

FROM SCRATCH: BOOK ONE  
**INHERITANCE**

DENNIS HUFFINGTON



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# **DEDICATION**

To my 11-year old self.

You are awesome! Don't let anyone get you down!

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE</b>	
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INHERITANCE</b>	I
<b>CHAPTER TWO: LAW OF ATTRACTION</b>	13
<b>CHAPTER THREE: FROM SCRATCH</b>	27
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: FAMILY MATTERS</b>	40
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: GOD BLESS AMERICA</b>	54
<b>CHAPTER SIX: TURN FOR THE WORSE</b>	67
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: SISTER ACT</b>	80
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT: LEGACY</b>	92
<b>CHAPTER NINE: APRIL 11, 2016</b>	105
<b>CHAPTER TEN: IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME</b>	117
<b>CHAPTER ELEVEN: EATING SINS</b>	131
<b>CHAPTER TWELVE: ESTATE TAX</b>	143
<b>CHAPTER THIRTEEN: INSURANCE POLICY</b>	155
<b>CHAPTER FOURTEEN: FAMILY VALUES</b>	168
<b>CHAPTER FIFTEEN: HOW DOES IT END?</b>	181
<b>CHAPTER SIXTEEN: BURNED BRIDGES</b>	194
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b>	209
<b>BONUS CONTENT</b>	211

# PREFACE

“EVERYONE’S CHILDHOOD PLAYS ITSELF OUT”

- MARILYN MONROE

The names in this book have been changed to protect the innocent. Me. I am the innocent. Writing this book has been one of the most difficult things I've ever done. I've revisited some of the deepest and darkest places that I've ever been. The process has been mentally, emotionally, and even physically demanding. I would even say that some days were depressing. The life of this book has become a concrete representation of my trials and tribulations. There were many times that I didn't want to finish but I felt that if I succumbed to writing the book, it was the same as succumbing to the events and experiences written within it.

Nothing about it was easy and it hurt like hell to be honest about my life. The truth more than hurts and it can be excruciatingly painful. I did the best I could to try and relay to you what it felt like to be me. This is a true story but if you know me it may be hard for you to believe it because I have become an expert at hiding, masking, and downplaying my pain.

Telling my story evoked pain, shame, anger, confusion and embarrassment. These are the roots of my existence as I have developed as a man with a foundation based in trauma. I have lived with this story all my life but kept it all a secret, thinking I would be safer if I hid my truth. I now realize that my truth is my weapon.

Many of us will not have what it takes to pull ourselves from out of what we inherit at birth. Some of us will not even have the mindset to recognize the inheritance that we have been given. I say “us” because all of us are

affected by our circumstances at birth, good or bad. Everyone of us is born into this world and given a name, a path, and an inheritance. We receive everything that we are from our family and the blessings and curses from prior generations are bestowed upon an innocent child. That is why babies come out kicking and screaming in frustration. At that very moment, when they leave the safe and beautiful peace of the womb, they are burdened with all that came before them. They call it living, but for many of us, life is more about dying.

As we grow and continue to live, our experiences and possessions are accumulated and treasured. Titles, accomplishments and status become prized possessions of the living as they will be the legacy of us when we leave the Earth. These prized possessions are the evidence of a good name and a life well lived. More importantly, these possessions are evidence of how one played the game of life. Upon death, we leave these things to our children and their children and their children's children, and so on and so forth. All so that we may, in our own way, live on forever. Not everyone passes on prized possessions though, and some of us inherit things that serve us no benefit.

If you're lucky, you will inherit wealth, status, and possibly even happiness. If you're unlucky, you will inherit nothing. If you're like me, you will inherit rejection, abandonment, and endless questions. I was born into a life of constant confusion and internal strife from both sides of my family. As much as I worked to fill voids, right the wrongs, and troubleshoot my problems, they kept reappearing. I constantly questioned myself and even my creator. Why me? What am I doing wrong?

When I first started writing this book, it was titled *From Scratch*. The titling of the book proved to be prophetic. My goal was to educate readers about the laws of attraction and how the universe works in our favor. It was a new way of thinking for me at one point and I had to

work to replace much of the way that I used to think, which was very negative. My new outlook on life and way of thinking empowered me to the point where I was ready to take on the world. That was how I ended up letting go of everything, to go forth toward my destiny. That was what I meant by starting from scratch. That was my original intention.

The narrative was going to chronicle my journey as I moved and started over professionally. *From Scratch* took on several meanings throughout the writing of this book. As I was writing, life continued to happen and I felt the need to tell a much different story. It became obvious that I was also on a journey to better myself, also seemingly from scratch. The life that was happening while I was writing *From Scratch* soon became a more important story to tell. At that moment, the entire book was rewritten, from scratch. What you are about to read is actually not what I originally intended to share with you, but the message is still just as powerful.

Thank You

## **CHAPTER ONE: INHERITANCE**

The warm Arizona sun brought a welcoming warmth and much needed Vitamin D. This was where life would be better and a new chapter would begin. I was convinced that GOD was here and surrounded me in the mountains, the sunlight, and the warmth. Years ago, a fleeting thought of the Phoenix bird crossed my mind and I considered the idea of moving to the warm, desert city. The idea of a booming and growing city wrapped in the warmth of the sun intrigued me. My body became warm with the just the thought.

The myth of the bird mesmerized me as well. The idea of rebirth in the midst of fire was both destructive and beautiful at the same time. We all should have the power to start over, press reset, give ourselves another chance, and destroy the parts in us that we no longer desire. I have always had an affinity to the poetic and literary, and as a result I tend to romanticize events in my life. I find myself applying literary elements to my daily life and looking for symbolism. The Phoenix bird symbolized rebirth and the city symbolized a place where people went to be reborn, or rise from their ashes.

After 15 years of living in St. Louis, I felt stripped and the need to be rebuilt. I needed a rebirth. It wasn't the first time that I wanted to leave St. Louis. In fact, moving had been a priority for most of the time I was in St. Louis but fear and uncertainty always prevented me from taking the leap and leaving. I had started over once when I moved to St. Louis, and I was afraid of what it would be like to have to start all over, once again. Phoenix was just one of the places that I had tossed around the idea of moving to but never took it under serious consideration. Then, what seemed like all of a sudden, it was my new home.

I continually find myself amazed at the workings



of GOD and the universe. A thought that I had put into the universe so long ago had come to fruition, at a time when it was most befitting to my life. Moving to Phoenix would rebirth me from my own ashes in the same fashion as the mythical bird. The rebirth would come as a result of following my dreams and putting all of my efforts into being the person that I wanted to be and leave behind the person that I was. The new me would emerge from the ashes of the old me as a writer and creative force in the world.

In order for this to happen, I had to leave behind all that no longer served me a purpose. That meant that I had to leave behind my career as a teacher, and completely forget about trying to save the lives of children in poverty. I was going to save my own life and through my story, I could possibly save others. There was a lot that needed to change and my body physically reacted to the mental changes that were taking place.

The first weeks in Phoenix were physically demanding on my body and mind. I was completely exhausted and couldn't do much without being tired. It wasn't a bad thing though, my body was purging and I needed to rest. Leaving St. Louis meant leaving behind a work environment that was killing me, a city plagued by violence and unrest, and painful memories and life lessons that scarred me as a teenager and young adult. My entire mindset changed, the very moment I pulled my car off of my apartment lot and left St. Louis and my body followed my mind immediately thereafter. Whether I called it a resurgence, a renewal, or a rebirth, I was becoming a better me.

I wouldn't just forget about everything that happened in St. Louis. All that I had experienced would not be in vain. I decided that I was going to write a magnum opus covering all the chapters of my life. Living in St. Louis was going to be a major chapter. It was where I came

into my own and learned how the world *really* works.

St. Louis is one of America's most historically relevant cities, but it has been plagued with a concentration of all of the problems that face America. As it continues to fall from its position as one of America's anchors, the people there have developed a tenacity and pride that resonates above all of the turmoil. It was complete culture shock moving there, living there, and seeing the impact the city has on those who live there. Writing a book about my experiences coming of age in St. Louis was going to be a guaranteed page turner.

It was never my choice to move to St. Louis. Of course we always have a choice in the sense of being able to make decisions for ourselves but when you have nowhere else to go, you typically choose food and shelter. I ended up there because I had nowhere else to go. If I knew then what I know now, I would've taken my chances elsewhere. I don't say that to knock the city or my experiences. I simply mean that I am a man of faith and not of fear at this point in my life. I have learned that what your life is at any given moment is what it should be at the time. You have to grasp your presence and recognize all the possibilities of your current situation.

I arrived in St. Louis at the tender age of 17, with a deficit in self-esteem, that continued to depreciate my self value. At 17, I knew nothing about the power of faith and favor or how my life could change based on the thoughts that I kept. Before I moved there, I was sleeping on my best friend's floor, after being put out of my grandmother's house. Nothing about life seemed to be going in my favor, and I was very negative about everything. Moving to St. Louis was the first time I would face the fire and rise from my own ashes.

In the years that followed, I worked extremely hard to pull myself out of poverty, and the toxic mental state that poverty puts us in. I went to college and graduate school

while working to take care of myself. While I grew to be a strong young man there, I also evolved into someone jaded and pessimistic. In the process, I completely gave up on my dream of being a journalist. Journalism was a dream, and I needed a job and a career that would guarantee that I could provide for myself. I didn't have time to chase after dreams. Instead, I had nightmares. Nightmares about my childhood and upbringing, that recurred, and kept me from truly resting during my sleep.

Marilyn Monroe wrote in her diary, *Everyone's childhood plays itself out*. Hers apparently played out in her relationships and drug overdose. I pray that my childhood has already played itself out. During those first years in St. Louis, my childhood played out in my nightmares and haunted me in my waking life. Children have the most vulnerable spirits. When left with unfinished business, like all other spirits, those childhood spirits become ghosts and can haunt us well into adulthood.

Many of us find ourselves haunted by the ghosts of our childhood. When we are born, we have no control as to what we are born into. As we struggle to overcome the lives that are handed to us at the time of our birth, we end up with unfinished business, leaving that childhood spirit to haunt us until we properly finish said business.

I had plenty of ghosts that haunted me, causing me to fear and fail on a regular basis. I was haunted by feelings of rejection, lack of love, and self-hatred. As a boy, I was very different than the others around me. Of course I didn't know I was different until I was told. The ways in which I was told were crushing to my childhood spirit and the pain it caused stayed with me. I found out that I was gay from others around me, through gay slurs, hate language, physical attacks, and harassment on a daily basis, no exaggeration.

