayed all night. Of course, he fell asleep before I could get down the stairs.” She laughed softly; one of the only we would have that day. “I think he was afraid that I wasn’t coming home from the hospital.”

“Makes sense. His brother’s not.”

“Still believe that?”

“Yup,” she broke the stump off her muffin and tried to eat the top. Shaking her head, she tossed the whole thing back in the bag and set it on the couch next to her. She’d seen this before; this radical surgery. “They do it as a last measure.”

“But, it could work. You’ve seen it work.”

“Oh yeah, but not always,” she sipped her hazelnut coffee. He could come through this fine, she told me with an almost clinical distance; he could not make it; or he could be in a persistent vegetative state for the rest of his life. “Do you want your son to be a vegetable?” Her cold language had evolved over years of nursing the sickest of cases. I always thought it was a device to help remain as distant from the patient as possible – to not get emotionally involved. But to hear her use the words about her son was disturbing. But probably for the best.

I appreciated her candor and clarity; not everyone would, I know. But hearing it spelled out so coldly, I think, helped me see things more clearly. Situations like these require some distance from the patient, even if it is your own flesh and blood, to determine what is right for him – not for you.

“No,” I sighed, “I guess not. Hadn’t really thought of that as an outcome. I mean, I always thought that he could have some brain damage, lose some faculty somewhere, but I never thought of him as a vegetable.” We lapsed into silence, overshadowed by the sounds from the TV.

“And some good news from Hollywood!” The voice – far too chipper for this time of day – announced. “Another Hollywood heavyweight just announced that she is pregnant again! Find out who after these messages!”

The morning wore slowly on. Jon came out and sat with us in the waiting room, rumpled from another poor night’s sleep. He mumbled a Good Morning with the lack of emotion that sleeplessness and worry invariably bring upon you.

They cleared all the visitors out of the PICU the other day for a major procedure that they were performing on a patient. Jon confided in me that the procedure was being done on his daughter, a heart and lung bypass procedure called ECMO.

“The extracorporeal life support procedure seemed to go well,” he laughed gently, using the full medical terminology. She was off the machine now, and breathing on her own again. The docs seem pleased. He sighed audibly and shook his head. “It sounds bizarre to be using such words about my kid, you know?”

“Try craniotomy,” I replied.

After awhile, a nurse came in and told us that he was back from surgery.

“We’ll get him settled and you can go in and see him,” she reported.

“How did the surgery go?” I asked. The nurse replied as she seemed to be trained, promising that the doctors would talk to us soon. She left the room with little fanfare. We continued to wait.

“And the sun is shining,” said the weatherman from the TV, “it looks like it’s going to be a glorious spring day...”

“Your son is ready for you,” the nurse announced to us, sitting silently in the waiting room. Jennifer and I looked each other in the eye, preparing ourselves to visit our own son. We had moved away from the family waiting area to the more public room down the hall. My sister and Jim had come in to the hospital already, and were waiting along with us.

As we left waiting room, Jennifer's friend Karen came scurrying down the hallway. Karen, usually the picture of personal perfection, came towards us without make-up, hair straight down, and wearing a plain sweat-suit.

"Well," I tried to joke, "I don't think I've ever seen you without make-up before."

"Oh please, I don't want to hear it," she snapped, clearly not appreciative of my attempt at humor.

"We were just going in to see him. We haven't seen him since the surgery." I took Jennifer's hand and we walked slowly together down the hallway. At the doorway to the PICU, we pressed the buzzer to announce our presence.

The doors swung open wide and invited us within.

Chapter 20

To Dream or Not to Dream

Little man with his eyes on fire,
And his smile so bright...
What you see and what you will hear
Will last you for the rest of your life
-- Eric Clapton

Death touches everyone differently, yet it touches everyone just the same.

It is strange, but in the months before Timothy's death, during quiet moments, I used to wonder why it is that we were so lucky as to have not been touched by death. Sure, Jennifer and I each lost a grandparent while we were together, but neither of us, no one in our families, was touched by a sudden and unexpected death. We were lucky.

I had read about accidents and tragedies in the newspaper: fires, shootings, car accidents, 9/11, you name it. Other people have had tragedy touch them on the shoulder and beckon wives, sisters, brother, sons, daughters, friends. They have all been called Home, or called by fate, or just plain killed. But not us. Not that there are so few of us, either. Jennifer and I both have siblings and friends who have been spread throughout the world, been in war zones, flown on airplanes extensively as part of a job, driven miles on the highways. Not one fatality. We've seen our share of sickness and ill-health, accidents and near-accidents; Jennifer, in fact, just last year

had to fish Matthew out of a pool and breathe life back into him, pulling him from the edge of death, but he did not fall over. As a foolish youth, I did plenty of things – none worth mentioning here – that should have earned me a spot in the very cemetery where Timothy is buried today. I drive the highway 30 miles or so every day to work and not had a life-threatening accident. We were among the lucky few in that regard.

We had Matthew, who is touched with Autism. I was hoping that his condition was dues enough, and we would not have to pay anymore. I was wrong. Still, to this day, so many months removed, I can't believe that my life has been touched so; that I am the parent of a dead child. I went from one small class to another; from the lucky few to the tortured few. I still can't believe this is real.

I went to a support group, once. There I heard stories every bit as harrowing as mine; I've been to memorial services for the loved ones of lost children; I've stood in church halls and lit candles with others to keep a memory alive; I've walked in remembrance walks surrounded by hundreds or thousands of others who share my title. My primary thought during each of these events is *I can't believe I am here*. I could not, and cannot, believe that I am one of the unlucky bastards who has lost a child.

I was one of the unlucky fools who believed in all that crap they taught us growing up. That one day, you would get married, have kids, watch them grow up, and then they would tuck you into bed when you were too old and frail to look after yourself. I was one of those fools who thought it automatic that upon conception, you would with absolute certainty give birth to a 10-finger-10-toed piece of perfection; that I would watch him grow up, go off to school, learn to read, play baseball in the pee-wee leagues, graduate high school, go off to college, and get a comfortable job somewhere, making me prouder with every step. I was duped.

I should have known the pregnancy part of the dream was a lie when it took us countless tries and scientific intervention to get pregnant; I should have known that the automatic birth part of the dream was a lie after two early miscarriages; I should have known all the rest of the dream was a lie after having a son diagnosed with Autism. But, I still believed it all. But when that band of medical staff stepped away from Timothy's side and let him step away into the mist, I knew it was all a sham, a hoax, a deception. The medical science that helped bring him into the world could do nothing for him in the end. Nothing promised was ever guaranteed, and nothing promised has so far been delivered.

Life is ugly and death even uglier. It's not this moment of beauty like they portray in the movies, with angels singing and spirits dancing. It is more of a kick to the stomach, when you know there is nothing more the medicine men can do but stand around and watch. There is no moment of grand exit, with the departing uttering *I love you*, revealing the long-held secret, parting words of strength and promise. It is a door closing hard, and usually on someone's fingers.

Timothy had dreams; he had plans; he was always looking forward. Whether it was looking forward to turning 4 so that he could join the local youth basketball league, wanting to turn 5 so that he could go to the same grade school as his brother, or just planning to go to a couple of music shows with me, Timothy always knew what he wanted to do.

"What's that, papa," he said one day, sitting on my lap looking at the computer. I was looking at the calendar of artists coming to a nearby country-music concert facility, Indian

Ranch. I was looking for when a singer named Buddy Jewell was coming. Timothy, always interested in the computer, stopped playing with his wooden train set and climbed on my lap.

“Oh, I was looking to see when Buddy Jewell is coming in concert. I thought that you and I could see him.” He was dressed for a Saturday morning in the spring. He had on a simple shirt with an image of a baseball player, a pair of jeans, and some generic white socks. He was not much of a fancy dresser, like most boys his age. “Would you like that?”

He looked up at me with his soft green eyes and his entire face smiled. “Yeah, he sings the banjo song,” referring to a song called *Sweet Southern Comfort*, which leads off with a banjo. He’d seen the video on TV a hundred times. “We’ll see Buddy Jewell. Just like we saw the Old Crow Medicine Show.” Another concert we’d seen together the past summer.

As I scrolled through the list of shows, he saw the logo for a country-music talent show that he and I watched on the television, called Nashville Star. He knew the logo right off.

“That one, papa!” He called. “Nashville Star, I want to see Nashville Star!” He and I used to watch the show faithfully each week for the past two seasons. Because it was on late, I taped the Tuesday show for Wednesday night, when Jennifer was out of the house. It was just between us.

Nashville Star is one of those shows where someone would get voted off the show each week. We used to guess which artist would be gone, and picked out favorites. We never agreed on either. One season, we each picked a singer who made it to the last round, both losing out in the end. Tim was so disappointed when his singer, whom he called Red Hat, failed to win. He was so upset last season, when the singer I picked came in second, Timothy rewound the show six times, expecting a different outcome each time. This time I know your guy will win, dad! But each time, “my guy,” Jason Meadows continued to come in second.

“But, I thought we were going to see Buddy Jewell,” I asked him.

“No. I want to see Nashville Star,” he demanded, quite sure of himself. “Maybe your guy will win.” He was still pulling for ol’ Jason for me. He reached over with his tiny fingers and played with the arrow keys on the keyboard until the logo was on the screen again. “No Buddy Jewell; he stinks!”

“You like Buddy Jewell, knock it off,” I laughed. “How about this,” I proposed, “I’ll go see Nashville Star with you, and you will see Buddy Jewell with me.” I shrugged down towards him. “How’s that sound?”

“Good,” he smiled broadly again, all of his little, white teeth shining through. “I want to see Nashville Star AND Buddy Jewell.” With this victory secure, he pointed to another logo on the schedule. “Let’s see him, too!”

“You don’t even know who that is,” I chided. “Who is that?” Tim fell silent and only smiled.

As I sit here, I look at the two tickets I bought that day for the Nashville Star show, unused. We had seats in the front row for the show, a fact that he understood well was something to be proud of.

Thinking of Timothy’s dreams for himself, I can’t help but remember all the dreams I had for him. I always had visions of him doing all those things that a typical boy-child might do in his life. I saw him standing there wearing a dark-blue youth league baseball shirt, dark-blue cap with a large white S on his head. Holding a bat in his hands. I had images of sitting in the stands with Matthew, watching his brother not hit the ball, and having to cheer him up after the game.

I've seen him acting in the grade school play, doing the *Government of the People* line from Lincoln, complete with stovepipe hat and fake beard.

I saw him shyly dressing up in a rented tuxedo, fidgeting with the flower in his lapel, his mother clamoring over him while he prepares for the prom.

I watched as he strolled up to the microphone at graduation to give a speech; not the valedictorian speech, but one he was chosen for because he was so popular and gifted.

I saw myself, tottering and old, watching him place a ring on the finger of a beautiful young woman dressed in white.

I remember fondly talking with Timothy as a newborn about all the things we would do together when he grew up. I would take him to shows; we would watch the Boston Celtics together; go to Fenway Park to see the Red Sox play; go to Cape Canaveral to watch the space shuttle take off; trips to Disney World; skitter down a mountain on one of those tiny alpine sled carts; learn to ski. So many things we would do, he and I.

I don't know when we had these chats, but I know we did. Maybe it was while I was giving him a bottle; maybe it was while he was sleeping; maybe it was while he was just sitting in my lap, bouncing on my knee; I don't know. It doesn't matter.

It got me to thinking, though, about how important a bonding experience these dreams and expectations are. Maybe it's unfair to place such ambitions on a child, but I couldn't help it. There was no ill intent. Just dreaming of a sunny future together with my son.

We found out about a week after Timothy died that Jennifer was pregnant again. I feared for my relationship with this child in a way I hadn't before.

Now that I've seen that children don't always have a sunny future, will I be able to look into the eyes of another baby and see him and me tossing a ball? Will I dream about teaching

him how to read and how to love books? Will he ever listen to music with me? Will I see him at his first day of school? Will I see him going off to college? Will I see him getting married and giving me grandchildren? I simply don't know. I have no way of knowing if he'll ever do these things, and I don't know if I will be able to envision him doing them. *When he grows up* has changed to *if he grows up*.

But more so, if I don't have this conversation with him, will my bond be any less? Since this experience such an important part of absorbing a child into my soul, what will happen if I can't do it?

With Matthew, we are uncertain of his future and never know quite what he can accomplish. The dreams I had for him were long ago changed. We went through a mourning process with him, too. A very different mourning, but we did lament the fact that his future would be very different than anything we imaged. I am sure I had the same conversations with the infant Matthew as I did with Timothy. But likewise, those dreams were dashed on one fateful day. Those dreams were replaced by a different way of dreaming, much more short-term and day-by-day, much more in his terms rather than doing all those things that other children are *supposed* to do.

Will I ever feel the rush of excitement about another baby that I felt for Timothy and Matthew when they were born? Will I ever look into the eyes of an infant and imagine some sunny future with him? Or, will I just look into his eyes and see only an infant? No future-vision, no dreams, no expectations. Just the minute-to-minute and day-to-day. And how unfair is that to the baby?

The relationship I have with children, all children and not just my own, is damaged. Is it beyond repair?

I know the child inside of me was torn out on that June morning. Did my love of children go too? I still love Matthew, and forever will, but can I love other children with the same joyous eyes and exuberant soul?

After all, so many of my dreams for Timothy have been shattered beyond recognition. Can I ever dare to dream again?

Once in a while, I pray that I am completely wrong about something. This is one of those times.

Chapter 21

Death Came a' Knockin'

Kiss me Mother; kiss your darling
Lay my head upon your breast.
Fold your loving arms around me
I am weary; let me rest
-- The Stanley Brothers

I walked into the room; he lay there on the bed, still motionless. He looked far worse than he did when he first got to the hospital, far worse than anything I could ever imagine for him.

The nurses were finishing up their chores of making him presentable to us. I can't even think of what he looked like when he wasn't presentable. As they gathered their things together his nurse spoke softly without looking up from her work, unable to look us in the eyes.

"They had to remove part of his skull," she said, telling me that it would allow his brain to swell. Otherwise, his brain would swell down into his spine -- herniation. I just nodded my head, having heard about this many times from Jennifer. "This can work," she tried to assure us.

"Or not," Jennifer said stoically. The nurse agreed solemnly, as she left the room.

I stepped up to the bed and looked down upon my son. Long gone was the boy I knew; long gone was the boy who came to this hospital barely a week before.

Jennifer softly spoke in a voice and tone that seemed clinical, distant, although I knew she wasn't being either. He's going to die. For the first time, I could see what she was saying all along and nodded my head gravely.

His head was no longer soft and round. His beautiful golden hair was all shaved off. The sides of his head were collapsed, sunken in two perfect concaves. Like a circus tent. A rim of bone extended all the way across his head, making him look like he was wearing a bicycle helmet. He had rows of stitching from the front of his head to the back, giving the appearance of an old football. Frankenstein looked like a natural beauty in comparison. In the middle of his head, the probe stuck up into the air. His little antenna was still intact.

His eyes were shut tight to the world, dark circles appearing under each. His face lost all its color, becoming ashen and pallid, empty and unnatural. I bent over to kiss his pale lips, no longer the robust red they once were. He felt warm, but artificially so.

"I never thought I'd ever say this about you, boy," I whispered softly into his ear, "but you look like crap." My attempt at humor was weak and forced, and not appreciated by Jennifer. His nurse had come back in the room and chided me gently, trying to play along. I met her eyes and the transient smile wore off quickly. She busied herself checking his IV tubes and making more scribbles on his chart. His machines beeped and booped away, telling the doctors all they needed to know.

"How is he doing," I asked tentatively.

"It's early," she answered carefully, "hard to say at this point." They have to keep an eye on his intracranial pressure. The surgery should have helped with that. I looked at Jennifer. Her eyes told me a different tale. He was not doing well, and the nurse was just trying to keep me afloat as long as possible. Her eyes filled with tears as she turned away.

With nothing to do but wait, I kissed Jennifer on the forehead and walked out to tell everyone what's going on. Even at this hour, the waiting room was filling with family and friends, all waiting in hope and prayer that somehow Timothy will get through this. Until now, I had the same delusion.

As I walked through the unit, Jon was standing by his daughter. He must have sensed my despair and caught me as I went by.

His eyes asked how Timothy was doing, but he knew in my face that the answer would not be good and his words never formed. He put his hand on my shoulder as I passed.

"How, how," I stammered, "is your daughter?" He sighed deeply and thought a moment before answering. Somehow, I could tell that his pensive pause was a sign that things had improved, taken a turn for the better that Timothy couldn't navigate.

He looked away from me and at his daughter, and said that the procedure seemed to have worked. I could hear the guilt in his voice as he spoke. Suffering does strange things to a person. He was clearly embarrassed that his daughter was doing better just feet away from my son who was not. A moment that he should be celebrating was a moment of guilt, like the guilt I felt about Timothy's doing better just the day before, little more than 12 hours ago. He quickly tried to cover up. "But, she's got a long way to go. Not out of the woods by a long shot."

As I staggered towards the door, past the painting of the clown that I had come to know so well, past Trot hitting the ball, "Hey, Trot," I called to the picture. "Damn, I wish I could care about the Red Sox right about now." The electric eye caught my coming and the doors swung open. Momentary royalty again. I turned down the hall towards the waiting room. I came into the room and sat hard on one of the chairs.

“The surgery went well, I guess.” I tried to hold back the tears, ever the gracious host. “They took out part of his skull,” I explained what little I knew about the procedure. “They think it will help.”

“What if the swelling doesn’t go down?” someone asked; I got up from my seat and moved towards the door.

“I need to head back to the room.”

Chapter 22

Of Caffeine and Alcohol

The whiskey that once settled the dust now tastes of pain.
And, the memories it once blotted out
come back stronger, more clearly with each drink you take.
-- Waylon Jennings

I was on the road to becoming an alcoholic during all of this.

It started out at the very beginning; starting with the very first night that Timothy was in the hospital. Now, don't get me wrong. I wasn't new to drinking. Like most folks, I enjoy a nip once in a while. A glass of Chardonnay makes cooking Sunday dinner special; a bottle of Sam Adams beer is a requisite for take-out Chinese food or Mexican night at home; and a nip of Jim Beam bourbon makes taking the dog out for a late-night walk in the cold somewhat more bearable.

But this was the first time that I started drinking for a reason, and not for enjoyment. I recall clear as yesterday that first night, coming home from the hospital, spent, exhausted, and I still had to pick up Matthew from Grandma's house. She was good enough to pick him up from school – and would each day through this trial – so that we wouldn't have to worry about him. So, I picked him up, gave out the first of many, many updates about Timothy's condition and

headed home. There, I got the boy to bed after a long struggle (he's always rather hyperactive after coming home from Grandma's house). I then ran around the house picking the place up. It was always a bit more tattered on the weekends when Jennifer worked. I did what I could around the house about cleaning, laundry, dishes, and all that; but with two monkey-boys to care for, it was hard to get things done. I wanted to keep the place looking as spiffy as it could, because I knew that Jennifer and Timothy would both be coming home any day, and I didn't want them coming home to a mess. So I did all that night that got neglected that weekend.

Then, I sat at the computer to type a few e-mails to work, mostly. Telling them that there was no way in Hell that I was coming in tomorrow. I knew they wouldn't care; I wasn't up against any deadlines or had any projects due. But, it was my duty to keep the boss informed. And, of course, word spreads quickly in a small company. I had a half-dozen e-mails asking what had happened. I got to return each of those in turn.

Finally, well after 9:00, I turned to the telephone caller ID box. A wonderful invention that displayed and recorded the names of each person who calls. My brother's name flashed on screen, representing Caller #7. I scrolled through the list and started dialing each number in turn. So far, mostly family, a few friends, and the folks at the preschool each received a call from Grandma spreading the news of Timothy's accident. They in turn called me for updates often.

Each conversation went pretty much the same way. My end of the phone transmitted: "Sorry to call so late; he's in the Pediatric ICU; no, he's not conscious; no, we don't know when he will be; no, we don't know what happened to him, and not sure when we will; no, we don't have a strong prognosis at this point; they are keeping him medically sedated to keep his ICP down while they wait until he's more stable." From the other end of the line I heard: "How is he? Where is he? How is Jennifer taking this? What can I do to help? I am so sorry; I just don't know

what to say.” I don’t mean to be flippant; I know everyone is concerned, it’s just that I was tired and ready to drop.

But, that’s where the problem started. With sleep. A final call to Jennifer for an update on the unchanging situation at the hospital. She had just crashed back in her little room, off the waiting area and was going to try to sleep.

“I wanted to stay in his room all night, but I am so tired,” she told me, almost apologetically – apologizing to Timothy for leaving, not to me.

“I know. You got, what, two hours of sleep since 4:00 yesterday? I’m sure you’re tired.” I promised that I would be there as early as possible, that next morning. “I need to drop Matthew off at school, walk the dog and all that stuff. Maybe around 10. Is that OK?”

She hung up the phone without saying goodbye. I sat on the couch in the flickering light of the television in my suddenly quiet house. The Red Sox were playing silently in the background. Slugger David Ortiz, known as Big Papi, was at bat. My first thoughts were of sitting on the couch with Timothy, as he cheered on Big Papi, his favorite Sox player and the only one he knew by sight. “Papa! Big Papi hit a home run! I am going to hit a home run, too, someday!” But, Big Papi struck out and returned to the dugout dejected.

“I need a drink,” I sighed. And there it began. I was suffering from one of those exhaustions where, no matter how tired I was, there would be no sleep. At least not without some help. In the dining room stood a blond-colored cabinet, a server I think she calls it. Me, I call it my bar. I opened the left door of the cabinet and peered in at the cache of bottles that stood in wait. Pushing aside a dusty bottle of merlot, I pulled out the jug of bourbon.

With nothing on TV, I grabbed my tattered copy of *David Copperfield* and headed for the front porch. Sitting on the steps with Dickens in one hand and a large keg of whiskey in the

other, I spun the red cap of the 1.75 liter bottle of Jim Beam and poured a tall one. I got to prove my adage: scotch is for celebration; bourbon is for drowning the sorrows.

It was there that I maintained my vigil, reading about a young lad on the run in one hand and a tumbler of Kentucky's finest in the other. Each night that Timothy was in the hospital would find me there, with the bourbon flowing taller and taller with each passing day. That night, my routine did not make me feel much better:

'I grieve to tell you that I hear this morning your mama is very ill...'

'She is very dangerously ill,' she added.

I knew all now.

'She is dead.'

I had already broken out into a desolate cry... and I cried, and wore myself to sleep, and awoke and cried again. When I could cry no more, I began to think; and then the oppression on my breast was heaviest, and my grief a dull pain that there was no ease for.

I needed it to sleep, I told myself as I swigged down another gulp of amber. My head slowly filled with haze and the words on the page slowly merged together, telling me it was time to go to bed.

I know it was highly irresponsible of me to get buzzed while half of my family was in the hospital, but it was all I had. I couldn't sit by Timothy's bedside, watching him immobile for 16 hours a day. Someone had to take care of things back home. That was my job. Jennifer, being a better advocate for him, with her medical knowledge, took the job staying with him, as he lingered along the edge of death. Her reward was not having to leave him behind every day, and being only steps away from him. My reward was a few hits of booze.

I guess that would have been OK, had my drinking been confined to only the nights that Timothy was in the hospital. But it was not. After Timothy died, it slowly got worse. Even after I got the pills to help with the anxiety that I swore I was drinking away; even after I got the

prescription to bring about the sleep that I swore would only come with the alcohol. I kept right on drinking.

But, I argued to myself, only at night after everything was done. And only enough to feel warm inside. I rarely had enough to get physically drunk. I might not have passed a police roadside alcohol test, but I wasn't wearing the lampshade on my head. I figured I was fine. I never got abusive, out of control, out of my mind. I never put Matthew in jeopardy. I was in control of it.

Or was I?

I think I started noticing that I had a problem around Christmas time. A co-worker gave me a bottle of bourbon as a gift. A fine bottle at that – I hope it was something that was given to him and he was passing it along to me. I would feel guilty to know he spent that kind of money on me.

“Wow,” I joked as I opened the gift bag, “not only is it a fine brand, but it comes in a convenient single-serving size.” It certainly was not a single serving.

“If that is a single serving for you,” he laughed, “then you’re in bigger trouble than I thought.” And maybe I was. I was only half-joking. “That bottle would keep me happy for weeks, months.” So, I watched closely as I drank his bottle, not in one sitting, but three. Two-and-a-half is more like it. I dusted the bottle off in a matter of days, not the weeks or months that he estimated.

The next sign of trouble came when I discovered an Internet site for alcohol. I quickly found three or four bottles of booze that one cannot buy in Boston. I got a jar of corn whiskey, a bottle of rye whiskey, and a nice bottle of scotch. The problem was, I think I drank the three bottles faster than it took to mail them to me.

I had started a collection of empties on a desk in my basement office. The shelf got filled very quickly, and I looked at my collection with great chagrin, as it provided a living history of just how much alcohol I had been consuming.

It was one night, a Tuesday I think it was, that I ushered Jennifer off to bed. I had drunk the past few nights and told her I was taking that night off. I sent her to bed and went straight to my bar. I took the bottle out of the cabinet and poured a quick one, then another, and another. When I was done, I washed the glass and placed it back on the shelf as if I had never used it. I brushed my teeth to camouflage the liquor on my breath, and had something to eat to provide additional cover.

I was starting to show the some of the typical signs and symptoms of alcoholism: I was drinking in excess; I was sneaking drinks; I denied that anything was wrong; I was drinking alone, often; and I was building a tolerance to the whiskey that surprised me when I started to measure what I was consuming.

One night, while alone of course, I took out my favorite glass and my tub of bourbon and poured. From the glass it went into a measuring cup. More than 3 oz of booze. After a few minutes, I polished off the cup at the usual pace and ran the exercise again. Another 3-plus ounces. All tolled, I was drinking more than 6 ounces of straight whiskey a night – that's the equivalent of 4 to 6 shots, depending upon which bar you go to, and how well you tip your bartender – four to five nights a week. And I was just beginning, only a few months into my bender.

But, what was I getting for my money? The alcohol truly was the only thing that took my mind off of Timothy. The more I consumed, the less consumed I was with him. It helped me sleep. When I was buzzed, his face didn't haunt my mind as I lay down each night. It helped me

forget how much pain I was in. Being stoned on bourbon was the only time I didn't feel like jumping off the Tobin Bridge. I was on anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication – heck, I often washed them down with a shot of whiskey. They helped me get out of bed each day and shuffle off to work; but they didn't make me happy. Drinking didn't either, I guess, but I was far less morose.

As I polished off the last of my measured 6-plus ounces, I didn't even feel a buzz. It was more of a tickle that I was getting for my efforts. I probably could have gone back for another triple before the effects of the ethanol would sink in. It was time to stop and time to stop immediately. So I did.

I spent the next few weeks battling heart palpitations, the shakes, weakness, a sick feeling inside, and cravings for booze that I couldn't imagine. I was going through detox. I felt like I was a living heart-attack, in constant cardiac distress. Every time my heart skipped a beat, I swore it would be the last and that I would drop to the floor at any moment. At least there I would get my wish, to be reunited with Timothy.

But, alas, I survived my boozing-days, and weeks with the DTs. I still have a drink now and again, and still have to fight the cravings to drink every night. I don't think I was a clinical alcoholic, but I seemed to have that status set in my sights.

I had started drinking to help me sleep and to help me forget. But, it seems, I was causing myself more problems than I was solving. I drank to escape my depression, but I was only making it worse. The anti-depressant I was on is far less effective when combined with alcohol. And I was certainly mixing the two. The sleeping pills I was popping likewise didn't work as well when tangling with Jim Beam. I was sleeping poorly, but didn't realize it.

It's amazing how fast you can go over the edge when you are not looking where you are going.

Whiskey to bring on sleep; caffeine to ward it off.

Another vice I have learned to embrace throughout these past few months is caffeine. At night, I was hooked on bourbon; during the day, I was addicted to coffee. I started each day with a tall mug of straight black coffee, followed quickly by a large ice coffee in the car on the way to work. If I didn't have both of those first servings every day, I would risk falling asleep on Route 128 on my way to Burlington. My eyes would start closing and my head would start listing onto my shoulders, like a new-born infant trying to fight off sleep.

It was odd that during the day sleep would come on without relent. But at night, it was nowhere near my bedroom. So many nights I would, and still do, lie awake, eyes fixed on the panels above my bed, desperate for a trace of sleep. But, it took long to come. And when it did come, it was fleeting and sporadic, often allowing me to keep tabs of the time as it slipped slowly by. I never knew which was worse: awaking to see 1:12 AM glowing red from the clock, knowing that there were still several hours of hit-and-miss sleep ahead, or seeing that it was 6:13 AM and that I would need to rise soon and face another day.

