

Saving Lala

Rescuing my child from the ultimate fraud

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PREFACE

I have been baffled, and at times horrified, by the incredible surprises life has to offer. While it is remarkable to feel awe and shock when someone narrates a story that is out of this world, I assure you that the narrator feels the effects far more than the listener. There is an utmost level of incomprehensive dilemma that one goes through when they must think about the life one has lived.

Fed by childhood and breathed by the world, we become who we are. I have carried the troubles of a weak family system all my life. I spent most of my life trying not to walk in the footsteps of my ancestors. To be able to give the world a virtuous contribution and to instill positivity in my children have been my objectives.

I learned very early in life that there were two sides to a coin. One could argue that it wasn't such for everyone. Some can just lay on one side like a forgotten penny in a wishing well. Still there are two sides. Insights require merely turning, or for some, re-turning the coin.

I have been in love, and I have been loved. I have worked to deserve good and been awarded good undeservingly. I have feared, and I have been feared. I have made mistakes, and I have been someone who's made the right moves. I have, in short, been a coin that never rests—in due course of this memoir, you will soon understand what I mean.

I am most notable as a mathematician by profession. Yet, I would not refer to myself as being a mathematician. I am many things, but most of all, I am a father. I am the father of three children who are the driving force behind this book.

The best thing life has offered me was my children, and even better than the best was the realization of being responsible for them, of being a father. Most fathers want for their kids what they could never have themselves. I liked and wanted all of that for my kids, the best in the world, but not monetarily. I want them to have the best emotionally, logically, and socially. To be able to provide is not difficult; what is difficult is to be present. This book exists so that my children can appreciate not only the presence but learn to be present.

This book is not something I had ever envisioned. I have never been a writer; in fact, I detested the task entirely. When I started my bike business and, ultimately, my bike blogs, I encountered the need to write. I dare not say it came easy to me or that I was born a writer. In fact, it was the opposite. I had to work on my writing skills and practice them endlessly, and only then was I able to write. I am also not a well-read individual in the traditional sense. I have read mostly chess and math books. I have also read philosophy and logic, which shall become apparent to all those who read this book. I would request all those who read this to forgive mistakes they may come across.

I have expressed what I would refer to as the second phase of my life in this book. As Confucius said, "We have two lives, and the second begins when we realize we only have one." I have thus refrained from mentioning much about my early days.

This autobiography has not come into existence for monetary benefits. Instead, it is the outcome of many unanticipated events occurring in my life.

After some read this work, they may see me worthy of sympathy; some may even empathize. Still others, in their own pristine context, may become offended. Ultimately, I believe there will be a few who will understand my journey and some that may learn from the mistakes I made.

This is for those few.

Thank you,

Yan Lyansky

Chapter 1: Childhood

To fully understand my path in life, the childhood element is important to describe as psychologists argue. I was born in 1971 on the picturesque bank of the Dnieper River, Kyiv, Ukraine, formerly USSR. Our family was complete upon my arrival, a family of four: my mom Dina, dad Paul, my extraordinary sister Elena, and myself. This was a beautiful beginning to my life in a home filled with love. Originally.

Like most people, I have infantile amnesia. A fancy way of saying that I have little recollection of my infant years. Nonetheless, I have come to see a lot of myself in my son, Apik. So, in a way, I've had the chance to relive my infancy through him. There really isn't much to observe at that stage. All he did was sleep and breastfeed. That placated his fantasies and constant urges. Overall, he was the perfect baby; I doubt I was as good as him. Maybe a bit close. I'd like to believe that I was blessed with him because I was also good.

The memories I have before the age of four are foggy but remain embedded due to the emotions attached to it. I remember playing on a Kyiv playground with my mom. I was overjoyed and had the time of my life as we swung and jumped and ran. As I close my eyes, I can feel the sheer joy in that moment, the laughter and adrenaline of running around. It is the only happy memory I have.

My other memories are shrouded by pain and horror. A deep sorrow grows in my gut and travels to chill my heart when I recall them. I was sobbing in a childcare facility as I waited for my mother. I was always the last to leave. The forgotten child. But I was always hopeful that the next day would be different. It never was. My heart broke every single day. Children are relentlessly hopeful and desperate for the affection of their parents. How was I always hoping for a different outcome? The pains of naivety.





The other instance is a memory of being dropped off at a neighbor's house by my mother. It felt like I was being abandoned, that she would never show up to get me. I lived in fear, and later, in moments when the memories flooded my mind, the fear felt tangible and present, like a giant competing for my oxygen.

The memory that has stuck in my mind the longest is being locked in a refrigerator. I remember thinking that death was coming for me and trying to make peace with my fate. I shivered and quivered as my body tried to fight the cold. I had been forgotten, yet again. Fortunately, my sister found me in the nick of time and rescued me.

Isn't it ironic that the memories that are the most vivid entail moments of great torment and fear? It is said that I was a playful child, hardly away from the fields and always discovering new adventures. Yet I have minimal recollection of that side of me. My most vivid memories are the fear and trauma I endured as a child. My inner child is a shaken boy, not the jolly

one I'm told about. It's only fair to be able to recall the laughs and good times to soften the anguish I carried with me. To lighten the load of misery. I believe that there are many who share in this flawed memory system. We can only rely on the memories of joy shared by others and try to fit ourselves in those moments. We are a product of our traumas, so it is important to understand how one's brain works.

In August 1974, when I was at the age of three, my family relocated from Kyiv to New York. It was a big change, and I was excited about the new path we had taken. I was too young to understand that we had been rejected by the former Soviet Union and were stateless. It was only years later that I came to understand the term stateless and its association to us. I expanded my knowledge on the subject and sought out all that there was worth knowing about being stateless, why we were stateless, and how it was affecting our lives. I've gathered much knowledge and now appreciate the liberties that the United States has accorded myself and my family.

During my first winter in the United States, I fell severely ill with chickenpox and other ailments. As a young child, I had a relatively weak immune system that led to me being sick more frequently than my peers. Following the sickness, my eyes began to cross badly. A rare circumstance that somehow landed on me. I had to wear thick glasses to correct the problem.

I disliked the eye cross, who wouldn't anyway. It caused me problems in various ways, from being the target of bullying to the constant stares by strangers. Nonetheless, I cherish all God created in me, including the eye cross. It's easy for me to accept it now, but I struggled to conceive why this had to happen to me. I now understand that this flaw is special and makes me unique. I have yet to learn the reason for this "gift," but I am very confident that I will learn in due time.

Perhaps it could be to keep superficial people away, repelling the vain from my surroundings. Perhaps its purpose is to help me grow myself to compensate for my inadequacy, or so that my children will meet someone with an eye that crosses and fall in love. That seems to be the logical conclusion. Ego is the enemy as Ryan Holiday explains. And my crossed eyes have kept that enemy away, enabling me to have genuine interactions with the people close to me. That was the only pro in my condition.



