

THE WAY GARGOYLES PLAY

An Inspirational Journey Through the Heart of Darkness to
Lasting Happiness

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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Hush-A-Bye

Hush-a-bye baby, on the tree top!
When the wind blows the cradle will
rock;
When the bough breaks the cradle
will fall;
Down will come baby, bough, cradle
and all.

This book is dedicated to my mother whom I lovingly refer to as Mama Blue Jay. Aptly named and in true form, she has always swooped down to protect me, her baby Blue Bird, from the harms of this world. If ever I find myself in danger, I know she will not be far away. Thank you for catching me, Mom, when I've fallen from the nest.

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“We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

-T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

INTRODUCTION

I believe each of us has a story. Many stories, in fact. I believe there is power within them. In the vulnerability of sharing our own stories, we have the power to heal ourselves and, in turn, heal the world. This book contains my stories of the tragic losses and beautiful discoveries that led to my spiritual healing and growth. I'm sharing my journey and poetry with you in the hopes that they will mend your wounds and inspire you to make transformative changes in your own life and in the lives of those around you.

Most of the poems in this book were written to be performed in poetry slam competitions, and they are best suited for the spoken word. For this reason, I have included the poems in both written and audio formats so you can fully experience them. My poetry is one of the ways I work through the things I do not understand in this world. The selection of poems included are my way of shining light on the injustices and the beauty I've witnessed in the hopes that all who hear them will be inspired to help bring about change and transformation. Listen to the poems at <http://www.andreacadelli.com/poetry>. *Note: Headphones are recommended to experience the nuances of the sound design.*

The Dilemma

I've learned that life is such an amazing journey. Full of complexities, challenges, surprises, sadness, joy, grief, pleasure, shame, and fear; it's one heck of a ride, especially if we're not in the driver's seat. Although many times, it's when we are comfortably driving the car that we find ourselves careening out of control. Life has a way of doing that to us. Just when we feel safe and in control of the vehicle, we almost run-off the road as we take every sharp turn.

After too many challenges, we start to anticipate the crash and burn around each corner. Suddenly we don't even enjoy the ride anymore. We no longer notice the beautiful scenery around us. Life becomes a dull drudgery of mundane tasks and we can't enjoy the NOW because we are too consumed with wondering when the next collision will happen.

At age 44, after tragically losing my youngest brother, this is exactly where I was in my life and the anxiety I was dealing with became so overwhelming I felt like I was going to die if something didn't change. I also couldn't remember the last time I felt truly happy and this realization caused me further despair and exacerbated my anxiety. After all, how could this be happening to me when I had all the things that I wanted: a loving relationship, a successful career, a beautiful home, and a core group of good friends? Well, as good as these things were, my losses felt more significant and I had this very real nagging voice telling me that something important was missing in my life. Clearly, I was stuck. And very AFRAID.

Our Collective Human Experience

When we get stuck living in past or perceived future challenges, we lose the ability to experience joy and happiness because we can only experience these when we are living fully in the moment. Knowing this universal truth doesn't mean it's always easy to do, especially amidst life's most difficult challenges, such as: living without food or shelter, the loss of employment, injury or serious illness, the loss of a child or loved one, violence, abuse, mental illness, or depression. Of course, these are just a few challenges that people in developed countries experience. For those who live in under-developed nations, the difficulties are more severe and often even life-threatening.

The good news is we can achieve a high level of happiness in the midst of very deep personal traumas. New discoveries in neuroscience have revealed just how powerful our minds are and how much control we have over our perceptions of reality. What this means is that while we may not have a lot of control over the situations that we are faced with in life, we do have complete control over how we perceive those challenges and how we choose to handle them. How well we deal with these difficulties in life directly correlates with our ability to feel and experience happiness.

According to Shawn Achor in his book, *The Happiness Advantage*, our feelings of happiness and self-worth also directly correlate with our success.¹ Yes, that's right – the happier we are the more success we will achieve. Sounds simple enough. So why isn't it as easy as it sounds? What is interfering with our ability to experience joy and happiness in our lives? What is causing us so much pain and suffering? Well before I can answer those questions, I must first define "happiness," "pain," and "suffering" so that we understand how each of these impacts our lives.

I follow Shawn Achor who prescribes the ancient Greek definition of happiness: "*It is the joy we feel striving towards our potential.*"² This definition is very enlightening as it includes the word "striving" which implies that we will experience successes, failures, and many challenges as we try to achieve our full potential. It also indicates that our happiness *is created* through this journey of ups and downs as we remain focused on reaching our personal best.

Hmmm? Does this mean we can't be happy if we're coasting through life taking the easiest path? Maybe we don't want to push ourselves too hard or we don't like challenges that force us out of our comfort zone - after all, can't there be happiness in just being comfortable? Well if it was that easy, wouldn't everyone be happy? Of course, we can find temporary joys in

life whether it's zoning out in front of the television, eating our favorite meal, watching our favorite sports team, or reading a good book. The difference here is that these are pleasurable activities that bring us temporary joy; however, they aren't the same as sustained happiness that carries us through difficult times.