That is assuming that I made it to bed that night. Like Jennifer and her need to sleep in Timothy's bed, I was plagued with a need to not go to my own. I would often sit awake into the late evening, early morning, flipping aimlessly through the television channels, repeatedly finding nothing to watch. I didn't want to go to bed because I didn't deserve to go to bed. Sleep was the only time when the pain was gone from my soul – I didn't deserve the reprieve. Even on

nights when I knew I had to get up early for work, I would listen to the ranting of David Letterman, or watch some inane music video deeper into the cable line-up. Usually, I would finally succumb to sleep, TV remote in hand, and drift off under the spell of Jim Beam.

When I got to work, the first thing I would do is set myself up with another cup of joe from the break room. It was terrible coffee, but it didn't matter; it was there. If I didn't, the baby-head syndrome would soon return and I would have to fight off sleep at my desk, too. No matter how much sleep I tried to get each night, I would still need my fix throughout the day.

One Thursday morning, I sat at my desk, deciding to skip my shot of caffeine. My desk is surrounded by photos and memories of Timothy. On the walls next to me hang several photos of him, a bumper sticker that I had made up with his dates, and images of all the bands we listened to together. On the monitor in front of me, covered lightly in a glaze of dust, stand a couple of toys that he left in my car the morning I dropped him off: an airplane I bought him at Nashville Airport, and a toy rendition of one of his favorite cartoon characters (also named Tim) that came with a fast-food meal. On the shelf to my left were a couple of framed photos of my boys.

I picked up a stack of paper and started to read. I had a large section of a manual I was writing that needed to be reviewed. I leaned back in my desk chair and turned my back to the hallway. With my feet propped up on a table I started to peruse the chapter. The words on the page started dancing and moving in front of my eyes; quickly they all merged together into a blur of black lines.

"Hey, Mike," a voice called from behind me, causing me to literally jump off my chair, paper spilling all around me onto the floor. I felt a cramp in my neck and noticed a spot of saliva

on my chin. I looked at the clock and noticed that 15 minutes had passed without my knowing a thing. I turned around to see someone walking by the window of my office and down the hall, unaware of my little departure.

Time for more coffee, I told myself.

Chapter 23

The End of the End of It All

"Hold on, hold on to yourself
For this is gonna hurt like Hell..."
-- Sarah McLachlan

I suppose a day so burned into my soul should be so fresh in my memory. But I honestly can't remember much between the time that Timothy was wheeled back into his hospital room after surgery and when he died. Perhaps that's because so little time passed before he did.

The one thing I do remember well is the pall that settled into that little waiting room that my family had taken over in those waning days. Just the day before, we allowed a certain level of hope enter into our thoughts. That inspiration was all but gone now. We had seen Tim at his worst and we let everyone knew that our fears were the same.

I can see myself sitting in that room, though I am not certain who was there. All the periphery was in a blur. I can see my sister and her beau, Jennifer's brother and his wife and Jennifer's pal Karen. If I am leaving anyone out, forgive me. I was a bit distracted.

I remember a constant flurry of activity in Timothy's room; though I couldn't say for certain what was happening. It was all pretty frantic and blurred. Doctors, nurses, and who knows who else ebbing and flowing through the stark white curtain that surrounded his bed.

Grave looks on the faces of all; serious-sounding talk rolled quietly among different parties as they discussed his condition and prognosis; much attention was paid to the machine on the right side of his bed: watching the ICP fluctuate, mostly I guess – that’s what I was watching anyway. Jennifer sitting quietly, knowingly, watching it all.

I tried to be his cheerleader; but I felt like a booster for the league’s worst team as they faced the defending champion. I was reciting my lines, but my heart was less and less into it as the morning moved slowly on.

“Come on, Timothy. You’re going to be fine; I just know it.” I stood at the foot of the bed, trying not to get in the way of the staff as they hovered around the bed. “You just have to wake up and come home with us; I won’t have it any other way. In fact, you are coming home with us. I demand it,” I raised my voice slightly in mock anger, but my voice was undercut by a tremor. “I’m your father, and I say Get Better!”

But, he didn’t respond to any of my demands. Why start now, I guess. He just lay there and sunk deeper into the darkness, slipping slowly away from us as we watched. Like a sailor tossed from the side of the boat; though he might cling to the life preserver, we could only hang over the side rail and watch as the massive waves spirited him and the life ring away towards the horizon. There was nothing we could do but watch. And even that we couldn’t do.

I was shocked that they would ask us to leave him at this point, but Jennifer, being a nurse, knew how important it was to the staff for us to cooperate. We were ushered out of the room with promises that they would come get us as soon as possible.

As we walked past the window into his room, someone pulled his curtain tightly closed.

We all sat motionless in the waiting room, waiting. There was little else any of us could do. Someone ventured down to get coffees from the shop on the first floor, but we all knew to not wander far. Things were moving far too quickly that morning, and in the wrong direction.

I don't remember what time it was that his nurse came out to get us. Must have been around 10:30, I guess. It doesn't matter anyway.

She announced that *the team* would like to meet with us in the conference room. This had to be bad; when the medical team wants to talk to you in the confines of a conference room, away from Timothy who could prove an unwelcome influence upon the decisions they expected from us; you know it is not time to fill out the dinner menu for the following day.

The silence continued to hang over us as it had most of the morning, and we were shown into a large, wood-paneled room far away from the patient area. A round wooden table sat in the center of the room, taking up most of the room's space. A ring of impressive-looking leather chairs rung the circle completely.

His nurse offered us a seat and the promise that the others will be in shortly. She closed the door to a crack and left us alone in the room.

"This is it, isn't it?" I asked Jennifer. "He's not coming home with us is he?"

"It's what I've been saying all along." A mother knows these things. Especially a mother who is a nurse. We weren't in the room long when a long string of doctors, residents and interns who have been working with him on Timothy's case came in, taking their seats around the circle.

"I'm not going to sugar-coat this for you," his doctor started. "I know that's the way you want it, right?" Jennifer nodded, and I followed.

Timothy is a very sick little boy, he explained, almost rhetorically, as if it were required by law. The surgery that was performed this morning was very drastic, and usually the last thing

we can do for a patient. If the surgery does not give the results they are after, “there is really little else we can do – I think you know this, Jennifer.” She did.

The purpose of the gathering came clear when he asked whether we wanted what are called *Heroic Measures* should he go into cardiac arrest, “which is a real possibility at this time.” He saw the look of clear comprehension in Jennifer’s eyes and turned to me to meet my confusion.

Heroic measures is also known as *Do Not Resuscitate*. A DNR is an order that tells the doctors not to perform CPR should it become necessary; signing a DNR is akin to signing a death warrant. When it comes time for the execution, the governor is not going to call.

“I can’t force you to sign this; it is a decision you must make together.” If we refused to sign it, should Timothy code, they would do everything to resuscitate him. I sat back in my chair and choked back the tears. I had no idea what to do; if we didn’t sign the DNR, they would medically flog the poor boy with every weapon they had: CPR, injections, those paddles they use to shock you back to life; it would be tremendous trauma to a body that has seen more than its share. If we sign the DNR, then we are almost admitting defeat, as far as I could see. If he went into arrest or whatever, the medical team would standby and do nothing. It was a choice that could mean life or death for our son.

“We’ll sign the DNR,” said Jennifer. “If he codes at this point, there’s no guarantee that he would survive the rescue efforts anyways. And if he does, he’ll probably be a vegetable for the rest of his life. I don’t want to do that to him.”

Jennifer grabbed the pen and signed her name to the form; she handed the pages to me, and I did the same. I felt no duress, no pressure, no disagreement with her. I just signed my son’s life away. I knew it was the right thing to do; the only thing to do at the time; a decision I was

and still am certain about. But it still felt alien to me. I should be signing consent forms to allow him to play tee-ball or basketball, not signing a form to prevent the doctors from keeping him alive. But, it was done, and had to be done.

I don't know what happened after that meeting; the blur has returned. Whether we went back to Timothy's room or were asked to wait back down the hall, I can't recall. The next thing I remember for certain is his nurse coming up to us in the hallway outside the PICU.

The report was not good; talk of trouble keeping his ICP stable and blown pupils. In medical terms, a blown pupil is when the pupils grow as large as possible and do not get smaller when a light is shone on the eye. Jennifer and I had been talking about this; blown pupils combined with elevated ICP is a sure sign of what the doctors call herniation – when the brain is so swollen that it is pushed downward through the hole in the base of the skull.

With that news we picked up our pace and trotted into Timothy's room. As we approached the room, we could see through the window that Timothy was surrounded by six or seven people all working as hard as they could to keep him going. Jennifer would call it *flogging the patient*. I thought of it as beating on him. As we pushed through his door, the same word came to Jennifer and me at the same time, as if Timothy had whispered in our ears at the same time:

“Stop!”

We both shouted in unison to the team. “Stop working on him.” I caught a glimpse of Timothy through all the bodies around him. I have never seen him, or anyone, look as bad as he did at that moment.

“Let him go,” we pleaded. “Let him go.” Our pleas turned quickly to sobs. “Let him go.” The team seemed stunned; they were so focused on their job that they didn’t know how to react to our pleas. Slowly, one-by-one they backed off, until Timothy lay alone in his bed. “Let him go.”

His doctor nodded to the team, and suddenly the room fell silent. The gasp and wheeze of the life support machine stopped. Jennifer pushed her way through the crowd and climbed into bed next to Timothy and engulfed him in her arms. I lay down on the other side of the bed and stroked his lifeless cheek. Jennifer heaved with sobs as tears streamed down her face; I was barely able to see the monitor through my tears, but I could clearly watch the blip on screen that read his heartbeat. I watched as the peaks of the line got smaller and the gaps between the peaks got longer. The waves that represented his heartbeat got smaller and longer until the waves disappeared and an unwavering line took their place.

Timothy was gone.

The only sound in the room was our crying. The medical team had left the room, knowing that there was nothing left to do but let us say goodbye. After a few minutes, his nurse came back in the room, wiping tears from her own eyes as well.

“Do you want to hold him?” She asked us? Jennifer was beyond communication, lying in a heap on Timothy’s bed.

“Yes, I would,” I croaked through raging tears. I somehow moved a chair that stood next to the bed and waited as his nurse worked around Jennifer to remove the various tubes and wires that were attached to Timothy. She picked him up and handed him over to me. I was shocked at

how heavy his body felt as she laid him in my arms – literal deadweight. He was still warm as I cradled him in my arms, like I hadn't done since he was an infant. His body was totally limp, and gave me no help or resistance as I shifted in my seat. My mind couldn't help but flash back to that Wednesday night prior, the last time I held him in my lap, watching whatever on TV as he slowly fell asleep in my arms. This was a totally different feeling. I looked down into his face; his eyes forever shut, his mouth hanging slightly open with his tongue poking between his lips. He was so heavy.

"I'm sorry, Buddy," was all I could think to say. "I am so sorry this happened to you, and that there was nothing I could do to help you. I am sorry." I buried my face into his belly and cried as hard as I ever had before.

"Jennifer," she asked, "would you like to hold him?" Without an answer, I handed him over to the nurse, who passed him onto Jennifer. She had sat up in bed and took her son into her arms. She said not a word but just stroked his face with the back of her fingers. The pain and anguish on her face is something I could never have imagined. After a moment, she lay back down in bed next to him and exploded again in tears.

His nurse instinctively knew to leave the room. "Whenever you are ready, I'll be at the nurse's station," she told me as she pulled the curtain around us on her way out. I climbed back into bed and held tight to both my wife and my deceased son.

After several minutes, it was time to go.

"Jennifer," I whispered softly, "we should go now."

"No, no, no," she begged. "I can't leave my Clamshell. I can't leave him here."

“Jennifer, it’s time to go.”

“Just a few more minutes. Please,” she begged further. “I’m not ready to leave my boy.”

“OK. I’ll go tell everyone out in the waiting room. You stay with Timothy.”

As I stepped out of the room, most of the medical team was still standing there. Some were talking amongst themselves, some were visibly crying. We exchanged eye contact, but no words, as I trudged out of the unit. Jon saw me walk past, but said not a word. If he didn’t know already, he learned about Timothy from my body language as I passed by.

Once in the hallway, Karen came up to me, a look of almost fear in her eyes.

I walked past her towards the waiting area, stopping a few feet short of the room. I leaned my head against the cold concrete wall, and collected my thoughts. Everything in my brain was flying uncontrollably. How to maintain control long enough to tell my family that he was gone? I slammed my head hard against the cold concrete of the wall and moved on.

“I’m OK,” I told Karen. “I just needed to gather myself. When I got to the waiting room, I looked at all of the expectant eyes in the room. They all knew something critical was going on, but had no idea what.

“The nurse came out and told us that they couldn’t control the pressure in his head; and that his pupils were fully dilated. When we went into his room, there were six or seven people working on him.” I took a deep breath and continued. I couldn’t look at any of them in the eyes. I leaned my head against the door frame. “But, there was nothing they could do. We told them to stop; we told them to let Timothy go.”

“We let Timothy go. He’s gone now. Timothy is gone.” The silence that swelled from the room was displaced only by the sound of tears and soft crying.

Back in the room, Jennifer lay in bed with Timothy, curled all around him, smothering him, if such a thing were possible then.

Chapter 24

Coping

"I see a shadow in the mirror
and she's laughing through her tears.
One more smile's all I can fake."
-- Maria McKee

Don't ask me how I got through it; I haven't finished yet.

When this first happened, it was my job to keep things as normal as possible. Matthew is a boy whose happiness and security depend upon normalcy. The more routine and structured his life, the happier he is. He simply doesn't have the capacity to understand the trauma that an incident like Timothy's can have on a family. Most kids can adapt to that type of change; Matthew cannot. Despite the fact that his brother was clinging to life in the hospital, Matthew had routines that he needed to fulfill.

So, as Jennifer took the job of being Timothy's full-time advocate in the hospital 24-hours a day, it fell upon me to keep Matthew's experience from listing in the storm.

That first night Timothy was in the hospital, I dutifully, and reluctantly, left his and his mother's side to come home and usher Matthew to bed. He, of course, was thrilled to have

Grandma pick him up at school, take him home, and watch him for the afternoon. He had fast-food for supper and generally got ordered around a whole lot less when she was around. When I arrived home, it was close to seven o'clock and Matthew was in his glory having Grandad watch him play a game on his computer.

"Look, Grandad! Here comes the engine into the tunnel!" When he heard the door open and the dog spring to life from her post on the couch, Matthew turned on me an instinctive wrath. "No, Papa. You go back to the hospital. It's not time for you to come home."

"Nice to see you too, dear boy," I smiled at him to no avail. You need to have a thick skin to deal with a kid like him. "I had to come home to help you get ready for bed."

"Nope!" he tried to correct. It wasn't time for bed; it was time for Grandma and Grandad to play; time for me to go away. He proceeded to shove the computer keyboard and mouse to the floor and then drop himself along side of them in a kicking fit.

"How's Timothy," Grandma asked through the din, unmoved by the tantrum, which was better left ignored for the most part.

"Pretty much the same as when I called you earlier – which is good. I guess." Grandad helped get Matthew off the floor and to calm him down. I spun the story again of their attempts to keep him stable and how they were working towards the trachea surgery. As Matthew calmed, his pallor went from glowing red to the usual pale pink; his breathing slowed down and his tears stopped flowing. Big hugs for Grandma and Grandad, and promises to have even more fun tomorrow as they headed out the door.

Matthew and I strolled into the kitchen, pulled some pajamas out of the clean laundry pile and he got changed. A trip to the bathroom, the washing of his hands, and the brushing of the teeth followed. Over to the kitchen counter to pull out his night-time pills, an assortment of

multi-colored tablets consumed with his requisite bottle of cold water (cold – not warm – cold). On nights when Grandma fed him dinner, he would invariably not eat enough and be hungry afterwards. Pop a plain bagel in the toaster and wait.

I guess the reason that I am rattling through all this is because of the normalcy that Matthew exhibited through it all. He never once asked about his brother that first night, nor any night thereafter. Timothy was in the hospital and their mother was by his side. He knew the hospital was bad from having spent two weeks there recently, and that was enough for him. He simply adapted these facts into his life and developed a new normal. The core of his life didn't change any, just the people on the outside. That might sound cold and uncaring, but it is how he deals with life. Once he accepts that such situation is entirely external to him, he quickly learns how to keep his life moving forward in as stable a fashion as possible.

It was the first lesson I learned as the parent of a deceased child: My normal would never again be the same; I, too, would have to adjust to a new normal and figure out a way to integrate that into what I need to do.

It's not easy to do; I am still struggling with it. Somehow, I had to integrate my new normal into my perception and keep doing those things I needed to do. At first, before I could accept my new normal of Timothy being gone, I needed to swallow my feelings as deep as possible, in order to keep things stable for Matthew. Later, when I went back to work, I would need to be able to keep my new normal at work despite the fact that my life was as abnormal as I could ever imagine.

Normal as possible is as true a statement as I can make about it all. Normal as possible. At work, I have a job where I constantly interact with people whose biggest concern in life is how to get their computer code working properly and on time; who feel as if life has dealt them a cruel blow because their desk doesn't have a window, or does have a window and they are forced to keep the blinds closed to see the computer screen.

I hear loud peals of laughter echoing down the hallways; rabid disputes over the relative successes of the Red Sox; lamentations about under-cooked meals from the microwave.

How I miss all that.

But, trying to find some thread of normalcy through all this might be an impossible task, but it is a mission I strove to accomplish daily. Sitting at my desk, surrounded by pictures of Timothy, serving to remind me that I will not be greeted by his broad smile when I got home that night. Knowing that I would arrive at home to a wife who was but a shell of the woman I married, and Matthew humming along as usual, stopping only infrequently to acknowledge that he was now an only child.

Matthew found comfort in normalcy before Timothy's departure, and he found no reason to change that philosophy after.

As hard as it was, in many ways I was lucky that I had to get out of bed every morning and feign some semblance of life before death with Matthew and at the office. I think it taught me how to cram the horror of all of this down into some deep recess of my soul, where even I couldn't find it. The horror would – and still does – leap out of its hidden crouch to torture me

throughout the day; but, it stayed away long enough for me to stagger along, searching for my new, un-asked-for normal.

So, how does a parent cope with the loss of a child? To be honest, I don't know. I suppose, since I am writing all of this down, that I should have a better answer than that; but I don't. The biggest hurdle to defining how a parent can cope is that everyone deals with these things differently. Death hits everyone differently; yet it will hit us, all the same.

I have friends who have lost loved ones – friends, siblings, spouses, and such – who have wondered why I am still so deep in mourning after all these months. I guess it has to do with a number of things.

Losing a child is different than losing anyone else. Losing a child is losing innocence; losing dreams; losing a future. Losing a child is life out of order, especially one so young. Losing a child is life gone so totally awry that it simply does not make sense. This lack of sense is a large part of why it is so hard to cope.

In Timothy's case, he seemed so perfectly healthy, so perfectly perfect. There were no reasons given for why he collapsed to begin with; no reason why he stopped breathing; no reason why his young body was not strong enough to fight whatever injured it. Here was a child who was hardly ever sick, being felled in his youth by an unknown assassin. None of it makes any sense.

In other situations, death can be understandable, if not fair. The smoker who gets lung cancer; the person driving too fast getting into an accident; the elderly dying of natural causes.

These types of death – while still sad and tragic – can be understood, rationalized. Timothy's death cannot.

Over the time since Timothy's death, I have noticed that people seem to become almost an exaggeration of their own personality after losing a child. People, like me, who had introverted tendencies can fall deeper within themselves, and eschew the help and support of others even more than before. People who are extroverted seem to almost explode in a fury of activity after a death, as if to lose themselves and their grief in the community of others.

I guess that explains the need for some grieving parents to launch full-frontal assaults on issues. People become tireless advocates for cancer cures or law reform with the goal of preventing anyone else from having to suffer in kind. We see myriad parents challenging the iceberg of state governments to change drunk-driving laws, advocating for stronger punishment for child molesters, rallying for tightened sex offender laws. We often hear of memorial scholarships in the name of a deceased loved one, an attempt at delivering something good through the black cloud that has engulfed the lives of those left behind. People can be moved to greatness following such a great loss; I got pushed into a deep and unrelenting morass of solitude.

I often thought about creating a Timothy W. Burke Memorial Scholarship, or running a Tim-athon, an annual road race to raise funds or awareness. But, I always got stuck at the *for what*. We never knew what struck our boy down, so there was no rallying cry; no *Down with Cancer* or *Let's Strike Out Heart Defects* bumper stickers in Timothy's wake. Only a *Don't Let Your Kid Pass Out and Lie in the Dirt Undetected* poster would suit Timothy's case. And that

wouldn't sell many tickets to a charity ball. Besides, I am not sure I would have had the strength to pursue such an endeavor. I have, in the past, participated in walkathons for Autism. But all my fundraising was done by sending e-mails, or posting a flyer at church or at work. I am not the type to go out and sell a cause or elicit money directly. Especially not now.

I have often harbored fantasies about creating a swarm of negative publicity for the organization that runs Timothy's preschool. They were in the throes of a major capital campaign to raise millions to open a new facility. *Help us as we beg money to rape some of the only untouched, pristine land here in town to build a cathedral on the hill where we can allow your kid to die in style.*

But, no one seemed to care much about the story. I contacted radio stations, newspapers, television stations, but no one wanted to touch the tale. I don't know if there is some positive bias towards this organization, or simply that I waited for too long to launch my offensive.

All I know is that my attempts have not netted me any gains in the coping department; just dragged me further under the surface.

Three things that have helped me get as far as I have through this: Matthew, the mortgage, and medication. Matthew forces me to get out of bed in the morning, and medication helps me stay out of bed during the day. The mortgage forces me back to work. And, at night, medication helps me lay down to sleep, keeping all the demons of unhappy thought at bay long enough for me to nod off.

It's not sage, experienced advice, I know. I hope you didn't come here looking for that. I have coped with the loss of Timothy mostly by not coping; rather by trying to keep it all hidden away, swallowing the pain, refusing to give in to the urge to collapse.

Chapter 25

Leaving Him Behind

Little birdie, come sing to me a song.
Such a short time to stay here,
And a long time to be gone...
-- The Stanley Brothers

Leaving the hospital that day was the single hardest thing I have ever done.

We lay in bed with Timothy for five, ten, fifteen minutes. I am not sure how long we stayed with him. But soon, I could see that they wanted to get to work on Timothy and cleaning up the room for the next one in line.

“Jennifer,” I whispered, “it’s time to go.” I started gathering our things: countless teddy bears that were brought by visitors; a stack of CDs, his favorite music; a blanket from home that decorated the end of his bed; books that we had brought but never read; and the countless other items that piled up during the week.

“I can’t leave him here,” she cried, literally, “I just can’t leave him here.”

“We have to go now. It’s time.”

“I have to stay,” her voice so garbled by sorrow that I could barely hear her words. “Timothy needs me to stay.” As gently as I could, I coaxed her out of bed and away from Timothy.

“He doesn’t need us any more,” I told her, which was the wrong thing to say. Her legs buckled out from beneath her and she slumped back down on the bed. His nurse helped me get her back on her feet and we shuffled towards the curtain that was pulled around his bed.

“Do you need a wheel chair, Jennifer?” she asked.

“No, I’ll be all right.” We both turned back at the curtain to take one last look at our boy. He lay empty in the bed, wearing only a diaper. All the tubes and wires were gone, not needed any longer. His soft green eyes were closed to it all now, as they had been for nearly a week.

“Bye, Monster,” I called softly to him, urging Jennifer towards the door. As we got to the door of his room, I stopped for a moment, unable to step out of the room and leave him behind. It was hard to believe that just a few days ago I called that out to him with those same words as I left him at preschool; he replied that day, but I did not hear. This time, there came no reply; there was nothing to not hear.

“Michael,” His doctor snapped me out of my trance. I stumbled forward out of the room, as if it had been the biggest hurdle I have ever had to overcome. He rubbed his chin, as if deep in thought: How to say this? Had had just spoken with the state medical examiner’s office; they need to do an autopsy of Timothy to determine cause of death. It’s routine...

“Routine that a three-year-old dies?” He smiled wanly and clarified that it is required by law that anytime a child dies, they need to do an autopsy.

“Great,” I sighed. Can this child endure any further insults? It is not enough that he is dead, but now the state wants to cut him open and perform all manner of un-godly tests on him.

I'll spare the gruesome details that I learned later by reading these reports, but an autopsy is not a nice thing to have done. And the autopsy would require time, we would not be able to bury Timothy for a couple of weeks. The doctor promised to *do what he could* to either skip or expedite the autopsy, but was uncertain.

"Thank you," I somehow summoned the nerve to say. "Thank you for everything you and everyone else did for Timothy." The crew had gathered around at that point, and I tried to look everyone in the eye, most of which were wet with tears. "We really do appreciate it."

As we walked away, Jennifer found some strength inside her too, and started to have a little more definition in her step, trying to get back in charge. We walked past the row of beds, with families all gathered around their patient, pretending not to look at us. Each one must have been thinking *Please, God. Don't let that happen to me; don't make me the next one to walk out like that*. Hell, were situations reversed, it's what I'd be thinking as the marked parents walked past.

Down the hall, Trot Nixon was still in his homerun swing and the clowns were still delighting whoever was there to see. Through the doors and out into the hall. As they swung closed behind us, I felt as if I were stepping into another world. It was coming truer by the step. Our son was gone.

Into the family waiting area; Jon stood up with a true concern in his eyes. Here is a man I met only days before, and I could see that he was devastated by my son's passing. Part of it, I am sure, was the sense that *If it happened to him, it could happen to me*. But mostly, his feelings were true.

“Good news travels fast, I see,” I tried to laugh. He shook my hand as firmly as the first time, when I met him in the hallway. His eyes said everything that needed to be said. “Good luck with your daughter. I sure wouldn’t want you to feel this.”

We gathered up Jennifer’s things from her room, turned off the lights, and closed the door. We waved our last, uncomfortable Goodbyes to Jon as we shuffled out into the hallway. Everyone who had gathered was still waiting for us, lingering about the waiting area, heads hung low, hands in their pockets, feet shuffling in place, just waiting.

“Did anyone call Grandma and tell her?” Jennifer asked, assuming her leadership role. Someone nodded yes, I don’t remember who. As a group, we all continued our pace down the hall towards the elevators, stunned; like the innocent man, freshly convicted, heading out of court to jail for a crime he did not commit. We, too, felt like we received a punishment we didn’t deserve. Timothy got the death penalty; we got life imprisoned by his loss.

At the elevators, the doors popped open of a car heading up. Someone in scrubs stepped off with a styrofoam tray of food; a woman in the center of the car reviewed some kind of paperwork on a clipboard; in the rear, a pair of young people, workers in some capacity, laughed loudly together. Life moves on.

Down on the first floor, we dove into the stream of bodies flowing towards the front of the hospital. Smiles and laughter seemed to be coming from every direction. Why was everybody so happy? Don’t they know what happened, just a couple of floors away? A sweet, innocent little boy lost his life. Gone forever, after only 3 ½ years. How can you people laugh at a time like this?

The line at the coffee shop extended well past the stanchions they set up; the people in line glancing at their watches – their biggest concern of the day was the time. On the right, I hear the voice of a woman complaining loudly that the ATM didn't give her a receipt; further on, voices of contempt that the newspaper machine was out of the Boston Herald already.

The lobby teemed with people hustling in every-which direction, oblivious to the loss of my son. Shouldn't they close the hospital in a day of mourning? Fly the flags at half-staff at least. The world is a lesser place than it was just an hour ago, and no one seems to notice; no one seems to care. Shouldn't we have a moment of silence or something?

Through the doors and out into the day we went, each footstep heavier than the previous the further away from Timothy we got. These are but the first of many steps I will have to take during my life without Timothy by my side.

I held Jennifer's hand as we shuffled along, but I am not sure I felt her. I was numb from head to toe, as though all feeling fell out of me as the life drifted away from Timothy. I could see the sun shining brightly; I could see people in summer-weight clothing, wiping the sweat from their brows; but I could not feel the heat myself. I knew there was a bustle of activity around me, cars and ambulances, visitors and employees, patients down from their rooms for a cigarette or two; but I heard none of it as we moved through the center of the mob. An unscented canteen truck stood on the corner, doling out what would be tasteless treats to appreciative patrons.