I went to a regular public school and was not the slightest challenged. I mostly daydreamed during class thinking about the many castles in the air. Life was much easier when I was in my thoughts. I controlled the trajectory of everything. This is the one trait I am sure that I passed down to my son. He could make a profession out of daydreaming; I was an amateur in comparison.

My son was God's chance to correct the mistakes he made in me. A much better version of me. He's bigger, stronger, faster, smarter, and more intuitive. Of course, I had to start with the positive traits. Unfortunately, he picked up some of my bad habits as well. Both of us are super stubborn and can be self-absorbed at times. For example, we can sit in front of someone, see their lips move, and not hear a word. Essentially, we have a problem listening to others and paying attention- a real cause of friction in the house. Anyway, I digress.

The one thing I remember from my days in public school is the fights. I got into three fights while in school. One of the fights happened as a result of bullying and is the most bizarre of the three.

When I was in the first grade, my neighbor was in the fourth grade. He was big, strong, and smart. Since we lived next to each other, I always followed and tagged along with him. He

was cool, and I was happy to be his associate. On one fateful day, he decided to beat me up. I'm not sure what led up to the fight, but it happened. He got on top of me and was punching me as I cried my tears out until I lost consciousness.

When I woke up, I expected to find myself in bad shape. I was nothing close to being in bad shape. I had somehow regained consciousness and ended up on top of him, beating him up. He was crying (as was I). The tables had turned. It made no sense. It still makes no sense. I understood something had shifted inside me that was not normal.

Giving it much thought for a couple of years, the most reasonable conclusion is that fear drove me to give in to my neighbor. The odds were against me. He was larger, stronger, smarter and more capable than I was in every aspect. My brain gathered that there was no way I could protect myself from his attack. Fear crept in and chased all defenses from my mind. That is the power that it holds. It crippled my sense of worth. I let him beat me up without any resistance because I was afraid. The fight was already lost in my mind before it began.

However, due to the adrenaline of the moment and my life being in danger, there was a shift. I lost consciousness of reality. My body was in defense mode. Fear had no place in that moment. I defended myself and ended up as the victor. I cannot say how the tables turned. The lesson seems to be that it's the fear that's debilitating. Fear gave my bully a head start. I could have handled myself and not given him the advantage of mounting me and delivering free punches, but I didn't because my mind was held captive by fear. It is important to be able to manage and address our fears at every given moment that it makes its presence known. One cannot live freely if held captive by fear.

My son Apik fell victim to a bully in the first grade and in a similar scenario to the one I was in. I had trained him to grapple since he was 2 years old, a hobby we shared together. He was amazingly strong, and a naturally gifted grappler. He moved swiftly and held his own at an early age. He was able to handle a 10-year-old when he was four! Despite his capabilities, he was scared of this one kid. His mind fed into him that he was not able to defeat him, keeping him from defending himself.

Thankfully, he never fought this kid. It never got physical with the bully. I'm sure he would allow himself to lose, just as I did years prior due to the fear inside him. It is funny how things cycle back from one generation to the next. I hope to teach him that his power lies in his mind and not his emotions. It is possible to feel scared but logically think through a situation and discover that you are more than capable of handling anything.



The second fight I got into was in second grade with a troubled kid called Mark. He initiated the fight as we got off the school bus. This time, I did not hesitate. I went right in and took him out in a matter of three punches. Contrary to what you would think, this wasn't a win for me. I was so worried that he was badly injured, or worse, permanently scarred. It felt horrible being the cause of his pain, but I felt good that I had protected myself. I went home crying and upset at my actions. I went to my sister, and she listened to my story. I never wanted to fight again. There was no satisfaction in it.

The thing about bullying is that it begins with the perpetrator feeding the victim an image of being superior. That is where bullies' powers lie – in the image they create in another's mind. Afterwards, the actual assault is easy to fulfill. In the fourth grade, the neighborhood kids were beating up this nice kid around the block. He was weaker than the rest and more timid. Therefore, they teamed up against him. I knew the amount of pain and trauma he experienced, but I never intervened. I turned a blind eye to everything. One day, the kids told me it was my turn to beat him up. I refused. I would turn a blind eye but not be part of the bullying. That is where I drew the line.

After a week or so, all the other kids got in trouble at school for assaulting him. This is not to say that my actions were right. My inaction was an act of injustice. To this very day, I am still ashamed that I never stood up for him. I was capable of sparing him the shame and torment, but I chose self-preservation. I was wrong. I knew I had special powers at a young age.

I learned an important lesson through the unfortunate events: it is each person's duty to protect the people around them, especially the weak and helpless. I cannot go back to my childhood and save the young boy being bullied, but I vowed to be better to other people in need of help. I would never look the other way. That is my penance for my inaction. And I would be serving it till the day I die.

The third and final fight was in the fifth grade. Mark wanted to fight me again, a rematch after three years. His father spectated and was there to ensure that I got beat up. This time I didn't take the lead. Frankly, I didn't want to take part, and it felt forced. I observed his movements and learned his tactics. He ducked and swung wildly when charging in. So, I figured an uppercut would be a good punch. On his next charge, I hit him square in the eye and it was over. He immediately got a black eye. His father urged him to keep going but I refused noticing the state he was in. He was in no condition to continue. It was over. And that marked the end of my adolescent fighting career.

I had become good at fighting and was very aware of my abilities. I believed nobody could handle me. There was no point in getting into conflicts that would result in a meaningless drama. I always felt like my energy was being usurped after these fights. I felt bad for my opponents, the injuries and pain caused by my hands, so I stopped fighting. I was good at it and later learned that there were better end-results to these abilities. I restarted my training with professional fighters more than 15 years in the future.

Aside from the fighting described during my elementary years, I did do little, but some, learning while there. The only notable moment I can recall was being verbally assaulted by a teacher in the fourth grade. I innocently raised a question in class.

“Multiplying generally increases a number, so why is it that multiplying a number by a fraction, which is less than one, decreases the number?”

This was the moment that I understood fully well that curiosity did in fact kill the cat. The teacher was unable to answer my question, so she decided to yell at me for asking a ‘stupid’ question. Looking back, there were numerous answers to this question. I would be connecting multiplication of a fractional term (less than one) to division of its reciprocal. The reciprocal is larger than one, and division by this reciprocal must yield a smaller result. This encounter led me to keep to myself. I never asked anything else in class until I got to college.

This simple moment in class led to a pivotal shift in my life. I never participated in classes because of fear of being ridiculed, of not asking the right question or not phrasing it well. It was too much to think about. I often tried to gain the courage to ask a question but by the time I phrased it right, the class was over. That was my struggle. It is my plea that teachers and the general public be mindful of the interactions they have with children. The mind of a child is ever growing, their personalities morphing, depending on their environment. It is crucial to be kind.

My middle and high school life was uneventful. I ended up as a B student in high school. I got A’s in math, C’s in English, and B’s in most other subjects. An average student with an average life.