My father obsessed over homosexuality and his idea of masculinity. He wouldn't even touch me, let alone

hug me. I would watch him play with my cousins, who were girls, whenever they visited but he never played with me and I lived with him. He believed that any sort of male-to-male interaction would make him less than a man and would cause me to grow up to be homosexual. In his eyes, affection and love between men was a not masculine attribute. As a boy, I wasn't equipped to discern the difference between affection and love. The absence of affection felt like an absence of love to me. As I got older, I witnessed other fathers having no problem giving affection to their sons and all of their sons grew up to be normal. My theory is that had I received the proper affection from my father, I may have not sought love from other males. Maybe I would have turned out normal too.

My father followed a particular set of rules when it came to masculinity. If you didn't fall in line or act according to his rules, you were not a man. Men do not eat ice cream, fruit, or drink cappuccino. Men do not like to read books or appreciate art. Men do not play the flute or talk on the telephone. I'm not sure where the set of rules originated from but he was a stickler to them. He lived by these rules as if they had been both medically and scientifically proven and ordained in every religion known to man.

I can only imagine the complete and utter soul-shattering disappointment he must have felt when I began expressing feminine ways at a very young age. Everything that he focused his entire parenting style and existence on had been for naught. His worst nightmare, having a gay son, manifested before his very eyes, even as he did everything within his power to prevent it. Surely, he must have resigned to the idea that the universe was working against him. When combined with his other life experiences, it most certainly must have seemed that way to him.

I never understood why I was gay and I tried many

times to retrace the steps back in my life to where it may have first manifested within me. Of course, my father's family blamed in on my mother, as if I had inherited it from her. If only he had been exposed to the law of attraction at some point in his life. He focused his entire existence, his entire energy, on not having a gay son and being masculine. In return, he received from the universe what he focused on the most, a gay son. The law of attraction granted him what he focused on the most, whether he focused on what he wanted or what he didn't want.

Every day that passed, I vowed to leave the small town that I grew up in and never return. That was exactly what happened but not exactly as I had expected it. I viewed education as my only chance to move up in the world, at least that's what we were told growing up. My father and grandmother laughed in my face when I told them that I planned to go to college. They didn't believe that I was good enough for college. That didn't stop me though, it only motivated me more. I applied for schools in Atlanta and Baltimore, and got accepted to three. I was determined to make something of myself but an even stronger factor driving me was that my family didn't support me and had went as far as to ridicule me. I would show them.

My plans after high school were to attend Morgan State University in Baltimore and become a famous journalist. Specifically, I wanted to be the head anchor for *The Today Show*, since Bryant Gumbel had moved on. For my entire senior year, I mentally prepared myself for leaving home that summer. I made sure that I stayed on top of everything that I needed to do for school, from filling out applications, financial aid papers, and applying for housing. After graduating in June of 2001, it was time to make my final arrangements, which included securing housing on-campus.

My father and I had a major blowup fight because

he refused to give me money that I needed for the housing deposit. What made matters even worse is that I was given plenty of money to cover the housing deposit as graduation gifts when I graduated from high school. The money that I received directly, I put to use immediately, paying for various fees that my school required. The housing deposit was \$500 and my Aunt Irene had put together a package with her kids to help me pay. They were the family that we had in St. Louis, and how I eventually ended up there. When Irene mailed the money for the deposit, he intercepted the package and took possession of the money.

When I asked him about it, he made so many excuses about why he was keeping the money. To me, it seemed like he was trying to keep me from going to school. He had done nothing but ridicule my pursuits. In later years, my father said that it was a mistake he made because he didn't know how to deal with me moving away. His plan backfired to epic proportions. Not only did I leave town, I moved further away than I would've been in Baltimore, and severed all ties with him for years.

That is an example of how the laws of attraction work, even when you are unaware of them. The law of attraction states, "what you focus on the most, you attract." My father's focus was on me moving away, and even though he may have avoided me moving away to Baltimore, he still attracted me moving away, just to a different place.

After fighting with him about my housing deposit, I went to stay with my best friend, Brittany, for a couple of days. Brittany and I had been friends since middle school and best friends since junior year. When I tried to go back home, I was informed that I was no longer welcome. Not only could I not go back, I couldn't step foot inside the house, even to get clothes. My father told me that my grandmother had the final say and she didn't want me in her house. It was his way of deflecting, but it didn't matter.

I doubted if it were even true, but that didn't matter either. All that mattered was that my father had no problem with sending me into the streets, with nothing, not even clothing. A few weeks passed and Irene sent for me, and that's how I ended up in St. Louis. When I left town for good, I had to have a police escort to the house, just to retrieve some clothes.

My father drew a line at that moment, and for years he remained on one side, and I on the other. As far as I was concerned, my father and grandmother were dead in my eyes. I was also determined more than ever to accomplish the goal that I had set, which was graduating from college.

After living in St. Louis for a few months and completing a semester at a college in the city, I knew that I needed to get out on my own, once and for all. Irene was living with her oldest daughter, Kyle, so that's where I ended up also. That was another ghost that haunted me. As a kid, I was always at somebody's house, other than my own, or with someone's parents, other than my own. Kyle had no problems reminding me that I was another mouth to feed. Tired of feeling like a burden, I reached out to my mother and a move to Richmond, VA soon followed. That living arrangement went south even faster than the one in St. Louis.

After a month in Virginia and less than 9 months after I left New Jersey, I was back in St. Louis. This time, I was determined to make my own home, where no one could put me out or make me feel like a burden. There were many times that I struggled trying to live on my own, but I learned how to survive on my own without help from anyone. As years passed, and I maintained, I prided myself on being a survivor, one who could make it through anything. Unaware of the laws of attraction, by labeling myself as a survivor, I was unintentionally inviting more struggle and strife into my life. In order to be this survivor

that I prided myself upon being, I would need to survive things. In order to survive things, I would need to go through things. I went from one struggle to the next, always coming out on top and deeming myself stronger than before.

A narrative developed within me that I was alone and on my own. Time and time again, I told myself that I was on my own and no one was there, but me, to help me through my struggles. All I was accomplishing was attracting more loneliness and more struggle into my life. My life was being lived in default mode. Whatever came my way, I accepted, and vowed to overcome. I also developed a deep resentment for my family, especially my mother and father. There were already seeds of resentment planted in me from my childhood and my struggles in young adulthood nurtured further resentment. My father was at the top of my list of people who I resented because I blamed him directly for me ending up in St. Louis in the first place.

After years of struggle, I made a way for myself in St. Louis. When I rose out of the fire, I had love, prosperity, and financial security in my life. I became a student of the new thought movement after stumbling upon *The Secret* movie on Netflix. After watching the film, I began seeking out more and more literature about the law of attraction. Within a matter of months, I had attracted everything into my life that I needed to attract more of the things that I wanted.

I was fully subscribed to the concept that the universe conspires for the benefit of me and the proof was in the way that I was reached. The love that I had for music led me to the song “Happy” by Pharrell Williams, which led me to watch an interview of his with Oprah, in which he lamented on the lessons he learned from reading *The Alchemist*. I downloaded the book on my tablet and read the entire book the very same night. *The Alchemist*, itself,



seemed like a cue to me from the universe. The boy in the story had set out on a journey to find a treasure which led him to experiences that he had never anticipated. Convinced that the law of attraction worked and already inclined to search for symbols and hidden meanings, I began looking for cues from the universe and delved deep into controlling my thoughts and attracting all that I wanted in life.

I created a vision board of what I wanted in my future, while focusing on all that I already had. It's very important to practice gratitude for what has been provided, while also looking to the future for what you want to have. The exercise was one of the first things I learned when I began studying the law of attraction. My board contained pictures of weddings, beaches, and money. Those were the things that I wanted to attract and I can attest that they have all manifested. A little more than two years later, I am married, seen the beaches of California and Cancun, and while working a part-time job, unaffiliated with my prior career, I have been more financially stable than ever in my life. More than that would also come into fruition, much of it I hadn't asked for or expected. I expected an amazing journey, but I had no idea that the universe was going to take me where I needed to go via such a scenic route.

When I started learning about the laws of attraction and that right thinking could bring me whatever I wanted, I was a bit afraid that I was engaging in activity that undermined my faith in GOD. It took quite some time for me to reconcile with my faith and my belief in the laws of attraction. Eventually, I discovered how much the words of the bible actually aligned with what I had learned. Finally, I was satisfied when I understood that no matter how much I used the laws of attraction, as powerful as they are, GOD is still the highest power there is. It was okay for me to better myself and my understanding of the universe, because it would never take the place that GOD has in my life. I had

two ultra-powerful weapons on my side.

The more and more that it appeared it was working, I struggled to make sense of the experience. Was I really creating this life that I wanted, or was I just getting lucky? Even worse, I thought that I would somehow end up a victim once again. All of these wonderful things were only going to make the blow stronger when my life came crashing back down. There had long been a battle going on in my mind that I attributed to a young life full of traumatic experiences. These mental and emotional demons presented themselves over and over again through the years. Even as I had reached my most prosperous point in my life in my final years in St. Louis, I was still plagued by fear and insecurity which prevented me from being able to fully pursue my dreams or truly believe that I could achieve them. I was still haunted by my childhood.

The more positive my thinking became, the more positive I became. I wanted to rid my life of any negative emotions or feelings. I reconciled with many of my family members and I worked to stop resenting my father. I believed that everything had happened for a reason and that reason would somehow benefit me. My father had gotten close to GOD as he battled cancer and was profoundly different than the man I grew up with. While he was strong in his faith, I noticed that he was also living in default mode when it came to his thoughts. He put all of his recovery in GOD's hands, which could be viewed as true and absolute faith, and resigned to whatever outcome GOD had for him.

That was a huge step for him in comparison to what I had remembered of him growing up. He was ultra-negative about nearly everything when I was a kid. I believe that I inherited that negativity from him and before I learned how it affected my outcomes, I engaged in negative thinking on a regular basis. I even contemplated how his thinking may have affected my sexuality. He

avoided hugging me, kissing me, or showing any form of parental affection because he felt it would make me gay. He was so constantly focused on not having a son who was a sissy, among other choice words, but that's exactly what happened. Perhaps, my father's thoughts were transferred to me through the law of attraction. I became what he did not want because he focused on what he did not want as opposed to what he wanted. What he did not want was a son who was homosexual. Through his own thoughts and his speaking, that is what I became. Is it possible that I inherited his negative thoughts and they manifested in my life, even as a child?

I visited my father for his birthday in August 2015, which would be his last. His battle with cancer made me feel sympathy for him for the first time in my life. He was open and vulnerable for the first time in his life and I was open and vulnerable with him in return, for the first time in my life. We had become a father and son for the first time in both of our lives. I got to see the connection that we had as he fought his illness. His body was weakened but his mind remained strong. His strength came from his faith, whereas my strength came from a combination of both spiritual faith and knowledge of the laws of the universe. The glory always went to GOD. This made me wonder how should one balance the understanding of the laws of the universe with an understanding of their faith and if I was doing it correctly. I also wondered about the millions of others out there who are also living in a survival mode, who have no idea or desire to open up to a concept such as law of attraction or even attempt to deal with the negative momentum that tough life experiences can create.