The parking garage, usually dank and cold was absent of feelings as we got into line to pay.

"Eight dollars for parking?" the woman in front of me complained. "It should be six dollars. I got here at 9:30. It should be six!"

I stepped up to the window that was unfortunately situated next to her. She turned her rage towards me. "Have you heard of anything so outrageous as eight dollars to park!" I was more a target of her exhaust than a participant in any conversation.

"Nope," I replied quietly. "You sure have reason to be upset." Eight dollars, requested the voice behind the Plexiglas in front of me. I slid the bills through the slot. I turned towards the woman as I left the window without saying a word.

In the dreary lobby of the garage, we all hugged each other and wiped tears from our eyes.

"I just can't believe this," Lori said of her nephew. "This is so wrong."

"Yup," was all I could muster in return.

Jennifer's brother Chris offered anything he can do. Another round of hugs followed as we all headed off towards our cars.

The woman from the window stood uncomfortably next to me in the elevator, holding two dollar bills in her hand.

Chapter 26

Contact

...When they pray they can look to the sky
and they'd see me as I pass by
heading to mists of down below.
The Duhks

One of the issues I have been struggling with since Timothy passed is the matter of what happens after one dies. I spent years of my adolescence and young adulthood as an avowed agnostic/atheist/indifferent who didn't believe in an afterlife of any kind: no Heaven; no ghosts; no visits from the beyond. Now, as I was re-discovering my Christian beliefs, the afterlife was again starting to enter my thoughts.

At least of Heaven anyway. Could there be this magical place where everyone is happy; no one feels any pain; no one has any wants or needs? It is certainly an appealing thought, especially to a grieving father.

But, I am less certain of a spiritual world, some middle-space where souls or spirits inhabit, able to observe or contact their loved ones or haunt their tormentors. It somehow seems less plausible. But, again, to a grieving father, it is a lovely thought.

But, both of these concepts run contrary to years of absolutism that I had as a younger man. I remember vividly a séance I reluctantly took part in, mostly to hold the hand of the girl to my left (but that's another story). We called upon a spirit – any spirit, please – to come visit us and let himself be known. Well, each in the circle of friends was convinced that we were touched from beyond. One of the girls, they tell me, radiated cold air despite the summer heat – a sure sign of contact from beyond. I felt the air around her and convinced myself that I felt nothing. All the while feeling the cold, but refusing to acknowledge it.

And here I am again, but doing just the opposite. Seeing easily explained phenomena and this time convincing myself that it is Timothy reaching out from beyond. It happened just this morning as I was visiting Timothy's Place – our euphemism for his cemetery plot.

It was raining moderately. As I talked with Tim, staring directly at his carved likeness in the stone, I told him how sad his mother was and how she couldn't get out of bed that day, when a drop of rain hit his likeness squarely in his eye, rolled down his cheek and along his chin, where it seemed to disappear. As though he, too, were crying.

Now, the cynic in me could explain this away by saying the raindrop was pure coincidence and it simply rolled downward along the edge of the carving, a natural canal. But, I watched for several minutes more. Other rain drops hit his little, carved visage, but not one hit his eye and not one followed the same path. In fact, almost all of the drops rolled down his face and off to the side.

I admit, I'll be the first one to seek a scientific or common sense answer when such things happen to others, the statue of the Virgin Mary that cries or such things. But that day, at least, I was a believer. Timothy was crying and he used the rain to show me how sad he really is, wherever he is.

Parents are always trying to establish and maintain contact with their kids. From the moment of conception all the way through, mothers and dads want to see, hear, and feel their offspring.

Throughout pregnancy, parents work hard to feel every kick, every twitch, every movement that the baby makes. The mother feels it first and reports every tingle to her eager spouse, sometimes indirectly. She'll invite him to put his hand on her belly, and the baby will invariably stop kicking. For the dad, he has to console himself for the time with the ultrasound images – those fuzzy, blurry, black-and-white images that somehow tell the doctor if you are having a healthy boy or not.

See, here's the heart, the spine; here's his head – oh he's going to be a handsome devil, I can see that already. To dad, it all looks like a blur of light and dark, but he nods and goes along with it. And, for the really desperate, there is always the rental audio device that lets you hear the swish-swish of his heart in-utero, and record it for posterity. Does anyone actually record and listen to a baby's heartbeat? We recorded Timothy's heartbeat before he was born. I forgot all about it until I stumbled upon the file on my computer. My hand shaking, I played the file, and heard the strong, regular heartbeat of a heart that beat no more. It reminded me, though, of the excitement of childbirth; eagerly awaiting the moment that I could assign a face to the series of beats I heard, the kicks I felt, the movement I saw in my wife's belly. One day, those grainy black and white lines on the ultrasound monitor would burst forth into a beautiful baby boy.

Right from the start parents are desperate for contact, desperate to begin and maintain a relationship with their child.

It's no different when the parent out-lives his child. I have spent so much of my time looking for signs and signals from Timothy. Just a momentary glimpse, a message from beyond

telling me that he's all right and that I shouldn't be afraid for him. The raindrop on the etching gave me hope that he is there, somewhere, listening to the words that I speak to the granite, call to the sky, mumble under my breath, or cry into my pillow.

There have been other signs that he's used to show me he's out there. There was a spell where every time I visited Timothy's place, a single insect would fly or crawl into view, a grasshopper, a fly, a bee would appear out of nowhere, flitter about and flash away. One day a single butterfly fluttered in and landed on my hand as I sat in the grass. Another stretch, it seemed a commuter train would rumble by along the tracks behind the cemetery, regardless of the time of day I arrived.

He once used a spider to contact me. Again, I was at Timothy's Place, talking to the stone when a small spider – dare I say, an itsy-bitsy spider – started crawling up the face of the granite, over Timothy's dates, across his name, and on a straight line to the top, where it seemed to turn and look in my direction. I was convinced that Tim sent to spider to remind me of the day last spring when I introduced him to the wonderful world of bugs.

It was one of those father-only lessons, one a mother would never teach. I was digging in the garden planting the annual annuals; it must have been a few weeks before he died. It was a warm and sunny day; late May, early June. Timothy was prancing around the yard, tossing a ball, charging down the slide, playing in the mud puddles along the walkway – doing all those boy-things that make a father proud. As I dug a hole for the impatiens, I noticed an earth worm and decided to introduce him to Tim.

“Timothy,” I called picking up the worm, “come take a look at this.” He padded over in his favorite red and blue striped shirt with matching red shorts, his little white and blue sneakers covered with dirt from doing who-knows-what, a sparkle of curiosity gleamed in his green eyes; he looked down into the palm of my hand at a slimy, brown creature as it wriggled and danced. “It’s an earthworm. He helps the flowers grow. Want to hold him?” I looked up to see an expression of fear and trepidation.

“It won’t hurt you, I promise. Put your hand out, just like mine.” Tim, ever trusting his Dad, slowly extended his hand, palm facing up making a little cup shape with his fingers. His eyes still registering uncertainty. I placed the worm in his palm, but it overwhelmed his little hand and squirmed away. He pulled his hand back with a look that somehow combined fear, surprise, delight, and disappointment; letting out a little laugh, he looked at his hand for damage, and seeing none, he smiled to show he approved of his new friend.

“That feels funny,” he smiled wider. I picked up the worm and handed it back to him, much more accepting of it this time. “Looks like a snake,” he mused, doing a far better job of controlling the contorting beast, using his left hand to help corral it. When the fancy left him, he coldly turned his hand over and let the worm return home in the dirt. He watched as the worm snuggled his way back into the cold, damp soil. “There he goes!” he squealed.

“Look here,” I said, pointing out a spectacular spider web built between the wall of the house and a rainspout. “See that guy in the middle? That’s a spider...”

“Like the itsy-bitsy spider,” he announced proudly and sprang into song.

“See this, it’s his web.” I drew his attention to the silken threads. “He uses it to catch bugs. The he EATS THEM!” I lunged at Tim with my hands bared and grabbed his stomach in a tickle. We fell down to the grass and tumbled along the gentle slope of the yard.

As returned to I dig some more, Tim went back to play, but paid more attention to what I was doing than before. I came across another bug; I don't know what its real name is, but as a kid I just called it a ball bug, as it rolls itself into a ball when threatened. "Check this guy out!" Tim waddled over to see the little black bug crawling on my hand. "Watch this," I gently poked the bug enough to get him to collapse into himself. I rolled him around my hand. "Here..." Timothy took the ball into his hand and tried to roll it, too. But like with the worm, his hand was too small and the critter fell off the side into the dirt below.

"Oh well, there will be plenty of more chances to play with the bugs."

Just as quick as it appeared, the spider ducked over the top of Timothy's stone and disappeared.

Music was one of our deepest connections and pleasures. Timothy learned a love of music early in life and was developing a fine ear. His mother might not agree with his tastes for music, many of which he adopted with me, no one could deny how much he enjoyed it. He would quickly learn the words to songs, mostly from an incessant repetition of entire songs or just portions of them. He learned how to use the remote control for the CD player, and you could almost see him learning each verse as he repeated it. That is, when he wasn't busy bouncing around with one hand in the air and one by his waist pretending to play the upright bass.

So it was not surprise, I guess that Timothy visited me through music and some of my most emotional moments involved music.

One of the earliest contacts was a sunny day in July; I snuck out of work to venture up to Lowell to see one of our favorite local bands, called Hot Day at the Zoo, playing a free lunchtime concert in the city hall plaza. If there's one thing I love, it's Free Live Music. It was a chilly day for July, with clouds filling the sky and a soft mist filling the air. Threats of rain were all around, but nothing would fall.

I am friendly with the singer in the band, as he approached me between sets after chatting with his friends and groupies that made up the bulk of the tiny, but enthused crowd.

"Why are you standing way back there?" he asked, knowing nothing of my new affliction, ushering me down front where I can hear better.

"I don't know, my friend. I am pretty sad these days." An understatement if I ever heard one. I looked down toward the ground myself, eyes starting to well with tears. "You remember my son, the little one?" Timothy had come to see the band back on a rainy day in April. His first time. We got there late; they left the stage early. Tim got to hear only one song.

Yeah, the singer recalled Timothy, remembering that he was really into the music. It's always a nice testament when someone remembers your son positively. It means that he touched someone's life enough to be remembered.

"Well, he passed away a few weeks ago..." my voice trailed off into the day.

He looked a bit taken back by the news, even though he met Timothy only once, and briefly. He seemed puzzled why or how I could be there.

"Just listening to a little music, trying to drown my sorrows." I tried to laugh, but failed.

"What... is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yeah, play Blues for Jimmy for Tim. It was his favorite of your songs." He seemed surprised and pleased that Timothy had a favorite song of theirs. "Yeah, he loved your disc. He

would always tell me how you shouldn't swear." The singer utter a swear word somewhere in the song. "I actually left a bunch of discs on a plane, yours among them. He was mad... I probably would have bought him a copy today."

He called to his bandmate to toss him a disc. He caught the CD and gave it to me. "We'll play his song, all right?" All I could do was nod, allowing the faint trace of a smile curl my lips.

When the band got back together, Mike stepped up to the mike. "Hey everyone," he called to the dozen or so people that were gathered. "We're gonna play *Blues for Jimmy* for Timothy. I hope he's listening." As they launched into his song, I wandered down closer to hear. I felt a touch of warmth fill my soul. As the final strains of the song is where Timothy stepped in.

"Never played this before, Wagon Wheel, boys. For Tim..." The band took off on a song that was one of Tim's "all-time" favorites. One of those songs he was interested in early and often. There's no way the band could have known to play this song right then unless an angel whispered into his ear. I am convinced he did.

I went to another show a few weeks later to see another of Tim's favorite local bands play. That old-time country band that Tim and I saw at a local restaurant on his birthday eve. As I sat and listened to the music, I swear that I felt a weight in my lap; as if he joined me for a couple of songs and was gone. Again, a few weeks ago, while watching his favorite bluegrass band, King Wilkie, I know I felt him in my arms. I must have looked odd, swaying and dancing alone with my invisible partner, but I didn't care. He was with me, if only for a fleeting moment.

For a while, Timothy contacted me through nature. He drew in the clouds he made things at Timothy's Place dance and sway in the breeze. These phenomena may have been a quirk of nature that I caught at just the right moment; but I choose to believe otherwise.

Driving to work one morning, one of *Timothy's songs* rolled around on the CD player. I turned it up as loud as possible, hoping he could hear. As I paused at a red light, I looked up through the gaping moon roof of my car and stared in amazement as a cluster of clouds had huddled together, allowing a distinct "T" shape form in between. The sun stretched though the T and down to my eyes. For a moment I felt as though he had touched me.

Another day, as we putted through Salem Harbor on my brother-in-law's boat, I again looked to the clouds. This day I saw a perfectly round jumble of clouds, with distinct shadows that formed the eyes, nose, and mouth of a little boy. I tried to snap a picture, but the photo shows only a featureless clump of silver-grey.

I know Timothy has tried to contact me after death just as I tried to contact him before birth. These moments were fleeting: seeing his face on the body of another child, hearing his voice in a dream, a single insect landing on my hand at Timothy's Place, or feeling him sitting on my lap at a concert. This contact was not enough, but it is all I have.

Chapter 27

Home

I never pictured every minute, without you in it.
Oh, you left so fast...
-- Leann Rimes

The alarm clock sounded early that first morning after Timothy left.

As I rolled over in bed to hit the snooze button, you know what was rolling through my mind.

Was it all just a dream?

It certainly felt like a nightmare; still does. Jennifer lay next to me, still in blissful sleep. I was ready to go back to sleep, to put off the inevitable for seven more minutes. But instead, I hear Matthew already thumping around in his room: “Papa. Time to get up Papa! I’m hungry!” As my feet hit the air-conditioned hardwood floor, I stepped slowly towards the door.

When I opened the door, I would be facing Timothy’s door. Would it be shut tight to the world, with him sleeping quietly behind it? Or, would it be wide open, displaying his empty bed, still unmade from the last time he used it a week prior? As I stepped into the hall, I was crushed to see that it was, in fact, open. It wasn’t a dream; it was real and he is really gone.

As Matthew called out behind me, I moved into the now-vacant room. His bed took up much of the too-small bedroom, his Thomas the Tank Engine blanket lay in a bundle where his feet should be. His pillow was empty of his head, with its soft golden hair. The sheets were wrinkled where he should have tossed about last night; such a light sleeper he was.

On the wall, I spied the Spiderman poster that we hung there not too long before. He was so thrilled when it came in the mail. We had to dash right up the stairs and hang it over the foot of his bed. On the opposite wall was a print of a steam engine that Grandma had given him. Framed and proud, the train steamed out of the wall into the bedroom, a series of T shapes in a circle on the front train's tank, which he was certain stood for *Timothy*. The same Thomas that was on his comforter hung from another wall.

In the back of the room was a pile of stuffed animals that had accumulated over the years; toys that were won at the Topsfield Fair midway; animals that I had given to Jennifer over the years on Valentine's Day; trinkets that were given to the boys when they were born; and the gingham cat I made in seventh grade home-ec class, some 25 years before. These critters were joined by the countless stuffed bears that came to visit Timothy in the hospital, standing in vain wait for him to awake and smile a greeting.

"Papa, I'm hungry," came Matthew's voice from behind his door. As it swung open, Matthew leaned out into the hallway, hanging off the doorknob; he was laughing as usual. Suddenly, he caught my eyes as I stood in his brother's room and the laughter stopped. He came padding into the room in stocking feet and looked solemnly at the empty bed. "Timothy's in Heaven with Molly," he noted, placing my son with Grandma's dog, who passed away a few years earlier. While his Autism often affected his vocabulary and speech, it did not taint his understanding of Timothy's situation. "He was in the hospital, but didn't come home."

“That’s right,” I sighed.

“I’m sad,” he announced. “I miss Timothy.” A tear caught in my eye.

“I do too, Buddy. I do too.”

Down in the kitchen, we went silently about our morning rituals. Matthew and I showered and got dressed, just like any other day. We got his breakfast, a bowl of cereal and a toasted bagel, nothing unusual. We made a pot of coffee and turned on the radio to the news station. Nothing wrong with this picture.

Until I looked at the hollow space on the counter where Timothy would have been sitting. Half-asleep and dreamy, he would quietly await his breakfast. I can see him smiling faintly, donning a set of Sponge Bob pajamas, shorts most likely. Behind him, the toaster ticking loudly as his breakfast is cooking. Timothy would rub his eyes, always the slow riser. The toaster sounding a ding when it was time to eat. His hair would be slightly strewn from sleeping; the thin blonde strands showing the effects of 10 hours of slumber. I would pour the maple syrup into a small bowl and arrange his french toast sticks on a plate, which he would pick up in his hands and dip into the syrup. Not exactly the paradigm of good table manners; but it mattered not.

It was a Friday, that day after, which meant that Timothy would spend the day at Grandma’s house. Mama usually worked on Friday nights, and having him out of the house for the day allowed her to get a good nap in. And going to Grandma’s house was so much better than daycare. Grandma would usually take Timothy to what the boys called the Train Museum,

actually the Wenham Museum, a small building that housed a number of treasures that symbolized growing up in the area during days past.

But the big lure for the boys was the train room. An entire room on the bottom floor dedicated to model trains. Timothy would race the trains from one end of the display to the other, seeing who could get to the other end of the line first. He became a regular fixture there, even getting his picture taken one Friday for the cover of a regional section of the *Boston Globe*. In the photo, he stood agape, staring at an ancient locomotive, eyes fixed on the train, his mouth dropped open in awe.

This particular Friday, Grandma was going to take him on a real train, rather than just watch model ones. She had tickets on the Amtrak out of South Station in Boston, bound for Providence. A quick lunch in the city and back home again they'd go. Grandma still has the tickets, I believe. Never used.

Matthew and I left for school together, for the first time without Timothy. I pulled up down the street from the school, as I usually did, and parked on the downward side of a steep hill. Matthew and Timothy should be getting out of the car to race each other down the slope, past the tall retaining wall, across the tiny side road that was barely more than a driveway, past the high green fence that restrained children on the playground that stood on the opposite side. Timothy would usually win these races, as Matthew would slow down just feet before the school to return the *Hello Matthew* from the crossing guard.

After dropping Matthew at his classroom, Timothy and I would trudge back up the hill towards the car. That day, and those that would follow, I made the walk alone. Everywhere I

looked, I saw parents walking young children back home after dropping off siblings, and noticed the absence by my side even more.

Back in the car, my mind followed the route down the hill, left onto Blaney, around the corner to Humphrey. Left towards Marblehead, past Fisherman's Beach and onto the preschool. Although I didn't need to make the trip, I did anyway. I put on some music and looked into the backseat. "Is that loud enough for you?" I called to the absent Timothy. "A bit louder? OK." As I drove along, I continued to talk into the newly empty backseat, my conversation one-sided.

"Are you going to have fun in school today?"

"Are any of your friends going to be there?"

"It looks nice out; I bet you will get to play outside, huh?"

"What are we going to do this weekend? You want to go to the beach? I think we can talk Mama into going to the beach. I know Matthew will want to go." But none of my queries was answered.

I pulled over at a small deli a block down from the pre-school. Timothy and I would walk down to the store once in a while if we were ahead of schedule so that I could get a tall cup of coffee. Not that the coffee here was particularly good – certainly not better than the chain donut shop where Timothy loved the glazed-stick donuts – but it gave me an excuse to hang out with him for a few more minutes. As I poured a steaming cup of the Breakfast Blend variety at the self-serve counter, my mind flashed back several weeks to see Timothy wandering over to the deli case, where he spied a bucket of pasta salad.

"I want some, Papa," Timothy begged, touching the deli case with his little index finger so firmly that the finger bent back slightly. A small finger print appeared on the glass before slowly fading away. His eyes fixed on an oval tub of multi-colored pasta twirls – red, orange,

green, and white spirals, mingling with a creamy mayonnaise-based sauce, various bits of colored peppers and onion. Fine. I ordered up a quarter-pound of the stuff and we headed to the counter to settle up.

“That pasta salad will make a good lunch, eh Monster?” I called down to him as he stood in place, waiting patiently, bouncing with his knees in a sort of dance he does.

“I want it now!” he smiled.

“Before school?” He nodded firmly. “Not for lunch?”

“No lunch. I want pasta salad now.” The boy always did know what he wanted. We sauntered over to an eating bar by the window, grabbing a plastic fork along the way. I lifted him onto the bar stool and he quickly launched into the salad. He swayed gently to some music in his head, waving the fork between bites like a baton.

“Is it good?”

“I like the green ones,” he said of the greenish twist of multicolored pasta. Red, orange, green, and white pasta spirals disappeared quickly. Without a word, we sat in the window, eating pasta and sipping too-hot coffee, watching the world roll by. Classmates being dropped off by their parents across the street; addled commuters heading towards Boston; a metro bus, nearly empty, lumbered by towards downtown. Timothy sat as content as could be. He finished the quarter-pound and slid off the stool, nearly falling to the floor from the height. We walked slowly back to pre-school, a little late, but Timothy didn’t seem to care.

As I passed by the preschool, I saw one of the girls in Timothy’s group, walking in with her mother. I sighed gently thinking of the feminine contempt she had for the boys in the class, Timothy included.

A week after Timothy passed, I visited the school, again playing out the routine. I was surprised how much I missed seeing the kids in the morning.

As I was leaving, I crouched down to talk to one of his pals.

“Hi. Do you know who I am?” He answered with certainty that I am Timothy’s dad.

“Where is Timothy?” he asked with the softest voice and gentlest eyes.

“Well, it’s like this...”

“Timothy’s dead.” One of the girls in the class came trotting up to answer the question for me. She grinned broadly, not so much happy at Tim’s demise, more pleased with herself for having known the answer.

“That’s right,” I added, “he got sick and went to the hospital; but the doctors...” I had lost them with too long an explanation. The kids wandered off in search of more fun things to do.

Life goes on.

And so did I, without stopping to drop Timothy at the school.

When I got home that evening from work, the dog stood statue in the hallway by the door. A little bread box of a pug, round and stocky, much larger than a pug dog should be. She looked up at me with that little monkey-face of hers, all wrinkled and creased, like a ball of black aluminum foil; her tail wagging behind her set her entire rear quarters in motion, small tufts of thick fur by her tail that she had not shed yet. It was time to go out and do her business.

For her, too, life goes on.

Chapter 28

Can Dreams Come True?

"I dreamed of you in my arms so tight last night.
With a lonesome chill I woke without you nearby."
-- King Wilkie

Waking up is the hardest part of the day.

I just read a book about the *other side* that talked about *dream-walking*: the ability of the dead to enter the dreams of loved ones. People I have spoken to have experienced this. One woman told me that, after her mother passed away, she and all her siblings each had the same dream, where their mother called them through a door into a room to talk.

How I wish that Timothy would walk into one of my dreams. Just to tell me that it's all right; that he is OK; he is happy wherever he is; that it is OK for me to stop tearing myself apart over this. That it is time to let him go.

But he has not, and I cannot.

I've had a few dreams about Timothy. I am not convinced, though, that they are dream-walks on his part, but they have a tremendous impact on me anyway.

The other night, Timothy just reappeared in our house. I woke up in this dream and walked by his bed, as I had everyday. But this day, instead of the empty bed that had been there,

there was a lump under the blanket. It was far too small to be my wife, so my first thought was that Matthew had climbed into Tim's bed at some point. My heart was swirling with sympathy at my son for missing his brother so much that he wanted to sleep in Tim's bed; then filled with anger that he would spoil the scene that Tim left behind by sleeping in his bed.

Then through the wall behind me, Matthew stirred under his blanket, dropping the toy he often took to bed to the floor. My heart sank with fear and confusion. "If that's not Matthew, then who is? The damn dog?!? Dammit I am going to kill her!!" I stepped into the room and Timothy rolled over, licking his lips in his sleep. "Jesus Christ," I called. His eyes opened slowly, his lips rolled into a smile when he saw me. Then, as if reading his own script, he stretched that full-body stretch that I had seen so many times, and missed so desperately.

He didn't say a word as I leaned over and picked him up. He looked perfect, as though nothing had happened to him, just a typical, normal day. Even through my dream, I could feel his weight as I held him in my arms; he nuzzled his head into my shoulder. I could feel the softness of his hair, and smell the gentle odor of a sweaty sleep.

I turned from the room and walked down the stairs. That was it. That was the whole dream. I have never known a dream where I could actually feel things before. I can still feel the dream Timothy today.

No, the hardest part of the day is not leaving these dreams behind, but walking up to the nightmare that is my reality. He is gone and is not coming back. I am still shocked once in a while by that reality. I will be humming along in my day, and something will make me think of him: a picture, a song, something of TV, conversations of other people, and -- BANG -- I am hit with the truth that my son is dead. It's like a kick in the back of the head (or elsewhere) with a steel-toe boot.

A simply sunny day, I was minding my own at an annual barbeque cook-off sponsored by a local radio station. I pondered the many offerings: cooked meats from nearby Framingham, distant Kansas City, the heart of Texas, and even from Australia. I paused for a moment in front of the Aussie's wares when a country song by Kenny Chesney came over the loud speakers. I think it was the first time I heard the song since Timothy left, but it was one he loved. I immediately saw in my mind the two of us sitting on the couch watching the video of a pretty, freckle-faced young woman surfing with her beau.

And I can't see how you will ever be anything but mine,,,

Suddenly the lyric floored me. My whole body flooded with tears and anguish; I suddenly found myself gasping for air, my lungs unable to overcome the heaving of my sobs. I literally drop to my knees on the pavement and I collapsed with my head to the ground. As the song faded into the heat of the day, I slowly reconnected with reality and heard voices of concern around me. "I'm fine, thank you," I assured and slowly lifted myself to my feet. And as quick as it came, the attack disappeared.

I saw a TV show where all of the characters could see and talk to a dead co-worker. I know these things are fiction, but they are nice thoughts. If I could only have the chance to see him one more time, to know that he can hear me each day when I come to visit Timothy's Place, that he knows how much I love him, and how much I miss having his with me.

That would be the most beautiful dream possible.

Chapter 29

Memorial Day

Oh come angel band;
Come and around me stand.
Oh bear me away on your snow white wings,
to my immortal Home
-- The Stanley Brothers

We decided not to have a wake for Timothy, for we had nothing to show.

Despite some complaints and grumblings from various people in the family, we knew that we could not have a wake for Timothy. The simplest reason for not having a wake is that Timothy would not have been able to attend. The medical examiner had his body and would for a spell. Even if he were with us, I am sure it would have been a closed-casket affair, as the brain surgery he had would have made it impossible for a traditional open casket without spooking the weaker-souled in the group.

And anyway, it would have been far too shocking to see such a small boy in such a small coffin at the front of the room. I think most of us have been to a wake and have a good sense of the size of the casket; I think the rooms in funeral parlors are designed to accommodate a typical casket, or at least it seems that way to me. To have a tiny, child-size casket in that space would

only serve to heighten the emotion, emphasizing how young the decedent is by perspective alone.

For the same reasons, I guess, we didn't want to do a funeral. The sight of that undersize box being carried down the aisle, perhaps only four pallbearers to the traditional six would be overwhelming. All eyes would be fixed on that tiny coffin at the front of the church and not as much on the memory of Tim.

Instead, we decided on a memorial service. It all happened so quickly; I made phone calls arranging the day, Saturday, June 18 at our humble church. Somehow, word got out to the members of the parish; so many attended, more than I imagined would. The ladies of the church put together a splendid meal for after the proceedings. Friends and family came from far afield to attend the remembrance of my boy. The cozy church hall was packed full that day.

I remember pulling my suit out of the closet, my best, black suit. One that I hadn't worn since a wedding that past September, where Timothy and Matthew were ring bearers. I could still see Timothy gingerly stepping down the aisle of the church, a satin pillow with a ring held in his tiny hands high above his head; as he walked he peeked through and around his arms to see where he was going.

I pulled the SpongeBob tie that my brother bought for me out of the wrinkled plastic shopping bag. It was a bright, yellow tie adorned with the goggle-eyes and flutish nose of one of Timothy's favorite cartoon characters. It had to be worn. My brother made a special trip to the mall to pick out the tie for me, and it was perfect. He needed a job, I was told; people in town to attend a funeral need a job to do. Apparently, attending to the death of a loved one must instill a sense of helplessness that needs to be filled with some type of task. Anything to get the feeling of doing something to help; anything to take your mind off the horror of the event you were there to

honor. I asked Tom to get me a SpongeBob tie; my sister Lori and her beau worked tirelessly to assemble picture collages of Timothy throughout his fleeting life. Starting with his very first picture and including his very last. Three frames of photos that encapsulated his life: growing quickly as an infant, playing eternally as a small child; always smiling, always happy. Pictures of him at home, on vacation, at relatives houses were included. Photos of him making cookies; trapped, grinning with glee, in the dog carrier, holding an immense-looking banjo; laying back on the couch in nothing but a diaper and his Boston Celtics baseball cap, watching TV. His entire essence captured in a couple of days through a couple dozen photographs. More testimony to the brevity and beauty of his time here.