I was not popular because my eyes crossed. Is it shocking that physical appearance determines the trajectory of one’s life? I think not. People are inherently judgmental. They shy away from what doesn’t fit the spectrum of normalcy. My crossed eyes were nowhere close to a typical set of eyes. Despite the discrimination, my life was not boring in school. I had two best friends, John Gatsoulas and Alan Bristol. John and I became friends in elementary school and stayed close until the age of 30.

John was really tall at 6 ft., 8 in., and was of Greek origin. His family lived down the street. Unfortunately, John and I eventually went our separate ways. I’m unaware of the exact reasons, perhaps the normal drifting of friends as years went by or the qualms of adulthood. Alan was about 6 ft. tall, super powerful, and of African American descent. I met him in high school. Alan became a lifelong friend; I trust him completely with my life. These two young men were the highlight of this period of my life.

Chapter 2: Temple University

I graduated high school in 1989 and continued my studies at Temple University. It was a fulfilling time. I remember the anticipation and eagerness to experience this new part of my life. At the beginning of my university studies, I wondered what I wanted to major in: Math, Physics, Economics, Psychology, History. I was spoiled for choice. I wanted to major in all of them. I was good at all of these subjects and more. Abundance has its own disadvantages. I struggled with making a decision and was constantly in search of a sign that would make my choice apparent.

I recall the day I had my aha moment. It was in the Fall of 1989, I parked at school early in the morning and decided to take a moment before heading out. I declared myself to be an exceptionally good person, to earn my living in the right way. That would give my life purpose. Therefore, the major I picked didn't matter so much, as long as it aligned with my character and goals. I could have chosen to join the mafia or become a thief, but it wouldn't serve my inner needs.

These taboo careers are often thought about by the young. It does cross their minds at some point that they could go in that direction. What leads them to the right direction is the value system instilled in them – the choice to be in service to humanity using the knowledge they have and doing good in whatever capacity they have. One thing that stops a child from being a criminal is the effects such action would have in the community. The risk of going to jail, risking their own lives, and also, having a career that can't be celebrated nor shared. It is pointless. There is no purpose in it.

Eventually, I decided to major in math because I was good at it (or so I thought). I discovered early on that upper-level math is completely different from Calculus and lower-level courses. Upper-level classes become theoretical without any numbers. The transition is not easy. It was a struggle for me and everyone else. Some decide to persevere and reap the benefits of growth, while many drop out.

The secret to successful studies is pursuing your interests. It makes the course work easy and interesting. I took a lot of math courses and turned into an A student. Interest and carried me through my studies. I was not extremely gifted in math, but I set my mind on doing my best to study it. There were two people I knew that were genuinely gifted students, and I did not fit in that category. However, my will was my secret weapon. As the popular saying goes, "Where there's a will, there's a way."

I didn't think I was elite when I was younger. I felt limited and disadvantaged. This restricted my ability to grow and expand my mind. I had to break through the notions I had in my mind of myself. I had to learn that I was just as good as everyone else and that I could achieve just as much and more than my peers. After that shift happened in my mind, I excelled in chess, fighting, cycling, swimming, running, and other sports.

The first semester at Temple University didn't start as I imagined. I took Calculus 1 because my family could not afford to pay for the AP Calculus exam. This discouraged me, because I knew Calculus. I felt defeated. I explained my situation to the professor, and he got me into Calculus 2.

It was a win despite me knowing Calculus 2 as well. At least I didn't have to do Calc 1. I got an A then proceeded to Calc 3 and Linear Algebra in the Spring term.

My Linear Algebra professor, Dr Datskovsky, was the smartest, friendliest, most generous and upright man I knew at the time. He taught me some theoretical math, even though I was completely unprepared for it. Moreover, he recruited me to do the Putnam problem-solving competition. He journeyed with me through all this and taught me everything I needed to know. He encouraged me to take Group Theory as a sophomore. He gave me a caveat saying that I wasn't ready for the course, but with hard work and determination, I could excel in it.

Unfortunately, Temple faculty were on strike in the Fall 1990 term, and classes were cut short by a month. I was already behind; now, the semester was crammed. I had a lot of work to do and felt overwhelmed by everything. I can honestly say I didn't understand anything, and I was terrified that I would fail! Despite this, I stuck with it. I did what I could; I memorized a lot and got through the semester. I took some more theoretical courses the next semester, and "*it*" happened. I woke up one day and felt confident in my abilities. I was able to solve most mathematical problems. "*It*" just happened with no warning. "*It*" is confidence. We are born with an inherent talent to do anything; we just need the confidence to believe that we can. Once we believe, magic will happen. To excel in anything, one must overcome insecurities and gain confidence; then everything comes easily. I can say that confidence is built from experience and consistency. I developed confidence after constant work and realized that I'm actually good at what I do. It wouldn't have happened had I not put in the work.

I pushed myself and continued taking harder and harder classes and attending various seminars. I grew to become a talented young mathematician - much better than the American students, but not as good as the foreign ones. Dr. Datskovsky left for Israel and Germany on a research grant for two years. A well-deserved elevation in his career. I was truly happy for him but sad to lose him. I was left without a mentor. Luckily, I started spending time with Dr. Yang, an excellent and intelligent faculty member. He took me under his wing and ended up being my PhD advisor.

From 1990-1991, I interned as an actuarial assistant at Reliance Standard Life insurance company. I was paid \$8.75 per hour, which was way above the \$4.50 minimum wage. This was my first indication that I was going to be successful. I started to believe that I was brilliant and slowly it turned into arrogance. I became rude and intolerable with all the characteristics I detested as a child. But that was what I saw success to be - accompanied by arrogance and a superior mentality. I was following the "playbook" as it was broadcasted to me while growing up. I was wrong to behave in such a manner. Soon enough I would painfully learn that pride comes before a fall. God took me on a different path than I had mapped out for myself.

The following year I got sick, extremely sick. It started innocuously as a nose infection. I went to my local doctor, Richard Paolino. I knew he wasn't the best doctor, but at that time, I had no knowledge of his dealings on the side. He was a drug dealer, selling scripts from his office. Unfortunately, a few years later, he was convicted of drug dealing and sentenced to life in prison.

After his examination, he gave me a toxic medical mix of Seldane and Erythromycin. Many people died from this. I was feeling funny from the first day, but I kept taking the meds. I didn't know that I was supposed to stop taking medicine based on contraindications. I didn't question anything at the time. What knowledge of medicine did I have anyway? I trusted my doctor. Sometimes it is said that things get worse before they get better, so I continued. On the third day, I became really dizzy. I took some more medication in the afternoon and then collapsed on my bed. I should have consulted a doctor the moment the symptoms persisted or when the side effects were notably persistent. That was a lesson learned.

A case of ventricular tachycardia started, which is essentially worse than a heart attack. My heart fluttered at 300-400 beats per minute, and I felt like it was about to explode. I was close to death, but it stopped. Then the tachycardia began to restart. I didn't have the strength to fight. I knew I was a goner. My mom gave me a glass of water to drink at that moment, and it stopped instantly. She saved my life. Not to say that water cured the condition, but it did help in that circumstance and since then, water has become a close friend of mine. Water is life, quite literally.