An example of the fleeting nature of pleasure is eating a delicious burger. You may acknowledge that it was one of the best burgers you've ever eaten but the feeling of enjoyment ends soon after you've finished it. Yes, this was a pleasurable experience but it doesn't leave you with a deep sense of sustained happiness. Achor defines the four main qualities that sustain happiness as:

- 1) **Optimism** – believing that our behavior will eventually matter.
- 2) **Social Connection** – the breadth and depth of our relationships.
- 3) **The Way We Perceive Stresses** – as challenges instead of threats.
- 4) **Meaning** – the connection between our actions and our values.³

How would you rank yourself in each of these areas on a scale from 1-5 (1=Weakest; 5=Strongest)? Which ones are you struggling with the most? Identifying and focusing on areas that need improvement, will increase your overall feelings of well-being and joyfulness.

Now we have an understanding and perspective of happiness. But what of pain and suffering? Are they one in the same? If not, how are they different? The widely-accepted definition of pain by the International Association for the Study of Pain states that, "pain is an unpleasant sensory *and* emotional experience that is associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in such terms." Interestingly, the definition goes on to say, "pain is always subjective."⁴ This indicates that our perception of and emotional response to pain is unique to our own personal experiences with pain in the past. This would help explain why people

afflicted by the same injury or disease do not always express the same symptoms or levels of pain.

Catherine Carrigan, a Medical Intuitive Healer, further explains the difference between pain and suffering in her blog (posted September 13, 2013):

Pain is the physical experience. It's an ache in your muscles, the strain in your joints, the fever and chills, the throbbing in your temples, the congestion in your sinuses, the stabbing in your upper back, the shooting sharpness down your leg.

Suffering is your emotional experience. Suffering may or may not be connected to physical pain. You can suffer emotionally even on a sunny day when nothing apparently bad is happening to you on the outside. Suffering is the negative story you are telling yourself about what is happening now, what has happened in the past or what could potentially happen in the future.

Carrigan goes on to say that while pain is inevitable and an aspect of our collective human experience, suffering is subjective - as it is how we perceive our situation and emotionally respond to it. She further explains the link between the two: "It is my experience that if you try to get rid of a physical pain without also clearing the emotions behind the pain – the suffering – you will not actually be able to clear the physical pain totally. It may morph into another direction, another organ, another layer of your energy field, but your pain won't totally go away until you also let go of your emotional suffering at the same time."⁵

With this foundation for understanding happiness, pain, and suffering, let's go back to my original questions: *What is interfering with our ability to experience lasting joy and happiness in*

our lives? What is causing us so much suffering? It is my experience, as you will see in the stories I'm going to share with you, that the answer to these questions lies in our inability to let go and move past suffering. If happiness requires us to live fully in the present moment, where we can effectively strive towards our full potential, and suffering is the replaying of negative stories (our perceptions) in our minds of events that happened in the past, or the fear of something that will happen in the future, then by all means, these opposing mind frames cannot exist simultaneously.

This conflict between the spirit and the mind was what happened when I got stuck in my own suffering. My spirit, pushing towards continual growth, was at odds with my mind which was stuck in the pattern of suffering over the loss of my youngest brother. I couldn't imagine life without him and what if I was next to go? These thoughts created severe and disabling fear and anxiety that I had never experienced before.

That nagging voice inside me was my spirit trying to overshadow the fear I had created in my mind of this event. My spirit was pushing me towards grief and self-forgiveness to help me move past suffering and into a space where I could focus on striving towards my potential. Unfortunately, my spirit was no match for the monolithic fear dominating my thoughts. I had created a monster in my mind and I wasn't ready to own it.

I resisted leaning into grief like a child refusing to eat their broccoli. The thought of the pain involved with letting go was revolting and left a bitter taste in my mouth. It was easier and safer to keep busy than open myself up to the painful emotions of grief.

Self-forgiveness wasn't on my radar either. I dug my heels in and refused to budge despite my spirit's beckoning. Of course, what we resist persists (and often grows exponentially till it's beyond our control). Thus, I remained stuck and afraid. The ground ripped out from under me.

Until the day I remembered who I was. The day my spirit awakened me with the truth. That was the catalyst that changed my mindset and allowed for healing to begin.

Until we are capable of changing our perceptions of how we were or will be impacted by a traumatic event, our suffering will continue. It took me years to understand this and learn how to reframe the negative story I was telling myself.

My life has been a series of mistakes and missteps. I got most things wrong before I got anything right. I'm nowhere close to perfect. But that's okay. This stage of my life is about learning how to live imperfectly and love myself anyway. I figure if God loves me despite my faults, I should too.

This new mindset empowers me to live each day intentionally and more vulnerably. My hope is that my stories will help heal and inspire you to find a path out of your own suffering, enabling you to be fully present in each moment of your life. I want this for you because I know from experience that suffering stifles our spirits. It prevents us from fully living in the NOW which is where happiness resides – that place within our reach where our dreams and full potential are just waiting for the taking.

About This Book

Though not a memoir, this book takes the reader on an inspirational journey of spiritual growth and healing told through my personal experiences and poetry. Though it's not a typical self-help book, I have included a plan for GROWTH to help you make transformational changes that will lead to a happier, more fulfilled life. Putting this plan into action will strengthen your mind and spirit so that you move more easily through difficult times.

The following chapters include my stories and the things I learned that helped me move past suffering to a place where my spirit could begin to thrive. The stories are not told in chronological order so I've done my best to place them into context of time and place. Each story has an adjacent poem with a related theme – these provide a glimpse of the lens through which I view the world. You will also find a classical nursery rhyme or children's song at the beginning of each story. I included these to create the juxtaposition of something old and something new in hopes that it raises provocative questions related to the themes in the stories.