## CHAPTER TWO: LAW OF ATTRACTION

When I started studying the laws of attraction and the laws of the universe, I realized I had been using it already without even knowing it. That was powerful to me for two reasons. First, it affirmed that the law of attraction was in fact a legitimate phenomenon. Secondly, I realized where GOD came into place in all of it. We all have the power to attract experiences through the laws of the attraction, yet many of us do not even know or embrace our power. In the absence of this knowledge, GOD, or whomever you believe in, protects you, and guides us all. HE guides those who know and those who do not know their power. For those whose thinking attracts negative things into their lives, HE provides grace and mercy and for those who attract the positive, HE provides favor and abundance.

How I met Travis is a textbook example of how the laws of attraction work. The first step I took was to focus on having love and take my focus off of the lack of love. If you focus on lack, you attract more of the lack. If you focus on what you want, you attract more of what you want. There was already an abundance of love in my life, so I made sure to be grateful of that. I focused on the love that I received from my friends and the love that I received from children whom I worked with. I was always surrounded by loving children, which is what had drawn me to teaching. Even those children who are the most misguided are still full of love. In my first years teaching, I realized that if I focused on the love within the kids, they exuded it more. If I focused on their bad behavior, they behaved badly more frequently. I was using the laws of attraction then and wasn't aware of it.

Next, I stopped listening to K. Michelle or Keyshia Cole songs about how bad love is and engaging in man-bashing conversations with my friends. I didn't stop talking to my friends, I simply redirected our conversations toward what we wanted from love and what it would be like to be in love, and away from the negative.

For all of my young adulthood, I struggled with dating, just as I had struggled with living on my own. Sometimes, I was desperate, and other times I was just stupid. Time after time, I found myself in unproductive and sometimes disastrous situations, none of them leading to anything worthwhile romantically. Most of my twenties, I was single and looking. My friends and I compared our notes on how much dating sucked and how hard it was to find someone good. We all remained single, jumping from situation to situation, sharing story after story. Writing a book full of those stories is one idea I had for my book series. There are so many stories to tell, that I could write my own *Sex and the City*-esque book series. Stay tuned for that.

After so many failed attempts at love, I stopped trying. For just over 5 years, I didn't even date or try to put myself out there. I had all but accepted that love would be an elusive experience in my life. It was to the point that I thought I was just going to end up alone. Maybe some people just weren't meant to have love, and I was one of them. That was going to be the continuation of my sad and pathetic story. A boy who grew up feeling unloved, struggled to find love in adulthood, and just couldn't figure it out. The truth is all the love that I ever needed, I already had. I just needed to learn to love myself.

They say as soon as you stop looking for love, love will find you. What happens is that when you stop looking for love, you realize that you should have never been looking for love in the first place. The very love that you are looking for is love that doesn't require any finding. You

already have the love that you are looking for, you just need to direct it inward. You should be loving yourself. Instead of looking for someone to love you, you should look for someone to love. When you find a partner who also loves their own self, they will be looking to love you and not looking for you to love them. Yet, you will love them because that's what you have been looking for--- someone to love. You both end up loving each other. It is a perfect design and it all works out wonderfully.

The universe conspired to bring Travis and I together in a way that felt supernatural. What seemed like a setback was a setup for a great blessing! One day, I received a traffic ticket for running a stop sign, in a part of town where you could usually get away with breaking any law. When I appeared at traffic court, I saw a beautiful man who physically embodied everything that I had ever imagined in the man of my dreams. He was the most handsome man I had ever laid eyes on. Travis could have very well jumped directly off my vision board. I assumed he had to be married or at least taken. A man like that had to be spoken for. It never even crossed my mind that he could've be single. Honestly, I didn't even think he was gay.

For a minute, I looked and daydreamed. Then, I went on about my business. His likeness became the prototype for the man that I would want to be with but I never expected to see him again. In just a few minutes, I studied most of his attributes and had a pretty good image of him burned into my memory. Whenever I thought about being in love, I would visualize us together. Not specifically him, but a man who looked just like him, a gay version of him.

Visualization is one of the most powerful tools that you can use to attract anything into your life. Whatever you can see in your mind, can become in life. I told my friends about him and described him from head to toe, further

reinforcing my visualization of him and the man that I would attract. I went on with my life as usual and entrusted the universe to do the rest. That was how the process was written about in all the books I had studied about the law of attraction.

A few weeks later, no more than a month, my good friend Mimi and I went out for drinks on a Friday night. Single and always ready to mingle, Mimi and I kept standing Friday and Saturday night plans. Our favorite spot was The Grove, a recently renewed neighborhood that had blended longstanding gay bars with new and trendy mainstream bars. There were also restaurants, shops, and businesses that helped The Grove attract a young and diverse crowd. It was the best of both worlds for us. I could eat crab cakes at my favorite restaurant and then step in and out of whichever crowded bar caught my attention that night. Most of the time, Mimi and I went to the gay bars but we would stumble into the other bars every now and then, usually on our way to another gay bar.

Mimi and I hit up a few new spots before stumbling into one of our frequent stops. By the time we made it to our regular spot, we were already tipsy. The night was very young and it was feeling like one of those nights that wouldn't end until the sun came out. As soon as I stepped foot in the bar, Travis stole my attention from the lights, music, and everyone in my sight line. Of all the years that I had went to bars or clubs, I had never seen Travis before, and now here he was, just weeks after I designated him as the prototype of the man of my dreams. I could not believe my eyes. It *was* the man of my dreams, not a man who looked like the prototype, but it was the actual prototype. He was sitting alone, just waiting for me to come and find him.

Mimi knew him from high school, which made it easy to break the ice. The two of them started chit-chatting about their high school days. He hardly made any eye

contact with me and barely engaged me in the conversation. I felt that there was no interest in me. He didn't seem mean, just uninterested. The thoughts in my head began to shift away from excitement toward rejection. That's when I determined myself to hold onto my new teachings. Remain positive and focus on what you want, not what is, I told myself. That is one of the most important tenets of understanding how the laws of attraction work. We shall not put our energy into the things we don't want, or we most surely will manifest more of what we don't want.

Confident that my positive thinking would create results, I decided to nudge him closer to me. I extended Travis an invitation to our next stop and left. He would show up, if it was meant to be. There was no implication that we would ever see each other again, but I trusted the universe. As Mimi and I walked down the street, I kept replaying positive visuals in my head. If the universe wanted us to be together, this wouldn't be our last encounter. I could walk away, move away, or leave the planet and the universe would bring us back together, quickly and easily.

It turned out to be much easier than that. Travis showed up at the next bar and we partied the night away. All the while, I talked to myself and told myself that the universe was working its magic. He didn't know that I had been working diligently to attract him into my life. Nor did he know that I imagined my love story would be a fairy tale. In my mind, I would meet a prince who would kiss me and take all of my pain away. I truly believed that true love's first kiss could erase all of the pain that I had ever experienced.

The entire night, I paid close attention to any cues from the universe and made sure to follow them. We talked about love and our past loves, as well as what we wanted for our futures. In the midst of our conversation, "I believe in fairy tales," came out of his mouth. I was so shocked that



I made him repeat himself. He repeated it and confirmed what I had thought he said. This was all just too easy. I started to feel like I was cheating at some sort of game, or practicing witchcraft. Was this man going to fall in love with me because the universe was forcing him to?

Whenever things seemed to go too well for me, I always allowed thoughts of unworthiness to creep up on me. These thoughts come from past emotions, that even if purged, still leave some residue of negativity. When those thoughts creep up, it's crucial to hold steadfast to your beliefs and tell yourself that you deserve to be happy and that GOD wants you to live a happy and abundant life.

At the end of the night, we exchanged numbers and started texting each other the very next day. He texted me first, which made it easier for me to feel comfortable texting him whenever I wanted to. When you date, there is always this apprehension to be the first person to text or call the other person. I was guilty of being afraid to text or call first. I had my baggage, I'll admit it. I wasn't ashamed of my baggage, I just wanted to fall in love with someone who would help me unpack my bags.

After we started dating, I came clean to my future husband that I had attracted him through the laws of attraction. He was not only pleased but honored that I had gone through so much to bring us together. It was the perfect response. There was something about him that seemed perfect for me from the moment I met him. He wasn't perfect, but he was perfect for me. I knew that he was going to be the man that I always wanted and more. He was not only the man that I had attracted from the universe, but he was the man who I had prayed for. Although the law of attraction may have brought us together, it would take GOD to keep us together. Not even the law of the attraction could have made him stay with me once he met my family and witnessed the layers of dysfunction that were soon to be revealed.

Our courtship was very simple and somewhat traditional. We went to dinners and met for drinks a few times. Of course, things didn't just coast along. By no means, was our courtship perfect, and I questioned if I was making a fool of myself on many occasions. There were moments early on when we were dating that I thought I was going a bit too far with the whole concept of the laws of attraction. It wasn't easy fully accepting that I wouldn't be disappointed once again. It was also difficult to explain to those around me what was motivating me, and why I was approaching this relationship so differently. No one could really understand what I was talking about when I talked about signs, cues from the universe, and positive thoughts. Most of my friends thought I was just so eager for love, that I was convincing myself that he was the one. I didn't blame them, but I also wanted to show them that I knew what I was doing.

Travis cancelled a couple of dates and I almost slipped back into my old ways. He was supposed to go with me to a rugby game but backed out after saying that he was too tired. Another night, he said he was too tired for us to have dinner. At one point, our communication even came to a complete standstill without warning. Each instance, I felt my familiar feelings of fear and frustration creep back up on me. I feared that he would turn out like the others had. I was frustrated because I was tired of failures in the romance department. Through it all, an inner voice kept telling me that he was the one and to hold on.

My usual mode of operation would have been for me to sulk in a woe is me state of being. I would have written him off as just like everyone else that had come before him. So many guys had wasted my time that I told myself they all would waste my time. That thinking didn't serve me any good, just as my narrative about being strong didn't serve me any good. Telling myself that I was dealing with the same kind of guy over and over again, only

attracted more of the same type of guys, the ones I didn't want, into my life. Things were different this time, I remained patient and held onto my belief that it was all going to work out. How it would work out, I didn't know but I held steadfast to what I believed.

One of the contributors to *The Secret*, talked about sticking to what you know without wavering. She referred to it as "unwavering faith." Love was such a major want of mine, that I was going to do anything to have it. For the first time ever, I was unwavering in my belief that we were going to be together. All of my prior attempts at love were failures that I had anticipated to fail, sometimes as early as the moment that I exchanged names with the other individual.