I was in a sorry shape for a while, but I slowly began to improve. This cardiac event is atypical for a 20-year-old, so there is not much data or planning for recovery. Unfortunately, the nasal infection, which is what took me to doctor in the first place, persisted. Many rounds of antibiotics had little impact on me. I had been struggling psychologically for months from the cardiac event, and the never-ending infection took a greater toll on me. I knew I had to stop taking the medications. After a lengthy period of frustration, I discontinued all medicine. I assumed I'd die, but I was determined to reject further medication. I wanted to go down on my own terms. Then everything changed; my body discovered a technique to encapsulate the infection inside, preventing it from spreading to the rest of my body. The area around my right tonsil was swollen and infected for decades, but it didn't spread. The infection stayed in my body for nearly 30 years until the problem was luckily diagnosed in December 2019.

It took me a long time to get back to a sense of normalcy. Eventually, I started playing basketball and then running just to get my life back together. Then one night, I had a vivid dream; a revelation really. I saw myself biking across the country. I woke up feeling like I had just discovered my destiny. This was the beginning of achieving freedom in this lifetime, which reminds me of a quote, "Birds born in a cage think flying is an illness." The dream planted an idea in my mind; manifesting the dream provided me freedom (flying). So I began a training routine to allow me to bike across the USA. Keep in mind I was sick, weak, and unskilled at training. I had no knowledge about the proper training techniques nor the steps to be taken to adequately prepare for the events.

Looking back, my training was absurd because it was poorly planned and lacked proper direction. It involved riding for 3 or more hours daily for many months. At present, I would have a more direct plan, integrating my diet into the routine and creating a workout routine that would assist in my agenda. In my younger years, I used brute force to prepare, which is sometimes counterproductive. Nonetheless, I prepared in my unprofessional way and left on a trip with a friend, Sam Ryan.

We left New York City and headed to Seattle in 1995. The first week was brutal; neither of us was ready. It took about a week to get to Niagara Falls, and we took a day off to sightsee and play. We carried way too much stuff: extra shoes, sweatpants, extra clothes, tools, food and anything we deemed necessary. Hauling this gear up hills was an incredibly difficult task. Eventually, we sent most of our extra gear home once we got a better understanding of the work in front of us. In Niagara Falls, Sam told me he was ending his trip in Minneapolis. He would have been happy to go home immediately but decided to stay and help me for a bit longer. I definitely needed his help! He figured out the routes, and we helped each other on the ride. We made a good duo. Thankfully he agreed to stay along for a bit longer.

The day we left Niagara Falls, I started having problems with my knee. I tore my ACL in my left knee a few years prior. It would pop out of place every year or so; other than that, it didn't bother me much.

A back story on the knee because it holds one of my most valuable lessons in life: Not long after I joined Temple University, I ended up in the backseat of Al's car on the way to a party, as was typical of us. A drunk, off-duty police officer ran a red light and crashed into Al's Nissan Sentra. We were unharmed; however, things escalated. The officer was belligerent. He pulled out his gun and said it was Al's fault. He went to the extent of conjuring up witnesses because he had a badge. Thankfully, despite his efforts and intimidation, he was found 100 percent at fault for the accident.

My sister was rear-ended three times, and each time, she collected between \$6,000-\$10,000 by going to therapy and suing the driver. To my understanding, I had to do the same. Unfortunately, it didn't quite work out for me. I claimed I injured my left knee & lower back in the accident which was false. I cooked the whole story up just for the money. Not my proudest moment. I ended up getting about a \$5,000 settlement from the legal case. I also got exactly what I asked for in my future. I tore my ACL in that knee a couple of years later; then, I tore both meniscus in that same knee a decade later. Additionally, my back has been a consistent issue for years. The lesson here is, watch what you ask for; you may actually get it, but not necessarily in the way you expect.

Many years later, I talked to a friend that broke his wrist as a bicycle delivery worker for Jimmy John's. He complained that they were not offering him enough money for his injuries (because they were so severe). I told him he would get exactly what he asked for; therefore, he would be best settling for a smaller sum and understanding that the injuries would likely heal completely. Otherwise, he risked a lifetime of physical problems. I don't know what happened to him, but after I shared my story, he had an ah-ha moment. He realized the truth, and I believe he made changes to improve his future. And so that is my social responsibility to you, do not make the mistake that I made. There is power on the tongue. Power in manifestation and our action. What goes around does indeed come around. Be careful what you proclaim with your tongue because you might author your own tragedies.

The first day in Canada, my knee was swollen and painful; it was just a mess. I couldn't use it, so I ended up cycling with one leg for the first half of the day. Sam was leading because of my injury. Eventually, we stopped, and he said, "Listen, you are hurt, and I don't want to make

this trip. Let's go back to Niagara Falls and go home." I wanted to quit; I was racked with pain from riding across NY state, my knee was swollen, and I couldn't do anything about it. However, I said, "No, I will continue." Instantly, the swelling in my knee went away, and I pulled Sam for the rest of the day, which means I rode in front, making it easier for him. It's funny how I was ready to quit and just saying "no" changed my life. Words have power! God tested my fortitude, and I passed the test. I had no idea it was a test; I just refused to give up.

Biking across Canada was enjoyable; it was flat, there were nearly no automobiles, and everyone was kind. After a few days we arrived at Port Huron, Michigan. Michigan was terrible for cycling since there were so many more automobiles, and everyone was in a rush. Many times, drivers attempted to drive us off the road. Furthermore, it rained every day. We didn't have many clothes, so we hung our washed clothes on the bike to dry. The rain disrupted our riding and clothing plans, but we soldiered on. Eventually, we made it to Traverse City, Michigan and hopped on the ferry across Lake Michigan.

The ferry took us to Green Bay, Wisconsin, an amazingly small town, with a NFL team. I believe the tallest building in town was 3 stories high. People in Wisconsin were nice, and really social. I fell in love with the people. The land was grand, and the roads were safe, though quite hilly. We even saw a ski slope, which shocked both of us. Eventually, we made it to Minneapolis and were picked up by Sam's in-laws. People were so much nicer in this part of the country. As we passed through the countryside, I reevaluated everything about life. People in Philadelphia were normally rude and mean. This trip proved to be eye-opening in many ways. It changed my belief in the goodness of people, which changed my essence as a person.

This marked the end of Sam's adventure; I was officially on my own. On arrival, I sent back almost everything I had on the bike. I continued my travels with only three pairs of shorts and three shirts (no warm clothes). I also did away with panniers (saddle bags), they acted like sails in the wind. Instead, I put a hibachi grill on my rack and bungeed everything to the grill, this way all my "stuff" was behind my back, to minimize wind drag. Unloading unnecessary supplies plus the ride from NYC to Minneapolis gave me the confidence to finish the solo tour.