This book was compiled with three groups of people in mind:

1. Those who are struggling with something in life (either a past event or fear of something in the future that's keeping you stuck).
2. Those who love the spoken word and poetry slamming (even if you don't yet realize you are one of them).
3. Those who wish to experience the transformative power of words.

If you're not convinced of how powerful words can be, you need only study the difference between a child who has been raised with praise and approval versus a child who has been repeatedly told they are no good and will never amount to anything. Only one of them will grow up with a healthy self-esteem and the mental/emotional capability to succeed. The other child may eventually find success as well but only after they have worked through the damaged remains of their self-image. I believe in the power of words. I believe the words we use can hurt or heal. So, we must choose carefully.

1

The Heart of Courage

Little Miss Muffet

*Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
Along came a spider,
Who sat down beside her,
And frightened Miss Muffet away.*

I've always been an outgoing and confident person from the time I was a little girl. As a child, I was very independent and liked dressing myself (apparently, I always wanted to wear the same outfit every day - my jeans and a t-shirt from Italy that translated to: "I'm happy, so very happy!") and though I did tend to put my shoes on the wrong feet, I got an "A" for effort from my mom. As a toddler, I also easily engaged in conversation with strangers. This personality trait caused my parents much heartache as I would often walk away from them in public to visit with someone I had never met. According to my parents, I was quite the little gabber. I talked their ears off and anybody else's that would listen.

One of my favorite childhood stories that I loved to hear my dad tell happened when I was four years old. My dad had taken me to Central Mall in Fort Smith, Arkansas to watch *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*. After the movie was over, we were walking through the mall when my Dad noticed several nuns from Saint Anne's Academy (where he had graduated high school in 1962) so he walked over to say hello. They were visiting and catching up, which apparently, I found very boring. Now mind you, I was distracted by the sight of a pleasant looking middle-aged woman who was sitting on a bench fifty yards away eating a double dip ice-cream cone. She looked harmless enough wearing a light-weight trench coat matching the color of her golden wheat hair that clung to her head in tight curls. I quickly scanned her from head to toe and set my sights on her tasty treat. My thoughts went something like this:

Mmmm, that looks really yummy. I wonder where she got that? I wonder if she could get me one? I wonder if she might give me hers?

My questions were starting to pile up and I wasn't getting any answers so I decided to take matters into my own hands.

That's it, I'm just going to go ask her.

Without telling my dad, I walked right over to her and sat on the opposite end of the bench. I stared at the nice lady, my big brown doe eyes flitting up and down, longing for just one taste of her ice-cream. When she didn't notice me, I flashed her my sweetest most sincere smile that said, "Look at me, lady, and give me a bite of that ice-cream." Still, she didn't see me. So, I scooted a little closer to her smiling my prettiest four-year-old-smile. *Finally!* She looked down at me and smiled back . . . and then went right back to eating her ice-cream.

Okay, this is going to call for drastic measures. Quick change of strategy.

On a mission, I scooted right up next to her, wiped that silly smile off my face, looked her square in the eyes, and said with the most serious voice I could muster, "Ma'am, (*pause for dramatic effect*) we share at our house." Then I shifted my gaze and locked the target on her ice-cream cone just so there would be no confusion. She smiled and said, "Oh, Sweetie, you want some ice-cream? Well where's your mommy or daddy?" To which I quickly replied, "Don't worry about him; he doesn't want one." The lady was caught off guard by my certainty of this fact – I guess she had not seen this kind of adamancy in a four-year-old before. She burst out in a big belly laugh and said, "Come on, let's go get you an ice cream. Now what's your name?"

But she couldn't trick me; I remembered this from my training! *Never tell a stranger your name.* "Snow White," I answered. "I'll take one scoop of chocolate and one scoop of vanilla. Please and thank you."

My dad and the nuns found me sitting on the bench eating a double dip ice-cream cone and laughing it up with the lady – apparently, I was a little comedian once I got what I wanted. It didn't occur to me then that if a posse of nuns are sent to look for you, you're going to be in big trouble when they find you. The lady and my dad quickly exchanged stories about me and he thanked her for buying me a treat and sitting with me out in the open so they could find me.

Then he yanked my arm and told me we were going home and I was going to be punished when we got there.

Gosh. I don't see what the big deal is? I WASN'T LOST. I knew exactly where I WAS.

Silly parents, geesh!

I've thought about this story many times in the past year and a half. Mainly because I needed to remind myself that my true nature is one of bravery and courage to do things even when I'm afraid. I must remind myself of this because in 2015 I suffered a tragic loss that pulled the rug out from under me and left me lost and afraid. In fact, at 44 years old, I was suddenly incapacitated by fear for the first time in my life.

My youngest brother Andrew and I were always extremely close – I think this was partially due to the fact we had already lost our middle brother, Dino (who was killed in a tragic accident), so we only had each other left. Even so, Andrew and I were close from the time he was a little kid which is odd considering I was ten years older.