The first time I ever laid eyes on him was August. We were formally introduced in September. By Halloween, things had slowed down and we were barely communicating. By mid-November, we had been out of touch for a few weeks, which normally would've signaled the end for me. That feeling that he was still the one remained, but I had also come to terms with the idea that he wasn't, or wasn't the one right now. If it was meant to be, it was going to be. If not, I trusted that the universe was going to lead me in the right direction. If I had been wrong and Travis wasn't the one, I still knew that I was getting close to finding the one and I was grateful for that. Regardless of what happened, Travis was still going to be the prototype, and I hadn't abandoned that idea.

We hadn't talked in weeks and then early one chilly, November, Saturday morning, he asked me if I wanted to meet him for coffee. I accepted, but not with the right intentions. My plan was to look amazing, wow him, and then remind him of how much of a fool he was for not wanting to spend every waking moment of his life with me. Things didn't work out that way.

After coffee, we went for lunch, and then to a nearby shop, where we put together our own fragrance oils.

The whole day revealed to me that Travis was much more refined than I had expected. I also realized that we had more in common than I originally thought. After we designed our own oils, I went home, only to end up at his apartment not even an hour later. We spent the rest of that Saturday watching movies and trying to keep our distance on his couch. No, I didn't have sex with him, but I wanted to.

For the five years that I had given up on dating, I had also vowed to remain abstinent until I knew that I was with someone who would be around for the long haul. Sex hadn't gotten me any closer to a commitment in the past, so I decided to approach things differently. I can't say whether or not I would have been able to hold out for five more years, but I had made it that far. My goal wasn't to be a born again virgin, but to wait for the person who I would spend the rest of my life with. Travis was all the man that I had envisioned and it was not easy to contain myself, but I did.

After that day in November, our relationship suddenly took off, and we started seeing each other on a very regular basis. We both began to open up more, and his behavior started making sense. Travis had just gotten out of a really messed up relationship, which is why he was afraid to get close at the beginning. It explained his cancellations and the unexplained distancing in communication. I did all that I could do to show him that I was different, but I didn't have to. His ex didn't see the value in him, just as my exes hadn't seen the value in me.

We saw an immense value in one another, in the simple things that we did, and the way that we approached love. He had been in a series of relationships before and had even been engaged, to a woman. I use the term *exes* loosely because I had never actually been in a serious relationship before. Yet, our approaches to love were nearly identical. We even had many of the same issues and hang-

ups. I feared that would be unhealthy, but it actually made us closer and better able to understand one another's feelings.

Our dates turned into a competition of who could show each other a better time. We must have gone to every awesome restaurant that St. Louis had to offer. I had always thought of myself as an amateur foodie, but Travis showed me some places that I had no idea existed. It was obvious that he had a liking for the finer things in life, and that both surprised and excited me. He was down-to-earth and cultured at the same time. Travis actually took out time and put thought into planning dates and romance. Eventually, we even went to the restaurant that he had backed out of going to months before. He made the date up to me. He was different than any other guy I had ever dated. This man was awesome to me, all rolled up into a handsome package.

By the time Christmas came around, we had reached the point in our relationship where it felt serious, but nothing was official yet. As a single man, I spent Christmas hanging out on my cousin Camille's couch in New Jersey. It seemed right to be around family for the holidays since I was single without any kids. My teaching job afforded me two weeks of freedom between Christmas and New Year's, so I used the time to get away from St. Louis and forget about being an adult. After getting close to Travis, I wanted to take a chance and spend my holiday with him. Even though we had only been seriously dating for a month, something about it felt like the right thing to do.

For the first time in years, I didn't make a trek back to Jersey for the holidays. The last time that I spent Christmas in St. Louis was when I wasn't speaking with anyone in my family at the time. For the first five years that I lived in St. Louis, I didn't keep in contact with anyone, except for when my grandmother died in 2003. We didn't open up the lines of communication again until

Camille graduated from college in 2006. Camille is also my god-sister, and her mother Angela is my god-mother, as well as my aunt. When Camille graduated, Angela reached out and expressed that the moment was bigger than any issues we all were holding onto. I forgave, forgot, and went to see Camille graduate from college. Afterward, we all kept in touch and remained on good terms.

When I graduated from college in 2007, Angela, Camille, and Carl, Angela's husband, along with Shay, Angela's other daughter came to my graduation in St. Louis. After that, the fences seemed to be mended and I started visiting Angela's family during the holidays and summers. Growing up, I always spent a lot of time with my god-parents and god-sisters, so it was easy to transition back into their family unit. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, and while I hadn't grown fonder of them, we actually got along better after the years of distance.

The issue that had pushed me completely away was actually between my father and I, so I didn't really have a definitive reason to continue to keep my distance from everyone else in his family. I had resentments toward nearly everyone, but I chose to forgive and move on from them. Growing up, I had always felt like everyone was united against me. There never seemed to be anyone on my side when issues arose, and when I was mistreated everyone turned and looked the other way. I never truly felt loved. I was told I was loved, but I could never accept it for some reason. My heart never believed what it was being told.

As strongly as I felt, I dismissed those feelings and decided it was easier and better for everyone for me to forgive. I wasn't ready just yet to forgive my mother, father, and sister, but I had to start somewhere. It was a good decision to try and release my feelings but I neglected to actually dispose of them correctly. I pushed them to the

back of my mind and dismissed a lot of what I felt as growing pains or feelings that everyone has. At that time, I was coming into my own as a professional and it was the first time in my life that I was truly happy with who I was as a person. Because of timing, I swept all of the negative in my life under a rug and chose to move forward. It was a time when I wanted to choose happiness and gratitude. I was grateful to have god-parents and god-sisters, so why hold on to issues?

Deciding not to go to Jersey that Christmas wasn't a hard decision to make, which says a lot about the actual state of my relationship with my family at the time. In an instant, I chose to spend the holidays with a relative stranger rather than them.

It felt good to me to feel like I had exercised forgiveness. The only problem was that I didn't really hold anyone in my family accountable for my feelings. My mother, father, and even my sister were the only family I was holding accountable. Everyone else, I basically let off the hook. Nothing had truly been resolved. All I had done was diverted all of my resentment to my mother and father. On the surface, everyone was getting along, but there were plenty of underlying issues.

Travis and I made plans for the rest of my holiday time to visit Memphis, Tennessee for New Year's Eve. It was going to be our first trip together, and my first trip ever with a love interest. Christmas Eve was also the first night that we slept in the same bed together. We still hadn't had any sexual interaction, but it definitely felt like a major step in our relationship. On Christmas Day, we exchanged gifts, even after we agreed that we wouldn't. I gave him a scarf and some socks which I thought would be appropriate for someone who I wasn't supposed to buy a gift for. Travis' gift was much more thoughtful than I was prepared for. He gave me a bracelet in the shape of cross that had my name engraved on it. He knew about how hard I was working on

building my faith, and he was listening.

A couple days after Christmas, we went to Memphis for five days. It was the first time that we were going to spend that much time with each other alone. It was also the first time that he would see me completely exposed. I can't remember how I ended up yelling but there was drinking involved. A lot. Some very small disagreement led me to expose all the insecurities that I didn't even know were there myself.

Travis and I were on the verge of something amazing and the issues that I had thought were gone resurfaced. I didn't know how to deal with something such as wonderful as love happening to me. Feelings of unworthiness and fear crept up in me and took me over. Somehow, I ended up screaming and yelling, and did everything I could to push him away. It was self-sabotage in the worst way. He was too good to be true and too good for me. I told him to leave me, that he might as well. He would leave me eventually, and I was just setting myself up for failure, by continuing to get close to him.

My yelling eventually turned into uncontrollable crying. I was sure that he was going to break up with me and leave me. But he didn't. He grabbed me and held me. He pressed my cheek to his chest and I cried until I could cry no more. He didn't leave me. He didn't yell at me. He rubbed my back. He comforted me. He kissed me. He loved me.

The rest is history. The next morning, he farted for the first time in front of me. He looked embarrassed at first until I burst into laughter. He said he had been holding it in for days. It was symbolic. We both were holding in something and we both had let it out.

We hit the city and the casinos in nearby Tunica, Mississippi. Everything felt perfect and I was more excited than ever. On our way home, I started to feel sad when I thought about it all coming to an end. I didn't want to leave



from him. I told Travis that I didn't want to leave his side and he lit up. He told me the same thing in return. So, we stopped at my house, picked up my clothes, and I spent the night at his apartment. I started picking my clothes up everyday after work and staying at his house every night. From that day on, we were together every single day. It was the kind of love that I had always wanted. He was like my best friend, or even a brother.

Two months later in February 2015, we moved in together. My lease at my apartment had expired and Travis suggested that we might as well move together, since I was there every night. Everything started falling into place, which let me know that we were truly in perfect alignment. I saw it as a new chapter in my life, purging old belongings, feelings, and even relationships. It was all happening so quickly but it felt right, as it had felt from the very first time that I laid eyes on him.

## CHAPTER THREE: FROM SCRATCH

Living together turned out to be easier than I would have imagined. As the months passed, we grew closer and closer. Traveling became our main hobby, with eating out following closely behind. We went to Chicago, Las Vegas, and visited my family in New Jersey. We designated Memphis as the place we fell in love and went back for Valentine's Day as well as the next New Year's Eve. Eventually, we became sexually involved, but only after we were best friends. It felt like we did everything the way we were supposed to. I felt loved without any confusion or any doubt in my mind. When Travis told me he loved me, I understood it, accepted it, and truly believed it.

Falling in love had been the most important goal in my life as I felt it had eluded me since birth. Once I had it, it became my most important duty to sustain it and continue to grow together. As my relationship with Travis grew, I also grew tremendously. In a very short period of time, I outgrew most of what I had surrounded myself with. All other things didn't seem as important nor as fulfilling.

My job began to feel like nothing more than a daily dose of stress. Many of the people who I considered friends no longer appealed to me. I realized that I had surrounded myself with many people just to avoid boredom in my single life. Some of my friends didn't seem to be open to the more evolved, in-love, version of me. Now that I was happy, I wanted to only include people and experiences that furthered my happiness. I found myself purging energy, things, and people who no longer seemed to fit into my my new life. Anyone or anything that wasn't working toward my happiness started fading from my life.

Some things went easier than others. My job was

harder to purge than anything else. Each day, I pushed back diligently against the negative environment that I was working in and the negative thoughts that filled my head, whenever I was there. However, I was unable to completely snap my negative thinking, even though I had become aware of how powerful my thoughts were. I came to the conclusion that I simply didn't want to be there and forcing myself to be somewhere that I didn't want to be was counterproductive. I just wanted to go.