I made it through Minnesota in around three days. I biked faster than ever, because I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. Thankfully, my progress in Minnesota proved me right, or so I thought. South Dakota, on the other hand, was a different story. On my first day in the state, I remember gazing at my legs and wondering what was wrong with them. It turns out that nothing was amiss. I was having difficulty moving because the wind was so fierce. I worked harder than ever all day and made minimal progress. After a few days, I found the prairie and saw no one for hours at a time; lots of cows and ranches but no people. For the first time in my life, I could hear myself think. I eventually made my way to North Dakota, passing through the Black Hills.

Most people tell me the Black Hills are in South Dakota, which is true. However, there is a small stretch of majestic beauty in North Dakota. Then I continued into Montana; I stayed for a night on a ranch and rode a horse (my first ever). Eventually, I found myself in Billings, Montana. I was invited to stay at a homeless shelter. At first, I was hesitant, but I decided to give it a shot. I was shocked to find out that everyone was the same as me. Good, hardworking people that had to restart life. Everyone in this shelter was unique and special. I met fishermen, construction

workers, cooks, and more. Each had a unique story that had a period of adversity. I learned that homeless people are not exclusively beggars, they have a lot to offer society.

As I went for a shower, I gave my wallet with all my belongings to a worker at the shelter. After he returned my money and credit cards, I learned he was homeless and owned nothing, yet he didn't run away with my belongings. I was so happy to see this "new" perspective on homelessness. It made me extend grace to the people suffering around me.

I stayed at hotels almost every night. It's hard to bike all day; it's doubly so without a good night's sleep. I was unsuccessful camping too many times to count. Thankfully my family was supportive of my experience and sent money, so I didn't need to suffer sleeping outside. Around Missoula, Montana, I started having issues getting hotels on weekend nights. I ended up camping more than I planned. Cycling alone is hard; not having a bed makes it tougher, especially for a young kid. I kept going through Montana and entered Wyoming's Yellowstone National Park. Yellowstone is fabulous and horrible simultaneously. Everyone talks about the unique wonder of the park. However, my experience was quite a bit different.

I camped out with a mosquito net and sleeping bag in late July. I washed my clothes daily, so I only had two dry changes of clothes. That night it got cold, but first, the dew soaked my sleeping bag. Then the temperature dipped below freezing in July! My sleeping bag froze with me inside. It was horrible, and I wanted to leave instantly. Cycling through Yellowstone is not a pleasant experience. I wouldn't retake that journey. There are tons of massive RVs, and everyone is in a rush. I was almost run over a couple of times by vacationers in RVs. Eventually, I got out of the park on the northwest corner. It is one of the windiest places in the country. Lucky for me the wind was predominantly from the south. I ended up flying out, hardly pedaling. I got up over 20 MPH on multiple flat stretches; the wind was amazingly powerful. I probably averaged 16-18 MPH. That is a super-fast pace for a loaded tour (normal is 12 mph).

I went through four mountain passes on this trip; I was shocked to see a tractor-trailer crawling up the highway at 15-20 MPH; I was probably closer to 5 MPH. I never saw a big rig go that slow. The world is different once you venture outside. That's why I encourage people to explore this world when they get the opportunity - to scoop it with both hands. I flew through Idaho in part of a day, it was all downhill, and it was super short in the northern part. Then I entered Washington, and it got weird. I saw all these BMWs and Mercedes cars. No more pickup trucks, which dominated the Midwest. The yuppies took over this part of the country, and I missed the good people of the Midwest. These rich folk were not as nice and certainly not good. I didn't like the west coast at all.

Additionally, it rained every day, which was horrible on a bicycle tour. However, on my way into Seattle, I saw the rain clouds under the Cascades (a mountain range), a mystical site that stays with me to this day. Eventually, I made it to Seattle in a troubling way. I was running behind schedule, so I chose to stay on the highway longer than expected; cycling on the highway is normal and legal in rural states. However, it is illegal and dangerous in more populated states. I was cycling on a major highway going into Seattle. I'm just moseying along, and another highway dumps three or more lanes on my right and three or more lanes on my left.

I'm riding my bike in the center of a large six-lane highway, with automobiles passing at over 60 mph on both sides! I had a large, hefty touring bike that weighed more than 60 pounds fully loaded. On this beast of a bike, I couldn't accelerate quickly or move about; turning around was impossible. I was in shock and didn't know what to do; I just regretted being in a hurry and bringing myself into this scenario. I felt like a lamb about to be slaughtered since I was restricted from doing anything because of a massive bike. Then the reflective lights on the road became a barrier. I avoided a few of them. However, I knew I couldn't do that forever, and one would undoubtedly knock me over. Just then, I hit a reflector and fell on the highway with cars flying past me on both sides. Then it happened. A cop stopped behind me with his lights on.

"What in the hell are you doing on a bicycle in the middle of a major highway in Seattle?" he said.

"Thank you for saving my life!" was all I could say. He escorted me off the highway. I was traumatized by the experience and done with highway cycling for a long while. I now understand my thinking about falling was predicated by my fall on the highway. My mind controlled my actions. I could have focused on finding a way through, and a path would have been found. Unfortunately, I was lost, and God provided the path in my time of need. I now return the favor to others in need.

I went to the homeless shelter in Seattle because I couldn't find a hotel. I was looking forward to staying at a different shelter as the previous experience was amazing. However, this was not the same. It was a hot mess because everyone was drunk or strung out on drugs. It was scary and crazy at the same time, and frightening, to say the least. The next day, I moved to a halfway house for \$50 a night because all the hotels were still booked. I stayed in Seattle for three days and visited all the tourist sites. Then I took the Amtrak train back home. On the train, I met an awesome German girl, and we spent two days together on the train joking and playing around. She was going to DC, and I visited her. Sadly nothing worked out.

Upon my return to Philly, I was a strong cyclist, and I entered many mountain bike races. One weekend, I traveled to a race with a friend who also ran long-distance races. On that weekend, he tried to convince me to run the Philadelphia marathon with him. I told him I had never run more than 2 miles in my entire life, and the race was in two weeks.

"No way, you're nuts," I said. However, he was relentless, and eventually, I agreed. I went from finding excuses to finding a solution. I created a plan and started on a path to allow me to run 26.2 miles in two weeks. Words have power!!! Use them wisely. People often misuse the ability God gave us. In addition to doing good, they can cause problems.

I chose to do three training runs the first week: 5, 7.5, and 10 miles. I did them all and was so excited. Then I planned on doing a 15-mile run, but I wasn't feeling right and stopped early. When I got to the race, I had never run more than 10 miles in my life! Two weeks prior, I had never run more than 2 miles. I wore horrible clothes for the long run. My shoes were not ideal, but my mind was engaged. Unfortunately, I had diarrhea before the marathon, and I was concerned. Then at the 7-mile marker, I pooped my pants. It was the worst experience ever.