We just sort of got each other from the beginning. He looked up to me and always supported my creative ventures. And I thought he was a cool kid who needed protection from his older brother who loved to harass him. How could I not adore my baby brother who loved his older sister and advocated for all my artistic talents and dreams? Of course, we had our spats and disagreements like all siblings do, but at the end of the day, we were always there for each other. I loved Andrew with all my heart and he felt the same way about me. It was always that way.

Andrew was a tall, lanky kid with sandy-blond wiry hair that had a mind of its own. There was no comb or brush that could tame that bird's nest. He had a weakness for sweets; they were his kryptonite. His most cherished possession was his Halloween candy - he would barter with every kid in the neighborhood for theirs too. With the appropriate amount of candy, my brother could be bribed into doing almost anything.

Much to my parents' chagrin, he was a stubbornly picky eater who refused wholesome foods (anything green was out of the question). He preferred to eat his weight in sugary treats. Since he refused to eat dinner most nights, my mom had to force vitamins down him daily to ensure he was getting proper nutrition. He was immune to discipline, so no degree of punishment or grounding could persuade my brother to eat. He was the King of Stubborn. On most nights, dinner would conclude with my parents throwing their hands up in defeat.

Andrew also had a goofy side and loved to tell corny jokes at dinner time (none of which were the least bit funny). I'm not sure if this was his attempt to distract us from the fact that he wasn't eating, but the jokes he made up were so bad we could barely bring ourselves to laugh at them (even though my mom tried to encourage us with gentle kicks under the table). Thankfully, my brother grew into his wit as an adult. All that practice as a silly kid finally paid off.

In spring of 2014, he was living in Sallisaw, Oklahoma and had shared custody of his two kids, Raylynn (9) and Dino (7). He had gone through a divorce two years prior and was struggling to manage his busy work schedule and time with his kids. He worked twelve-hour shifts as an HVAC technician for Nestlé. Since he worked the night shift from 6:00 p.m. – 6:00 a.m., he would sleep during the daytime. He wanted to spend as much time as possible with his kids whenever he wasn't working, which left him very little time to rest and recuperate. In the five years that he worked for the company, he never took a real vacation and only took a total of

five to seven days off each year. My mother and I secretly worried about my brother and the stress of all the obligations he was under.

Andrew, who was 33 years old at the time, told me he hadn't been feeling well. "Hey, Sis, I'm having some stomach issues," he informed me. "Really? Like what kind of issues are you having?" I asked. "Well, it's hard to explain. Not pain so much, but a lot of nausea and vomiting. The doctor thinks it might be esophageal reflux so I'm on medication for it." he explained. "Yeah, I've got that too and so did dad. It must run in the family. That sucks, Brother, and I'm sorry you haven't been feeling well. At least you're on some medication now and will hopefully feel better soon," I encouraged him.

I didn't realize during our conversation that he had been having persistent stomach issues for the past several months and had continued to get worse instead of better. He couldn't eat much without getting full quickly and he would end up throwing up most of what he had eaten. Since he couldn't keep food down, he was losing weight rapidly.

Now my brother didn't have much weight to lose. At 6'1", he was tall and lanky, and never weighed more than 158 pounds at his biggest. He was always trying to gain weight and build muscle mass, but no matter how much he ate, he could never budge the scale. This was a constant battle for my brother. So, when he saw the pounds start falling off, he knew something was wrong. He had gone to the doctor a couple of times that spring and rather than doing any testing, they just diagnosed him with GERD (Gastro Esophageal Reflux Disease) and put him on prescription antacids.

This treatment didn't provide Andrew with any relief and he continued to lose weight quickly. I saw him in May of 2014 and almost didn't recognize my own brother. Now I was worried for him and I felt certain that the medical staff had overlooked the cause of his illness. I

told him he needed to go back to the doctor and insist on a colonoscopy (since we have a history of colon cancer on my mom's side) and an endoscopy to find out what was going on with his stomach. For the first time, he didn't argue with me – that's when I knew that he was scared too.

My brother went back to the doctor in late May and explained that he was not feeling better and was barely able to eat without getting sick. His doctor expressed concern over his lack of improvement and he scheduled Andrew for a colonoscopy in mid-July. My brother was so upset that he would have to wait another month and a half to get any answers. And what was he supposed to do in the meantime since he could barely eat? At this point, he didn't know what to do and despair started to set in.

In July, Andrew had a colonoscopy procedure which showed nothing abnormal with his colon, which was great news. The bad news was he still had no diagnosis or indication of what was causing his stomach issues. He continued to drop weight and with each pound lost he sank further into hopelessness.

In late August, my brother went to see another doctor for a second opinion. He now weighed 134 pounds and the doctor immediately knew there was a problem. He reviewed Andrew's previous test results and, bothered by the lack of a diagnosis, scheduled him for an endoscopy in EARLY OCTOBER. "Hopefully I will still be alive by then," Andrew told me. My brother was trapped in a nightmare he couldn't wake up from and it was taking a toll on our whole family. He spent the next month trying to survive on smoothies and any little bit of food that he could manage to keep down.

Finally, on the day of his test, we all waited with bated breath for the results from his procedure. However, his endoscopy test was inconclusive. He had so much undigested food and fluid in his stomach, that they couldn't see well enough to do the scope and biopsies. Since the

prep should have cleared everything from his system, the doctor knew that this was a sign that his stomach was not emptying properly. The doctor made an emergency referral to a specialist in Fort Smith and based on his recommendation, Cooper Clinic rescheduled my brother for a follow-up endoscopy a few days later. We knew this wasn't a good sign. My brother sank deeper into despair and my mom and I did our best to keep him positively grounded with optimistic outcomes, but the truth was, we were trying to convince ourselves as much as we were him.