When I became a teacher, it was a decision made during survival mode. It was a comfortable career that would allow me to live a stable and responsible life. Teachers were respected and I could do something positive in the lives of many. I've always loved children and I grew into being a master teacher on accident. As long as I was doing something to empower the children I worked with, I was successful. It was the universe that led me into teaching because I needed to learn more about life than I had up until that point. It was GOD that wanted me to teach to help reach those who are so often unreachable. It felt like I was doing what GOD wanted me to do and when it no longer felt that way, I knew that I had to get out. I didn't desire to survive anymore, I wanted to thrive.

In October of 2015, my stress and frustration physically manifested into illness. I broke out in a painful and disgusting rash which I later found out was shingles. The emergency room doctor could only stare in disbelief that I had developed this condition at age 32. He delivered the life-changing news that I could only be in this condition as a result of extreme stress. My primary doctor went further and placed me on high-blood pressure medicine, asserting that I had heart attack levels of blood pressure on multiple visits. I was killing myself, either because of the stress of my job or the self-inflicted perception of stress that I had developed. After ten years and three advanced degrees in my field, I came to the conclusion that my career

was no longer working out for me. I was being nudged to move in a different direction, the direction that my heart wanted to go in.

Love has the power to reawaken the things that a lack of love can silence or deaden. In my case, having someone fall in love with all of me built confidence in the talents and dreams that I had buried deep within me. True intimacy exposes one's true self and my true self is an artist, writer, and creative being. All of the dreams and talents which I had put on the back burner and then buried completely were rebirthed through love. My dreams were the things that Travis loved most about me. The presentation that I gave to the world is what attracted Travis to me, but it was my true self, my true heart, the real me, that he loved.

Travis' seemingly perfect alignment with my dreams and goals only further solidified my belief in the law of attraction and put me in a fervor. We started tossing up a few cities as places to relocate but weren't completely sure which place we wanted to commit to. Before I knew it, we were flying to Phoenix for his job interview. He had gotten a tip about a job, sent in a resume, and was called in to meet with human resources. We immediately fell in love with the geography, the palm trees, and the people. There was something about Phoenix that felt so right, that I knew it had to be another cue from the universe.

I had an interview myself a few weeks later, which gave us another excuse to return to beauty and warm weather. By now, it was December, and Phoenix was a beautiful and sunny escape from the cold weather in St. Louis. It was obvious that I was more than qualified for any job related to education. Not only did I have years of experience, I had just received my Educational Specialist's degree on the 11th of December. As qualified as I was, something told me that I wasn't going to get the job I applied for nor did I really, truly want it.

I didn't get the job. The universe responded accordingly. If I had gotten that job, I would've never been able to keep focused on what I was being called to do, which was writing. GOD has given me gifts and the universe conspires to help me use those gifts. That conspiracy, on behalf of the universe, led to Travis being offered a job, in Phoenix, just weeks later, with a start date in February of 2016.

On Christmas Day 2015, just a year after we spent our first Christmas together, we spent our last Christmas in St. Louis. My gift for Christmas was a teddy bear with a miniature backpack. Inside his backpack was a diamond ring. Travis proposed to me. That was the first time I understood what it felt like to be still. Stillness allows us to see what we have and it opens us up to gratitude. Being still allows GOD to answer our prayers, and the universe to present us with the signs we need. If we are always in motion, moving toward the next thing, we can miss those answers and signs.

Being still had always been difficult for me. It required me to do nothing, which for me was the hardest thing to do. Or should I say not do? The life experiences that I had always required some sort of response, plan, or action. I could create a vision board to help me visualize or make a list of all that I'm grateful for. Those exercises required me to do something, but being still required me to wait and believe. It was an act of surrender that required vulnerability and true faith. It was the one tenet of the new thought movement that I struggled to grasp.

As I looked at my engagement ring and into the eyes of my future husband, I fully understood stillness. Stillness was about that very moment and what it means. That moment meant that Travis wanted to be with me, just the way I was for the rest of our lives. It meant that I would never have to want for love as I had wanted for all of those years, which seemed endless. It meant that anything that

happened from that moment on would be secondary to us. Life, death, and everything in between was secondary to our love. I could be still because whatever would happen in the future, I was going to have support and love in my corner.

Later that day, I called Angela to wish her a happy holiday. I also told her about our engagement. She sounded genuinely happy for us and shared the news with Camille, Shay, and Carl. I also spoke to my father that day, but I was too nervous to share the news. As much as we had reconciled, his homophobic language and approach to masculinity remained burned in my memory. The fact that he had immersed himself in church while battling cancer, only made me more uneasy about telling him that I would be marrying a man. I did tell him about our decision to move to Phoenix, which he lauded us for. He was more than excited that I had decided to pursue my writing. Surprisingly, he was also very supportive of the idea that I was going to quit my job. He recommended that I get out as soon as possible and go after all of my dreams.

My plan was to leave my job in January, but as the new year approached, I opted for a fresh start to 2016. There was no way that I was taking that negative energy with me into another year. After I told my father about wanting to quit, he came up with a plan that he described as making the best out of a bad situation. His idea was that I would take a leave from work without having to quit. We could use his illness as an excuse for me to take time off. I had no intention of ever going back, but at least his plan would make leaving less messy for me, than just up and leaving. I figured that I should definitely take heed to advice given by someone who is terminally ill.

During the previous year or so, my father and I had started to open up more with one another. We weren't close but we were on better terms. In the months leading up, I started to recognize how much we had in common with one

another. He had a great deal of tenacity when it came to dealing with his circumstances, something that I recognized in myself. We made the most out of any situation, no matter how bad. “If I have cancer, why not take advantage of it?” he suggested. This man was pretty clever about things, a trait that I too possessed.

Just days after the start of the New Year, Travis and I made the trek to New Jersey to put my father’s plan into action. His condition appeared to have vastly improved since we saw him for his birthday in August. His spirits were high and there was definitely a vibe that he could beat his illness. If nothing else, he was going to continue to live with it and keep fighting it.

I was in awe at times of how independent he wanted to be as sick as he was. He didn’t want me to stay with him during chemotherapy and insisted that he could catch the bus home. He saw no reason for me to drive back to Philadelphia to pick him up from chemotherapy. There was no question that he was resilient, but I wondered if he was being too resilient. Did he need to rest more and allow his body to try and heal?

He was on the move as if he was 20 years younger and saw no reason to make any changes to his daily life. I was shocked that he had conceded to move into an apartment for senior citizens, after vowing to remain in the house he had lived in all his life. It was the same house that I was raised in and that he grew up in as a child. It was also the same house that I was thrown out of at age 17. To me, it was just a structure. I had no emotional attachment to it, other than the painful memories I had from childhood. To him, the house represented his lineage and inheritance as the eldest male with our family name.

My father had lived his whole life anticipating that the house would be his someday. When my grandmother died, it became his by default but legally remained in my grandfather’s name, who had long been deceased. The

house wasn't structurally sound and lacked modern amenities that people in the 1970's would've expected. I believe that some of the materials in the house and even the air may have been toxic. It was just a theory of mine, but I wondered if the house may have even contributed to his illness. His mother died of cancer, in 2003, after living in that house, and here he was suffering the same fate. Even if my theory was true, it wouldn't have persuaded him to leave the house. He had been in his apartment for a few months, but he still caught a bus to the dilapidated house on a daily basis. His dog still lived there and he would make sure to visit and feed him. Sometimes, he would go to the house just to sit on the front porch, like he always had.

Cancer hadn't changed much about his daily life or his personality either. He remained as rude, arrogant, and visceral as he was all his life. If he had suddenly toned himself down, I would've been worried. Church had softened him up a little but he remained steadfast in his assertion of who he was. Being rude, arrogant, and visceral made him who he was, and he was proud of those attributes. Although he had lived his entire life in his mother's house, you couldn't tell him that he wasn't the man of the house or the big man about town.

When my grandmother died, Angela positioned herself as his closest relative and was there for him on a regular basis. Yet, he still presented himself as a boisterous, take-charge alpha male, who didn't need help from anyone. He and Angela butted heads on a regular basis as they both struggled to find a balance in their relationship. Angela helped my father financially but my father didn't see that as cause for him to be subordinate or subservient to his little sister. As he grew older and sicker, their relationship went from complicated to dysfunctional, and often toxic.

When my father and I were estranged, I wasn't privy to anything that went on between he and Angela. When I started talking to the both of them, I often found



myself in the middle of their disagreements. My father would express his frustration with what he felt was a lack of respect for him because he was dependent upon her. Angela would express frustration with what she felt was not only a lack of appreciation but the audacity that he would have to insult her. Angela felt as though because she was always by his side, the least he could do was temper his tongue and scale back insults. My father insisted that Angela put them both in positions to be insulting to one another and that it was unfair for him to be expected to absorb her insults, just because he needed her more than she needed him. He refused to let her talk to him any kind of way because she was helping him out.

When Angela would tell me about one of their fights, I could identify with how she felt a lot of the times. My father's words definitely cut and could cause you to give up on trying to have any kind of relationship with him. That was my own personal experience and also the catalyst for my bias. Angela was no angel, but I gave her the benefit of the doubt because she did do a lot for him. She had done a lot for me as well, so I believed that she had our best interest at heart.

If my father told me about an argument they had, I could understand his point of view, but I never felt as sympathetic to him as I did to Angela. Part of the reason was that he never presented himself as a sympathetic figure. He had made it his duty to present himself as someone who didn't need anyone, didn't care about anyone's feelings, and didn't have to answer to anybody for what he said.

My father had complex relationships with all of his sisters and their relationships with one another were just as complex. They all gossiped about what the others were doing and when one got mad at the other, the other siblings were let in on the details from both sides. My father would confide in his other sisters, Irene and Etta, about his

problems with Angela, fully aware that Irene and Etta had their own issues with her. All of them harbored deep seeded resentment toward each other. Some of their issues stemmed from as far back as when they were children. I guess that's what most families do, but it only caused confusion about who really felt what about whom.

Just days before Travis and I arrived in Jersey, Angela called to tell me that she was "done" with my father. She was fed up with him and said that he was too toxic and nasty for her to deal with. Angela decided that she was not going to pay his phone bill or cable bill until he learned how to speak to her respectfully. This conflict was a prime example of how things usually went when the two of them butted heads. In her opinion, he should choose his words differently, or face consequences.

As usual, I couldn't take a side in the matter because I could understand them both completely. Fortunately for me, I had put a lot of effort toward learning to understand multiple perspectives in a disagreement. It was a skill I perfected, refereeing disagreements between fifth graders. But something stuck out in this conversation with Angela. She made a reference to my father acting differently when I came around. She felt as though he became cocky and disregarded others because he knew that I would be there soon. When I was around, he felt as though I could take the place of the people he normally depended on, namely Angela and Irene. I thought it was a very interesting observation and comment for someone to make about how a parent acts when their child comes around. Was he wrong for feeling more empowered when his only child was around?