I cinched up my tie and wandered through the house to help get Matthew ready to go. He, too, donned a black suit, last worn at a wedding last August, when my brother was married in a steamy, tropical ceremony in Florida. Timothy was the ring bearer, there, too. Another satin pillow with a golden ring tied on.

He had a look of apprehension on his face as he stepped down the aisle. But, even as the rain started to fall, he was undeterred in his task. Even when the ring fell off the pillow, slick from the moisture, he kept on his mission. Eventually the rings were delivered to the best man, egged on by my pleading from the wedding party. It must have made quite a show to those who didn't know us, which were many in the crowd. Dad standing in a tuxedo in place next to the best man, urging this little boy to bring a pair of rings to the front, all while rain started to taper down. Such memories a simple piece of clothing can muster.

His service was on a beautiful Saturday in June. The type of day where I would normally be at the playground with my sons, given the choice. But we were not given that choice and the three of us trudged out to the car in our Sunday finest. As we loaded up, a van drove past, the driver waving a cheery Hello.

“Oh damn,” I uttered at recognizing the only passenger in the vehicle.

“What is it?” asked Jennifer, in a plain black dress, with full make-up and her hair done, an unusual occurrence for this woman who used – and needed – little makeup or decoration.

“We didn’t tell her.”

“Who?” Timothy’s in-home daycare provider had motored by. She watched Timothy a couple days a week for the first two years of his life, before we moved him into the pre-school. She had known Timothy since he was an infant.

“I thought you folks were going to a wedding, or something,” she would tell me a day or two later, when I finally broke the news. “I wondered where Timothy was.”

No matter how hard you try, I guess, someone always gets left out of these things.

The church was teeming with people when we got there. Our little church supports only on-street parking, no lot around. So we pulled up to the curb further away than we usually would need to on a Sunday morning.

“Are you ready for this?”

“No,” Jennifer said, swallowing tears, and shaking her head slightly. “Are you?” Who would be ready, could ever be ready, to attend a memorial service for your three-year old? It seemed utterly impossible that we were here for that purpose. This church that had seen our two

boys baptized, fed first communion to Matthew, and blessed our wedding vows, would now turn black with sadness as we prepared to formally say goodbye to Timothy.

We walked quietly together, Jennifer's hand in mine; Matthew strolled a few steps ahead. Even he understood the solemnity of the service. Usually, he would be running ahead, with or without his brother, ducking into the head-tall bushes that lined the outside walls of the church. The space between the bushes and the foundation made an excellent alley for a young boy to play in. But not this day; he walked slowly, quietly towards the front doors of the church.

Countless pats-on-the-back, hugs, prayers, and well-wishes greeted us as we made our way down to the front pew. It had been a long time since we last sat down front; Timothy's baptism, I think. We usually sit in the back with the *families whose children can't sit still and be quiet for an hour* group. Today, we again held the place of honor.

Right on cue, the organist started her playing and a small procession of people came down the aisle towards the altar. Murmured voices sang along to the song that had been playing.

*Hills of the north, rejoice;
river and mountain spring,
hark to the advent voice;
valley and lowland, sing;
though absent long, your Lord is nigh;
He, judgment brings and victory.*

The procession took its place on the altar, and we all sat. As the organ fell silent and before the reverend could start, a silence filled the hall, which was quickly overtaken by a choir of sobs, crying, and mumbled words of disbelief. Matthew seemed pleasantly oblivious to the

pall that fell throughout the room as he quietly flipped through the pages of a book he had brought with him.

The reverend moved slowly to the center of the altar, a fairly tight space bounded by long benches on either side that were used by the church choir on Sundays. He raised his eyes to the crowd, and a simple twinkle of compassion and understanding emanated from within him as he started to speak.

*I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord;
he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live;
and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*

The reverend was an older, retired priest. Our parish priest had recently retired herself, and was replaced by a wonderful interim rector. He gave us great support through Timothy's time in the hospital, but Jennifer and I felt that having someone who knew Timothy better would be a wiser choice to lead the service.

*Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord;
even so saith the Spirit, for they rest from their labors.*

Even he, a man of great faith and devout beliefs must have felt the irony to speaking these required words of a child. He had no labors to rest from; he has only been relieved of the burden of play, and strong health. Timothy did not need rest.

*O God, whose beloved Son did take little children into his arms and bless them: Give us grace, we beseech thee, to entrust this child Timothy, to thy never-failing care and love, and bring us all to thy heavenly kingdom; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.*

The assembled mourners quietly echoed his *Amen*. People of differing faiths, or no faith at all, not quite sure how to respond.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
for Thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff comfort me.*

*Thou shalt prepare a table before me in the presence of them
that trouble me;
Thou hast anointed my head with oil,
and my cup shall be full.*

I flipped open the program that is handed out before each service, delineating the order of the procession: which hymns to sing, which prayers to pray, which readings will be read. The reverend had suggested that my eulogy be listed in the program, but I deferred, not knowing if I could go through with the speech. His plan was to look down at me during his sermon to see if I was strong enough to speak. As I sat in the pew, and the Gospel read, I still did not know.

The Gospel of the Lord.

I remember little about his sermon, the entire day was a blur; I just remember a story about Timothy *disappearing*, as a way to relay to children what happened. He had a way of talking directly to children that most responded to and understood. He often called the children down to the front of the church in the usually-empty pews during his sermons. Timothy had just gotten to the point where he was old enough to join his brother down front during these sessions. Now, he was the topic of the sermon.

“Think of it, children,” he started, using that soft and soothing voice, “as if Matthew has gone to his room by himself.” Matthew? “Matthew might be out of sight, you see, but we will all see him again someday.” A few voices gently called out, trying to correct him; *Timothy*, *Timothy*. The good reverend had killed off the wrong child. “Matthew is not truly gone, we just

cannot see him. But we will all see him again someday in the Kingdom of Heaven..." He went on undaunted. I looked over to see Jennifer, slightly uncomfortable in her place, upon hearing the switched names. After all, it hadn't been too long before that it was almost Matthew who was entering God's kingdom, if such a place exists.

He moved towards the end of his homily and look down at me. I nodded my head *Yes*, and started to remove the typed pages from my coat. Jennifer looked surprised to see that I had written something, as I had done it all while she slept. I didn't want to give the slightest hint that I might give a eulogy, then not be able to.

"And now, friends, Timothy's father would like to say a few words about his son."

I walked slowly to the front of the church, facing the altar. I stared up at the sparkling stained glass window that hovered over the head of the building. A cacophony of colors, cascading light down into the hall through a five-paneled scene depicting some scene from the bible; I couldn't tell you which. I turned my glance upward, and seeking help from God, Timothy, or anyone who would listen, whispered into the air.

"Please help me get through this."

I turned to my left and stepped up onto the podium, laying my sheets of paper before me, each touch of the wooden dais audibly bumping through the speaker system into the sniffing silence of the hall. I adjusted the microphone slightly, with it attendant metallic creak the loudest sound in the room, or the world, for all I knew at the time. Finally, looking up from the chancel, I saw rows of people, packed in tightly; family and friends alike, all brought together by this tragedy; all now having something in common in experiencing the death – and life -- of this little boy, but each in his own way. I saw crying, heard the sniffles, watched the tears wiped away by

people whose emotions I may never have seen before. Others sat stoic and motionless, contemplating the mortality of a child, or maybe their own. Everyone seemed to be waiting for me to begin, perhaps waiting for me to collapse onto the floor in a faint, or run screaming from the hall.

I cast my eyes back down onto the sheets of paper the supposedly contained all my feeling about losing my son. No volume is large enough to document what I feel about losing Timothy. Not even this one. Partly, because I haven't experienced all that I will experience as I move through this. Mostly, though, because my feelings can't possibly be cataloged in that way; I've run through them before here, I think: anger, sadness, rage, anxiety, fear, pain.

But, I was tasked to somehow envelop everything that was Timothy, everything that he meant to me – to us – in a few short minutes. At least, that's what I thought was my job. I had never written a eulogy before; heck, I don't recall ever having heard one.

I guess I saw President Reagan eulogize the shuttle Challenger astronauts, trying to pay tribute to heroes.

*What we say today is only an inadequate expression of what we carry in our hearts.
Words pale in the shadow of grief;*

I know I heard Courtney Love's angry rant to her deceased rock-star husband Kurt Cobain, who committed suicide:

God! You asshole...

I suppose on some cable TV show I might have heard Senator Jacob Javits praise the late President John Kennedy, while trying to calm a nation.

Mr. President, hundreds of thousands of words have been published, and hundreds of thousands more have been spoken into the microphones of the world since John F. Kennedy was struck down in Dallas, but none of them were really adequate. Words never are in the face of senseless tragedy.

Or, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s friend Benjamin Mays' words trying to memorialize a friend and maintain a movement, I must have heard somewhere:

To be honored by being requested to give the eulogy at the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is like asking one to eulogize his deceased son — so close and so precious was he to me... It is not an easy task; nevertheless I accept it, with a sad heart and with full knowledge of my inadequacy to do justice to this man.

I had sat at my computer after Jennifer and Matthew went to bed over the previous couple of nights trying to craft something coherent, cogent, interesting to say; I needed to find my words, as Mr. Mays has, to do justice to this child. I had visions in my head of a dozen people sitting sparsely in the pews, maybe one or two who stumbled in off the street to hide from the sun. The words came slowly, but certainly. I wrote as though I knew what I wanted to say all along. I wrote of memories, of stories; I wrote because Timothy needed me to, because Timothy deserved it.

*Death is an angel sent down from above
Sent for the buds of the flowers we love
Truly tis so, for in Heaven's own way
Each soul is a flower in the Master's bouquet.*

When the Stanley Brothers sang those lines back in 1949, little could they imagine that the Master would wait until now to pick the most beautiful flower of all for his bouquet. Little could any of us imagine that He would come for Timothy so quickly, and so soon.

One of the things I have heard most frequently from folks over the past few days was: I am speechless; I don't know what to say; there just are no words. It is my job today to find some words to describe what Timothy meant to me, to my family, to all of us. I hope I don't fail him.

As Timothy lay in his hospital bed, one of the many, many things I said to him was *Thank you*. Thank you for bringing 3½ years of joy and happiness into my life, into all of our lives. Every single day, Timothy brought a smile to my face and laughter to my heart. These have been the best 3 ½ years I have ever known, and for that I will be forever grateful.

Whether it was racing with his brother to the back of the CVS pharmacy to be the first to press the “Go” button on the blood pressure machine; helping my stylist wash my hair at the salon; putting on his favorite hardhat and toolbelt at pre-school; going down to the town pier with his brother and me and trying to walk on the floats without falling in; or simply sitting in my lap and watching TV with me and his mother, Timothy brought me joy every moment of the day.

Now, everywhere I look, I see memories of Tim. The things we did, and the things we didn’t get to do.

I drive by King’s Beach and think of our last night together, Timothy, Matthew, and I, throwing rocks into the ocean and looking for hermit crabs in the tide pools. I pass by the train station and remember teaching him the other day why the engine is sometimes at the front of the train and sometimes at the end. I cried the other day at the Panera Bread restaurant thinking of how much he loved his peanut butter and jelly sandwiches every Saturday morning after swim lessons, fighting with his brother over who would get his pickle.

I saw a picture in the paper of a scene from the Salem Willows amusement park and recalled how much I wanted to take him back there - someday. I came across a schedule of boat rides to the Boston Harbor Islands and remembered my plans to take him out there - someday. I saw an e-mail I wrote to someone about places to take him horse-riding - someday. And, of course, I always think of the two concerts we had tickets to this summer, Tim and I, and how excited he was that we would be sitting in the Front Row for both.

In so many ways, watching Tim grow up was for me like watching a child grow up for the first time. Tim and his brother are so very different; the experiences that we had with Matthew are totally opposite from Tim. Timothy had a hunger for learning new things. He always wanted to know what you were doing, and always wanted to share experiences with you. Whether it was singing my awful country music with me, helping his mother pay bills on the computer, watching the Red Sox on TV with us, cleaning the yard or playing *Just Me and My Dad* on the computer at Grandma’s house; cooking brownies in the kitchen, looking at things in the newspaper with me, or hitting the ball off the tee in our backyard, Tim always wanted to do things together with people.

And holidays with Tim were a particular joy. Where for Matthew, Christmas is just another day of the week, Timothy opened his gifts, Matthew’s gifts, my gifts, his mother’s gifts, Grandad’s gifts, everyone’s gifts with an almost aerobic energy. And on Halloween when Matthew was satisfied with the treats in his bag, Timothy wanted to forge on, to hit every house in town.

And he could learn things fast. Show him once and he got it. Whether it was using the remote control to find his favorite episode of American Builder in the On

Demand section on cable TV; learning how to navigate the Haunted House scavenger game at the Garfield the Cat website; learning how to ride his tricycle; or learning how to make popcorn in the microwave (the bag goes up this way and you press the button twice), he attacked every new task with a voracious desire to learn.

I am so thankful for having Timothy in my life. I am so thankful for all the wonderful adventures we had together: Our trip to Greenfield, MA to see one of his favorite bands, the Old Crow Medicine Show. Sitting right down front and screaming the name of song so loud that the guitarist had to tell him to stop; our trip to Brunswick Maine to see King Wilkie play; our family trip to Plymouth to see Thomas the Tank Engine at Edaville Rail Road; our trips to the train station to see the 6:20 express tear through; even our trips to the Stop and Shop to buy bagels for his brother's breakfast. Especially, though, I am grateful for our recent family trip to Florida. A trip that I didn't want to take, as I didn't think it was a good time for us to go. That trip will forever remain in my memory as one of the last things we did as a family.

Timothy, I pray that you are safe in God's hands. I pray that you help us learn how to live without you in our lives. I pray that what happened to my family never happens to another, because the pain is just too much to bear.

I want to thank each and every one of you from the bottom of my heart, for all the caring, love, and support you have shown us during this trying time. The cards, the letters, the flowers, the food you have sent is overwhelmingly generous. For each of you who has worked so hard to make this church so beautiful and inviting. And for all of you to take time out of your busy lives to share this day with us, is truly comforting. I know many of you have traveled great distances to be with us today: from towns throughout the state; from other states, even from as far away as Germany. Even if you just came from down the street, it means the world to us that you are here to share this sad moment with us.

Before I finish, do me a favor and make sure you hug your children and family members and tell them how much you love them, every chance that you get. Because you just never know. When I dropped Timothy off that Thursday morning, I never could have dreamed that the last words I would say to him were "Goodbye Monster."

*Gathering flowers for the Master's Bouquet
Beautiful flowers that will never decay
Gathered by angels and carried away
Forever to bloom in the Master's Bouquet*

Thank you Timothy, for everything you brought to my life. I shall never forget you, and will always love you.

How I got through it all is still foreign to me. I broke with the speech-giving conventions taught to me in the forensic class I took in college, keeping my eyes pinned to the pages before me. The few words of humor I weaved into the tribute worked as a benefit as well; the gentle, sympathetic laughter from the audience helped my spirit remain buoyed enough to continue. But, again, I got through it because Timothy needed me to; he deserved it, and more. Timothy deserved more than words. He earned a full motion picture, a slide show, a computer presentation, rolling through countless photos of him enjoying what little time that life had given him, all backed by a live soundtrack of the Old Crow Medicine Show, or King Wilkie, or whatever band he might choose. He deserved time on network television to tell the world what an amazing child he was.

But all he got was five minutes of eulogizing by his old man. I hope it was enough for you, Timothy.

The rest of the service was another blur. More prayers were said and songs were sung. Communion time came and we all went up front. As I kneeled at the rail, I could see Timothy next to me, holding the oversized wafer in his hand – the parish allowed even the youngest of children to receive. When the chalice of wine came by he would dip the wafer in the drink, plunging his entire hand in the wine before I could stop him. He would occasionally mumble *Amen* – a tradition from my Catholic upbringing that I taught the boys, although it was not generally a part of the Episcopalian practices. A few parting words were spoken and the service was over. The congregation stood as the organist slid into the closing hymn.

*O love, how deep, how broad, how high,
it fills the heart with ecstasy,*

*that God, the Son of God, should take
our mortal form for mortals' sake!*

*Let not sorrow dim your eye,
soon shall every tear be dry;
let not fears your course impede,
great your strength, if great your need.*

We moved slowly out of the pew and walked down the center aisle. All eyes in the place were on us, I am sure, although I was looking squarely at the rug beneath my feet. I still walk with my head down, still finding it hard to meet people in the eye. Somehow, I know they know; somehow, even people who don't know me, look at me with a piteous scorn: *He's the father of that dead boy*. Maybe it's not true; but it certainly felt like it that day. The difference, I guess, is that for everyone in the church that day, their hearts were broken. Everyone's heart was broken to a different extent, some merely saddened by the loss of an innocent life they didn't really know, others heartsick over the death of a child who was special to them for some personal reason. And then there was us, devastated beyond words to lose a son.

The hall off to the side of the church was filled with tables and chairs, all adorned with green vinyl table coverings. It is not a spectacular room. Its drab yellow-ish walls with a series of windows that looked out into the yard on one side and at the house next door on the other. A wall of closets stood at the front of the room, where the choir donned their robes and stored their belongings during the service. A fading metal plaque hangs on one wall, honoring the benefactor who donated funds from his estate to build the room.

But that day, it looked as warm and inviting as I had ever seen it. Overflow flowers that could not fit on the altar lined the room. The three photo collages that my sister assembled leaned against the windows on the sills. A long row of tables was set in the front corner of the room, crowded with sandwiches and salads, cookies and cakes, soda and water, all to refresh the

masses that attended the service. This was all done with love and care by a group of women in the church, all for free and out of the goodness of their hearts and affection for Timothy.

As we entered the room, they all came over with moist eyes to hug each of us, uttering soft words of sorrow in our ears. They knew, as well as we, that the words would do little to soothe our wounds, but I appreciated the sincerity and compassion that they showed us.

Their generosity was obvious by the majesty of the spread, an obvious amount of work that went into arranging this fete. As we spoke quietly with these women who watched with us Timothy grow from newborn to small child, the crowd slowly ushered into the room. People were not sure if they should come over and console us or get into the queue for lunch. Things seemed to work themselves out as an even split of consolation, queuing, and sitting seemed to take place. We managed a table off to the side of the room and began the long process of receiving friends and family.

I don't mean to sound critical, but when things like this happen, people are struck dumb, and often resort to repeating the same trite, albeit well-intentioned phrases. I am not sure I could do any better, were the roles reversed that day, but we heard a countless stream of *I'm so sorry; I don't know what to say; that was a lovely eulogy; I don't think I could have gotten through it.*

People sat in tables, discussing who knows what. Catching up with people not seen in awhile, droning through a rota of things they did this weekend, complaining about wasting a beautiful Saturday in June. I am sure that folks found time to marvel at how well we were doing; how nice we looked; how dapper Matthew looked in his little suit. All the things I would have said were I sitting among the invited rather than being one of the guests of honor.

In the corner, a CD player streamed a flow of Timothy's favorite music. The same CD player he had just used to annoy a deckful of family members just two weeks before on that other Memorial Day.

As I set up the deck that day listening to the radio, Timothy discovered a CD inside by the band The Duhks. He played one song over and over, at least a half a dozen times before Grandma had to tell him to turn it off. Almost like that guitarist had to tell him to stop calling out for his song. He was playing a piece about a young girl who was sexually abused by her father, *Four Blue Walls*. Again, less than appropriate perhaps for a three-year-old audience, but he liked the song, and never asked about the words; so what was the harm?

We floated about the reception, receiving hugs and handshakes in a quantity I had not seen since our wedding reception. I don't remember if I ate anything that day; on this day, I can imagine not being in the mood for finger sandwiches, as lovely as they looked. My memory is shoddy; clouded, no doubt, by the constant stream of Timothy images that race through my mind.

Just as they did when they came into the room, as people left, they approached us with the same tired platitudes that are standard rhetoric for occasions like these. Again, not that I could do any better, mind you; it's just that hearing the same phrases over and over has a sort of numbing effect on the senses. I know for certain that the clichés spoken do not represent the feelings actually felt. I know people were saddened by Timothy's passing. Each person in the room was moved enough to come; some by feelings for Timothy, some by feelings for us. Like I said in the eulogy, I appreciate every person who came that day. Misery is bourn better when shared with a group.

I don't know how long the luncheon went, I'd have to speculate an hour or so. But soon the room was cleared but for the good church-folk who organized the event. We stood gathering our things and getting ready to head home. I watched the last of the party-goers stepping down the carpeted trio of stairs that led out of the room. I knew that they were heading back to their lives, unchanged for the most-part, untouched by our tragedy, save for a pinch of sorrow that will dispel quickly as they return to their own reality. I was jealous of that. Here, our lives were decimated beyond recognition, and their lives were touched as if their favorite TV show was taken off the air or the local coffee shop closed down.

Why couldn't that be me? Why couldn't I be the one leaving the grieving behind and returning to normalcy. Why couldn't I be the one looking at my watch trying to figure out what to do with the rest of the day, rather than being the one who has to remember how to breathe?

Chapter 30

We All Fall Down

The water cascaded down in sheets over my head. In the shower, I was engulfed by a cell of silence and peace. For what seemed the first time in the days since Timothy had passed.

I don't know what started it; but something kicked the legs out from under the table I had been perched on for the past week or two. People had been telling me repeatedly *how strong you are* or *I admire your ability to press on*; crap like that.

I had to be the spokesman for this team, the man out front, the town-crier for our little family village. I was the one who wore that *brave face* that so many speak of. Jennifer simply could not do it; I believe she had a hard enough time facing herself in the mirror; there was no way she could face others.

I did not lament that role; if it made Mama's life even one degree easier, I would do anything.

I was the one who had to tell the world; I was the one who had to say *Thank You* to all the well-wishers and sympathizers; I was the one who eulogized him at the service; I was the one who was *so tough*. Wrong; it was denial that was so strong. For the past days I had shoved the

pain of Timothy's loss so deep inside that even I could not find it at times. The house had to be tended to; Matthew still needed at least one parent; the damn dog still had to be walked.

But that sorrow found me as I stood in the shower that morning after; it exploded out of me in a volcanic reaction that brought me to my knees.

I stood in the warm comfort of the shower. Matthew busied himself in the other room, playing some game that only he understood, watching some video on TV that chronicled the adventures of Fireman Dave. It hit me.

It started with a wave of sobs and tears that I could not control. My soul screamed out loud, echoing off the Plexiglas of the shower stall. My uncontrolled fist pounded the plastic of the walls so hard that I was certain it would go right through. Then my insides felt as if someone had reached inside of me and crushed my every organ in his fingers; the air rushing out of my lungs, my heart pounding with fury against the wall of my chest. I bent over in agony only to find my legs stopped working; I collapsed onto the floor of the shower, face just inches from the drain that I was certain had sucked my life down with the water. My chest ached as I heaved for breath, stars and colorful spots dancing before my eyes. I was breathless and sobbing, gasping for air as the fingers tightened their clutch of my entire body.

Somehow I managed to force the shower door opened; it rang with a delirious clatter as it flew open into the toilet the stood near the shower, rattling back towards closed. I literally rolled out of the shower onto the floor, still searching for breath. Unable to climb to my feet, I lumbered out of the bathroom into the kitchen, scrambling across the floor, folded over at the waist like a hunch-less Quasimodo.

Without seeing, I felt my way to the stairs and staggered at the base, having to crawl up each step. Once at the top, I lunged into Timothy's bedroom and collapsed into bed next to

Jennifer, who lay prone and motionless for untold hours. I curled up next to her, awake but hardly aware of my presence.

There we lay, for I don't know how long. Two people physically together, but mentally miles apart. Somehow comforting each other with a mere presence while unable to console ourselves.

I sobbed deeply and painfully into Jennifer's back, as the tears rolled silently down her cheek onto the pillow that stilled smelled of Timothy.

Chapter 31

A Mother's Voice

"The tears that mama cried for her lost son..."
--Buddy Jewell

I haven't spoken much about Timothy's mother in these pages.

I guess, that is because I intended this recording to be my words, my memories, my feelings, my sorrow. I dare not speak for Jennifer under most circumstances, particularly this one. Believe me, she is as devastated as I over the loss of Timothy, make no mistake about that. Perhaps, even more so. Mothers have a connection with their children that fathers can never understand or compare. That starts, of course, with nine months in-utero. That connection is heightened as mother and child spend so much time together in those first hours, days, and months of life. The way our society is configured now, the mother has more opportunity to connect in those initial stages, with hospital time together and three months away from work.

It's ironic, in a way; when Timothy was born, Jennifer went through a spell of post-partum depression. Timothy's birth sent her into a funk. Now, just a few short years after she fought out of that spell, Timothy's death plunged her into another. I can only imagine that this

depression is far deeper than the former. The depth of that pain was spelled out on one hot summer's evening in August.

I have been repeatedly told that the death of a child is one of the leading causes of divorce in this country. The stress and strain of mourning over a child seems to pull even the closest of people apart. Perhaps that has to do with the inherent selfishness and solitude of the mourning process. It is something that one must go through alone. Even if you share every thought; every feeling; every detail with your partner, the mourning jacket is a custom-tailored job. Everyone walks through this valley, this canyon, alone.

Jennifer and I have worked hard as possible to stay together. We are free to share any thought with the other; we encourage each other to be as open and honest as needed, no pretending or masking of feelings is allowed. If one of us is in a good mood (or as good as this will allow), the other should not be afraid to express his or her sadness and despair. There is no wrong time to talk.

I was standing that August night, in front of a collage of Timothy pictures we had taken at the Sears at his third birthday. Although the photos had been on the wall since the previous October, there were a couple I hadn't really noticed. The ones we didn't get blow up into 8"x10" size for the wall, wallet size for portability, or 5"x7" for distribution to the family hung here.

She came down from putting Matthew to sleep. The Red Sox game droned on quietly in the other room when she came up and stood next to me, clutching a Diet Pepsi.

"What'ca looking at?"

"My boy," I answered. "God, he had grown so much." She reached up and took the frame down of the wall. Pulling the small metal tabs of the back, she pulled the backing out of the frame to expose a stack of photos inside. When we got new studio photos, we laid them over the

previous set, creating a small historical archive of our sons' lives. As we spread the pictures across the pale white linen of the dining room table, we could see him grow before us. Pictures from 3 months yielded to pictures at 6 months. The 9-month-old shots followed, pursued by a batch from his first birthday. Timothy sat smiling beside a giant number 1. Next were images of an 18-month-old toddler that grew by page into a two-year-old. Finally, the photos at the front of the frame demonstrated the last professional pictures we would have of him.

"God, I miss him," I sighed, looking across his brief history.

"My little Clamshell," she cried softly looking at the images before her.

"He never did like that nickname, did he?"

"No. He used to say *I'm not a clamshell; I'm a little boy.*" She sobbed audibly, and tears rolled from her hazel eyes. Timothy got his eyes from her; he had his own variation, with more green. But his eyes certainly did not come from my brown eyes.

"He liked Sweet Dumpling Pie even less." She managed to say between sobs, working in an ironic laugh.

"I just can't stop thinking about the day he died in my arms," she shook her head and dropped her chin swiftly towards the floor. "Feeling his heavy, limp body in my arms and then having to try to say goodbye and leave him at the hospital. It was the absolute worst day of my life." I know what she meant; I relive that day over and over in my head, too.

"And then, I start thinking about how I sat at his bedside all day and night; I was exhausted." Absolute exhaustion was the only thing that got her out of his room, and only to sleep in a little cell just outside the PICU. "I was with my boy for his entire hospital stay right up to his last night on earth." I knew all of this already, but could tell that she wanted to get it out of her head, her heart, her soul, so I let her continue, looking down at the pictures of our lost son.

“I watched him get worse overnight and knew he was going to die. I told you he would.” I shook my head. She was right; as much as I wanted to deny it, pretend that Timothy was coming home with us, she knew it from the very start, when he was first rolled into Salem Hospital. “I just sat there watched him die. For a week. There was absolutely nothing that I could do.” She never took her eyes off her boy as she spoke, much like that week in the hospital.