Looking back, I can laugh at the whole experience; however, it wasn't fun at the time. I could not find a bathroom for a couple more miles, so I ran to the nearest port-a-potty. Once inside the port-a-potty, I was in clean-up mode. I was there for more than 10 minutes; people were waiting for me. I told them to keep going and that it was going to be a long while. Eventually, I got myself together and restarted the run. I found a friend and stuck with him until mile 20. I actually ran 20 miles! It was a whooping victory for me. I was so happy; I took a moment to relax and walk a bit. However, this became a major problem for my legs. They stiffened up, and I couldn't restart running for a while. Around mile 22, I started jogging again, but it was super hard. I ran 1.5 miles and then called it quits. I was walking to the finish. I began to lose bodily control because my arms and legs were no longer in harmony, yet I felt fine. I made it to the finish just before the 5:30 cutoff time. My friend picked me up and took me home. I could not believe I actually did this...how was it possible? Later I learned the rules of thirds. Once you are exhausted and have nothing left in the tank, you are only one-third done. You still have two-thirds in the tank. However, you must never give up.

After the marathon, I wanted to work in a bike store, but no one was hiring. So, on weekends, I volunteered at Son's Bike Shop in Roxboro. They gladly accepted free labor. Truthfully, I was relieved to have something to do. The bike trip taught me that I was happier when I had something positive to do. Hence, I went out to do as much positive stuff as possible. In my second week, I put a customer's frame on the work stand instead of the seat post, a big no-no. Afterward, they fired me from my volunteer position. However, I learned that Interbike was coming to the Philadelphia Convention center next weekend. For context about how big this was, Interbike is the biggest bike dealer show for resellers only. I read about it in many cycling journals over the years. I was planning on going, no matter what. I was no longer part of Son's, so I claimed to be part of "Yan's Bike Shop," paid \$50 to get in, and got many wholesale dealer accounts.

Within a few months, I set up a business license and started buying parts wholesale and reselling them on bicycling newsgroups in 1995. This was the beginning of the internet. I used my Temple URL, www.math.temple.edu/~yan, for my shop named the Downtube and used my office at school as storage for inventory. It was so funny; I had been weak, sick, and feeble a short while before. Now, I had become a cross country cyclist, marathon runner, and bike shop owner. What are the odds? All this happened in one year. One should always know how and when to take the bull by the horns and make the drastic yet determining decisions to make massive progress in life.

The next year, I became a strong cyclist and went on another cross-country tour. I feared the west coast, so I started in Flagstaff, AZ. I stayed at a youth hostel, named the Downtowner, for the first time in my life. It was cheap and fun; there was a party happening every night. I stayed in a room with a bunch of cool guys, and the laughs were never ending. I stayed three days, and didn't want to leave. It was a delightful experience.

From this point on, I stayed at youth hostels everywhere: Albuquerque, Salt Lake City, Hong Kong, and more. The rooms were cheap, the coolest people (mostly Europeans) stayed, and the party was non-stop. Unfortunately, my bike was flawed for this trip; it had a racing frame (not a touring frame).

Additionally, I had a poor Speedplay pedal system that misaligned my right foot because of a cleat bolt problem. The cleat bolt fell out and Speedplay parts are impossible to source, so I used a Shimano cleat bolt. It turned my right foot slightly sideways, an unnoticeable amount. Then my knee moved from its proper alignment. Later my hip went out and then my spine became problematic. A spiral of negative events were happening at the same time. It was too much. At this point I was done cycling and had problems walking. I suffered from this misalignment for most of my adult life.

I ended the bike trip early and returned to Philly. That year, I started swimming instead of cycling. I ended up becoming a strong swimmer and swam nearly three miles in one day which is a lot. My studies suffered at this point. I was a great undergraduate student that had many graduate courses completed. However, as a graduate student, I became aloof and knew I would get my Ph. D anyway. I knew I would never become a world-class mathematician, or maybe I just didn't want to bother myself too much about it at this point. It didn't feel like the direction I wanted for my life. Hence, I started slacking off and doing other stuff.

Around 1997 or '98, I was in the gym and saw a group of boxers. The trainer was Joe Black, a former third-place middleweight champion of the world. I asked him if I could join, and he welcomed me. On my second day, he put me in the ring with a 6'4" bodybuilder that weighed around 250lbs. I was 5'11" and 170 lbs. He busted my nose and beat me to a pulp. It was a bad beatdown. Everyone was sure I was never coming back.

The next day I returned refreshed; they then knew I was built differently. I kept fighting six days a week with one day off. Eventually, I got really good. I had quick hands and sluggish feet but a quick mind to find opportunities. I would dissect every opponent, finding opportunities and then capitalize on them. Everyone thought I was a good fighter; I was the only white fighter in the gym. My trainer became my best friend; we hung out day and night for months. At the end of my time with Joe, I was a better fighter (in my opinion). He didn't like the fact that I was naturally smart, educated, successful, AND a good fighter. So, he assaulted me during a sparring session. I went down, and he jumped on top of me and started beating me. He was my best friend, yet he assaulted me while I was down. I was crushed and broken. How could my best friend do me like this? He broke every rule I thought I knew. That was my last day fighting.

My dad was a fighter, and he refused to teach me anything. I never knew why and didn't bother to pester him on the subject. After the assault, I learned that most of my fighting friends were consistently in and out of jail. They were not "mentally well" and could not be trusted with one's life. My dad tried to keep me away from this trauma. He ought to have told me, but regrettably, he kept it to himself, and I unknowingly dove right in. I believe I communicated this clearly to my son. These trauma-generational patterns must be stopped! I do not plan to have my son follow that exact thread in his life!

Afterward, I decided I would only fight for my academics. Essentially, I was done with physical fighting. I did study Shodokan and Hapkito, but I only practiced to spar. I had no interest in moves or belts. I was a natural-born fighter; I knew it from my childhood. I could easily handle most black belts because they could not fight; they knew moves but could not handle distance and dynamics properly. Eventually, while fighting, I tore two meniscuses in the knee with a torn ACL

(this is not uncommon once the ACL is torn), so I needed surgery. At this time, I learned cycling had kept my knee stable for years. Once I stopped cycling, I was at increased risk of more knee injuries. I wish I had had ACL surgery sooner, as it would have saved me from future meniscus problems. There is no point in wishing for a rewrite of the past; we just have to anticipate and write our futures better. Now, I cycle daily to keep my knee strong and stable.

Chapter 3: The First Time I Loved Lena

My father broke up with my mother and both my parents became extremely ill. Ironically, neither could stand each other, but they could not live apart. At the age of 27, two completely opposite events happened that tugged on my heart. My dad was sick, recovering from two heart attacks, and I experienced my first love. Her name was Lena, and she came from Moldova. It wasn't the kind of love that movies portray. No butterflies nor knots were in my stomach. It was frank and direct. A genuine connection based on our interests and personalities - a love that grew fonder with each interaction.

We were like two peas in a pod. We went everywhere together, playing, joking, and laughing. Everyone wanted to join us; we were the life of the party. On our first date she wanted me to buy her cigarettes, but I refused. Then she started badgering me that she needed to smoke. I'm a cyclist and non-smoker, so I said no. She became incessant about smoking; eventually, I got mad and said the date was over. Smoking was a deal breaker for me. She started laughing and said, "I don't smoke." I appreciated the humor. It sealed the deal for me; she would be mine. This continued for our entire relationship. I long to meet someone like her again; I truly miss her.