The only consolation for Andrew, at this point, was that his next procedure would be performed by Dr. Jacob Joseph, a renowned gastro specialist in Fort Smith, Arkansas. My mother knew this doctor personally and we all felt assured that we would finally get some answers.

My mom was scheduled to be in Haiti doing mission work the week of Andrew's procedure, so I told him that I would stay with him in Sallisaw and take him to Cooper Clinic for his test. As a precautionary measure, they had him do the prep drink for two full days this time to make sure that everything was cleared from his system. At this point, Andrew was so weak and tired from not getting enough nutrition, I thought this two-day fast was going to kill him. He was so hungry. All he could talk about was food the night before his exam.

Being Italian, my brother and I both love to eat and we were spoiled by a number of great cooks in our family. He told me about the meal he wanted to eat after his procedure, even if he could only take a few bites: New York strip steak, mashed potatoes, and a salad with Ranch dressing. My heart was broken to see my sweet baby brother wasting away and I assured him that whatever meal he wanted that's what we were going to have. With that promise, there was a momentary twinkle in his eyes that said, "Thanks, Sis."

I could tell he was worried that night because he knew, without a doubt, he was finally going to find out what was wrong with him. We both saw this as a blessing and a curse. He told me that he hoped it wasn't cancer. As is my nature, I remained positive and told him all the other things that they could possibly find to explain his symptoms. In retrospect, I wish I had just held his hand and had the courage to be afraid with him. But on that night, I was not that brave. So, we sat alone trying to find some peace with the silence.

In November of 2014, after Andrew had healed from his stomach surgery, we traveled with my mom to Houston, Texas to go to MD Anderson Cancer Center. It would be our first meeting with his oncologist to determine his treatment plan. Little did we know at the time, but the cancer had already spread to his hips and spine, which made the seven-hour drive and sitting in the car excruciatingly painful for him – to the point that our second stop when we got there, after we checked into the hotel, was the hospital.

We spent a long night at the Houston Methodist Hospital trying to alleviate Andrew's pain. I was worried that we would miss his appointment the next morning with the oncologist. We could not afford to miss it, so I was already stressed when we finally left and headed for the hotel around 4:30 a.m. that morning. His appointment was at 8:00 a.m. and even though we were all exhausted, there was only time for a quick power nap.

We awoke anxious and a little cranky with only a few hours of sleep and hunger stirring in our bellies. My brother asked if we could stop at Smoothie King so he could get some breakfast on the way. My first instinct was to tell him, no, that we didn't have time before his

appointment. *Doesn't he know how important this is?* But then I thought better of it and remembered that my brother needed to eat with all the pain meds they had put him on at the hospital. I checked my AroundMe app to see if there was one close by. Yes, there was, only a couple of miles from the hotel. *Okay, let's do this!*

“We’ve got to go now if we’re going to grab something to eat,” I snapped. My tone conveyed the stress I was feeling. We jumped in my GMC Acadia and zipped out of the hotel parking lot. Because I was hurrying and not familiar with this area of downtown Houston, I accidentally passed the entrance for Smoothie King.

“Damn it! I just passed it!” I yelled. Obviously, I was failing miserably at remaining calm and in control. My mom told me to go down a little further to a place where I could turn around. *We don't have time for that! Doesn't anyone but me understand that we can't miss this appointment?*

So, I stopped in the middle of the road and looked up in my rearview mirror and noticed that there was no traffic behind me. *Awesome! Here's my chance and I'm going for it.* I started to back up quickly and suddenly the silence was broken by the loud crunching of metal and glass.

Oh my God, I just hit somebody! But I looked and no one was there! I had just run smack into someone who was right behind me. And if that wasn't embarrassing enough, the fact that my car was equipped with a backup camera the size of Texas made me feel even more like an idiot. I pulled over into the parking lot and watched as a small dark gray sports car zipped in right behind me. *No wonder I didn't see the car; it's as small as a damn cracker box!*

Before I even put my car in park, a middle-aged woman with long sandy blonde hair and heels ran over to my driver's side window and started yelling at me. “What’s wrong with you?”

Who stops in the middle of the road and backs up? Didn't you see me? How the hell could you not see me? You have a freaking backup camera!" she ranted and then ran back over to look at the front of her car.

I stepped out and followed her apologizing the whole way. "I'm sooo sorry, I didn't see you when I looked in my rearview mirror and I haven't had this car long so I'm not in the habit of relying on the backup camera," I pleaded as we checked out the bumper of her car.

"Well maybe you should try using it!" she retorted.

Her car was more than ten years old and ironically the grill was already missing so it was hard for me to tell what damage came from our collision and what damage was already there. We continued to survey the front of her vehicle to find some deep scratches, a broken headlamp, and a few dents that I couldn't tell whether were old or new. Then we walked over and looked at the back of my car which amazingly didn't have a single scratch or piece of evidence that would indicate this even happened. "Well it looks like your car is fine, of course . . ." she mumbled something under her breath.