“When they took him off of the ventilator, god, it took nearly 10 minutes. I watched my son die before my eyes. I never dreamed I would have to do that.” We walked out of the room, leaving the pictures spread across the table. It was unlike her to leave a mess and not clean it up immediately. We sat on the living room couch, a silent television flashing myriad pictures from across the room, unwatched.

Ours is a small living room; the house is not large. A beige sectional sofa consumes the length of one wall. An entertainment center covers much of the opposite wall, stocked with a television, VCR, DVD player and a stereo. A drawer at the base of the center used to be packed tight with videos and discs that Timothy watched – all of which are gone now; the drawer is empty, save for the two or three that Matthew watches. On each of the off-white plaster walls, pock-marked from the boys’ rough-housing and slightly bowed and puckered with age, are countless pictures of the boys from various studio sessions: pictures from Matthew’s eighth birthday hang next to pictures from Timothy’s third. On the right wall, directly above Matthew’s computer, hangs one of the photo collages that my sister put together for Timothy’s memorial service; pictures from throughout his short life.

Timothy’s pictures will age with time; but their subject will not.

“You know,” she started, “Before we had children, I never realized how much love I could have in my heart.” She glanced at the near-life-size headshot of Timothy on the wall. “And

now one has been taken away from me forever. All I have left are my memories and pictures of my little Clamshell. It's just not enough.

"I still love him, you know. Maybe even more than before. It's hard to believe that I could possibly love him any more, but I do." I sat silent, listening to her words, which flowed in a series of bullet-point thoughts, as if she had taken a mental list of her every thought and was reading it off verbatim, oddly clinical and emotional at the same time. "You know our lives have been damaged – permanently changed by his death."

"Damage is a good word," I whispered under my breath.

"It's how I am feel every minute of the day." She turned to look at me, watching her daub away the tears that rolled down her face. "I feel like damaged goods. Everything I do and say seems to have some connection to Tim. I wake every day with my first thoughts of him and how happy I was when he was alive and in my life. I spend the whole day thinking of him or seeing things that remind me of him everywhere I go."

"Remember how we had to go to the funeral home to identify him?" That was a truly brutal task.

The funeral home was a large, square brick building, with tall pillars out front. One of those buildings that could only hold a mortuary. After working out the fineries of the cremation, Michael, the funeral director, with grace and polish informed us in a most apologetic voice that we had to identify Timothy before they could cremate him. We walked down a narrow, twisting set of stairs and into the basement. A special viewing area was set up to shield loved ones from the activities that took place behind the doors. He was rolled out on a cold, metallic table for our viewing. It was clearly him. He donned a knit hat to cover the gargantuan rows of stitches on his head, and covered with a sheet to hide the incision lines from the autopsy.

“Can I see the incisions from the autopsy?” Jennifer asked, always the nurse. She knew what they did to her precious boy, but needed to see, to make sure her image met with reality. As the mortician lifted the sheets and turned his body slightly on the table so that we could see better, we spied the long slices in his trunk. A long V-shape that traveled from his shoulders down to his waist was stitched up hastily, without the care and precision of a surgeon. As he held the body, I could see underneath Timothy, where pools of pinkish fluid floated on the table. The fluid, iced-over in some areas from the cold, was specked with tiny white chunks of unidentified matter. I brushed my hand across his lifeless cheek; it was cold to the touch and completely unresponsive to the pressure of my hand. He lay still, unmoving, on the table.

“Do you need any more time with him?” Michael asked. I looked to Jennifer, whose eyes were flooded with tears. She shook her head, No.

“I guess were all set.” The mortician covered Timothy with the cloth, reminding me of how we used to tuck him in at night. They spared us the spectacle of watching him be rolled away, as Michael led us back up the stairs. “Bye, Timothy.” I called over my shoulder as we went.

“Then to see him again almost a week later lying in that white coffin with a winter hat on his head to cover the incision lines from surgery, ready to be rolled into the fire.

“I’m glad we had them put on some new pajamas,” I sighed, remembering my errand to the department store to pick out a new set of SpongeBob jammies for him to wear. We had gotten rid of everything else. “And, I am sure he appreciated that we had him cremated with all of his favorite things; his tool belt, his truck, his hard hat.”

“But, we forgot to bury with him was a picture of us,” she lamented. “I will always regret that. But, I am glad you were with him when it happened.”

I sat at the small chapel in the middle of the cemetery waiting three hours for him to be cremated. I walked through the headstones looking for one that marked the death of one as young as Timothy. I spoke aloud the ages of the residents. “92, 84, 73, 88, 54. Oh, there’s a young one. I must have looked at a hundred stones before I saw one marked Baby Jones with no dates. Near that was a six-year-old who perished in the mid 1900’s. I made my way back to the chapel, still marking ages. “77, 103, 45...”

I sat back on the front steps and picked up where I left off with the young David Copperfield. When the cremation was done, I was called into the lobby to pick him up.

“Your son is ready now, Mr. Burke,” the crematory director called to me. As I stood up, my mind flashed and I saw Timothy standing in the lobby, maybe after some kind of medical procedure, a smile on his face, thrilled to see me coming. As I stepped through the door, I didn’t see a happy little boy, but a small, white shopping bag sitting on the counter.

“Well, this is not something they teach you in parenting school,” I tried to joke in order to keep my tears at bay. She smiled kindly and handed me a pen to sign the requisite paperwork. I stepped out the door, walking with my boy for the first time in weeks, holding him not by the hand, but by plastic handles.

As I headed home, I was struck by a sudden urge to visit the town pier where I loved to take the boys. We had been there not long before, the boys running around on the floats as they bobbed on the gentle waves of the ocean. Timothy had just gotten the confidence to step from

float to float. A small boat, used as a shuttle to take people out to their boats sat on one of the floats. Timothy climbed in and smiled that smile.

“Can we go for a ride on the boat?” he asked.

“Not our boat,” I answered.

“Can we get a boat someday?” he asked hopefully.

“Maybe someday. If not, we could go on a boat ride. Remember last summer when the three of us took the boat out to Misery Island?” He shook his head No to the memory of our trip to the small, uninhabited island in Salem Harbor. “Yeah, you were awful young. Maybe we can do that again.”

I sat on the same float with my little white paper bag, dangling my feet in the sea, head hung as low as physically possible. It was a busy day at the pier, with numerous boaters and boats coming and going. Not one person could have imagined what I had in my bag; most probably thought it was lunch. Without a word, I stood up after 15 minutes and walked up the metallic ramp back to my car.

“I thought burying him and erecting a stone in his honor at the cemetery would give me some closure but it hasn’t,” Jennifer confided from the couch. “I wake up sometimes thinking he is still alive.”

“I know what you mean,” I answered. “Everyday when I get up, I walk past his room and expect to see him lying on his bed asleep, with the pillow half-way off and the blanket at his feet.” Jennifer laughed slightly at the memory of him sleeping uncovered, and unconcerned.

“And when I get home, I still expect to see him waiting for me at the door like he used to. But, he’s not there.”

“I just am barely functioning every day,” she rolled on in a self-imposed monologue, as if hearing nothing that I said. “Everyone says, *Oh, you look great!* and they are glad to see me out and around. But, I am only doing it because I have Matthew to think about. He is suffering as much as we are, you know.”

“It’s just not as obvious because of the Autism.” Matthew is clearly affected by the loss of his brother. It is not overt, but if you know him as we do, you would see mourning in his behavior, his attitude, and his actions. He is angry that his brother is gone; he is sad to lose his playmate; he is lonely without Timothy. Matthew is not a clingy boy; he is not very affectionate or in need of physical contact. But, since Timothy’s death, Matthew has been hanging all over Jennifer or me, looking for – craving – physical attention. He has shown flashes of great anger, reverting to the temper tantrums of his younger years: throwing things, dropping to the floor in protest, screaming out obscenities to show his wrath. These are behaviors he hadn’t seen in years. And he has made no secret of his missing his sibling. Often throughout the day, he will say out of the blue: *Why am I sad? I am crying. Because I miss Timothy.* Matthew is not one to speak his feelings; he simply cannot. But here his feelings were so overwhelming that he found a way to constructively relay his emotions to us. And when we visit the cemetery on the weekends together, Matthew always flashes the I Love You hand signal, blows his brother a kiss, and wraps his arms around himself in a hug for Timothy. He misses his brother; we all do.

“I miss his voice, his smile, his soft blond hair,” Jennifer continued, “but most of all his touch. I loved getting hugs and kisses from him, talking to him about things he wanted to do in the future.”

“He gave good hugs,” I added for no particular reason other than it was true.

“I will never talk to him again; never hold him again; never put him to bed again; never see him smile again or comfort him when he is crying.” Then, she started crying – the kind of deep, intense crying that no amount of consolation could stop. After a few minutes, she managed to control her sobbing, but her anger started to show.

“Look at me! I am changed forever because of the death of my son.” She started counting the ways that she was damaged on her fingers. “I can’t function in a healthy way or, or, or find any comfort in anything that people say are supposed to comfort you. I, I, I, I cry everyday. I have anger everyday. Hell, I don’t want to get out of bed most days because I feel that there is no point to go on with things because my Little Clamshell is not there.” The tears started again. “His ashes are buried in an urn under the ground. That is no comfort to me and will never be.”

“I look at the world differently now that he is gone,” she went on. “Nothing is fun anymore. I cannot enjoy doing anything and even if I do, it is only transient because that pain is always there looming in my head and my heart. This family is in shambles.”

“We’re not in a shambles as a family; maybe as individuals, but not as a family,” I rebutted feebly.

“This family is forever changed by his death; don’t you even try to deny it. We’re a mess, look at us. You’re sullen and silent most of the time; I spend most of my days crying and miserable; Matthew is a train wreck. This family will never be the same.” I could not disagree with that.

“Now, we are also trying to prepare for the birth of our third. He’s coming, you know. And we’ve gotten nothing done. I have to buy so much stuff, and I’ve done none of it!

“So, let's go to the store...”

“I should be happy to have another baby; at the same time I am thinking about Tim and what a great brother he would have been. I think about what it would be like to have my three boys together.”

“But, people say having another baby will help...”

“I know, but I am so afraid that it won't be the case for me.” She is nervous that Christopher will somehow be harmed by all the sadness and pain she has felt through all her months of inconsolable grief. As though her depression will pass through the placental barrier. It is simply impossible for her to not anguish over her lost son while trying to accept the coming of a new one. As far as I could see, it is just too much for a mother to bear. It is for me.

“All I can do now is remember how things were before June 9th.”

“It's all we have now.”

“Why did this have to happen to a happy, healthy boy; he didn't deserve this death sentence.” I had no answers then and I still have none now. “Even if we knew why, it doesn't change anything. He is still dead and that will never change. There will never be another Tim.

I couldn't have said it better, no matter how many words I might use.

Chapter 32

August 20

We'll meet again on some bright highway,
with songs to sing and tales to tell.
But, I am just a pilgrim on this road, boys.
Until I see you, fare thee well.
-- Steve Earle

He was buried on August 20.

It was a day that had little significance, just another summer Saturday. But it is a day that will forever have meaning for us now.

It was another lovely summer day. I am not sure why I keep mentioning this; except that there are so many things I would rather have been doing with Timothy on such a day, rather than burying him.

The family gathered once again, this time in a field of grass dying from too much sun and not enough water, pitted with the leave-behinds of a flock of Canada Geese that summered in the cemetery. I had driven by this cemetery countless times in my decades in this town, but had never gone in. Other than to maybe dump yard waste in the hollow out back – since closed to dumping. Until Timothy, I didn't even know how to spell *cemetery*; I never needed to.

Jennifer, Matthew and I were greeted with hugs and handshakes, smiles and tears, by uncles and grandparents. The reverend from church came, sacrificing a couple of hours on a Saturday afternoon to invoke prayers over Timothy's hole-in-the-ground. Sometime that morning, or maybe the day before, the public works crew used their backhoe to scoop out a couple of feet of dirt, where his remains would lay. For a cremation, the hole needs to be only two feet deep or so.

We carried with us the little wooden box that held Timothy's sand-like form. His remains came in a ceramic container, collected together in a small plastic bag – one that he might have used to carry his lunch to school one day. Jennifer had lovingly split the contents of the bag into the two wooden boxes and propped the second one on the middle shelf of the dining room cabinet, where Timothy also lay. The first of the matching boxes was here with us, ready to be shut off from the light of day.

The box is tiny, maybe big enough to be someone's cigarette holder. A beautiful, light-colored wood, oak maybe, adorned with a simple brass nameplate on the top. It looked, appropriately, like a tiny coffin – sans the handles – that a kid might use to bury a pet hamster, or something.

An ivory-colored cement container lay positioned in the hole; we were to lay Timothy's wooden box within that container and place the top on. A special sealant would hold the top in place, protecting the little wooden box for an eternity.

The priest opened his book and started invoking prayers . We all huddled around the hole in a crushing silence. As he spoke, the sound of children playing in the playground of a distant apartment building swelled in my ears. Shrieks of joy and carelessness pierced my sorrow with dagger-like penetration. I could imagine a gaggle of little boys, all about Timothy's age, dancing

with glee as they stood on line to slip down the slide, flew high in the air on a parent-powered swing, and scaled the myriad climbing structures that offered to them the only heaven a child should know.

Timothy stood at the top of the slide, little white sneakers poking just over the edge, peering down with great trepidation at the descent below him. “You can do it, pal-of-mine,” I called out in encouragement, the nickname sounding more like the horse, palomino, than anything else. The Boston Celtics hat resting on the top of his head shadowed his eyes from the bright Florida sun. He turned around and dashed back through the huge jungle-gym structure that stood outside a shopping mall in Bonita Springs, content to jog across the chain-reinforced bridge, giggling with delight as it swayed with his every step.

“Come on, buddy!” I called to his shrinking form as he sped away from me. “You can do it! I know you can.”

“It’s too high, Papa,” he called back, seeking out the smaller, less-steep slide on the other end of the jungle-gym. Though he was not much more than two, there was no way I was going to let him chicken-out from the daunting challenge of the larger slide. “I don’t wanna go down that one,” he growled, with a great determination that reminded of why I called him Monster. His little face peered over the plastic sides of the jungle-gym, standing on his tip-toes to look over the rail at me.

“Then you’re going with me!” I yelled and dashed towards the narrow, kid-sized ladder to the platform where he stood. A comic shriek relayed that he knew I was coming and he ran again for the far end, and the relative safety of the smaller slide. I squeezed my adult-frame

through the opening and quickly grabbed him in my arms. He laughed with a mixture of sheer delight and nervous uncertainty as we headed back towards the big slide. “Let’s go, Monster. You’re all mine.” I snarled gently in his ear, pecking his cheek for reassurance. Somehow I sat down on the top of the slope, doing a bit of a limbo to get under a bar at the top, and held him firmly in my lap.

“Are you ready?” He nodded gingerly and we dove down to the bottom, taking an inch of flight as we hit the hump at the mid-point of the ride. At the bottom, we landed firmly on my feet and bounced to a stand, Timothy bursting with smiles and joy.

“Let’s do it again!” he shrieked as he squirmed out of my arms and headed for the ladder. “I do it myself this time,” he announced as his little shoes bounced along towards the slide.

*I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord.
Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though he dies.
And everyone who has life, and has committed himself to me in faith,
shall not die for ever.*

The reverend stood at the top of the little hole that had been dug, incanting words from his little red book. The same priest who presided over the memorial service again came to our aid.

*O God, whose beloved Son took children into his arms and
blessed them: Give us grace to entrust Timothy to your never-
failing care and love, and bring us all to your heavenly
kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and
reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for
ever. Amen.*

The assembled murmured an *Amen* in reflexive response to the Christian upbringing most of us had undergone. I was taught in those religious education classes that *Amen* means *We*

Believe. However, on this day, I could not utter the word, as I certainly did not believe that Timothy was blessed through his dying; we were not blessed; nobody was.

Most merciful God, whose wisdom is beyond our understanding:

Since the moment this happened, I have been, and still am, trying to understand what happened, why it happened, why Timothy, why us? I stood there wishing for the faith to be able to turn all of my questions over to the blissful philosophy: *Because God wants it this way*; and we mere mortals are not to understand everything He does. It must be so calming to believe in The Plan, His Will, His Way. I didn't before; I sure as Hell don't now.

*Deal graciously with Timothy's family in their grief.
Surround them with your love, that they may not be
overwhelmed by their loss, but have confidence in your
goodness, and strength to meet the days to come; through
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Again, a gurgle of *Amen* from the group. Do I even need to say how hollow that promise sounded that morning, and even more so as I write this so many days later? I wondered if the priest recognized the crushing irony in turning for comfort to the One who caused this pain. Almost like asking the guy who just robbed you for a loan.

*In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life
through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty
God our brother Timothy, and we commit his body to the ground;
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless
him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him
and be gracious to him, the Lord lift up his countenance upon
him and give him peace. Amen.*

At some point in the ceremony, I don't remember exactly when, I took Timothy's little wooden holder and crouched down onto the grass. I admired the name etched into the plaque on

the lid. *Timothy William Burke*. I smoothed my finger over the letters in one last attempt to touch him. Without looking up, I reached down into the hole and lay him within the cement container. Someone handed me the container lid, and I set it in place. I recalled the funeral director's admonition to use force when setting the lid, so that the seal would take. Pressing down as hard as I could, but I didn't get the sense that the lid was holding in place. I lifted the lid and it raised slightly, not taking hold; it seemed as if Timothy were fighting to get out before the door closed completely.

"I can't get this thing to take..." I mumbled into the hole in frustration, pressing down some more.

Out of nowhere, I felt Matthew's 60 pounds land heavy on my back.

"Let me help, Papa," Matthew offered; even in the end, Matthew could not tolerate Timothy getting all the attention. Suddenly, I felt the pillowy seal take a grip as the lid suddenly dropped into place. A couple of hearty tugs could not move the lid an inch.

"Thanks, Matthew," I said in confusion, as a wave of uncomfortable laughter waffled through the air.

"May I read something," I asked the group as I assembled myself above ground. I pulled a folded page with a poem I had written. I hadn't written poetry – or had much use for it – since I was a sullen kid high school. It was an escape then; perhaps these words were an attempt to escape now.

I had written the poem at work actually; in about ten minutes or so one day. I had been looking at a picture of Timothy as the sun set behind him into the Gulf of Mexico.

I remembered that day when I took the picture as well as any. We stood on St. Petersburg Beach watching the sun settle down into the Gulf of Mexico, just he and I. Jennifer and Matthew

went back to the room to get ready for bed, but Monster and I stayed behind to catch a few photographs of the setting sun.

I don't know if he knew the significance of the sunset, or that it would rise again on the other side of the Florida peninsula tomorrow, rising out of the waters of Tampa Bay behind us, like I saw with Matthew just the day before near Fort DeSoto. I think Timothy saw this as a chance to spend time with his Dad, in as much as I saw it as time to spend with my son, my true best friend.

"Don't go into the water, Tim," I suggested to him, "you don't have a bathing suit on." My request was soon unheeded.

"OK, you can get your feet wet, just not your pants..."

"Well, your pants are wet now, try to keep your shirt dry at least," but still my requests were unheard as he and I waddled into the Gulf up to his chest. He looked at me with one of his knowing grins, knowing that he was getting away with something. But, we were on vacation, and I didn't much care. I was just happy to have him there with me. "You know mama's going to be angry when we get back to the room." Another ear-to-ear smile. "And, she's going to be mad at me, not you." Timothy splashed water up into the air; it cascaded down all around him, leaving darkened circles on his red and blue-striped t-shirt, and glistening sparkles in his spiky blonde hair.

"We've been missing the sunset, you know." I told him as we waded out of the surf to get the camera. We stood in the soft white sand watching the waves roll onto the beach; birds of all

varieties dancing along the edge of the water, some floating along the crest of the waves; one hungry bird lunged into the sea and pulled a fish out with his beak.

“Check that out, Timothy,” I pointed out the bird bopping on the waves, about to eat his dinner. Timothy slid the dark black sunglasses down his nose to get a better view as the bird threw his head back and swallowed the fish in its entirety.

“He ate it all!” Timothy squealed in delight. “He ate the whole fish, Papa. Gulp!” On the horizon a speed boat grabbed his attention as it leapt about the waves, slapping hard on the surface of the ocean as it cruised along. “He’s going fast! I want to go in a fast boat! Zooooom!” The bird ducked beneath the surface, looking for more.

“Watch him, Tim. Where’s he going to come up?”

“Over there,” he pointed to the spot where we watched the bird dine a moment before. But, it resurfaced 20 feet to the right, this time empty of a catch.

“He can swim under water, just like you can.” We were starting to teach Timothy how to hold his breath under water.

We turned our attention back to the setting sun, as it neared its entry point in the sea.

“The sun is almost in the water, see? Timothy, does the sun go into the water?”

“No,” he answered knowingly.

“What would happen then?”

“It would go out! And never go on again!” He replied without the slightest irony. He knew the answer, and knew I was being silly for asking it. Imagine, the sun going into the ocean....

“Hold still. Don’t move.” I reached out and positioned his chin just so, so that I could catch the reflection of the setting sun in his sunglasses. “Let me try again.” He stood statue-still

and let me move his head just enough to see a spot of orange in the black of his shades, almost an intentional red-eye shot. “Got it!” He was a natural.

“Look at that boat, Tim.” I pointed out a sunset-cruise ship floating by. “People go out on that boat to watch the sunset from the sea. It must be beautiful.”

“Can we go on that boat, Papa!” He stepped a few paces towards the lip of the gulf to get a better look.

“We’ll have to talk to Mama about that, my friend. We’ll see.” The boat sailed past the sun, started to turn about and come back. “Turn your head and smile, boy,” I ordered. Timothy turned his body slightly in my direction and kicked his head back, flashing as big a grin as he could muster, showing all his teeth. The camera flashed in the limited light of the day, reflecting off his no-longer-needed sunglasses.

“Boy, I hope that boat doesn’t get in the way of these pictures,” I called to Tim who was busy chasing a gull along the sands. He meandered back to my side. “See the sailboat out there, with its big sails? “

“Just like my boat in the tub!” he recalled the little wooden sailboat he received as a gift from a former co-worked of mine.

“That’s right. Maybe someday we’ll have a real sailboat, huh? Would you like that?”

“Oh yeah! Look papa, the sun is almost in the water!”

The sun found its way into the sea that night. I had often heard that older folks are *in the twilight years*; the long day of life has nearly finished and the sun was slowly setting on their existence as they readied for the long sleep of death.

As I watched Timothy revel in the sunset, as the day faded into black, little could I imagine that he was in the twilight of his life. In less than two months, it would be he who was fading away into darkness.

The words to the poem came suddenly and without relent. As the clutter and clatter of the office place prattled on around me, my muse had awoken from years of sleep and whispered into my ear an ode to a precious boy who was taken from this world far too soon.

Twilight Too Soon
August 20, 2005

It's hard to believe,
that night by the sea
that you were in twilight of your life.
After all,
you were only three.

It's hard to believe,
that morning when I left you,
that you would be leaving me
never to return.

It's hard to believe,
that when I saw you again
You couldn't see me.
When I told you "I love you,"
You couldn't hear me.
When I kissed your cheek ,
You couldn't feel me.
When I held your hand,
You couldn't hold mine back .

Now I can't hold back :
the Pain
the Tears
the Sadness
the Anger
After all,
you were a part of me

I spend my days now thinking
how this could be?
And how it used to be.
And why I wasn't I
your Superman, your Mr. Incredible
and somehow made it all different.
After all,
I am your father.

You relied on me;
You needed me to protect you.
I let you down.

I was there for the bumps and the bruises.
I was there for the cuts and the scrapes.
I was there to blow your nose.
I was there when you needed to sleep.
Or to wake up.
I was there when you needed to run and to play .

But I wasn't there when times were at their worst.
I failed you when you needed me the most.
Something hurt you, and I could do nothing to
stop it.

I did not do my job.
And now, I've lost that job.
I had it taken from me when you were only three.

It's hard to believe,
as I see the sun set behind you,
the joy on your face, the love in your heart,
that it would be our last sunset together.
I will see many more.
But never with the same eyes;
and never with same joy .

And now it is night.
Though the clocks say otherwise.
It is dark in my heart.
It is cold in my heart.
Will my sun ever rise again?

After all,
you were my sun.
And now you are gone.

They tell me that you are in a Better Place;
They tell me that you are with God.
But, I can't see how any place is better
than here, with me.

I see you lain in the ground at my feet.
You do not belong there;
you do not belong in Heaven;
you belong with me.

Now all I have are the memories,
and the photographs
like this one,
that make me laugh and make me cry
all in the same breath.
A breath I desperately wish I could give to you.

If you can hear me, Timothy ,
thank you for those memories;
and thank you for the photographs
that you so clearly loved to take.
These are little pieces of you
that show the world how beautiful, how loving,
and how wonderful
you always were and will always be.

But wherever you are,
whatever you are seeing,
whatever you are hearing,
whatever you are feeling,
whoever's hand you are holding,
you will be forever in my heart
if not in my arms.
That will have to be enough.
For it is all I have left of you.

After all,
You are my son, forever.

Almost on queue, a pair of quiet cemetery workers wheeled up in the background a large wheelbarrow full of the dirt that would soon embrace my son. No longer will I be able to hold him safe, but this mound of dirt will. I will no longer be able to tuck him in safely at night, under the warmth of his Thomas the Tank Engine comforter; but he will be tucked into the soil that most little boys take for granted, use for a toy: making mud-pies or packing a pail full of moist dirt only to dump out a cylinder of soil for a castle.

Let us go forth in the name of Christ.

The reverend concluded the service, and closed his book.

“Is that it?” I asked sullenly, through a voice of tears. “Aren’t they going to cover him now?”

“Most people,” the priest started with the softest and sincerest voice I could imagine, “they don’t want to be here for that.”

“Well, I do,” I replied, not quite sure why I wanted to be there. “Can I stay?” I asked the cemetery guys; they looked down at their reflexively shuffling feet, mumbling a response in the affirmative. “The rest of you don’t have to stay.” Yet, no one left.

The worker rolled the wheel barrow up to the hole with a shrug of indifference. He lifted the barrow slightly, letting a few grains of dirt tumble down into the hole. The other fellow readied his shovel for the task.

“May I?” I asked, wanting to heave the first shovel of dirt. “Like they do in the movies...” I tried to joke.

Taking the shovel, I scooped as much dirt as I could muster and leveled it over the hole. “Goodbye, Monster,” I let go the dirt and watched it cascade down onto the pristine white box. Without hesitation, I turned to scoop another shovel of dirt and dropped it down onto Timothy.

Somehow, I was possessed with the notion that I alone must bury my son; maybe as my last act as his father. Like so many other things, it was my responsibility to close his book; to write the last chapter of his time on Earth; to be there for him in the cemetery after his death, the way I wasn't at that play yard in the closing moments of his life.

"Can I borrow that?" I asked the guy to hand me an iron rake that lay on the ground near his feet. "This will work much better." I furiously pulled at the dirt in the wheelbarrow as the white box disappeared from sight. In moments, I had the barrow empty and the hole full. "I forget, do I pack the soil down before rolling out the sod, or leave it loose?"

"Um," he stammered in reply, taken back by my taking over the burial, "we always pack it down..." I turned to the loose mound of dirt and started stomping with my feet to solidify the base for the sod. My newly-shined shoes and freshly dry-cleaned suit picked up a layer of dust from the small cloud I was kicking up.

"Anybody want to join in?" I asked my family. "It's a bit therapeutic, actually." More foot-shuffling and eyes being cast to the ground. "How's that?" I asked when the ground looked good and tamped to my eyes.

"Should be OK, I guess." He motioned to his cohort to get the rolls of grass that stood nearby. He got to his knees and positioned the first roll in place; I joined him on the ground and rolled the grass into place before he could. I dropped the second roll next to the first and unfurled it. The same with the third and fourth pieces of grass until the hole was completely obscured. I tamped around the edges of the sod to nestle the pieces properly in place. As I finished, rolls of sweat now mingling with my tears, I noticed a hump in the grass right above where Timothy was. I planted my foot as firmly as I could to level the grass there, but it would not flatten.

“That will flatten over time,” the cemetery worker said absently. I couldn’t help but think about all the advice I had gotten over these weeks that my sorrow will fade *in time*. I wondered which would be the first to abate, my pain or this mound of earth.

The mound won; it is flat where Timothy lays now.

Chapter 33

A Born-Again Agnostic

In this cemetery mist stands a newborn atheist.
Even if You do exist, You're far from almighty...
I'll prayed and prayed don't let me lose what my heart adores.
Are miracles old-fashioned news? No healing hands were ever used.
Faithfulness was my excuse. Tell me what was Yours?
-- Allison Moorer

I used to believe in God.