After driving for 20-something hours, we rolled into New Jersey in the early morning hours. I told my father I would take him to the doctor that morning when I arrived. I spent the entire first day at the cancer center with my father. It was disheartening to watch patient after

patient file in for care. Many of them looked like they had all but given up. I wondered what their lives were like before and how they would be after. Who would actually beat cancer and who would lose? And why would the losers lose and the winners win? I knew how the laws of attraction worked but I wondered if any of the patients knew. I just wanted every single person in the waiting room to know what I knew about the laws of attraction and for them to begin thinking their way to health.

My father stood out from the other patients because he appeared to be much cooler and calmer than any of them appeared to be. It was another moment when he reminded me of myself. He actually looked happy and unbothered by his ordeal. He joked around and flirted with every nurse, which was shocking, since he was known for being very hard on the looks of women. I guess when you're faced with your own mortality, a lot of your old ways subside. He had become more likable than I had ever remembered.

I didn't tell my father about the conversation that Angela and I had because I didn't want to be put in the middle. The more that I thought about it, the more uncomfortable I began to feel about some of the things that Angela said. This argument made me feel a bit differently than usual. Maybe I was more sympathetic towards my father because of his condition but I didn't think Angela was right this time. I wouldn't treat a person that I loved that way, especially not one who was terminally ill. As wrong as my father may have been, it seemed to be a bit extreme for someone to subject a terminally ill person to anything that could cause great stress, such as having their phone cut off.

Over the years, my father had built up plenty of resentment toward Angela. Some of his resentment came from the way that he felt my grandmother and Angela treated him. He was always asserting his manhood because

he felt that they treated him like a child. He also resented Angela for the role that he felt she played in our relationship. He felt that Angela was part to blame for the wedge that was between he and I because Angela and I had grown closer while he and I remained distant.

As we sat and waited for his doctor, my father brought up the argument between he and Angela, and of course his story was much different than hers. Actually, his story sounded more realistic than hers. In her story, she was tired of being pushed around by her brother whom she did nothing but help. In his story, they had both said some mean things, and he ultimately went too far. His story made more sense to me. That was the family that I knew. Unfortunately for him, he was in need of her, more than she was in need of him.

It must have been the changes that I had recently made in my life that caused me to begin to see things differently. I began questioning motives, of myself and Angela. Why now would my father's sister deem it necessary to teach him a lesson about the way that he talked to people? Everyone let him be the way that he was all of his life. So, why now, when he was ill would anyone expect him to become a person that he never was before? I certainly didn't expect him to be different and he didn't expect me to be different either.

I too was also holding resentment toward Angela which may have blocked my ability to be completely impartial. When I visited Jersey over the summer, Angela said something to me that stuck with me. Somehow, a trivial discussion became an even more trivial argument. The family's favorite trivial argument is always about who is related to who in the small town or what year someone graduated from high school. No one in the family can accept being wrong, so a ridiculous topic such as that can often lead to personal insults. When you add alcohol into the situation, things can quickly go south.

After going back and forth about who was related to who in town, Angela started spewing some really mean things at me. I told her I refused to go low like she was. After she continued to say hurtful things, I fought back by telling her that she couldn't hurt me with her words. That was apparently too much for her to swallow, because she went in for the kill. "I can't hurt you. I was there for you when no one gave a f--- about you," she said. I couldn't believe the conversation went that far in her mind. "Your mom and dad were both f--ked up," she followed up.

Not only did the conversation and the petty disagreement not warrant her statements, it was one of the first times that Travis was around the family. It was embarrassing and uncomfortable for both he and I. The silver lining was that he got to see all of what I had went through as child for himself. You can explain something to someone in words, but when they see it firsthand, they truly understand. When I thought about how she had made me feel, I realized that my father may have been right this time. Angela felt that because she had done things for me and my father that she was able to speak to us in anyway that she wanted, even if that meant degrading us.

If Angela had said that to me years ago, I would've internalized it. I had already changed when she said it and I saw it just for what it was. Her words were not a reflection of me or my parents, she was just mean. Her intent behind what she said was more important than what she said. Why would she want me to think that my mother and father were not there for me? As I recalled my resentment to Angela and our argument, I knew that my father was not the only participant in the hurling of insults, nor was their nasty argument one-sided, as Angela had tried to present it.

When my father and I first discussed my move and taking leave from work, he told me that I should make sure that I keep anything we talked about strictly between us, that included the visit, and the leave that I would be taking.

His exact words were “Please keep it between us.” He said that his sisters would find a way to make things negative. I didn’t ask him what he meant by that, I just followed his directions as he requested and kept quiet about it all. Soon enough, I would find out exactly how negative they really were and what he really meant.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FAMILY MATTERS**

The moment I e-mailed my leave paperwork to human resources, I immediately felt free. I had given so much of myself to others during my time as a teacher, that I had forgotten what it was like to put myself first. Having the freedom to do what nurtured me, excited me and reawakened feelings that I had long suppressed. I felt young and determined. I felt that I could do whatever I wanted to as long as I put my mind to it.

To celebrate, we decided to drive up to New York City. Our future was in Arizona, and we knew that it might have been a while before we made it back east. It would only take us a little more than an hour drive from where my father lived. Travis had already accepted a new position in Phoenix, so he was using up his vacation days from his old job. We were both free and able to do whatever it was we wanted to do, at least for the next few weeks. It seemed like it was the perfect time to just be lovers.

The energy in New York is always invigorating and makes you feel that any and everything is possible. While I was already feeling that same energy inside, I wanted to cultivate more of it. Once upon a time, I believed that I would somehow end up as a New Yorker, someday in my life. I think New Yorkers are born to be New Yorkers, even if they aren't born in New York. There's something about the people that end up in New York that connects them all. I always had an image in my head that I would move there and become a successful writer, actor, or some kind of artist.

My first trip to New York was in the 7th grade, on my 7th grade class trip. As close as we were, living in New Jersey, the family never made regular trips, or really talked much about New York. Where I grew up, people acted like

going two miles away was a long trip. I didn't have that same small town mindset, but I didn't realize how close New York was either. I went to New York for a second time in 10th grade for a writing competition, and my love for New York was solidified. It wasn't the city itself that I loved; I loved that it was a place where anyone could do or be anything.

Like so many single gay guys and gals in the early 2000s, I was hooked on *Sex and The City*. It was like someone had personified the caricature of myself who lived in my head. It also seemed that someone had perfectly chronicled my struggles of being single. I imagined myself moving to New York to live out my life as a jet-setting writer, just like Carrie Bradshaw. If you had asked me back then, I would've told you that Carrie Bradshaw and I both were going to stay single forever. Fast forward to 2016 and I wasn't single anymore, I was engaged, and love was changing the way I was viewing the world.

Travis and I spent a day in the city, sightseeing, eating, and breathing in the vibrancy. I couldn't deny the vibrations that I felt and I wondered how the universe was able to balance all of the energy of all of these people in such a confined space. There was evidence everywhere that the energy of all the people in New York city had manifested to create a magnificent spectacle. Greatness was everywhere, in the buildings, in the art, and the talent that filled the streets. New York was the greatest city in the world and everyone there was encapsulated in that energy.

As amazing as New York City is, love definitely transformed how I viewed the city. New York was still very much awesome, but it was also over-the-top, overpriced, and overcrowded. I was no longer as excited by the constant stimulation or even the magnificence that was New York City. In fact, I would have rather spent my time cozying up in a secluded cabin. Arizona had presented me with a view of nature and beauty that I hadn't appreciated



before experiencing it. Still, the city reminded me of dreams that I once had and continued to reawaken the creative forces that were re-emerging.

As we headed back to Jersey later that evening, I realized how much I had changed and that I was still changing. Just the day before, I was questioning how my father was being treated by Angela. That was a first. Love had definitely made me softer, but what else had love changed about me? While I was amazed at how much I had changed at the same time I was reminded of who I used to be. I felt I was balancing who I was with who I was becoming. There were things about me that I *shouldn't* have changed, mainly my desire to be creative. New York seemed like just a fun day trip, but when the universe is working on your behalf, even the most unexpected events can have an effect on you. New York reminded me of the artist I was in 10th grade, who wanted to be a writer, entered writing contests, and won!

Why had I given up on him and all the dreams that he had? Immediately, I began jotting down notes for a project that I had no real direction for. All I knew was that I wanted to harvest the energy that I felt in that moment and turn it into something that would not only express what I was feeling but could inspire others. My concept was titled *From Scratch*. *From Scratch* would chronicle my journey as I became a celebrity chef and food blogger. It was also an attempt to combine two of my passions together and pursue them both simultaneously. Writing had been my talent since I was a kid, and cooking had become a creative outlet for me more recently.

Coming to terms with letting go of all that I had achieved and worked for before was the hardest part of transitioning. In order to reach for and grasp new accomplishments, I had to let go of all of my education and career accomplishments up to that point. The last thing I wanted to accept was that all of my hard work would be in

vain. All of my years of school and the resume I had built would feel like it had all been for nothing, if I was truly going to commit to being a writer. *From Scratch* seemed like a catchy concept, but actually following through with it meant it would take on a deeper meaning. It was cute on paper, but from scratch, meant starting over with nothing.

Ever harder would be letting go of all the misconceptions that I had held onto for much of my life. Of course, in order for me to let go of the misconceptions, I would first need to realize them. That process of realization had only just begun for me and I still had a long way to go. GOD was definitely working on me and it was evident through all of the signs being presented by the universe. My biggest responsibility was to work on being still so that I could see how my steps were ordered. GOD would do the rest.

Over the years of being me, I've realized that I respond better to pressure. It hasn't been by choice but more by necessity. I do better when I'm pushed, blocked, or put in a position where I have to act quickly. Sometimes, when I seek rapid growth or progress, I purposely put myself under pressure so that I make sure that I do well. This approach has gotten me through multiple degree programs in college and spurred much of my personal growth. While many frown upon procrastination, I would embrace it at times, knowing that I could do better at something at the last minute. It doesn't work for everyone but it has worked for me.

I decided that I would take that same approach to letting go of my misconceptions. I hoped that by putting myself under the pressure, I would let go of things quicker. Not only would I need to let go of misconceptions, but my thoughts and feelings would also have to change. The most prominent feelings that I needed to change were the ones I had about my own parents.

For all of my adult life, I had told myself a

narrative about my parents. I was going to let that go. I told myself that my father and mother had too many issues to love me the way that I wanted to be loved. I also told myself that my mother was not willing to fight hard enough for me, or she was too lazy to go out of her way to fight for me. Whether this narrative was true or not, continuing to hold onto this thinking would only attract and manifest more negativity. Besides, starting over from scratch meant that I had to wipe the slate clean.