Apart from our age, many of our likes and dislikes were similar. Together, we were inseparable. Nothing would come between us. Or that is what I thought in the times I looked into her eyes and saw our destiny together. What we had was a source of joy for both of us. I couldn't speak about what she truly felt, but it was a certainty for me. She was my life. She brightened my world and gave me a reason to look forward to the next moments of our lives. It was filled with fun, laughter, and never-ending bliss.

As time went by, I realized joy had its seasons. It wasn't perpetual. My father, whom I cherished despite being prejudiced against him, had passed away. This broke my heart more than I imagined. One would think that a lifetime of being detached from the man would soften the blow, but it didn't. I spiraled into depression having many questions on the value of life and how unfair it was for him to be gone.

My father wanted to die because he was unhappy with his life. His depression stemmed from a poor relationship with my mother. It's hard knowing that someone you love dearly did not want to be part of this world anymore. I tried to understand him; it hurt deeply that he gave up on life. During his last interactions with me, he told me that he was proud of me and that he admired my life.

This statement was atypical. He was a big, strong man that drove me to become tougher. He always nitpicked at my inadequacies, with the goal of making me stronger. He never complimented me, especially not on the way I lived my life. He was the very definition of tough love. That made these last moments special to me. I was thankful for his positive words; he knew I was hoping to be different in society, to charter my own path and make my own rules. I appreciated that he observed this and commended me for it. It's never easy being different. It takes a lot of courage and perseverance.

My father didn't have a healthy relationship with my mother. They were bad for each other. Their relationship affected our entire family negatively. A dysfunctional relationship rarely leaves family members unscarred. It is one of the most prevalent causes of trauma in children. The unhealthy love passes down to them and they go through life without peace in the place where love and harmony should be honed.

Despite their situation, he never left us. He sacrificed his own well-being for his children. I see his life as one full of honor and integrity. He did what was right for the family. A sacrifice so big it would be impossible to repay him. In my early life, he mocked me for not making enough money. He argued that, as a man, I should be earning more. With time, he changed his mind and began to appreciate the idea of sacrificing money for freedom which has been the theme in my life. He wanted to enjoy his retirement; unfortunately, he died just before he was 62. It was a sobering realization of how important it is to live life while you still have the opportunity, while young. It is never too late to explore and have a good time. You are always younger than your future self, so take the time to enjoy life.

As earlier stated, I didn't have a strong attachment to my father while he was alive, but his passing seriously affected my mental health. My father worked as an electrician and HVAC mechanic, who could fix anything from cars, refrigerators, air-conditioners to anything. He could fix it. I admire that about him. In addition to that, he was huge and tall. The size of his hand was large enough to fit my hand twice, his fingers were super thick. He was stronger than most people, and his physical appearance could frighten most. He was a walking giant.

I grew up too fast due to the trauma of witnessing my parents fight and the negativity and dismissal I felt as a child. The environment I grew up in made me want to distance myself from my family, and I did, most especially my parents. His death stung. The coldness I thought I had in me melted away. I had spent a lot of time carrying this load in my heart, and after he was gone, it felt like nothing was there. I had lost so many opportunities to create memories and to reconcile with him. It was heavy.

The love I have for my father has grown stronger since then. I chose to dwell on the times we shared that were blissful. My inner turmoil made me think of breaking up with Lena, and it was not because I had no intention of being with her but because I was not sure if it was the right thing to do. I debated the matter several times in my head before letting her know about it. On the one hand, I felt very content in her presence; on the other hand, I was battling depression and my cup was too empty to pour anything into hers. It felt wrong stringing her along in my journey when I couldn't be there for her fully. I was lost in my loss.

The heavens might have decided to make the changes on my behalf. Lena didn't act any differently throughout our relationship, but on one fateful day, she said to me, "Yan, I don't think it's the right time for us to be together. Not like this."

I looked at her, almost numb and somewhat shocked. What had just happened? When she said it, I didn't feel relief but rather doubt.

"What do you want us to do then?" I asked, holding my emotions together.

“Take a break. When it is the right time for us, when I'm sure, I'll give you a call,” she said. “I want you to get me pregnant and have your baby.”

I shook my head. I didn't understand her. I remember each word that she said to me because it wasn't a lengthy conversation. It was all said in succession as though she had planned it for days. It was what I had wanted too. The difference was, I wasn't sure, and she was.

“Okay?” She waited for my response.

“Yes, okay.”

That was how it ended. Quietly. I waited for that call for years. Not once did my phone ring to announce her presence. And not once did I try to call her, making me doubt if I truly felt love for her. Or maybe I loved her so much that I wanted what she wanted, to respect her boundaries.

After some time, I got back to my senses and realized that love involves sacrifice and endurance, conditional on the circumstances of a person. It is cruel to leave someone after a tragic incident. Tough times will always be present. It is how we handle it and hold each other in love that matters, giving each other the strength to stay alive.

After Lena left, I became more depressed about my father's passing. I hadn't thought through my decision to accept us parting ways. I should have tried to make things right, to fight for what we had, but I didn't. My mind was flooded with emotions at that time. I wonder if she would have stayed if I hadn't said, “Okay.” These are questions that we will never know the answers to.

Sometime later, when it dawned on me that the call would probably never come, I decided to move on. I dated an extraordinary woman from Indonesia named Emelia. Maybe it would have worked out with her at some other time or place, but it didn't then – a tragedy of mis-timing.

Time slowed down after that, but I was willing to flow with it. I took everything one day at a time. There was a graduate student party hosted by Temple University some time afterwards. It was refreshing to go back to my roots. I took in the air and felt redeemed. I felt so much better being on familiar grounds and among friends. There, amidst the crowd, I met the woman who became my wife.

Chapter 4: Natasha

Natasha was originally from Ukraine and came to Temple as a Ph. D student in Economics. The graduate student celebration was her second day in America. She was beyond stunning. Her aura was beautiful, graceful and intelligent. She was nothing short of what every guy wanted in a lady. She was everything and more. Her beauty can't be put in words. She was completely breathtaking, fit to be on the cover of a magazine. Everyone turned their heads when she approached, men and women alike. Men lusted over her as she was someone they desired to have. Women envied her because she was everything they weren't. She couldn't be ignored. She carried the attention of the crowds throughout the night; therefore, I did not approach her but simply admired her from a distance.

The first time we met, she was undoubtedly the humblest woman I had ever known. Her every action and word bewitched me. I was taken by her. She was an exemplary woman and she amazed me. She came from a country that had an abundance of exotic women. Growing up and living there, she did not receive the attention bestowed on her when she came to America. Unfortunately, this got to her head while here, and her attitude began to change. Despite her nation having beautiful women overall, I have yet to meet someone as beguiling as she is.