Before Timothy died, I was an absolutist in terms of there being a Supreme Being. I just had a hard time believing that *All of This* is a giant cosmic accident. A tiny speck of matter explodes for no apparent reason, and expands at immeasurable speed. Stars and planets just form, again for no real reason. And there just happens to be this one planet that formed just close enough to the right star to be amenable to life. Whoops. And on this planet, there is water and a proper atmosphere to sustain that life. Whoops again. And life just somehow starts! Lucky break, there. As for the evolution thing, I see no reason why a deity couldn't start the evolutionary path himself.

No, someone, something somewhere had to have a role in all of this. This all can't be a mistake of fate.

My epiphany came in seeing Matthew being born. Knowing how he started, how he was created, as a single cell and then grew inside my wife into a beautiful baby; it has to be planned-out. Before then, I was a reformed Catholic. It's not that I didn't have any interest in what they were saying in church, it was all the noise they made outside of church I had trouble following. People who don't allow women to be priests just because they are women, others who say that a gay man cannot be bishop, then turn around and tell us that Jesus loves us all the same. People who lobby hardest against sexual protection are also steadfastly opposed to abortion. And I don't even want to get into the priest and altar boy ugliness.

No, I was never an atheist; I was more agnostic. I believed in God, not whole-heartedly, I guess, but I did. All the teachings in the Bible and all the stories about Jesus left me doubtful. I mean, the same book that tells me that man started with Adam and Eve (who had two sons and no daughters); tells me that it rained for 40 days and this fellow named Noah somehow ported pairs of all the animals in the world in a boat; then tells me that God sent his only son with the intent that he be executed. I was never sure what to believe.

But, after Matthew's birth, we started attending an Episcopal parish, and I started to come around to the notion of Jesus and Heaven and all that is told to us. If God can create life, why can't He create an After-Life. Seeing, too, that the after-party was far better than the prom, why couldn't the After-Life be better than life. It started to make more sense. Until now. Until Timothy.

I have been told all my life that *God Giveth and God Taketh Away*. If He truly is God, it certainly is His prerogative to take back that which he gave us. None of us is truly a gift from God; we are merely on loan. Sometimes, it seems, He calls in his chits sooner than other times.

OK; so I made this next part up. The guy you are about to meet is fictitious; he is a composite character, based on people I know (who shall remain nameless). Everything said during this artificial conversation were things said to me in the time after Timothy died, or things I have heard or taught to be true. I rolled all these comments together in to the mouths of a character, loosely based on myriad people I know⁴, to show what not to say to someone who lost a child. And, to explain to these same people why I lost what little faith I had.

My friend Gordon is truly a Christian. He believes it all with his heart and soul. I am jealous in a way; even when I was learning to be a Believer, I never had that absolute belief in it all. There were always nagging doubts. Maybe it's the writer in me, but I can see the entire Bible being written as a work of fiction; I can see Kings and Leaders sitting around trying to devise ways of getting people to behave and remain in their control; issuing promises of eternal bliss and grandeur in exchange for being good. People living in squalor would respond to such promise without question or hesitation.

I see story-teller's tricks crop up from time to time, like why everything in the Bible seemed to take 40 days. It made it easier for story tellers to remember. *Let's see, Moses was in the desert for 57 days; Jesus was in the desert for 23 days; Noah was on the boat for 72 days. No wait, Moses was 72, Jesus was 57, and Noah 116. Ah skip it; call 'em all 40 days. How else am I going to keep this straight?*

But, not Gordon. He believed it all, and made sure you knew about it. Not that his love of discussion is a bad thing. I have heard religious platitudes from countless people in the months since Timothy died. He actually gave me the first opportunity to debate the point.

⁴ No, it is not you. Stop guessing.

I agreed to meet Gordon one evening – albeit reluctantly – at a restaurant in town. It was a nice little place right on the beach. It’s been there for generations, passing through different owners, moving through different evolutions and being called by a different name at each turn. I grew up knowing it as a fried-food joint, mostly aimed at the takeout crowd; today it is a fine dining establishment, steeped in class and culture, and price, too.

The hostess escorted us to the table, a pair of menus in hand. She pulled out a chair and smiled broadly.

We sat in a table along a wall of windows that overlooked the beach, and placed quick orders for a couple of beers. I couldn’t help but look down at the rocks below and remember playing there on Timothy’s last night with us.⁵

“What will you have, my friend,” Gordon called from behind the menu. It was one of those tall, full-size menus, faux-leather cover embossed with gold lettering on the cover. Laminated pages inside all held together with a thick piece of string that dangled in a tassel towards the table.

“I’m not that hungry.” I admitted. “Maybe just a drink or three.” I was still in my want-to-be alcoholic phase and was putting in as much effort as I could towards that end.

Gordon decided on steak and an offer to split an appetizer.

⁵ This bit is true; I have been to that restaurant and have sat in the window overlooking those rocks and remembering.

“Sure you pick.” A smartly-dressed young man, likely a Salem State College student poured a twin set of glasses full of water and ice before offering a basket of bread that was obscured with a white linen napkin. I sipped gingerly at the drink.

“So, how are you doing?” he asked, placing his menu down.

“Pretty rotten, you?” Soft piano music swelled into the room. I couldn’t tell if it was being piped in or perhaps being played live in the lounge.

“We’re not here to talk about me. I am fine.”

Gordon took a glance around for the waitress. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but I’ve been praying for you, every day.”

“I don’t place much credence in prayer these days. I prayed my ass off for a full week, and it did Timothy no good. I can’t tell you how many people were praying for him. It did nothing.”

“You don’t know that. You said he died peacefully, no pain, right?” I nodded my head, not sure where he was going. “Maybe that was his answer to the prayers. That Timothy die with no pain.”

“He was three-years-old for chrissake. Why let him die at all?” I spun in my chair also looking for the server. All of a sudden, I needed that drink bad.

“You can’t just give up on prayer, just because you didn’t get what you want,” Gordon started. “Remember what Sister Angela used to say in church school. *God always answers your prayers...*”

“...sometimes He just says No.” Ernie and I finished in unison. “Yeah, yeah. I know all that. But why take a three-year-old boy? It makes no sense.”

“Maybe it was all part of His plan all along,” Gordon said to me from across the table.

“God’s plan?” I chagrined. “Killing a three-year-old is part of His plan? They execute people for making plans like that. No deity I want to follow would devise a plan to off a healthy three-year-old. That’s damn psychotic.”

I’ve met people on line, since Timothy died, who have also lost children. People who take absolute solace in the notion of *God’s plan; he’s in a better place; I will see him again someday*. I am envious of these people, their faith, and the comfort they get from that faith. I do not have that absolute certainty in my heart. I tried hard for years to get there; what happened to Timothy destroyed whatever roots had been planted before those roots could fully bloom; perhaps like Timothy was never allowed to fully bloom.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, and I know you won’t or I wouldn’t even say this,” Gordon offered tentatively, “you didn’t know for a fact that Timothy was healthy. He did pass out after all. Maybe...” His argument tailed off when he was the objection in my eyes.

This is not the first time I’d heard the divine plan argument. Over those months, I had a number of people use religious or biblical references as a way to help me cope with the loss of Timothy. I am glad that these people find solace in their faith; I am jealous that they do. For I do not find comfort in religion or faith right now. And let me emphasize the “right now” part. This may change. I just do not know.

I wonder, actually, if it makes things harder to understand, rather than easier.

“Isn’t that a bit harsh?” I replied, coldly. I have to admit upfront, that my friend had a bit of a tricky task in front of him. After repeated unreturned phone calls, I finally decided to call him back and agree to dinner. I was not the person he last saw a few weeks before.

“If, in fact, this is all by His plan or design,” I said through a sip of beer, “I can only question why His plan would include taking a beautiful, healthy child away from such a loving

and caring home; why He would cause so much pain and heartache to people who tried hard to do His work; and why He would take the brother and only friend from an 8-year-old boy already burdened with so much.” I swirled my finger around the top of the beer glass distractedly, doing anything to avoid looking directly at him.

“You can’t look at it that way,” he spoke almost rhetorically, as if he didn’t believe what he was saying himself. He was a Christian; I don’t know if devout is the right word – that implies an almost unshakable faith, an absolute, almost blind faith. Unquestioning. I don’t think he goes that far. But he is a believer, to be sure.

He, like I, believed what we were told growing up. We went to church and religious education classes as children together; skipped church together as teenagers, always making it a point to walk carefully by the church when the service was done to see who the priest was, as he stood in the weekly receiving line at the door. *Oh yeah, Mom. Father Dingle was as long-winded as ever. Didn’t hear a word.* And, when you were expected to be in church each week, it didn’t hurt to have the neighbors see you in the vicinity at some point.

“What other way can I look at it? One day Timothy was fine; the next he was gone. If He had anything to do with it, he has a lot of questions to answer.”

“Such as?”

“Why Timothy? Why us? There are so many rotten people out there whose families are still in tact. Why destroy mine?”

“He doesn’t look at things that way. These Earthly details are not important to Him.”

“We regularly attended church, gave money, worked in the church ministries -- choir, church school teacher, committee memberships, fund-raising help,” my voice rising with each

task I itemized. “Why test our faith so? Hadn't we proven ourselves yet?” The waitress came over.

“Do you folks need a few more minutes?”

“Yes, Caryn.” Gordon was one of those people who use their server's names when ordering. I never use servers' names. Maybe that's why He took Timothy.

“I actually had someone tell me,” I continued, making passing glances at my menu, should Caryn come back, “that He loved children and needed children around him. If He so needed to have more children around Him, then why not take a sickly child; take a child from a neglectful, abusive home; take a child for whom Heaven *would* be a better place. Hell, just leave them in Heaven, for chrissakes.”

“You don't think Heaven is better than here?”

“I'm not convinced of that.”

“Look around you. Children get hurt all the time. Kids get kidnapped, raped, murdered by all sorts of sicko's. Doesn't it make you feel a bit better knowing that will never happen to Timothy?”

“My son collapsed at pre-school; fell face first into a dump truck; inhaled filthy mulch; and choked on it. He was down for God knows how long; and died a week later never having woken up. I'd say that is not a very nice way to go out, would you?”

“I mean,” I continued after a pause, “maybe Heaven would be better for a sickly child; a frail, elderly person short on health; someone alone and unloved. But I can't believe this is true for Timothy. Even if Heaven is all it is said to be, Timothy is still better off surrounded by those who love him and dedicated their lives to care for him. Haven't we been taught that it is better to have love than to have material goods? Wouldn't the same be true about Heaven? That all the

promise that is Heaven would not be better than an average life on Earth, surrounded by a loving family?"

"Look, I'm not here to fight with you. Do we really want to spend out time arguing about something we will, apparently, never agree on?"

"And then," I continued, not hearing his suggestion to stop, "I have been told that we will see Timothy again someday in Heaven. Someday. That is supposed to give me solace."

"And it doesn't?"

"The notion that *someday*, 1, 10, 20, 50 years from now, I will die and hopefully see him again in the afterlife? That is supposed to make me feel better? I want to see him now. I miss him now."

"You don't want to wait that long; I can certainly understand that," Gordon concurred.

A wave of silence engulfed the table, as a wave of the ocean overlapped the rocks where Timothy and I last played; we still have the pink golf ball he found among the rocks that evening.

"I remember reading a story," Gordon started again, "whose moral is that God loves children above all others. And he wants to surround himself with as many children as possible."

"Look, I have no doubt that's true. Who doesn't love children? But He has so many others, why can't he love Timothy from afar and content Himself with those already around him. Why force me to love Timothy from afar? I only had two children...

"...with one on the way, don't forget," he pointed out while pointing his knife towards me.

“Well, yeah; of course.” If he intended to throw me off, he failed. “The amount of grief caused by our loss must far outweigh the happiness He will get from bringing Timothy to be with Him. I can see it no other way. Simple numbers dictate this.”

“What numbers are you talking about?”

“Well, He’s God, right? He can make children like that,” I snapped my fingers. “Down here, we have to wait nine months to create another child; if we are lucky. If He loves children so much, then why not make lots of children in Heaven and not send them down here; if He plans to keep them, why send them here to die face down in the mulch? Why take kids away from the only family they’ve known? Why not make the babies in Heaven, raise them there, and leave ours to us?”

“Look,” Gordon pulled out his napkin to wipe his mouth free of debris left by a French roll before continuing. “We’re all going to die. When we do, some get to Heaven; some do not. Children get a straight ticket there. From what I believe, Heaven is our true Home; not here.”

“Timothy has only one home that I know of. And, he is no longer there.”

“Now, you’re being snide...”

“Maybe I am being selfish and short-sighted, but it’s all I have right now. I don’t have the strength to see things any other way. Maybe he is happier up in Heaven, maybe I will see him again some day. That just doesn’t mute the pain and anguish that I feel now. That doesn’t make me miss him any less.”

“The fact that he may be happier makes you sad?”

“No,” I relented, “it’s not that. It’s that I don’t know he’s happy. Here, I could see it. When he played ball in the back yard; I could see how happy he was. When he lined the ball up on the tee and whacked at it with that over-sized bat, I could see his smile; when he watched

SpongeBob on television, I could hear him laugh; when we went to see bands together, I could see the sparkle in his eyes just looking at the musicians; when I tucked him in at night, I could hear him say *I Love You* in the way that he hugged me. I have none of those reassurances now. If he's happier up there, he's made no attempt to show me, or tell me, or let me know in some small way. I just want to know that he's happy and healthy and being taken care of.

"Well," Gordon started slowly, "what if God answered Timothy's prayers instead of yours? What if, and I don't know how, or if, this could happen, God or an angel or St. Peter himself came to Timothy in the hospital, and asked Timothy what he wanted to do?"

"He wanted to leave us?" I asked, intrigued by his question.

"Maybe, Timothy knew that he, or was told, that the injury to his brain would leave him in a vegetative state or be severely limited; and, maybe he knew that you and Jen had your hands full with Matthew, another child on the way..."

"...and he didn't want to be a burden?" I finished his thought.

"Or, didn't want to live impaired." I had no answer to his question; I hadn't even considered that Timothy might have wished to go – not sure even given years I would have been able to consider that. I quickly changed the conversation.

"I am not turning away from God; we are just not talking right now. I am still trying to do His work, at least by teaching Sunday school, or trying to. Although, I may only be doing that to keep Matthew's routines as in tact as possible. It is he who insists on going every week, and is often the only reason I do.

On those few occasions where I did attend a service, to be in a room filled with people celebrating God, who just said *No* to my most earnest and sincere prayers, left me more empty inside. To be expected to praise and revere a deity who, by some interpretations, intentionally

took my son, knowing as He must, that it would devastate me and my family, felt odd and uncomfortable.

If I learned my religious education lessons properly, there are three possibilities.

One, God exists and actively interacts with human life on Earth. He intentionally took Timothy for His purposes, despite my prayers to the contrary. If this is the case, how can I worship Someone who would do this to me and my family. It is beyond my comprehension right not, to rationalize a Reason for all the He has put us through.

Or, God exists and He does not, or cannot, interact with us. He does not answer prayers or have any role in life or death, beyond starting the whole thing rolling. If that is the case, then why worship him at all? Why pray? Just try to follow His rules and things will get sorted out in the end.

The third option is that there is no God, period.

In any case, I cannot see worshipping and praising God, regardless of which possibility is real.

I remember going to a funeral for an older gentleman not long after Timothy, and how the words of the priest just echoed empty through my head. God's plan; better place; eternal life; his reward. It was all so meaningless at the time. And, for now anyway, it still is.

So, thank you all for trying to help with your words. Right now, though, they are just hollow words in a book to me.

The only words that would give me peace would be: "I like you, Dad." And only if spoken by the right person.

Chapter 35

Fascination with Flight

I'm gonna lay my head on some lonesome railroad line
and let that 2:19 train pacify my mind...
-- Bob Wills

“Have you thought about killing yourself”?

That’s one of the first questions that they ask you when you go to therapy for something like this. Must be taught in Psychology 101. Parents of dead children want to die, too. Jennifer got the same question, as I did; we both answered the question with the same honest response.

“Yes.”

How could I not? How could I not want to bring an abrupt end to all this pain? I had just been through one of the worst experiences that a parent could endure, losing a child. I can think that the only worse fate would be to have a child abducted, or run away. I would imagine that the constant contemplation about the possibility of seeing your child again would be far worse than knowing that you never will.

So yes, I have thought about killing myself, often, daily, every hour on the hour. I have thought about suicide in abstract terms; can you be forgiven by God for suicide if you apologize

before doing it – and you are filled with regret for what you are about to do. After all, if there is a Heaven, Timothy is certainly there; and I want to meet him up there when I go.

I have thought about suicide in concrete terms; imagining how I might do it; forming a little gun with my fingers and pressing it to my throat. Bang!

I look at every tall building and wonder what it would be like to step off the ledge at the very top. I am looking at one such building right now: looks about 12 stories tall. That might be high enough. There is certainly no turning back from such a flight. Once you step off, you'd better pray for mercy and die before hitting the ground.

Maybe I would go out with a big show; go to the 60th floor of the John Hancock Building in Boston, nearly 800 feet from the pavement of Copley Plaza below. I'd need something to throw through the window; must be protective glass of some kind. Then to leap from that dizzying height. Maybe some tourist would get a photo of me falling.

Of course, I might never get to the Hancock to begin with. Maybe I'd stop on the way into the city on the Tobin Bridge, an 800-foot long dinosaur of green steel that stands in the Mystic River, its head lying in Chelsea with its tail in Charlestown. Twin dorsal fins extend from its back 250 feet into the sky. Certainly, the 135-foot plunge from the roadway deck to the icy slab of the Mystic River would certainly suffice. Or, I could climb the ladders to the tip of one of those dorsal towers and take flight from the very pinnacle of the bridge. I would make a big splash, by more than one definition.

I think it would be easy, once I got to the point of actually doing it. I can see myself sitting on the ledge, dangling my feet over the side, and with a gentle push I would be flying. I would close my eyes and float gently on the currents of air, like a sheet of paper on the wind.

I always have had a fascination with flight. How I would love to soar above the Earth, wings spread wide, like a falcon, floating in the air, looking down with contempt on all those below; only to get shot out of the sky by some hunter. I have had those dreams where I am drifting in mid-air, no way of getting down, looking below on my world, unable to touch anything, unable to make affect any change, unable to help my son as he lay dying.

I could jump to my death.

I am standing on the train platform. The 6:20 express is about to leave Salem Depot. By the time it roars through Swampscott Station, it will be cruising at 70MPH. As it streaks by, a trail of paper and various jetsams follow in its wake. A patron on the platform watches as his fedora is pulled off in the vacuum created by the passing train.

How easy it would be, at just the right moment, to step off the platform and into that path of the streaming behemoth. It would be instant; I imagine it would be painless. There would be little left to identify me by. Absolute disintegration.

And what an irony after spending so much time on this very platform with my boys to have this be my final stand.

I read somewhere that automotive anti-freeze mixed with ginger ale is tasteless – and instantly fatal. Mix that cocktail with some vodka and sit on a lawn chair in the back yard sunning myself on a gentle Spring day. Maybe some chips and salsa on the side table for effect.

Or, I could take the easy way out.

I have a drawer full of sleep medicines and anti-depressants that I have tried and have failed. Pop open a few bottles, and swallow a fistful of pills wash them down with a blast of Jim Beam straight from the bottle. Then just sit on the couch and allow Waylon Jennings to keep me company from the CD player.

I never stop believing in your smile
Even though you didn't stay, it was all worth while.
You were the best thing in my life that I recall.
Lord knows we had it all.

"I am coming Timothy; look for me. I'll be there." Will I recognize you when I see you? Will you recognize me? I have a beard now. I remember how you used to hate my beard. Said it scratched when I kissed you. You helped me shave it off, remember? You used my electric razor and wiped my face clean. It hurt, a little bit, but I didn't mind. I'll see you real soon.

I've thought about it; far too often and in far too much detail.

But, Timothy, the truth is, I can't do it. Not that I am unable; I am unwilling. I just can't do that to your mother, Timothy. I know that if I died, it wouldn't hurt her nearly as much as losing you did. That's OK; I guess I feel the same.

I couldn't do it to Matthew. He needs me; he needs both his parents. He really needs his brother, too. I remember how you two used to play together. You taught him that. He never really knew how to play before you showed him. He connected with you in a way that I don't see in anyone else. For an autistic boy, a boy who cannot tell us he is hungry, to come out and tell us how much he misses his brother, how much he misses you. I can't take myself away from him, too.

I couldn't do it to Christopher. It is sad enough that he was born after you left and will never know you, will have never met you; I can't have him not knowing his father either.

I am sorry, Tim. You're just going to have to wait. I can't come right now. At least I can't take care of it myself.

Unless I have an accident...

Chapter 36

Perchance to Dream

At the end of the journey
when our last song is sung,
will you meet me in Heaven someday?
-- Johnny Cash

It was as dark and dreary a night as I've seen in a while. As I left work at the usual time, a fine mist floated down from the night sky. I jumped in my car and popped a Waylon Jennings disc in the player. He started singing about how much the ladies love their outlaws as I pulled onto the highway.

The traffic was flowing smoothly and I pulled into the fast lane, all the way over on the left. At 65, I watched the images of buildings emerging from the darkness, appearing, and then receding into the night.

A large 18-wheeler droned on down the highway just ahead. I didn't give it all that much thought, not knowing what role it would play in my life in mere moments. I passed it quickly on the left looking up through the moon roof to see a weary driver, on a long haul from Tennessee, if the words on the side of the truck were to be believed.

Suddenly in front of me, a flood of brake lights popped on and cars quickly slowed to a stop; in my rearview, the truck seemed yet to see the slowdown and pummeled forward. At the last moment he slammed on his brakes and started sliding out of control. He was quickly slowing down, but the weight of the loaded trailer started pushing the helpless cab along the roadway. The driver was fighting physics as hard as he could to prevent the truck from jack-knifing. Distracted from the road ahead as I watched the drama unfolding behind me, I hadn't noticed that the slowing stream of cars had come to a dead stop.

I, too, slammed on my brakes and quickly found myself sliding out of control on the wet pavement. As I turned the wheel in a frantic effort to right my car, I started swinging the opposite way as I drifted to a stop, perpendicular in the next lane.

As my fingers let go of the steering wheel, and a cloud of breath escaped my lungs, I turned to see a wall of silver in my window. Row after row of small metallic rectangles, gleaming with moisture under the streetlights of the highway. The last thing I heard as the truck plowed into me was Waylon, singing about *Me and Bobbie McGee* driving along, singing songs in the cab of a truck that was much like the one I was about to meet.

Suddenly I woke up, never realizing that I had fallen asleep. I was standing in a room, in total darkness, an absolute vacancy of light. My senses were completely shut out, I couldn't even feel the pressure of my weight on my own feet. I may well have been floating for what I could tell.

As I stepped cautiously forward, two long strips of lights appeared in a winding path, long into the dark. The lights reminded me of a landing strip at an airport, or those little lights along the aisles at the movie theater.

I slowly followed along between the lights, still not feeling my own footsteps or hearing a sound. I was beginning to feel a cold, dry air around me. I walked for what seemed an eternity when a rectangle of light shone out before me. Not the whole rectangle was lighted, but just the outline. A door, I thought and pushed gently.

I stepped into a room that looked like the lobby of an old hotel, or maybe a bed-and-breakfast. The walls and floor were a dark wood, scratched and pock-marked from years of abuse and neglect. Covering the floors were tattered oriental rugs, running the length of the room. Tired prints of ancient paintings hung on the wall in equally tired frames; some slightly askew; some looking as though they might fall off the wall at any moment. The only sound was the eternal ticking of a large grandfather clock that loomed in the corner; its face chipped and worn, the hands absent from its face, as though time were moving forward, but it did not matter the hour of day.

Across the long room was a long wooden desk. Behind, on the wall, hung countless keys among even more keyless hooks. The keys and hooks blurred into nothing as they disappeared into the distance to the left and right. A single book lay on the desk, closed. Next to it a bell, with the standard sign: *Ring bell for service*.

Slowly, I moved along the frayed carpet, nearly tripping over a section that was buckled and worn through. Behind me, the ticking continued, filling the room.

The bell on the desk was typical, unremarkable almost, except for its being there. I pushed the plunger and a *ding* drowned out the ticking for a moment. Through a door on my left I heard the shuffling of feet and the clamor of someone abandoning one task to come out to help me at the desk.

The door opened with a holy creak, and a single man walked out; *staggered* out was more the word. He was ancient, hulked over, shoulders and head drooping towards the floor. Slowly he shuffled to the desk, raised the platform and took his place behind the desk. There, he seemed almost rejuvenated, talking on an ethereal glow. Dressed head to toe in white, he had long flowing hair and an interminable, scraggly beard that hung well below the top of the desk. He looked like a wizard from one of those medieval movies my wife was always watching. A nametag on his chest introduced him as only *Peter*.

“Name,” he muttered, not looking up at me.

“What?” I uttered, lost in a haze of confusion. “Peter,” I almost said, still trying to digest all of what I was seeing, feeling, sensing.

“What is your name?” He looked me straight in the eyes this time.

“Michael, Michael Burke,” I replied. He opened the book with great effort. It was huge, maybe two feet long and three feet wide with countless pages inside. The pages were browned with time, and the edges singed with use. The must smell of an old bookshop filled the room. Peter’s hands were shaking, with age not nervousness, as he touched a fingertip to his tongue to better flip through the pages.

“Ah yes, here we are,” he sighed. “Oh my,” he muttered, almost to himself, as he read, finger moving along with the words. “Yes, I see.”

He looked up at me. “You look well for what you just went through. Some are not so lucky.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Says here that you were in an automobile accident – you people and your cars,” He shook his head in sorrow. “I see far too many of you because of those darn cars.”

“But,” he continued, “you were lucky; if you could call it that.” He returned his attention to the book. “Says here that the truck swerved just enough to hit the back of your car. Didn’t cause much damage to you.”

“So what happened, where am I?”

“Says here that you died of a heart attack from the trauma of it all. Never seen that one before.”

“How do you know that?” I stammered. “And where the Hell am I?”

“I know you’re not there,” he laughed softly under his breath. “It’s all right here. I’d show you if I could. Privacy concerns, you know...”

“Am I dead? Is this...”

“Well,” he smiled warmly, “I’m no doctor, you understand. But it says here you most certainly are dead.” He tapped on his book. “And yes, this is...”

He turned to stare at the keys on the wall behind him, searching. “Here we are,” he reached for a key, slowly lifting it off the hook.

“So you are...”

“Yup.” He pointed to his nametag. “Says so right here. Here’s your key.” He placed the key on the counter. A simple silver-colored key attached to a small, diamond-shaped plastic piece, embossed with a black number.

“But, where are the pearly gates, and the angels, and all that?” He looked at me with a worn and frayed look of his own.

“Just follow the hall behind you, third left.” I turned to look down the hall, where I had just emerged from the dark, but saw only an eternally long corridor stretching out into the distance. Confused, I turned back to Peter.

“How did you know?” I struggled, “the book. I mean... So there really is a plan?”

“Look,” Peter sighed. “I have a lot of work to do. It’s all explained in the pamphlets...”

He looked up to see the genuine confusion and concern in my eyes. “There really is a plan, but its one thing you humans got wrong. I forget who screwed it all up, but someone did.” He slumped onto a stool that stood behind that desk. “You went to Sunday school, right? The plan was, to have you just follow the 10 Commandments, give penance when you go astray, live a good life and all that folderol, and you’d be In. Simple. That was the plan.

“But somewhere along the way, you people decided that He had this intricate, detailed plan for everyone; their entire life charted out. It’s just isn’t true. Do you think He has time to work out the intricate minute-by-minute details of all your lives?” Peter seemed to be getting agitated with his own story. “You’re not the only planet with beings, you know. Oh, that’s right; you don’t know.”

“But, the book; how did you know I was in an accident...” Peter heard my pleas and sighed hard; he rubbed his forehead forcefully with his left hand. He seemed tired, as worn out as the rugs I was standing on.

“All right, all right. I can’t lie to you. I know what you’ve been through. Besides, lying is commandment number four, or is it five? I can never keep them straight.

“There is a plan for everyone. When they will be born; how long they will live; how smart they’ll be; how handsome, and all that.” I suddenly felt a queasiness pass over me. If there was a plan, then He meant to take Timothy. Who could do such a thing? I had lost faith, in part because I couldn’t conceive that Anyone would plan someone’s life to end at three.