I continued to apologize profusely and told the woman that I would give her my driver's license and car insurance information but she didn't seem satisfied with any of this. She was understandably angry at the whole situation. And I was so upset I just wanted to cry. Now I knew we were going to be late for Andrew's appointment.

I grabbed my wallet from the car, trying to hold back the well of tears building up in my eyes, and pulled out my cards so she could take down my information to file with her insurance. As I handed her the cards, I mentioned that I was taking my brother to MD Anderson for an appointment and that this was my first time driving in downtown Houston. Again, I apologized for backing into her. As she grabbed my cards, she glanced in the windshield of my car and

locked eyes briefly with my brother who was sitting in the front passenger seat – I knew she could tell just by looking at him how sick he was.

Suddenly she handed the cards back to me. “Just don’t worry about it. My car is old anyway. There was a little damage there before,” she huffed, her tone softening a little.

“What? Are you sure?” I asked confused.

“Yeah, just forget about it.” she said as she scurried back to her car.

“Thank you. And I’m so very sorry for the trouble I’ve caused you!” I shouted after her.

“Yeah, I know,” she said as she got in her car and drove off.

I watched her leave and head down the road and then I got back into my car. My mom and brother were staring at me like birds of prey right before the kill. “Well?” they asked, “What did she say?”

“She told me not to worry about it, that her car was older and had previous damage,” I told them.

“Really? Unbelievable,” my brother replied, “because that was definitely your fault.”

“Yes, I know,” I said as I backed out and headed down the road.

None of us got a smoothie that morning but we did enjoy something much sweeter. We got to experience an act of kindness from a compassionate woman who selflessly looked at our needs before her own. This is the grace that is exemplified through kindness (more on this in the next chapter) and its benefits are far more lasting than anything you can drink from a blender.

As long as I live, I will remember and be thankful for this stranger who touched our lives in such a special way.

Unlike my brother, Andrew, I'm not good at remembering important dates. That's why I'm lucky to have Siri on my iPhone to remind me. However, there are four dates that are now permanently engraved on my heart:

- October 16, 2014, the day Andrew was diagnosed with gastric adenocarcinoma (stomach cancer).
- October 21, 2014, the day he had his $\frac{3}{4}$ of his stomach removed.
- February 13, 2015, the day MD Anderson told us the first line chemo wasn't working and the cancer had spread.
- February 25, 2015 at 1:45am, the day my brother passed away and joined our father, brother, and grandparents in Heaven.

He died the day before our dad's birthday and I couldn't imagine a better present for my dad than to be joined by his second son in eternal life.

That thought, and my gratitude that my brother was no longer suffering were the only reprieves from the overwhelming sadness that had settled into my heart. It weighed on me like an anchor trapping me in an angry sea with its relentless waves of guilt and self-doubt pummeling the shattered bow of my ship.

Was there more I could have done to save him? Why didn't I catch that MD Anderson had never received his biopsies from St. Edward's Hospital? Was his oncologist invested in his treatment and recovery? Why didn't I push Dr. Mackey to do the Her2 test (performed to determine a more targeted therapy for those who test positive)? Why didn't they remove all of his stomach to decrease the chances of the cancer spreading? Would removing meat and sugar from his diet have helped him beat the cancer? Did Andrew get to spend as much time as he

wanted with his kids? Why didn't I go down there more often to help him? Why couldn't I just hold his hand and just "be" with him without trying to fix everything? WHY, WHY, WHY?!?!

Every time I looked at my mother and saw her suffering from the pain of losing both her sons, I felt my heart sink lower in the murky depths. When I heard my niece and nephew crying at the loss of their dad, I felt certain I would not be able to swim to the surface for a breath of air. I could feel everyone else's suffering so deeply and I mistook it for my own. But I was too busy trying to make everyone feel better and wrestling with my guilt to feel my own pain. I ran so fast from grief, I was sure it would never find me. And even if it did, I was certain it couldn't catch me.

After my brothers' memorial and his affairs had been handled, there was nothing left to do but grieve. But it was a little too late for that. The stormy sea had already taken its toll on my battered ship and it began its long slow descent to the bottom of the ocean, to a place much deeper than the Mariana trench. Six miles of man-guided mechanical scope couldn't see to the bottom of the hole I was in. Down here, five thousand fathoms below the sea, there was only cold and darkness and the unimaginable sea creatures that survived in the depths where light did not exist.

Although I could make it to work every day, I was functional at best. I made all my meetings and hit deadlines. However, I found myself consumed by depression and anxiety. I was numb to everything except my own fear and it followed me around like a threatening shadow that I could not escape. Every crisis at work seemed so trivial to me, little petty annoyances that I didn't have the energy or desire to tackle. I would randomly cry at my desk or in the bathroom and not even know why I was crying. I had completely disassociated myself from my emotions (I've learned when you block one, you block them all). Suddenly the world

turned itself upside down.

I was trapped in this dark place of apathy and fear that sucked the life out of me and left me broken in a thousand pieces. I didn't know exactly what was happening to me but I was keenly aware that if something didn't change I would surely perish. And this realization fed the insatiable fear monster inside me. I realized I needed some help and I was finally at a point where I was determined to reach out and ask for it.