I wanted letting go to be easy but I questioned myself. I always questioned myself. It was just what I had become accustomed to doing. I asked myself, Would I be lying to myself or pretending? Was I letting them off the hook too easy? I came to the conclusion that it really didn't matter. The time had come to let go. Even if I had the right to still be hurt, or the right to air my grievances, I was choosing not to. Instead, I chose to be happy with who I was and who I was going to become. I couldn't erase what had already happened in my life, it was already written. However, I had the power turn the page.

Much of what I felt about my parents had been influenced by other members of the family. It wasn't the only factor in the resentment that I had, but I had heard a lot as a child that I shouldn't have. My mother and father's marriage was often the subject of family fodder and ridicule. My grandmother and Angela used to down my mother just for their own entertainment. My mother was attacked for being gay, being on welfare, or even because of where she grew up. They never attacked her in person but it was always done directly in front of me. They made sure I heard them.

Irene and Etta lived out of state, so I don't remember hearing them say much about my mother, but I remember the things that Angela and my grandmother said about my mother very vividly. Angela lived the closest in proximity to us and to my grandmother, so she was always

around or on the phone with my grandmother. They held nothing back without any regard for me or how I felt about the things they said about my mother or father.

Honestly, I didn't care much about what they said about my father because he had emotionally detached himself from me for as long as I could remember. I also resented him because he was the one who I blamed for keeping me away from my mother. When they talked negatively about my mother, it used to create a fire in my stomach. I felt like I hated them. It seemed like they did it more just to hurt me.

They seemed to take pleasure in destroying my mother's image in front of me. I theorized why they would talk so abusively about a child's mother right in front of the child. Did they want me to distance myself from her and align directly with them? Perhaps they thought that a child would lose their love for their mother if she were not around and others were acting in her place. Could it be possible that these people were so self-absorbed that they wanted me to disown my own mother for their own self-satisfaction? Maybe they had purely sociopathic motives. Maybe they wanted to watch me, a child, squirm, as they degraded the closest person to me. Whatever their motive was, I could not defend myself or my own mother.

After years, I became immune to it and eventually, even stopped caring what they said about her or anyone else, for that matter. I'll never know what motivated them but I will never forget what happened. I will never forget how they associated anything negative about me to my mother. If my room was dirty, they would say I was trifling like her. If I told a lie, they said I was a liar like her. If I was sneaky, I was sneaky like her. If I dropped something, I was clumsy like her. Anything that they deemed an inconvenience, I must have inherited from my mother's side of the family.

I was very clumsy as a boy. I felt like a

bumbling idiot as a child and was pretty much a nervous wreck because of them. Every single interaction I had with my family as a child unnerved me because somehow I knew that I would be ridiculed and attacked by them. My father never came to my rescue either and when he felt bullied by them he would turn around and take it out on me. I suppose he didn't want to stand against their united front. The way that they talked to him and diminished him, in combination with his lack of affection and emotional detachment, caused me to view him more like a big brother, rather than a father. There were times when I would get in trouble for things that he did around the house. He knew that it was his fault but he was so afraid of getting a tongue-lashing from his mother, that he would sit by and watch me get punished for something he did. He was childish to me, and I didn't have much respect for him during my childhood.

So, I grew into an awkward child with fear and shame embedded into my every waking moment. I was afraid of being myself and never received praise for anything. I started lying about every mistake I made because I knew that I would be ripped to pieces for any mistake that I made. That didn't help me. I earned the reputation of being a liar and constantly was accused of doing everything imaginable. Even if I hadn't done anything, it didn't matter. Once you're labeled as a liar, no one will believe anything that you say.

As I grew older, I was labeled with more negative traits, labels that I did not earn nor deserve. Not only was I liar, but I was labeled as sneaky, manipulative, and opportunistic. My father never came to my defense and saw their attacks on me as opportunities for him to get on their good side. He would either join them against me or get them to join him against me. While my father was physically there in the home, emotionally he was absent, and I was left to fend for myself against everyone. I'm

blessed that I was able to overcome the emotional abuse, but I developed a large amount of resentment toward my father for his part in the abuse and toward my mother for not being there to protect me.

My mother and I hadn't put any effort into our relationship since I was a child. With my father, I felt that it was only right that we did some kind of work based upon the history that we had with one another. Because he was always present in even the minimalist form, we had some sort of foundation to work from. My mother and I, on the other hand, had no foundation of any kind. She hadn't even felt compelled to tend to any duties as a mother. She was absent financially, emotionally, and physically. She was never in attendance when I needed her nor did she seem to make an effort. Needless to say, I was having a harder time letting go of the resentment I had towards my mother, than I did with my father.

Instead of beating myself up, I accepted that it would be more challenging and take longer with my mother. It took 32 years to learn the importance of living in the moment. As long as I tried in the moment and tried again in the next moment, that momentum would build and eventually things would turn.

With this in mind, I made arrangements for my sister to bring my mother to New Jersey, to meet with my father. My mother moved to Virginia when I was very young and never moved back to New Jersey. The goal for having her come to New Jersey was twofold. I wanted my father to have an opportunity to make amends with her, as I thought it would help with his healing. It would also give me an opportunity to take the first steps toward building the momentum that I needed to rebuild some sort of relationship with my mother.

My mother agreed to meet with my father at a local pizza place, just a few steps away from his apartment. As we waited in the parking lot for my sister to

arrive, I realized that this meeting would mark the first time I saw my mother in almost 15 years. It would also be the first time that I witnessed my mother and father sit and have a meal together. Anxiety built as the magnitude of this meeting sunk in. In my own way, I was replacing negative memories, thoughts, and narratives with positive ones.

It didn't matter how many bad thoughts I had about my parents or the feelings that they had toward each other. At that moment, which was the present at the time, there was going to be a positive interaction, a positive memory, and positive feelings would arise from it. Never had I imagined that I would be having a family dinner, for the first time at age 32, with my mother, father, and sister, but it was happening. From this, I realized that it's never too late for anything, and that anything is truly possible in life.

Almost 33 years ago, my parents met at a bar in Camden, New Jersey. The city has been a perpetual ghetto for decades where crime, drug use and trafficking, poor education and lack of health care oppress the largely African-American and Latino population of the city. At the time when my parents met, he had many advantages over many men in Camden. He lived in a different town, which had a much better reputation. He worked a good job, something that was harder to come by during the Reagan years, and still is in present-day Camden. He had a fair complexion, which was heavily overhyped in the 1980's. My mother who came from an impoverished family in Camden saw him as a way to a better life.

They began dating and were probably a better match than either of them realized. Not because they were in love but because they were both looking for something that the other could've provided. My mother was struggling with being gay and wanted a husband who could provide her with a normal life and stability.

She was raised in Camden by her grandparents

after losing both of her parents as a newborn. My maternal grandmother committed suicide after my mother's father, who was actually married to another woman other than my grandmother, died in an accident. My mother says she grew up in poverty and incest and was raped by her grandfather on many occasions. My mother left home at age 17, just like myself, and says that she was raped again by another man. This man was my sister's father. After being a victim of rape again, she says she became a lesbian.

When my father met her, he too needed someone to love him unconditionally. He looked good on paper but he came with his own set of issues as well. His family was highly critical of the choices he made and often bullied him. He was looked down upon after he made a near fatal mistake during his senior year of high school. His mother never truly let him forget about his mistake and his family sent him mixed messages of support and disdain for what he had done.

When he was 17, he was involved in an accident while being chased by police. He worked in an auto body shop and would take the cars that were in the shop for joy rides. Everyone knew what he was doing but no one advised him to stop. One day, he took a car and he was reported to the police. The ensuing chase caused him to flip over the median in the road and he was severely injured, nearly dying.

My father spent a year in the hospital undergoing an intensive rehabilitation. He was given a metal plate in his head which would cause him to have seizures until the day he died. He also had to become left-handed and one-handed as he would never be able to open his right hand out of a fist. The injury to his leg caused him to walk with a pronounced limp for the rest of his life.

Before his accident, Irene described him as the "golden boy" of the family. That all changed after his accident. No one in the family came to visit him for most of



the time that he was hospitalized because he had shamed the family in the town. Irene described the change in the family attitudes toward him as a “fall from grace.” Since no one came to see him, Irene made sure to visit him every day and eventually took up nursing after spending so much time at the hospital.

When I first moved to St. Louis, Irene used to tell me stories all about what it was like for him in the hospital. It was her way of trying to bridge the gap between my father and I after he put me out on the street. If I could understand what he had been through, I would be able to understand why he treated me the way he had. If I knew of his plight, I would know that he loved me but struggled with his own demons. What I realize now, is that both of my parents suffered traumatic experiences at age 17, which altered their relationship with their families forever. My ejection from the home at 17 continued that rite of passage.

My mother and father would marry each other and bring me into this world under much duress. My sister was 5 years old when I was born. She was happy to have a baby brother and my father as her stepfather. My sister’s father was not around and our mother told her that she was conceived out of rape. She called my father “daddy,” a term of endearment that I have never used. He was actually nicer to my sister, than he was to me, because she was a girl. Everyone told me that he hadn’t gotten along with his own father, so he treated me the only way that he knew how, based on what he had experienced.

My sister grew up with this notion that I was afforded so much opportunity as opposed to the lifestyle that my mother provided her. My father did work very hard to provide me with the best life that he thought he could, albeit being emotionally abusive throughout my entire childhood. In my sister’s mind, I always had more than her and that was why I was able to attend college, nurture a career, and maintain a comfortable lifestyle. The problem is

that I didn't have more opportunity, or any advantage over her. We both made different decisions which took our lives in very different directions.

Travis had already been exposed to the dysfunction of my father's family, when Angela and I had our run-in during the summer. Now, he was going to see what my mother and sister had to offer. I would've been nervous, if I hadn't truly believed that Travis was the one for me. He might as well have seen all of me, especially the bad, so he could understand me completely. Travis was well aware of my story, but he needed to witness it to have a true understanding. As I imagined what my family must have looked like in his eyes, I realized just how blessed I was to have him in my life.

Dinner went well. My mother and father did most of the talking, reminiscing about their courtship and the demise which quickly followed. I couldn't help but imagine what would have become of them had they stayed together. I also wondered what made them give up so easily. It appeared that they actually liked each other. They were obviously not going to get back together but they did have that personal chemistry that makes a couple seem compatible, at least on the surface. So, where did it all go wrong and would I make the same mistakes that they had? The last thing I wanted to do was end up alone, like the both of them. I was scared at just the thought of it being unavoidable. They never divorced, and while my mother dated women afterward, my father remained single. Hopefully, I hadn't inherited all of their dysfunction and if I had, I prayed that I was still enough of my own person to be able to overcome it.