“So God did mean to take my son at 3 years old?” I found that I was almost yelling.

“Why would He do such a thing...” Peter was, at first, taken aback by my anger, like the high

school kid at the supermarket checkout counter. *Don't blame me because the price of tuna went up; not my decision.* But, the look slipped slowly off his face.

"Oh no, no, no." Peter assured. "Sometimes things happen that aren't in the plan. You know what you people say about the *best-laid plans*. Applies up here, too. Sometimes, things happen that aren't in the plan. Your son's death, the way it happened, that wasn't part of the plan. He can't control everything."

"Then why couldn't He help Timothy?" I could feel my voice rising, along with my anger. "I prayed, hundreds of people prayed. Hell, I was on my knees in the hospital screaming in the stairwells..."

"I know, I know. We all heard you," Peter closed the book, and leaned heavily on it. "There are rules, rules that even He has to follow. He can't complain, He set the rules up, although He does." Peter shook his head gently. "You see, your son was very sick, you know that. It just got to the point where even He couldn't help. It would have violated the rules..."

"What rules?? What are you talking about? He's God for Heaven's sake!" Peter glanced unconsciously at my unplanned pun. "What happened to the all-powerful stuff?"

"That's the point. He could have done something, but it progressed to the point where it would have taken a miracle. Your son was so sick that only a miracle would have saved him."

"Then why couldn't he, why didn't he... We're good people, church going, and all that. Why, my parents are completely devout and..."

"Look, I don't know the particulars of your case, but I imagine that there were other people in greater need of a miracle than you. He can't grant every miracle or answer every prayer. Then it wouldn't be special anymore. I could look it up; we do record these things..."

"No," I sighed, tears slowly coming to my eyes. "I don't think I want to know."

“That’s why sometimes people wait for years; given time He can perform the occasional miracle and save someone. Your son went so quickly, there was nothing He could do; like I said, you’re not the only beings under His watch.

“You mean if I, if we didn’t tell them to stop his care...”

“Again, I don’t know the particulars of your case. I have no way of knowing.” He turned away and walked over to a shelf of books. His finger followed along the bindings of each until he found one that he wanted. With much effort, he lumbered the book over to the counter, dropping it next to the other, a small cloud of dust floated from the counter, or from the book itself.

“Look, I can do this for you. I really shouldn’t...” He flipped the book open, again wetting his finger to flip to a page. “Let’s see, here he is. I should know this, I transcribe all these for Him; what do you think I was doing in the other room? A lot of births today...”

“Timothy Burke, October 23, 2001.” That’s him, right? I nodded. “Synopsis: Timothy is a handsome person, with a strong and outgoing personality. Must go to an equally strong and loving family,” Peter looked up to catch my eye. “He will do very well in school, almost without effort... College... Pre Med... Harvard Medical School...” Peter looked up from his reading, “He was supposed to be a doctor. His mother would have hated that.” Back to the book, “Publish six books... retire to a small island in Maine... die at 83 of natural causes.” Peter slowly closed the book. “There’s a lot more detail in there, but that was the plan.”

Our eyes met, not a word moved between us. I thought of Timothy growing up; wearing a graduation gown; studying for his medical boards; standing proudly in his doctor’s smock with *Dr. Timothy Burke, M.D.* on a gleaming brass badge on his chest. I started to cry.

“I knew I shouldn’t have said anything.” Peter muttered. I turned from the desk and started down the long hall. From behind a voice turned me around.

“If you weren’t in such a hurry,” he paused, either searching for words or trying to decide if he should use them. “I just may have something that you would be interested in.” Peter turned back to the wall of keys, again scanning. He rested his finger on a hook where there was no key, but somehow one materialized in his hand. He tossed it on the counter in front of me. The black number on the tag stared up at me. “Don’t tell anyone where you got it.” He smiled gingerly and busied himself by putting the book back on its shelf.

The hall was long, many doors passing me as I moved along. Hall after hall of dorms, each with a different number. Not a soul to be seen anywhere. At the right moment, I turned left and followed the numbers. The first key Peter had given me was tucked safely in my pocket; the second, was clenched in my fingers. I slowed as I neared the number on the key, pausing in front of the door.

It was a simple, unadorned port, basic wood-framed door, painted a flat white color. Nothing special, no grand ornamentation that one might expect of such a place as this. No gilded gold; no fancy artwork; no gates of pearls or chorus of angels in full glory. Just a plain white door with black numbering. The keyhole seemed far away as I reached out, slipping it into the slot. With a gentle turn, the door seemed to open itself.

Inside was a jumble of toys, music, colors, and lights. A wonderland of magic. Trucks, trailers, trains, and taxis stood parked in various places on the floor. The walls were adorned with posters of cartoon trains and characters; a little, blue train; a small man in a yellow hardhat; a

superhero dressed in red hanging on a building; an odd square creature with his starfish friend all hung from the walls with the pride of the DaVinci collection in the Louvre. A baseball bat and ball sat idle in the corner next to a short basketball net. A table with small, wooden trains looked freshly played with. Somewhere in the room, I heard the patter of feet shuffling about.

“Hello?” I called cautiously into the room. “Is there anybody here?” A small boy stepped from nowhere in front of me. My heart both sank and leapt in the same beat; my breath caught somewhere inside of me. I knew that little blond head and greenish eyes better than I knew my own.

“Hi, Dad,” he said. “Where’s mama?”

I bolted upright in bed, my heart pounding as if it were 10 sizes too large; my forehead was decked with sweat and fever. I looked over at my wife sound asleep and the clock on her nightstand telling me it was 3:08. I felt crushed; he slipped away from me again.

I tried desperately hard to fall back to sleep again, to try and re-capture the dream before it slips away, but I cannot. It was gone; like Timothy himself.

Chapter 37

Moving On?

Mama says that I just shouldn't speak to you
Susan says that I should just move on
You oughta see the way these people look at me
When they see me 'round here talking to this stone
-- Leann Rimes

“Don’t you think it’s about time to start thinking about moving forward?” Grandma said with an honest concern in her voice. She told me that I seemed stuck in place; no better, no worse than you were when this first happened. It’s time. And, maybe, joining her for Thanksgiving was just what I needed.

“Move on? What are you talking about?” I was suddenly angered by her words, as well as they were meant; and I don’t get angry with Grandma very often. “It’s not time to move anywhere; not even close!”

“It’s been five months already...”

“*Only* five months, you mean,” I raised my voice louder than I ever had with her and unconsciously leaned in. She defended with the suggestion that Timothy would never have wanted me to be this way...

“I never wanted Timothy to be dead, but what I want doesn’t seem to matter here.”

“Don’t you take that tone with me, young man,” she found her bearings again and this time, she was doing the leaning-in. “Timothy would never want you to be sad.”

“Oh, so I should just be Mr. Happy-Go-Lucky, like nothing happened, just because that’s what *he* would have wanted?” My sarcasm was always un-tethered when I got angry. A defense mechanism, my therapist says. “If Timothy wanted to eat all his Halloween candy last year all in one sitting, would I have allowed it just because that’s what he wanted?”

“We don’t always get everything, just because we want it.” I turned away, looking at the one picture of Timothy she had showing in her house. “I only want one thing right about now, and I ain’t getting that anytime soon.” A tear formed in my eye, both out of sadness and of anger.

“Our relationship meant far too much for me to even think about moving forward.” I picked up the picture, a professional portrait of him standing next to a big #3, his left hand placed coyly in his pocket, he left foot slightly on it side, one of my favorite pictures. Sort of an *I am cute and I know it* pose. “What would that say about our relationship, if I were suddenly ready to get over it and move on?” The seriousness of my voice was unwittingly overtaken with more sarcasm. “Oh well, he’s gone; nothing I can do about it now. Darn, there goes another write-off on my taxes!”

“I can’t talk to you when you are like this.”

“I prefer not to talk to anyone when I am like this.” She put her hand to my shoulder. “Look, I am not ready to move on. Maybe when I can sleep at night without popping pills; when I can get up in the morning without being forced out of bed by Matthew; when I can get through the day without thinking every thought of my son. Then, maybe – and just maybe – I’ll be ready to think about moving on. Right now I have to think about breathing; I am not ready to think about moving on.”

“How would you want people to feel if you were gone?”

“That’s not a bad notion,” I whispered under my breath. She looked at me through twisted-up eyes. She heard what I said, but didn’t want to acknowledge it.

“Would you want people to be sad all the time? Or would you want them to go on with their lives...”

“Like nothing happened? Like I meant nothing to them?” I asked with a piqued voice. “Yeah, that’s just what I would want.” Actually, it is, but that wouldn’t fit here in the conversation, and might open a new branch that I didn’t want to travel.

“No, maybe not. But would you want people to be miserable?”

“No, I guess not...” Then, she said, how can you not believe that Timothy would want the same thing?”

“Because he was only 3.” I snapped. “Three-year-olds can possible rationalize things like that. They can’t tell you what they would want after they die. They’re too young to understand that. Hell, he didn’t always tell me when he had to go to the bathroom.” I looked at Grandma, her eyes a strong and unyielding resolve. “I can’t presume to know what he’d want from me now. Maybe he would want me to be this sad. Maybe he’d want me to kill myself so that I could be with him wherever he is...”

She seemed taken back, and decided that God would never allow me into Heaven if I were to kill myself. “That’s a sin!”

“Yeah, well, I don’t even want to go there right now.” We’ve covered the God-thing already. Now her eyes were glossing over with anger. Religion is clearly her arena and I was stepping over the boundary. *Save it for a rainy day*, I thought.

“Maybe he’s up there wanting me to be with him. Did you ever think of that? Maybe he’s lonely up in Heaven, or wherever. Maybe he’s up there scared to death because he’s never been alone before. There’s no one up there to watch him. No one that he knows anyway...”

“Nana’s up there. He loved Nana...”

“When he was an infant. She died a couple of years ago.” She started to tell me about the angels that God has to take care of...

“Maybe he doesn’t like angels. He’s a boy, remember? He liked rocks and dirt and trucks and boy-things.”

“There are boy angels!”

“OK, now we’re getting into loony-toons land here. I just wanted to drop off your cake pan. I don’t need to be looking under the skirts of the angels trying to figure out what sex they are. Way too far out there for me.”

“Look,” she says, leaning against the kitchen counter. “All I am saying is that someday – someday – you will be ready to move on. I know it took me awhile to get over the death of my mother.” I started to raise an objection. The death of a child is in no way the same as the death of a parent, but was cut off.

“I don’t want to hear it.” She was talking now. Someday I will be ready to go on with my life. “For me, this is what I need to do, keep things as normal as possible.” If that meant cooking a big dinner on Thanksgiving, then that’s what she has to do. “It keeps me sane, Michael. Not only do I have to suffer through the loss of a grandchild, I have to watch two people I love dearly going through the most painful experience I have ever seen – and there’s nothing I can do about it. Don’t you think that hurts me too?”

“If you want to cancel the holidays, that’s your business. I won’t bother with your business if you don’t bother with mine.”

And she was right. One thing I learned through this mess was not to criticize other people’s pain. Each person deals with pain in his or her own way. As long as they are sincere in how they deal with it, and what they deal with, I guess it is OK.

I thought about a man I met at the cemetery, a sudden widower. He told me that he was married for 60 years when his wife died last spring. My first thought was one of disbelief. 60 years? How can he be sorry that he had her in his life for 60 years? I had Timothy for only three.

But then, as I thought about it, he had someone who was a part of his life, intertwined, interconnected, one with him for most of his life. And that person is gone. Just as easily, he could have looked at me and criticized my pain: *How can you be this sad over someone you knew such a short time? Three years. Hardly a bump in the road.* He’d be wrong of course; but, I was too. There’s no way to measure pain and sorrow, and no proper way to live through it.

“Here’s your cake pan,” I whispered softly, ending the argument with both of us standing literally and figuratively in the same spot as where we started.

“It’s about time,” she laughed gently. “I loaned you this last May!”

“Something came up,” I smiled wanly. “I forgot all about it. Haven’t used it since then.” She took the bundt pan and held it in front of her. “Actually, the last time I used it, Timothy helped me make a cake. He loved to cook.”

“I don’t think you ever told me that story.” She said laying the pan down and returning her hand to my shoulder. “Why don’t you come in. You drink whiskey, right?”

“Bourbon, if you have any.”

“I think I just might. Leftover from last Christmas.”

The house was all quiet; Jennifer has gone to work, Matthew to bed. It was our time, Timothy and I. “How about we make a cake?”

He jumped off the couch, running in his pajama top and night diaper – no pants, a liberty that we boys took when Mama wasn’t home – straight into the kitchen, opening the cupboard where the electric mixer sat. I pulled out the mixer with his help (“Oh, it is so heavy,” I teased.). He helped me boost it onto the counter. He climbed a kitchen chair onto the counter and pulled out a cake mix, but there was none. “How can we make a cake with no box?” he puzzled.

“From scratch, my boy.”

I helped him off the counter and over to the fridge, pulling out what we needed: butter, eggs, milk, chocolate sauce, and all; he placed each item on the counter one-by-one. He held out the measuring cup, ready for action; he sat on the counter, spindly legs hanging over the side, bouncing to some inner rhythm, constant motion. He smiled broadly, small stains from some bedtime snack adorned his Jimmy Neutron jammy-top, dull gray with red trim, a mischievous cartoon character riding a rocket across his chest.

“Let me grab the flour,” I said, boosting him aside the ingredients.

“Flowers in the cake?” he joked, knowing full well that flour was that white stuff in the jar, too. An old joke from Timothy, or as old as can be.

We scooped the butter (OK, margarine, but he didn’t need to know that, or care) into a sauce pan and set it on the stove to melt. As we waited, I measured and he poured each ingredient in the bowl of the mixer. In went the flour, baking soda, baking powder and salt.

He moved the black handle to the right setting “Low, Papa?” and watched the blades whirl. He shifted the blades to medium, giggling as some of the chocolate mix sprayed out of the bowl; then, onto high at the appointed time. His favorite setting causing the mixer to vibrate slightly as if it wanted to walk across the counter.

When the batter was ready, he poured it into Grandma’s bundt pan, so careful not to spill any of the precious chocolate goo. The blades came off the mixer, one for him and one for me to lick clean. He enjoyed his metallic lollipop as I popped the pan in the oven and turned the inner light on. I set the timer and we ran off to the living room to wait; every 10 minutes or so, he would run back, peer through the slightly stained window into the stove, checking progress. “It’s almost done,” he chirped with every inspection.

When the stove chimed, he ran into the kitchen again. “All done!” he proclaimed, seeing the cake had risen over the edge of the pan. He looked at the cake with tired eyes, as I pulled it out, rubbing his eyes hard to keep the sleep away.

“Ready for the toothpick test?” I asked; he nodded. I pulled out the clean toothpick for his inspection. “Done,” and he agreed through a yawn.

“Tell you what,” I pulled out the container of frosting, scooped out a spoonful, and handed it to him. “Why don’t we frost it in the morning? Needs to cool off.”

“You do it,” he decided, licking clean the spoon. “I’m ready for bed.”

That was the last time we cooked together. Had I known, I would have savored the cake even more.

I haven’t touched the mixer since.

It's not a matter of *whether* I can move forward; I don't *want* to move forward, yet. It's not that I enjoy my sadness. I just don't know *how* to move forward.

How can I move forward without leaving Timothy behind?

I feel that by moving forward, I must forsake Timothy in some way. If he and I were both lost in the woods, but I found my way to safety without him, would I *move forward* onto safety? No, I would turn around and look for him. To me this is much the same. If I move forward, I am moving away from Timothy. I cannot do that; even if I knew how.

One way to move forward is through a form of denial. I've pondered this before. If I hide the pictures so that I don't see him anymore; if I stop talking about him so that I don't think of him anymore; if I keep things as normal as possible so that I erase the affect that he has had on my life, I could possibly move forward.

But, I don't want to.

I love looking at pictures of Timothy. I can't get enough. As much pain and sorrow as his photos may be, they remind me of better times, of a child just brimming with life, of a child who knew no sadness, only true happiness. They make me cry and smile all at the same time. I still need that in my life.

And, I love talking about Timothy. Whether people want to hear what I have to say, matters not. I can't stop talking about him, even if I have nothing new to say, even if it turns people away (and it does). I enjoy just saying his name, Timothy.

As for keeping things normal, nothing seems normal to me now. Even though I spent far more of my life without Timothy, he is such a huge part of who I am, what my life has become, where I am going, that I can't possibly be *normal* again. My normal has changed. And for right now, things like carving a turkey on a certain day in November, or opening presents on that day

the following month mean nothing to me. Trying to keep things normal would be just going through the motions for me. And I have never been one to just go through the motions.

No, this is all too high a price to pay for moving forward. I am not ready to move forward yet. I am not ready to leave him behind.

So, when does the time come to move forward? And how does one measure time after a loss like this?

How long is long enough?

They say, in polite societies, that a year is long enough to mourn. But who decided that? Not I. I may not be ready to shed my mourning jacket after only a year. I am told that I have to get through all the “firsts”. We’ve been through the first birthday without him, the first Halloween, the first Thanksgiving; we still have the first Christmas to come. Then, there will be many other firsts, including the first anniversary of his death. Is that the time we start moving forward? After all the firsts have passed?

I know at some point, about three years or so from now, that Timothy will have been gone longer than he was with us. Is that the time to stop mourning?

Others say that the pain won’t subside until you’ve had another child.

Maybe that day will never come.

I was speaking to a gentleman in the cemetery a while back. He told me that he lost a child who was 18 months old. It happened 51 years ago and the sorrow has never fully left him to this day.

I don't know when the day will come that I am ready to move forward. Maybe it will never come. I just know that it is not today...

As I write this, it has been six months to the day since Timothy died.

It's truly hard to believe it has already been six months. The time has flown by so quickly. It seems like moments ago that we told the doctors to let him go, and I watched as he passed away in his mother's arms.

But then, it's hard to believe that only six months have gone by; it seems an eternity ago that I last held him in my lap and heard him say "I like you, Dad."

It seems weird to be counting in months again. When he was first born, like so many parents, we counted his life first in days, then weeks. Soon we were counting in months. He was never 1/2 a year old; he was six months old. Right up to 18 months we were counting that way. Then, we skipped to years. He was never 19 months old; when people asked, we'd say a year-and-a-half then 2. When he died, he was 3 1/2, not 43 months.

Now, we are back to counting in days, weeks and months. Soon, I guess, we will be counting again in years. It's hard to imagine that day will come, but come it will.

Tim, on this sad semi-anniversary, I will tell you what I have said every day since you've gone, and I hope I said every day of your precious life: *I love you*. I love you forever, and that's all that counts now.

Chapter 38

Timothy's Place

I stand alone, in a frigid, driving rain; but I wouldn't be anywhere else.

It is a cold, November morning, and I am standing alone in the cemetery. The rain is pouring down in torrents, falling sideways in the wind of the day. Puddles form in the roadway leading into the cemetery, attracting the attention of the ducks and geese that make a home there during the summer months. The grass is slick and wet, the earth soaked through with the precipitation of three days. A freshly-laid grave nearby was sinking into itself under the weight of all the water.

But, there I stood, as on every day since August the Twentieth, when we first lay Timothy here. I hadn't missed a day and don't see reason why I should. My brown felt cowboy hat kept the rain out of my face, but the water pooled in the hat's oversized-brim, pouring out as a gutter whenever I bowed my head towards the ground.

"Good morning, Timothy." I spoke to the granite slab in front of me, to the small, wooden box that now held my son below my feet, to the heavens where I hoped he was now, happier than when he was here with me. "It's raining pretty good." His image in the rock was

running with water, lips of moisture pooled in the carved letters, puddling on the top of the stone and at the base, which extended out an inch or two.

It was a beautiful stone; Timothy's image was etched forever in the granite; him leaning against a large number 3; that same image that was at Grandma's house; his hand placed in his pocket, his feet slightly askew with the right foot gently leaning on its side; a smile brightening his beautiful face. The image was remarkable; an absolute copy. You could see the whites of his eyes and the little spaces between his baby teeth. It was if I was talking to him, as I stared at his eyes in the etching.

Timothy's image was etched forever in the granite, forever stuck at age three.

"I don't have much time this morning, my friend," I again addressed the stone. "I have to get to work on time. The radio said there's a lot of traffic." When I spoke, I addressed the etching, keeping my eyes fixed on the stony stare of my son, as I would if I were talking to him directly. "I don't have much to say today, pal. Not much going on at home."

"We're supposed to go out to dinner tonight, do you want to come?" Each time we went to a restaurant, the host would see the three of us enter and offer us as many chairs. I always thought to tell her *four, please*, instead of three, but I never had the courage. "I would love to have your company with us tonight."

"I can't wait for this winter to be over, Tim." I told him. "We are going to plant some little shrubs on either side of the stone, here. Like that plot over there." I pointed to a plot a few rows over that had a pair of dwarf Alberta Spruce trees planted on either side of the grave stone. "And maybe those tulips I planted will blossom, too. You'll have the prettiest plot in the place."

Timothy's stone was just that, his. Unlike most grave stones in the cemetery, which declared the decedents' last name on the front, and placed the first names on the back, we

dedicated the entire front side of the stone for Tim. We thought that he deserved that. In addition to his image, we had various symbols etched into the front as well: a seashell to recall his mother's nickname for Timothy, her Little Clamshell; and a Gibson F-5 mandolin, representing our shared love of music. Our family name was emblazoned in the rock, followed by a dedication to our lost son:

ADORED SON
AND BROTHER
TIMOTHY WILLIAM
OCT 23, 2001
JUNE 15, 2005

The rain continued to pour down, the sky dark and ominous. "Look, Timothy; I know I wasn't the best dad ever. I tried as damn hard as I could. I had my failings; you've seen them. I yell at Matthew too much; I let you listen to lousy music that a 3-year-old shouldn't. I had my shortcomings. I know that. But, know that I loved you," I caught myself mid-sentence "I love you, always and forever. From the moment I first saw you; the moment after you were born; when I first looked into your eyes, they were so blue when you were born. You became a part of my soul – a part of me. After you came into my life, I was never the same again; and now that you are gone, I will never be the same again. I miss the hell out of you, pal. I know I say that every day that I come here; but it's true. I miss you more than I could have ever imagined." Tears welled up in my eyes and my throat started to close tight. "Well, this is a heck of a way to start a workday, eh Timothy?" I kicked at a puddle that formed by my feet since I was standing there.

"Much more rain and I'll be sinking into the ground; I could be standing right next to you, if this keeps up." I looked up at the heavy cloud cover, not a blink of sunlight to be seen. "And, I think this will keep up for a while."

“Look, kid, I need to get going before I melt here. I was going to listen to BR5-49 on the way to work; what do you think of that?” I always liked to clear my musical selections with him, and BR5-49, a Nashville honky-tonk band, was one of his favorites. A number of symbols of Timothy still remained at the base of the stone, soon to be pulled into storage for winter. A Bob the Builder doll rested on the right side of the stone, along with his friend, Scoop, a talking front-end loader. A singing SpongeBob toy stood in the rain, ever smiling, representing another of Timothy’s favorite cartoon characters. A steam engine that once circled Grandma’s Christmas tree pointed towards both. A small, wooden trolley that we bought in Ogunquit, Maine a few weeks before that reminded us of the trips we took up there over the past summers. A pint-sized license plate told the world that *I am Loved*. And the blue, plastic hardhat that Timothy always asked for but we never bought for him, stood testament to all that we would never be able to do together: all those plans, dreams, and visions of the future that would never come.

“Dammit, Timothy,” I told him every day. “I miss you so damn much. I just want you to come home with me, like this never happened.”

“This sucks,” I cursed at his face, an outline cut into rock.

To this point, Timothy’s was the only grave stone in the row. The row was new, only having been started a few months prior. At the beginning of the row is the wife of a Boston Red Sox legend; to her right is an older woman with an old-Swampscott surname; on the other side of us is a young man, the cause of whose demise is unknown to me; the newest resident is a middle-aged woman claimed by breast cancer. But of all the neighbors in this row, Timothy was the first to have a stone.

“I really miss dropping you off at school, buddy.” I told the carved likeness of Timothy. After I walked Matthew into school, I would head back to my car amidst a swarm of mommies

and daddies walking with their pre-school children. I couldn't help but recall the days when I would walk with Timothy back to the car. He would be so excited about getting back to preschool, to see his teachers and his classmates. I always loved dropping him off in the mornings, to have the opportunity to chat with all the kids for a moment, to watch Timothy play with his little friends. But, instead of that, I stand in the deluge talking to a rock. "I know I say this every day, but this is so wrong. You don't belong here, my friend. This is so wrong."

"I am going to be sorry when I get to work. Nothing like the feel of wet denim all day," I tried to smile. "Well, I guess I should be going. Gotta hurry up and sit in the traffic." I stood in place not moving, which was a daily event: after I decide to leave Timothy's Place, it would take me another five minutes to actually get going.

As I did everyday, I kissed my hand and gently touched the etching of my boy and the ground at my feet closest to where I thought he was buried. I moved my fingers into the hand-sign for love. "I love you, Timothy. And I miss you desperately." As I started to walk away, I caressed the rough stone at the top of the grave maker.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow, pal." And I walked away, leaving him behind again.

Chapter 39

The Season of Our Discontent

Christmas is always a special time in our house.

The day after Thanksgiving usually finds me scaling the pull-down ladder up to the attic where box after box lay among countless bags, each filled with decorations for the season. One-by-one I would precariously step down the ever-creaking rungs of the ladder, careful not to fall. The way the house is designed, if I were to fall off the ladder, I would likely plunge most of the way to the first floor, landing somewhere on the steps below.

Each box, I would lug down the narrow, twice-curved steps to the living room below. There, my wife would wait, eagerly anticipating a different box than the one I had just brought down.

“Michael,” she would say, “I’m looking for the box with the garland that goes around the railing. Have you brought that one down yet?”

“I just takes ‘em down as I finds ‘em, ma’am” I would quip, with a decidedly non-politically correct drawl. A poor attempt at humor for this time of the year. “We’ll find it when I get them all down. What’s your hurry anyway?”

“I just love this time of year,” she would dance off and turn up the music, Nat King Cole singing something about chestnuts roasting. “Now, get a move on!”

Quickly, she would fill the house with holiday cheer; every room would brim with lights, banners, holly, candles, stuffed animals, statuettes, and every other conceivable charm. Stuffed cartoon characters lined the top of the entertainment center; each flat surface had its own scented candle; the dining room table held the advent wreath and properly colored tapers; a nativity scene was setup in the living room; the den held a table populated with a tiny village of shops and homes, each decorated in its own way for the holiday; carols played incessantly from whatever musical source was near.

The windows would be adorned by various stickers of bells, candles, Santas, reindeer, and such; a single white electric candle stood on each windowsill.

The whole place would smell of Holly berry for weeks on end.

The tree would be positioned, constructed and loaded with decorations. Yes, it was a fake tree, but that was only so she could leave it up as long as possible. Miles of bright, multi-colored lights would adorn the tree along with equally long strands of garland. Ornaments, from the expensive store-bought variety to those handmade by the kids hung from the branches. On top, was the Christmas angel, usually canted a little to the left, but illuminated brightly still.

Once the inside was complete, the task would return to me to clamber out on the front roof to hang strands of icicle lighting.

“I’m going outside to hang the icicle lights. Okay?”

“Just be safe, and don’t get hurt.” As if that were high on my holiday wish list – falling off the roof.

“At least the snow already on the ground would pad my fall,” I call, ducking out the door. The wind would invariably blow icy cold, and my fingers would numb to the bone. Without fail, a strand of lights would cease to work, but only after I hung it from the gutter. Also without fail, my Jewish neighbor comes out to watch, usually with some humorously snide commentary: *That’s why I am not a Christian!* After a time, and many trips to the store for more lights or to replace the extension cords that somehow disappear during the off-season, the lights are up and blazing. I am never sure which are brighter, the white lights or my cold-reddened hands.

Each season had its share of road trips to various holiday-themed places. The trek to the mall for the annual attempt to get both boys to sit on Santa’s lap and smile together – and not the mall close by, oh no; we had to travel 30 miles for just the right Chris Cringle. Generally, it was a failure. Next was the trip to the business park in North Andover to see what was billed as the largest Christmas tree in the world. The site would be festively joined by giant presents under the tree; the same carols blaring on loud speakers; a Santa’s village with mile-long lines to not smile with Santa again, pet the reindeer, and ride on the merry-go-round (nothing like spinning round in circles in the 20-degree weather). Off to the Zoo many miles away in Stoneham to see a cacophony of lights and displays that once sat on the top of someone’s house, until the neighbors complained. Roll through more lines to see animated characters of all description doing all manner of dances; trains rolling around in ovals; singing mice; elves making toys; swans a-swimming, geese a-laying, and the partridge perched high in his tree. And, of course, another long line to see yet another Santa (how he gets around!).