In June of 2015, I started seeing a licensed social worker who did energy healing and hypnotherapy as part of her treatment regimen. The first visit with Carol was, by far, the least pleasant as it involved a history intake where I had to detail all the important events in my life from as far back as I could remember. "You do know we only have an hour, right?" I asked. Carol smiled and encouraged me not to leave anything out. It's never fun dredging up the past, especially when you think that you've already processed it and moved on, but I understood it was important for her to know these events in my life and where I had come from. So, I told her EVERYTHING and we still finished up in an hour.

It's strange how you can sum up all the important events in your life in such a short time span; a single hour. And yet, we often give the past more power over our lives than it deserves. Days, weeks, months, and even years are freely donated to the past when we lock ourselves inside our suffering.

I started seeing Carol once a week and our next visit was much more productive. Finally, we could talk about the present and what was truly bothering me that seemed to be triggered by my brother's death. During the second visit, she asked me what I hoped to gain from our sessions. Devoid of all emotion, but with desperation in my voice, I said, "I just want to be happy and feel joyful again. I hardly remember what it feels like to smile or hear the sound of

my laugh.” I didn’t know at the time that she would lead me on a journey where I would feel much worse before I would start to feel better. I had to learn to release all the emotions I had locked away deep in the cellar of my heart before I could arrive at a place where I could feel joy again.

During our second visit, Carol picked up on my anxiety before I ever told her it was an issue. “You have to slow down, Andrea, and learn how to breathe,” she said.

What is she talking about? I am breathing or I wouldn’t be alive sitting on this couch in front of her!

“You’re keeping yourself insanely busy so that you don’t have to deal with your feelings,” she insisted.

Okay, okay. Maybe, I’ll give you that one. After all, I was working full time as a Senior Marketing Manager for a Fortune 100 company, producing my second film, *The Perfect Host: A Southern Gothic Tale*, and trying to spend every spare second I had with my niece and nephew who lived an hour and half away. I had no time just for me . . . to breathe. It was exhausting.

“You need to take a vacation,” Carol said.

I didn’t like the way this conversation was going. Yes, I was crazy busy and tired all the time but that wasn’t what was bothering me! What was bothering me is that I was miserably sad over the loss of my brother and I didn’t feel happy. “When was the last time you felt happy?” Carol inquired.

“I honestly can’t remember,” I replied.

I was embarrassed to admit this because I was sure that this was also my fault. Silence filled the room and we just looked in each other’s eyes. In that moment, I knew Carol could see inside my soul because I saw my own sadness reflected in her eyes. The part that nagged me the

most is that I didn't know why I felt this way – I had everything I thought I wanted in life. This is what I needed Carol to help me understand, to help me fix. I explained this to her to be sure the problem was clear and where I needed her help.

“Why aren't you happy?” she asked.

Am I supposed to know the answer to this? Since I'm paying you, I was hoping you would tell me! “Well, I have so many constraints on my time right now but what I REALLY WANT to do is write. For several years, I've been wanting to write this book about my Italian grandparents and their life in Italy before and during World War I,” I sheepishly replied.

“So why aren't you doing it?” she inquired.

Wow, she must think I'm Wonder Woman. I should be able to work full time, write a book, and save the world while I'm at it! I could feel my cheeks getting hot. “Well I have this great job and I'm in the middle of producing my second film. Between those two things and spending time with my niece and nephew, I just don't have the time to dedicate to writing,” I explained.

“Then why aren't you happy?” asked Carol again.

Damn, she's good. She just might break me. Her skill at asking rhetorical questions that we both knew the answers to would lead me to a place where I had to accept accountability for my own happiness. *Dang! I thought this was going to be easy!*

Over the course of the next few weeks, Carol helped me understand a lot of what was happening to me and why I was overridden with fear, anxiety, and sadness. Of course, losing my baby brother had taken a huge toll on both my heart and mind. She explained that this loss would be exceptionally hard for me to deal with because Andrew was technically the last male influence in my immediate family. At first I didn't realize the significance of this, but Carol

explained that this particular bond is important because we derive our sense of safety and security from our male influences. On top of this, my insecurity and fear were further exacerbated because Andrew's illness was such a shock to my entire family and he died so young (not in the natural order of things).

Andrew's death stole my confidence in life and in myself. Now the problem had been brought to the forefront: "You're not grounded, Andrea. That's why you feel so afraid," Carol concluded. The realization of this truth was the catalyst that released all the emotions I had locked away. I was finally able to cry for my brother and feel angry that he left me behind to deal with this world by myself. I suddenly felt everything so deeply that it took my breath away. Carol helped me lean into the grieving instead of trying to avoid it. And strangely, the pain I began to experience with the grief also brought me a sense of relief.

Carol taught me how to meditate during our hypnotherapy sessions, which she used to help me experience deep relaxation. She encouraged me to meditate at home as well and I dedicated thirty minutes every morning and evening to meditate on my own. I grew to love this "me" time and the benefits I was deriving. I started to feel much more relaxed and less anxious without the help of any medications. During meditation, I could see beyond my sadness to a place where I was free and perfectly content. After these sessions, I noticed that I started seeing people in a different way. Of course, physically they still looked the same but I could also sense something that wasn't visible to the human eye, their feelings and things they wanted to hide were also within my perceptions. This helped me connect with them in a deeper, more meaningful way that was truly beautiful and spiritual. For the first time in a very long time, I felt the strange wrinkle of a smile forming on my face.