All in all, I was proud of the work that I was doing for myself and my family. In the past, it seemed as if my mother had no intention of making any effort to build a relationship that would require her to go out of her way. Maybe this was her attempt to show me otherwise. This

moment could be the first moment that we needed to start building momentum.

When the night ended, my mother and sister both put on their sad faces. They have this look that they usually give when they want someone to feel sorry for them. It's a helpless look that makes you feel like they are the saddest people you've ever met. It might have worked on a stranger but I had seen it all too many times before. I saw it every time that I left Virginia after visiting my mother. It was the face of a victim but there were no victims in this family of ours. There were opportunities for us to be close, but we all chose a different path each time. As a family, we simply did not value or see necessity in being a unit, and that may have been the only common bond that we shared. If we were victims, we were the victims of our own choices.

Seeing my father with my mother further humanized him to me. Seeing my mother and sister made them seem like sad and somewhat pitiful beings. Apparently, I hadn't developed the sympathy for them that I had recently developed for my father. Never had I doubted that my father would've been there for me when I really needed him and I couldn't say the same about my mother. I had definitely made some progress with my father. Thinking about all of our progress heightened my nervousness about telling him about our engagement. I decided that I would tell him right before we left, so that we could hop on the road as soon as we got done.

The next morning, Travis and I packed up the car and were literally on our way to the interstate when I decided to swing by and drop the gay marriage bomb on my father. I gave him a call and told him that we were going to stop by and see him one last time before we hit the road back to St. Louis. Not only was I going to say goodbye, but I was going to come clean about our engagement.

We took him to breakfast at the Colonial

Diner, his favorite hangout. He went there every morning for coffee and a three-dollar egg breakfast. I figured it couldn't hurt to tell him on a full stomach. As we drove him home, I became extremely nervous about how he was going to react. I didn't necessarily care whether he approved or not, I was more concerned with how it was going to affect our relationship and all the work that we had done. I was afraid that if he didn't approve, it would send us back into the dark place that we had been moving away from for so long. Travis was going to be my husband, and nothing was going to change that. All I wanted was for my father to know, and hopefully give us his blessing.

I remembered the times that he called me faggots and ridiculed my feminine ways. As usual, I asked myself questions. Had his religious faith made him more homophobic or would he be full of love as he was now aware of GOD's love? You can never anticipate how religion will change a person. For some, they become judgmental, self-righteous, and subscribe to the rules and norms set forth by a church. Others begin to understand the spiritual aspect, receive GOD's unconditional love, and then spread it to others. I was hoping that he had embraced the latter. I didn't want him to reject me, but more importantly, I wanted to know that he truly understood how good GOD's love was and how powerful it was to love others. If he was able to love and accept me, now, after so many years of homophobia and verbal abuse, that would mean that he had truly grown and he was in GOD's hands.

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As much as we humans try to control ourselves, we are a vengeful bunch. I know the bible says vengeance is the Lord's and I completely respect that. The bible does not say that vengeance is bad though, it's just the Lord's. To be clear, I am not seeking revenge but what better revenge would there be than to write a popular book about all of the things that I've seen and overcome. The names have been changed to protect the innocent. Me. I am the innocent. You all know who you are.

A major part of living is recognizing the times in life when there is a major shift or realignment. Some experiences and periods in time are before and after markers in our existence. Many of us distinguish what our life was like before and after we were married, had children, or some other major life event. If you're lucky enough, you won't have to experience a before and after event, whether positive or negative, until you are emotionally mature enough to process it.

When you are emotionally mature, you can come to a place of understanding and appreciation of the person you were on both sides of the before and after marker. Not only are you able to move past any negative emotions, but you will actually be able to see the value in what took place, regardless of whether the outcomes are positive or

negative. Put simply, you will grow. That is, if you are emotionally mature.

Emotional maturity is not a given with age, it comes with living a variety of experiences that expose you to the growth process from which you learn and expand as a person. Experiences are neither positive or negative, but rather wanted or unwanted, desired or undesired. In the moment, they may evoke emotions that are either positive or negative, but the experience itself is necessary for us to be moved along our path. Experience develops our emotional maturity which later benefits our ability to use our emotions, therefore, strengthening our ability to harvest the power of our thoughts and emotions.

With emotional maturity, we become more courageous, less worried, and more positive in our thinking. Ultimately, we become better at utilizing the laws of attraction because we remain in a positive mind frame.

The contrast to emotional maturity is emotional immaturity, which also doesn't necessarily have a connection with age. However, it is more likely that an emotionally immature person is younger. We would hope that the younger you are, the less exposure to negative emotions you would have. Most of us want children to live in harmony and experience joy much more than the other negative emotions. With that being the goal, many children still end up experiencing more negative emotion than the positive.

So what happens when the negative emotion disproportionately outweighs the positive? The answer is: The lack of emotional diversity stifles the development of emotional maturity. The same goes for someone who has only experienced positive emotion. They will also remain emotionally immature. When something that prompts a negative emotion does manifest, they will be devastated and feel like it is the end of the world. It is only when the experience is over and they realize that the world did not

come to an end that they can begin to develop their emotional maturity. When another similar experience arises, they are much better prepared to control their thoughts.

When we disproportionately have negative emotions, we struggle with a more detrimental form of emotional immaturity. Not only do we think the world is going to come to an end, but we have been waiting on it for a long time and may not even be frightened by it. A life with an overabundance of negative emotions makes it more difficult to have a positive reference point than it is for the person who has only experienced the positive. It becomes second nature for one to think negative thoughts, only furthering the manifestation of more negative experiences. It is a perfect and dangerous cycle.

Emotional immaturity is not a bad thing and one need not to seek out experiences that evoke certain emotions to develop their maturity. Life provides the experiences every day of our lives. To develop your emotional maturity, all you need to do is live. We should all seek happiness; the maturity will come naturally. Hence, the saying “You live, you learn.”

When children develop emotional maturity too soon, it is often because they have been exposed to a diverse offering of experiences at a very young age. This can lead to children appearing to act older than they really are and seeking to satisfy emotional needs that they may be too young to have. Emotionally immature children, as many are, might not be able to handle challenging experiences appropriately. That's where adults come into the picture, as moderators and buffers for children who are still developing their emotional maturity.

The first before and after marker that I remember in my life was the day that I started middle school. I can see myself as two entirely different people before and after that day. I almost want to go as far to say that I had two



completely different personal cores. My before core remained but in the years that followed, it was smothered and concealed by so many layers of negative emotions that who I was after I went to middle school would never be the same.

I didn't develop emotional maturity because I did not experience a single, solitary, positive emotion in the years that followed my entry into middle school. I only had negative experiences and I had them on a daily, hourly, and even minute by minute basis. It was HELL.

How I wish that I was exaggerating or using hyperbole to make this book more entertaining for you, but I am not. From the day that I entered the 6th grade, I entered a world of harassment, hatred, confusion, disloyalty, and anguish. It was all because of homophobia. My soul was robbed of everything that I ever had. I was diminished at every turn, and destroyed by constant disappointment and rejection.

I have prayed for peace, for even as a grown man, the scars run deep. Even as a grown man, I thirst for some form of justice, some taste of revenge. Not for me, but for the innocent me. I want retribution for the 11-year old me, the boy who was destroyed. Not for me now, but for the boy who dreamed of getting far away from it all; the boy who considered suicide. Not for the man that I am now, but for the man that I used to be; a man who struggled with his existence, believing the world was against him.

The only way I feel that I can help all of the boys and the man that I described is to tell their stories. They must not be hidden in shame any longer. They've been hurt tremendously and for me to continue to carry on the facade that they haven't been hurt, only continues to empower their transgressors. Instead, I will use their experiences to empower others like them, because they are everywhere, hiding in plain sight.

As I began to write this book, I thought of what I was truly trying to express. I wanted to send a message that would inspire, but the more that I relived my experiences, I was enraged just as if it had just happened yesterday. I was so angry and embarrassed that some of the people in my past were able to enrage me twenty years later. They still had power over a part of me. They were still my enemies. I was a grown man filled with the purest form of hatred for the 11-year old versions of the people I went to middle school with.

It was a big moment for me. There was work that needed to be done. As I wrote, I embraced the idea that GOD had made me special, and most people were put off by it. When you write about your own life, you can't avoid seeking understanding of your own experiences as you try to present it artistically. The more I explored the idea, the more it seemed like an effective angle. The only problem was that it began to upset me. I wasn't writing to make myself a victim but I was feeling like one. I couldn't get my message through, if I was still full of this hatred. I stopped writing and decided to let it rest until something happened. I didn't know what the something was but that's where the universe comes into play.

As I waited for GOD to show me my next steps, I began brainstorming some ideas for a title. The only thing I could think of at the time was *Nemesis* because it sounded cool to me and I was portraying everyone in the book as my enemy. I googled the term *Nemesis*, just to see how well it would fit. I wanted to see if there were additional meanings or literary uses. Most of the other uses were action movie titles or science fiction books that centered around two formidable, opposing forces going against one another, often for multiple sequels or an entire series. It seemed like my use maybe wasn't the most appropriate.

Being the scholar that I am, I dug deeper into the roots of the word. What I found was extraordinary. While I

thought I was waiting on the universe to point me in the right direction, the universe had already sent me exactly where I needed to go. The definition of the term *nemesis* didn't fit my story too well but when I learned the story of the Greek Goddess *Nemesis*, I could barely contain my excitement. The story of my youth that I was writing directly paralleled the myth of *Nemesis*.

According to Greek mythology, *Nemesis* was a remorseless goddess who maintained an equilibrium amongst mankind. *Nemesis* measured out happiness and unhappiness and ensured that no one had too much of either. She has also been named *Invidia*, which meant jealousy and *Rivalitas*, which means jealous rival. *Nemesis* was seen as the personification of the resentment of people toward those who were blessed with countless gifts or good fortune.

It was exactly what my story was about up to that point. Of course, when I lived it, I felt so bad about myself that I was unable to recognize who I really was, let alone see the great talents and blessings that were bestowed upon me. The person I am now, who was writing the story saw my experiences much differently. I was rejected, not because I was less than those who rejected me, but because I was greater.

Remember, all experiences are neither positive nor negative, they all move us forward in the direction that we should be going, but the emotions associated with them can be negative. Trusting in the universe, I resigned to believe that *even* these tough experiences were part of a bigger plan, a clarity I waited 20 years for. If for nothing else, my experiences with bullying, homophobia, and suicidal thoughts would make an awesome book and could possibly save someone from contemplating killing themselves, someone else, or turning bitter as I did.