We did it all, cheerfully, willingly, annually; until this year.

This year, we called it off. All of it.

There would be no Christmas; there would be no presents, no garland, no wrapping, no trimmings, no trappings. December 25 would be just another Sunday. It was the only way I could handle it. I'd been through six months of Sundays, without Timothy, I could handle one more; but to be without Timothy on Christmas was a concept far too great to bear.

The agreement between Jennifer and me on this was quite surprising. I had a speech all prepared for her if she resisted my attempts to derail her Polar Express. As I said, she loved Christmas and all the clap-trap that goes along with it. There was no way that she wouldn't want to do something: lights in the windows, maybe just the tree, just presents from Santa on Christmas morn for Matthew. She had to want some piece of this tradition that she held so dear.

"OK," she said when I pitched the idea, "No Christmas? I agree; I don't want to do anything this year..."

Matthew is a different cat altogether. We thought from past experience that he wouldn't even know Christmas was coming if we didn't tell him. He's never been a big fan of Christmas in the past. I recall well year-after-year that we struggled to get him to open a single gift. We, and each of his relatives, would invariably buy him more toys than the average kid could use in a lifetime. But, just as invariably, he would balk at opening a one. He would rather play with the toys he already had. We have hours of video tape of us following him through the house with packages galore, imploring him to rip the paper off.

But, year after year, we all bought him more things; and year after year the closet shelves would get more crowded with unopened toys. Until Timothy. For Timothy, that closet of toys was like a kid locked in a toy store at night. He would open the door, pause momentarily, and point out the next thing he wanted to try.

“That one. I want the red one up there.” He’d smile broadly, showing all his tiny teeth. “No, papa! Not that. Right there! Yeah!” At one point, I think, we had four different racetracks set up, ten different puzzles all going at once, an odd game where you take things out of someone’s head, gallons of finger paints, and countless toy cars and trucks all given to his brother, but used by Timothy. Today the closet is empty.

With Matthew’s history, we thought certain that he would not miss the day. I recalled last Christmas and figured that he would not mind the holiday passing without notice. He didn’t last year.

Matthew awoke at his appointed time and we went downstairs together. He strolled right past the stockings hanging by the stairs. When he went to bed they were empty; this morning they are full. He waltzed unblinking into the kitchen and got down his box of cereal, positioning himself as he did each morning at the breakfast bar in plain sight of the Christmas tree, maybe 10 feet to his right. Last night only a few presents graced the underside of the tree; today the room was flooded with gifts. He didn’t notice.

“Papa, can you make me a bagel,” was all he said as he poured his cereal. Just another day in the life.

But Timothy, Tim’s first words were of the holiday.

“Did Santa come last night?” he asked, eyes barely open, covers still in tact. “Did he bring presents?”

“Of course.” I replied and he burst into a smile. The moment he set foot on the first floor, he made a dash for the tree that would be the envy of all the post-Christmas shoppers as they

lined up at 5am for the big sales. He stared in amazement at all the presents, large and small, wrapped and un-wrapped. He immediately grabbed the biggest one and started to tear.

“Wait, Monster,” I called after him. “That’s not for you; that’s for Matthew.” Undaunted he grabbed another.

“This one?”

“Oh yeah, that’s yours.” He ripped the paper off the toy quickly cast it aside, looking for more loot.

“Matthew, don’t you want to open presents,” I called to the kitchen.”

“Noooo,” he growled, “I’m eating a bagel.” And so it went. We, as usual, had to chase Matthew around to get him to open his gifts. The ones he didn’t want to open, we ended up unwrapping ourselves, the very people who wrapped them to begin with. Meanwhile, Timothy opened his own gifts, then tried to open Matthew’s gift, my gifts, his mother’s gift, his grandmother’s gift, all the gifts under the tree.

The weeks leading up to this Christmas were harder than I thought they would be. Just ignore it all and it will all go away. But until something like this happens, and you try to avoid the season, I don’t think you realize how all-consuming Christmas really is. From the day that they mark down the Halloween candy by 50% -- and sometimes earlier than that, as soon as they clear the shelves of back-to-school – the stores break out the holiday gear, the holiday gifts, and the dreaded holiday music. Everywhere you turn there is a Santa Claus staring you in the face; everything you hear has a tinge of the holiday; the sights, the sounds, the smells all ring of the Yuletide.

The radio stations, every last one of them, starts playing carols; the radio talk show hosts find ways to bring the holidays in (*Have you ever noticed that no one can say “Merry Christmas” anymore; it’s always “Happy Holidays.” Why is that? And what can we do about it?*); the stores pipe in bland versions of your Christmas favorites played over and over in every place you go. Houses started decking themselves with holiday lights, that seem to appear overnight and without human intervention. It’s starting to look like Christmas, all right, and it’s only the first Sunday of November.

I was doing a fine job of avoiding the season for the most part; the store displays didn’t bother me much; I could turn the radio dial in time to avoid the heavy-metal Christmas anthems; and the houselights just whirled past me without much notice. Until one day in the market.

I was browsing the shelves looking for just the right bagels for Matthew’s breakfast the next day when a woman near me started humming along with the instrumental version of the 12 Days of Christmas that was wafting through the store. As she sang, I felt that lead boot hit me in the gut again. Tears swelled in my eyes. I grabbed the first bagels I saw and quickly moved away.

I realized then, that it was not the season itself that was bothering me so, it was the fact that I could not enjoy it while everyone else did. When the receptionist at work started answering the phone *Happy Holidays...* she truly meant it. For her, and everyone else, it was the happy holiday season.

But for us, Christmas was just another day without Timothy. This day all the more poignant because of how much he loved it.

I survived the first Christmas Eve. I spent the better part of my day pretending that it was just another Saturday, nothing special, nothing new. It helped that it was some 20 degrees warmer than it ought to be at this time of year. It felt more like a spring day than the beginning day of winter.

Matthew spent a good chunk of time at Grandma's house. I was supposed to be there, but he didn't want me to hang around.

"You leave, Papa. Go home. Just me and Grandma and Grandad."

Who am I to argue with an 8 year-old on Christmas Eve?

Matthew got to open presents, which he liked; the grandparents got to spend time with him at the holidays, which they liked; and I got to have a break from Matthew and do a few errands on my own, which I liked.

I found myself at the rocks near Riverhead Beach in Marblehead – a peaceful hiding place that allowed me to forget the holiday bustle that was going on just a few hundred feet away. To access the rocks, you need to turn off the main drag, Atlantic Avenue, drive down to the end of the street and park. A set of concrete stairs leads you twenty feet below the level of the road above you and into a pocket of solitude. At least in December.

The rocks were absent of anyone, I was alone. The harbor, usually a place of great activity and excitement on a hot summer's day, was barren and cold; absent, too, of boats, save for a couple of fishing boats – professional craft that knew no season.

The sun felt almost hot as it glared off the water, gently lapping at the rocks below, barely moving in an out, still as a sheet of ice. As I sat, I couldn't help but think of Timothy. How much he would have loved this corner of town. I don't think I ever brought him here.

I saw him dazzled by all the sights and sounds: a rivulet of water pouring constantly from a drain of some source, the water rolling down the rocks into the thirsty sea; a dozen ropes finding their way into the ocean from large metal grommets bored into the rock, waiting for the summer when they could again hold a boat at bay. The ocean at my feet was just inches deep, at low tide. I could see through the sea to a bottom of mussel shells, empty crab shells, periwinkles rolling with the tide, long dead barnacles still clinging desperately to the rocks, clumps of seaweed swaying in the ebb of the sustaining sea. “Where’s SpongeBob?” I might have asked Timothy. “I can see Mr. Krabs.”

I sat on the rocks, alone, thinking of an e-mail someone sent to me not long before, which imagined Timothy in Heaven, jumping from star to star, cloud to cloud.

It's Timothy's first Christmas in Heaven. What a grand time he is having, he is dancing with the angels, jumping from star to star; look how bright there are! Timothy is helping to shine the Northern light for all of us to find Jesus. The stars are shining as bright as his smile. The big night is coming up, and Timothy will be standing right up front he listening to the angels sing and play their trumpets. The celebration of Life and Timothy, for each little child has a special place beside God. Listen on Christmas Eve, the night that Jesus was born for his little voice will be carried in the wind. An angel singing among the choir of heaven.

I tried hard to think of these words, and picture Timothy in the Paradise that I have heard about my entire life; but all I could see was Timothy bouncing from rock to rock, searching for stones that he could throw into the ocean and watch them sink to the bottom. As I looked into the chilly harbor, I harbored my own thoughts about jumping into the sea and sinking to the bottom. But, then I heard the screeching caw of a seagull and I was taken away to a different day, no so long ago, in a place nor far from here, yet a literal lifetime away.

It was a winter's day last year, unseasonably warm like this one, where the two boys and I went and tried to feed a flock of ducks at a nearby beach.

It was a quiet little place, not much of a beach but more of a boat launch. When the tide was high, the sand and rocks were obscured with water. But now, at low tide, we would walk among the rocks and seaweed, crab shells and mussels, dodging puddles of seawater stranded in divots and recessions in the earth. The beach was maybe a football field in length, maybe closer to an arena football field, somewhere in between. Ropes and chains wandered from where they were secured along an iron railing into the sea, some holding dinghies others holding the place of dinghies that were elsewhere.

We stopped at Shubie's along the way, a local shop where we bought a dozen or so rolls that we could toss, in addition to some caramel-filled chocolates that we greedily ate on benches in front of the store. But every time we tossed a piece of bread into the sea, a seagull swooped down and plucked the bread out of the ocean quicker than the ducks could react. Now, I know that seagulls have a certain place in literary lore, Jonathan Livingston Seagull and all that, but when you live around the ocean, the seagull becomes sort of a flying rat. A scavenger who would gladly pick trash out of an unguarded bin or steal french fries from an unsuspecting patron of Kelly's Roast Beef on Revere Beach. I never held much regard for seagulls, and let it be known to the boys.

"When you throw the bread in, keep it away from the seagulls." I explained to them, more to Timothy than Matthew who was searching for rocks and sticks that met his fancy. "See those white birds? We don't want to feed them. We like the ducks."

Trying as hard as he could, Timothy tossed chunks of bread towards the mallards and the box ducks or whatever species they were and away from the gulls. But no matter his efforts, the

gulls swarmed in and plucked the morsels out of the ocean, often fighting amongst themselves for the honor of the latest throw-away. The little brown ducks were getting nothing from our efforts.

“Don’t you eat that bread!” Timothy growled as fiercely as he could through clenched teeth. “You leave it alone. The bread is for the ducks!” He tossed another clump of sourdough in front of a greenish duck, whose little orange feet paddled mightily in its direction. But, a white and grey gull, cawing madly and flapping his wings as if in full battle mode dropped down and grabbed the bread away as the duck could only watch with open bill.

“We don’t like seagulls!” Timothy shouted. “We like the ducks!” He stood adamantly, actually angry at the gulls, his little denim baseball hat skewed slightly to the side on his head. “Ohhh! They got the bread again, Papa! I want the ducks to have it.”

“I do, too, buddy. But I guess the gulls are hungrier.” I took the last clump of bread and tossed it in the middle of a gaggle of ducks. But a single gull bombardiered out of the blue and splashed-down next to the roll and ate happily.

“Papa, we need to go somewhere where there’s no seagulls. I don’t like the seagulls. I like the ducks.”

“I know what you mean kid. Next time I know a better place to go.”

Do I need to say it again? There was no next time.

What all that has to do with Christmas Eve, I don’t know; and maybe that’s the point. That’s exactly what I wanted, wasn’t it? An escape from all the holly-jollies and ho-ho-ho’s?

Well, I made it through the First Christmas.

It was easier than I thought it would be. Funny thing about Christmas. While it was approaching, it was hard to avoid. Everywhere I turned, there it was starting me in the face, eye-to-eye. But when it finally got here, it was a tame beast. I hid in my house and it made little effort to find me. Oh sure, there was the occasional passer-by waving a Merry Christmas to me, and so many places on the radio and TV were flooded with Christmas tidings. But in the end, I muddled through, relatively unscathed.

The hardest time, honestly, was putting Matthew to bed the night before. It was hard not to use the old adage *Go to sleep or Santa won't come*. It was hard, once he got to sleep, not to have to scramble around as in years past to pull the presents out of hiding and fill the space under the tree and stuff the stockings with gifts galore.

Hard too, was explaining to Matthew why we weren't celebrating the day, why he wasn't opening presents, why he wasn't going to a grandparent's house. Because we are sad that Timothy cannot share this day with us, we are not celebrating.

And that, of course, is the hardest part of everyday; not being able to share the day with Timothy.

I didn't miss the presents (which we gave Matthew last week), the celebration, the trip to the grandparents' house. I didn't miss watching Timothy tear into his gifts. I didn't miss the endless opportunity to take countless more photos of my boys. I didn't miss any of it, because today wasn't Christmas. It was just Sunday. It was typical average Sunday.

I was helped, unwittingly, by the still unseasonable temperatures. It felt more like a Sunday in March or April than December.

And I was doing OK, until the trip to the playground. There, I saw two young sisters playing together; I couldn't help but think of Matthew and Timothy playing together, too. Of

course, at the playground, the boys would invariably go their separate ways and do anything but appear as siblings. But watching these two girls, I could see the love between them, and it made me remember the special bond that Matthew and Tim so obviously had; a bond that as a parent, I could never penetrate or equal. That was their alone.

And now, it is gone.

So another hurdle met and overcome. I've passed his birthday; the first Thanksgiving; the six-month anniversary; and now the first Christmas. Somehow I have managed to stagger through it all. But never without thinking of how much better it all would have been with him.

And, isn't that what Christmas is all about?

Chapter 40

In the End

"I say 'Dear Lord,
Do right by me
I'm tired of feeling
Lonesome, Orny, and Mean'"
-- Waylon Jennings

It was nearly 12:30 am when I pulled into the cemetery. It was dark and cold; the January temperatures had plunged back to normal and below in the few days since Christmas. The music in my car was blaring loud; a rock band called Black Label Society was shrieking out of my speakers – music a man my age probably shouldn't be listening to.

I had just come from seeing a movie, a Johnny Cash bio-pic, as they say. For two-and-a-half hours, I actually enjoyed myself, and it was tearing me up inside. I needed forgiveness to quell the guilt I felt for having fun.

I pulled the car over next to the row where Timothy was buried and climbed out of the car. I staggered down the row, this time not saying hello to the baseball legend's wife, as was my practice. I went straight to Timothy's stone and fell to my knees.

"Looks like your trees are dead." I said into the night about the little fir trees that we placed there for the season, my breath hanging in the air, a cloud in front of me. "But, then so are

you.” I picked up one of the plants and held it in my hands. The tree looked almost orange in the light of the street lamps that barely illuminated the site.

“I’m sorry, Timothy,” I pled to the granite image of my son. “I had fun tonight. I know I shouldn’t feel guilty about having fun, but I do.” I was speaking out loud, almost yelling, my voice cracking with each word. “I need to have some fun, Timothy. Let me have some fun.”

I bounced to my feet and paced around the small patch of grass and snow. The ground was frozen hard.

“I was at a movie, enjoying myself while my son is buried in the frozen ground.” I was yelling now. “It’s not fair! It’s not fair!” I was screaming now, and let out a shriek that was so loud that it echoed off the nearby buildings, my voice resonating through the still night for what seemed like an eternity. “Goddamn it! Why???” I dropped to my knees and slammed the plant against the ground, smashing it into pieces. I collapsed into a heap on the frozen ground, sobbing so hard that it hurt. “Why,” I moaned into the grass.

As I looked up, even in the dark of the night, I could see dirt and mud smeared all over Timothy’s etching in the stone; soil dotted the entire marker, over his name, his dates, everywhere. With tears flowing from my eyes, I frantically tried to rub the dirt away, making more of a mess with each wipe of my hand. I looked down at my hands to see a mix of dirt and blood.

I jumped to my feet, working hard for every breath; I stumbled to my car and sat on the hood, trying to catch my mind, which was miles away from me, and slipping further away. After a moment, I caught my breath and moved slowly back to Timothy.

“Timothy,” I dropped in a heap to my knees, “you have got to let me go. We let you go; now you have to let me go. I can’t do this anymore.” I fell forward my head touching the dirt in

front of me. “I want to kill myself, Timothy. Your brother is coming in a couple of weeks, and I don’t care! I don’t care! We are going to have another child, Tim, and I don’t care.” I mumbled into the icy ground.

“You have got to let me go. I want to take up smoking, I am so screwed up. I am drinking too much. It’s the only thing that helps, Tim; and even that doesn’t work as well anymore. Help me Tim. Help me!” Sobbing, heaving, shaking all over, I climbed to my feet and looked up at the stars. So many stars were shining through the clear night sky.

“Help me, Orion,” I called to the sky. “When I started all this, you were over there,” I pointed to the south where Orion used to stand in the night sky. “Now you are so far to the north. You keep moving, why can’t I?” I wiped the tears from my cheeks. “I haven’t moved an inch since this all started. I still feel as miserable as I did the day this all began.” I turned back to the stone.

“Let me go, Timothy. That day in the hospital, we knew you would not have wanted to live like that. We let you go. Look at me! You have to let me go. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t live like this. Why can’t you let me go??” I fell to my knees and then flat on the ground, whispering to the grass and to Timothy below. “Let me go, Tim. Let me go.”

I don’t know how much time passed – it couldn’t have been long – that I lay there on the frozen Earth when I saw the headlights pull through the gate. A searchlight was scanning the stones from the side of the car. I knew who it was. In a moment the car pulled in front of mine and the light was shone on me. He got out of the car and walked slowly over to me, as I struggled to my feet.

“Are you OK?”

“Nope,” I replied.

“What are you doing here so late?”

“Visiting my son.”

“We got some complaints about screaming and yelling...”

“Yup. It was me.”

“You woke people up, you know.”

“Yup. I guess I did.”

“You know you can’t stay here. Do you have somewhere to go?”

“Sure do.”

“Can I let you go there? Are you going to be all right?” I looked down at the stone, at Timothy’s smiling face, then up at the sky.

“No... I mean Yes; I guess so.” I stammered, not impressing the officer that I was not a drunken fool, but a broken-hearted one. “I’m OK to get home; but, I will never be all right. Never again.” He nodded in a sympathetic understanding.

“I lost a brother when I was just a kid,” he said quietly into the night and climbed back into the car. Out the open window, he whispered “I don’t think I’ll ever be whole again, either,” before driving off into the night.

Never again. I guess I will just have to get used to it.

I have no other choice....

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Chapter 41

Epilogue

Can the Blessed on God's Mountain
love you more than I down here?
-- Allison Moorer

I find myself standing ankle deep in snow staring at a black slab of granite. It is the day before Christopher is scheduled to be born. It's a beautiful gravestone, if ever there can be one. Certainly, one of the nicest in this cemetery; of course, I am a bit biased here. It's ornate but simple. Not one of those monstrosities that feature a life-sized sculpture of the Virgin Mary or something.

It is a simple design, with an image of Timothy etched in the stone. The detail is amazing; you can see the whites of his eyes, each of his teeth, the wrinkles in his jeans. We got some grief about taking formal pictures of him with jeans, but that was Timothy. Like most boys, I guess, he wasn't into formal clothes. He was always a t-shirt and jeans type. Although he did look stunning in a tuxedo.

"Timothy," I told to the etching, "your brother is coming tomorrow. I'm sorry that you won't get a chance to meet him." A small tear formed in my eye and rolled down my cheek.

“But, I am really sorry that he won’t get a chance to meet you. You would have made the best big brother.”

I could easily see Timothy helping out with Christopher:

“Uh-oh. Christopher did a poop and needs a new diaper.” And then he would help change his brother, getting a diaper from the pile of fresh ones, maybe picking out a new outfit, if needed.

“I can warm up Christopher’s bottle,” followed by Timothy taking a bottle from the fridge and putting it in the microwave (Against the advice of most experts. Oh well.).

“I’ll get him a new binky,” and Tim would wander into the kitchen to get a new pacifier from the stash we will keep on the counter.

Timothy would play toys together on the floor; he’d show his brother how to make Elmo appear out of the jack-in-the-box.

And when Christopher would get older, I know Tim would have shown him everything: how to hit a baseball, how to shoot a basketball, how to climb the wooden jungle gym in the backyard; which songs by Old Crow Medicine Show were the best.

I can see it all; but none of it will happen.

I joked once or twice when telling people that we were pregnant that “Timothy’s replacement has been ordered and is in production,” I knew that no one could ever take his place,

nor would we ever dream of replacing him. As much as I would want another son like Timothy, I hope that Christopher is nothing like his brother.

I know I haven't spoken much about Christopher, but that's only because this is Timothy's story. I think that Christopher is the primary reason why I am writing all this down, so that maybe someday he can read about his brother and realize what he missed out on. Matthew likely won't read this, but he already knows what he has lost; he tells me everyday how much he misses Timothy; how he asks to go to the cemetery all the time; how he sees Timothy in his dreams; how he sees Timothy's eyes in the sky; and how his brother is never coming back.

I know I should be happy about the impending birth of our third son, but I am not. I am still confused. Just as confused as that first day when we found out. I still haven't figured out how I can be so happy about one thing and so sad about another at the same time. I guess I will find out tomorrow whether I welcome the little bundle of innocence into this cold world with love and affection, or meet his arrival by running out the room in tears because he is not Timothy, and never can be.

I have resisted telling people that we are pregnant for that very reason. Everyone gets this happy look on their face and throw their hands out for a hearty handshake, usually followed by a *Congratulations*, or a *That's wonderful!*. I guess it is wonderful; then why are the people I tell about Christopher happier than I am about him?

Part of it, I guess, is the third-child syndrome. I've been through this before and am not worried about doing it again. Unlike with the first child, I know I can take care of a baby; and unlike with the second child, I know I can take care of more than one. There is none of that apprehension. Perhaps that is quashing my anticipation as well.

But, most of it is due to Timothy. His loss colors every aspect of my life – usually black.

With the birth of our third son so close, I got to thinking *What if something happens to him before he is born?* With Timothy's life, I have lamented that his twilight came too early; what if Christopher's twilight comes before sunrise? Can you mourn something you never really had?

The answer, of course, is yes. And I've seen it in many forms and happen to many people. I know the experts will tell you the odds of something happening at this point are long; and that it is all but a certainty.

But with children, unfortunately, it isn't official until you hold him or her in your arms.

I've met people who have lost children at all stages along the way: early-term miscarriages, late-term miscarriages, stillbirths, and children who have died immediately after birth. Even an adoption that falls through is a loss. It can happen, even when everything looks perfect from the outside and the outcome seems certain, things can turn quickly and coldly.

At cemetery I saw people who died at all ages, in the elderly stages, mid-lifers, twenty-somethings, teenagers, and a child who lived to see only one day.

How is it possible to mourn over someone you never touched or knew other than from an image, a photograph, an ultrasound? Because I know it is. We fall in love with idea of someone; we allow ourselves to dream about our life with this person. To have that taken away before we can know it is just as painful as taking away that which we do know, that which we have held in our arms, regardless of how long we were allowed to hold it in our arms.

It is easy to understand. All the planning and precision that goes into bringing a child into your life. Buying all those adorable little outfits; planning the theme for the baby's room; telling everyone about the impending arrival; and buying all the stuff that the little lad or lass needs. We

all want to create a perfect world for him or her to come home to. When he or she doesn't come home, our perfect worlds are destroyed, and us along with it.

I think this is why I am still not fully integrated into the planned arrival of Christopher into our lives. It is more than just enduring the pain of Timothy's absence; it's a fear of falling in love with a child and having to face the possibility of losing that child.

I have visions of his arrival. I see myself both grabbing onto him and not wanting let go, not wanting anyone else to hold him, even his mother. But, I can also see myself taking my first look at him and leaving the delivery room, because he is not Timothy, and Timothy is all I really want.

I know that my reaction will be closer to the former, and that I will embrace him. I know he's not Timothy and I never expect him to be; I never expect him to fill the void in my life that Timothy has left. I know that he will occupy some of that void, but not all; as he grows over time, will he fill that void more and more? I won't know anything for certain until he arrives.

And that cannot come soon enough.

For those of you who know the pain of that day not coming, believe me, I understand. I live everyday with some of what you are going through, and will go through. Our thoughts are with you and we hope with all our heart that you will someday see your dream come true.

Chapter 42

Epilogue 2 – June 15, 2007

So dear friends your love has gone
Only tears to dwell upon
I dare not say as the wind must blow
So a love is lost, a love is won
Go to sleep and dream again
Soon your hopes will rise and then
From all this gloom life can start anew
And there'll be no crying soon
-- Queen

Well, it's been two years to the day since you left us, Timothy. I still miss you as much now, if not more, than the moment you slipped away in your mother's arms. More than 700 days have passed, but it feels like one.

It has taken me a long time to write all this down, nearly 18 months now, I guess. It's been a hard task; but one I could not refuse. My muse, maybe Timothy himself (?), would visit me from time to time and plant an urge in me to write. Then she would disappear for a time, as though my heart and soul needed a respite from the pain my brain wanted to express.

Christopher was born and I loved him as deeply as any father could imagine. A little more than a year later, Tim, we welcomed a girl into the family – a sister for you, my friend, Lia. She is amazing. You would have loved her.

We marked the sad anniversary with a nice picnic lunch at Timothy's Place; your mother, younger brother, little sister, and I. It was another glorious June afternoon; again, just like your last day with us. Weather-wise, anyway. You missed that glorious June weather back in 2005, as you missed this one, too.

Christopher, like any 15-month-old, quickly found the toys we place at your gravesite each spring and summer: the Spiderman doll, the Bob-the-Builder crane, the firetruck now driven by SpongeBob, the tiny model space shuttle. All little bits of who you were, and who you will always be. Lia sat idly by in her carrier, smiling her little three-month-old smile – dimples and all – at the gentle sunlight that bathed her.

In the past fifteen months, we have heard from so many people who have suggested that two new babies should mute the sorrow we feel for you, Timothy. To them, and to all who might think that, it doesn't work that way.

When I think of how we are graced by the births of Christopher and Lia, I think of that tired analogy about the oil-and-water (it that it?), where the oil is joy of our new additions and the water is the sorrow of our loss. I see a clear vial, with a layer of one liquid on the top and another layer of liquid below, sitting atop one another, no intermingling of the two. You can shake the vial as violently as you like; the two will combine for a time, but they will always settle out again into two distinct entities in the bottle. But, once in the bottle, you can't ever separate out the two – they are forever paired, forever distinct, forever together yet apart.

To relay some sense of how this all feels, I was sitting at a community center pool last Saturday; a beautiful, hot August afternoon. Christopher and Lia perched on my lap, enjoying the cooling water. Matthew splashed not too far away, playing with a spongy ball he found floating in the blue. As I sat, I noticed across the shallow end one of Timothy's pre-school classmates,

splashing about with a friend of his. I couldn't help but see Timothy in the group, playing along side the two other boys. As I sat on the steps of the pool, a pair of beautiful babies in my lap, all I wanted to do was cry for what I didn't have, unable to celebrate what I did.

The mood dips are like a solar eclipse. The sun blaring down, illuminating and warming all around, only to have the moon come along and blot out the rays, casting an all-encompassing shadow across everything in sight. The air chills slightly in the dark. Then, the moon pulls away, and all returns to how it was before.

I only with my moods were as rare as a solar eclipse.

I know I've said it before, not sure if on these pages; that one of my greatest regrets is that Christopher and Lia will never get to know their big brother. For I know what a wonderful brother he would be. I saw how he related to Matthew, how he unwittingly pulled Matthew along, taught him so much; so much more that his mother and I ever could.

I think I've gotten to the point where I've said pretty much all I've got to say. It's like that when I visit Timothy each day. Some days I get there and have nothing to say to him. How many times can I tell that stone etching how much I miss him; how angry I am at his being gone; how much this sucks.

I am not sure how to close this missive. I wanted some heady line like a Dickens story. But I have nothing.

Other than to say that I am angry that you're gone; I am angry that no one could help you; I am angry that there are so many piss-poor parents out there who still have their children, despite how they may not deserve them.

I guess I'll just leave you the way I leave Timothy every day. I love you, buddy. Forever and always.

Bye Monster.

Then, I'll leave you as suddenly as he left us.

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