I saw Carol for four months and during that time she helped me through this difficult

journey. I was committed to our sessions and the therapy regime she prescribed: daily meditation, yoga, and the occasional energy healing that she performed in her office. I could feel myself slowly rising from the depths of the dark ocean. I could see the rays of sunlight penetrating the surface of the water. And finally, I knew that I would make it to the surface for that glorious breath of air. I yearned to feel the sunshine on my face and I knew, in time, that day would come too.

I am grateful that I found the courage to reach out for help when I wasn't able to do it on my own. After my work with Carol I could feel my confidence starting to come back. The real me was still down there struggling to be released from the shackles of fear. And slowly but surely, the shackles were removed, one at a time. Although there was evidence of my confidence returning little by little, the defining moment came when I was laid off from my job in June of 2016 due to an organizational restructure that displaced several associates in our department.

I was brought into my Senior Vice President's office and told that 'unfortunately for me, this was going to be a quick meeting.' Seeing as a representative from HR was sitting in the room, I didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to figure out what was about to go down. I sat calmly and smiled at my SVP who told me my job was changing and that I was not qualified for the new role so my position was being eliminated. That was that; I was being terminated. Without asking if I had any questions, he quickly turned it over to HR to cover my severance packet. I listened patiently and waited till she finished. Then with calm reassurance, I looked my SVP in the eyes and said, "Well I'm disappointed that you didn't take the opportunity to get to know me and the value that I bring to this team and our organization." (He had just joined our company three months earlier and never bothered to meet with me once.) Before he could reply, I smiled

and continued, “But that’s unfortunate for you, not me. However, I do wish you all the best with the business.” Then I stood up and firmly shook his hand as I looked him directly in the eyes. He stared at me speechless, like a deer caught in the headlights and I knew in that brief moment he second guessed his decision. I turned and calmly walked out of his office to retrieve my things.

On the way to my desk, I noticed that I wasn’t feeling anxious, stressed, or angry about the fact that I was just laid off. I took a deep breath as I grabbed my belongings and as I exhaled, I thought to myself, *Everything is going to be okay. I’m going to be just fine.* In that moment, with that thought, I realized something wonderful. *Ah, yes! The old me is back!*

Consequently, even though I was initially disappointed by this turn of events, it was the most amazing blessing. I feel positive that my brother, Andrew, who so admired me for always chasing my dreams had something to do with giving me a gentle push off the ledge. I could hear him say, “Go for it, Sis! Go write those books you’ve been dreaming of writing! I’m so proud of you and I know you’ll put your whole heart into it and they’ll be amazing.”

Today, when I think of my brother, I still sometimes cry but always with a smile on my face because I feel his presence in my heart so deeply. When I look at the sunrise, I see his beautiful smile. Each cool breeze reminds me of his laughter. I feel his warm embrace when I stare upon the stars at night. He whispers to me through the birds that sing and the flowers that bloom to remind me he will always be with me. To remind me that even if I’m broken down, it doesn’t mean I’m broken.

I know that grief has changed me in many ways and that I will never be the same person I was before. But I’m okay with that. I would rather have loved and lost Andrew than to never have loved or known him at all. Four months went by so fast, but I’m thankful my brother got to

spend time with his girlfriend, Steffi, before his illness was diagnosed. I'm thankful for the time he had with his kids and the quality time I got to spend with him during his brief journey with cancer. I'm thankful that I got to be there to support him in his time of greatest need. And I'm thankful for thirty-four years of wonderful memories with him that I will cherish for a lifetime.

THE HUNTED

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Broken down, and on your knees,
And SMILING.
You kiss the ground and praise God
for the silence that follows the sound of your breath,
gasping through teeth clenched tighter than your eyes.
But you're alive, boy, cause your lifeline is strong,
pulled TIGHT against death's threat . . .
Like hounds howling hell's own flames,
They got noses FULL of your smell.
They got noses gorging on the scent of black hands and feet scramblin' through the forest –
“You better run, boy!”
Like hounds howling hell's own flames,
they got noses burning, BURNING DOWN your tracks.

So how does it feel to be hunted,
when you're wanted for the color of your skin?
To know that for their pleasure,
they'll make right their lustful sins.
And how does it feel to be hunted,
when you're wanted for the price of your coat?
To be laid out flat while your hide is skinned,
on the back of some fisherman's boat.

And what will become of you,
when they're done with you,
when they've used and had their fun with you,
And you're nothing but some CRAZY FOOL'S joke?
Well now see, that's when their fun begins –
That's when they'll point their guns at you,
laugh and make fun of you;
Tell their stories of the chase they pursued,
how they brought you to the ground with fear in your eyes,
and of the victory that your death renewed.

But you can't blame the sick bastards –
They can't help but lie . . .
Saw such peace and tranquility restin' in the depths of your eyes,
Near drove 'em to madness –
Cause they got the FIRE BURNING inside 'em;
You can see the flames flickerin', dancin' in their eyes,
Cause they got the FIRE BURNING inside 'em –
Can't wait to suck the life right out of you . . .
Cause see, boy, the FIRE it don't live without air.

But you and I, we both know the truth -
For never once did you cry out for help or scream writhin' in pain,
so quiet and tolerant of their teasin' as they spit their insults in your face.
So tell me now, boy, how does it feel to be hunted . . .
When you're left for dead,
but you are SO MUCH ALIVE?