She was an extraordinary woman. She had a beauty and charisma that left me speechless. I was overwhelmed by her. She had the power to mesmerize everyone around her. There was always something that would leave you intrigued by her the most. Everyone felt intimidated by her beauty and intelligence, I was no different. There were countless times where I was left speechless, in awe or plain dumbstruck, and there was no shame in it. She was quite the experience. Her physique was enough to have power over a man, but it was her graceful nature and how she carried herself that caught my eye. I thought of her as an eagle, the mightiest bird. The way an eagle would sit and crane its neck gracefully. The fact that it need not prove its might to others, every other bird just knows that they are the mightiest. There is no doubt about that. She was the eagle amongst us.

As time progressed, Natasha went from being a beautiful woman to an eagle-like individual. She became aware of the attention she was given and how beautiful she was. It is important to note the difference between the two from a pragmatic standpoint. A person's awareness of their beauty can do one of two things; they can feel repulsion of some sort or become arrogant. It can get to your head and lead to you thinking of others being less important in comparison to you. A certain entitlement to everything begins to breed inside you as you are given everything you desire. When I was in her company, I did my best not to give out any sign of being intimidated or taken by her. I never made my feelings known to her. Time to time, I would casually shrug off the attention she received and proudly took in. My natural response in such instances was to joke around by saying, "Natasha, everyone is looking at you!" As though I was not part of the myriad of admirers who could not have enough of her.

A year went by and everything about her stunned me even more, day by day. It became apparent to me that I wanted more than a platonic relationship with her. I wanted her. I wanted to be with someone as alluring and exquisite as she was. I wanted her to take my very breath away when I woke up beside her. I wanted to marry her. This was during my last years of acquiring a

doctorate to become a mathematician. I was an aspiring, hardworking mathematician. My desire was to make an impact in the field and raise a perfect family while doing that. I had it all figured out. She would fit perfectly into my life. She was the missing link in the equation of my life. I could not see how anything could go wrong.

While I was making plans to propose to her, her father, who lived in Ukraine, became seriously ill. It was a tragic moment but ended up favoring us getting married. She planned to go visit him, but we weren't sure about her visa status. Hence, we got married to make things easier on her. It may sound like the wrong reasons to marry, but it was in the plan anyway, just not this soon. The visa only acted as a catalyst. We were both happily married.

Natasha and I synchronized like the sun and the moon. None taking the glory from the other and each fulfilling our duties. Not much was said between us when we were together. We expressed ourselves through silence. It was not awkward nor did either of us feel the need to fill the silence with anything. It brought us peace and understanding of who we are. My heart felt calm and relaxed around her presence. What more could a man ask for? I had everything. Being with her was poetic. Our moments carried valuable interactions and experiences. There was no time for useless, idle or foolish talk. Our relationship was about the quality of the experience as opposed to the quantity of time spent together chatting. The beautiful relationship was as a result of two intelligent, mature and goal-oriented people coming as one. I didn't know then that I was living my best life. A peaceful life is hardly ever easy to achieve. In the time we were together, I was blessed to have experienced that.

A valuable lesson I learned during our relationship was the power that words carry. I recall a religious personality saying that words were indeed actions. It is in fact very true; words are meaningful actions. We embodied this. There was purpose and meaning to our words and actions. Robin Sharma says that words can inspire, and words can destroy, choose well. It is important to be intentional about everything we say and do. They carry a weight that could either lift us or drown us.

I completed my doctoral studies in mathematics the following year. I had been studious for most of the time, and it was a great accomplishment. I felt proud of myself for having finished my studies. I carried around the tag with me passionately and did my best to fulfill my goals. Not long after, the door of my life was knocked on by a huge opportunity. I was awarded a full-time teaching contract at Villanova University. I was taken in as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Computer Sciences. I was humbled by the opportunity and graciously took it. Villanova University was a noble institute, having the opportunity to have it in my resume was a blessing and set me up on a great path for my future. To this day, I can say with authority and conviction that my job at Villanova was the most prestigious one I have ever had. It was undoubtedly the kind of place that when entered, sealed your future for the better.

Chapter 5: Lutik

As Natasha and I were preparing to start a family, we decided to purchase a puppy as a gauge on how well we would parent our own children. It was going to be our first trial at taking responsibility for anyone other than ourselves. She named him Lutik, after a flower in Ukraine. He was a Lab/ Shepard/Chow mix. He was incredibly small and delicate when we took him in, but he grew so fast. We loved Lutik dearly. He meshed into the family easily and glued us together even more. I believe that we made excellent parents.

I had a lot more time on my hands because I was no longer a student, so I spent a lot of time with him. I worked for 7.5 hours weekly, and although a bit more time was spent at school, I had minimal obligations. Lutik became my kayaking partner; he would run along the Delaware river as I kayaked. We went hiking daily, and I started making bicycle sprints with him. He was fast off the line, but I could always reel him in at the end. We were inseparable. Natasha and I would take him for a long walk in the evening and to the park daily. We ended up making more friends and meeting other dogs to play with. It was a happy time for us. It definitely makes for my top five experiences in my existence.

Part of my everyday routine was to race Lutik. He loved racing and winning. He would often tease me and look back as a way to make fun of how slow I was. Eventually, I decided that I had had enough of the teasing. I would beat him in a race. So, we started running 100-yard dashes against one another at the local football field. We kept at this for about six months doing 10-20 races per day, seven days a week. It made a big difference. I could run as fast as anyone.

To be frank, I never won a race against Lutik, but he changed me. I became a super-fast sprinter because of him. In the beginning, I saw myself as a middle-distance runner with slow sprints. The moment my mind switched, and I focused on beating Lutik at a race, I became better and better. As I mentioned earlier, it all begins with the mindset and belief system. Everyone is who they think they are and what they believe they can accomplish. Personal beliefs reflect who we are. Natasha was amazed by my progress; one day she asked me how I accomplished my progress. My speed was equivalent to that of a horse, with little exaggeration. As her husband and to simply pull her leg, I told her that it was simply a natural athletic ability but it wasn't. My mind made a change.

My connection to Lutik grew exponentially because I spent every waking moment with him. He became an extension of my body. We all slept as a family in the same bed; Lutik would sleep by my feet. We were a tag team, true partners. On one occasion, I felt his pain and struggles and determined that it was Lyme disease. I took him to the vet and said that he needed medication. She wondered how I could tell that he was unwell. It was hard to explain because I simply felt his pain. We morphed into each other and became one. The vet did not believe me. She thought I was nuts but confirmed that Lutik did indeed have Lyme disease and gave him a prescription. That's just how much I was connected to Lutik.

Eventually, I learned to fight with Lutik since we both enjoyed wrestling and fighting. I have fought a lot of people over the years, and I have come to notice that my closest friends were my greatest opponents bringing out the best in me. Lutik became my most ferocious opponent,

sealing the fact that our friendship was indestructible. He taught me how to spar with my elbows because he would bite me full force, forcing me to keep my hands protected. He was a brave dog and understood his role in the family was to keep us protected. I considered myself the protector and didn't want him to take up that role. We clashed on this as I understood that it was stressful for him. But he insisted on the role, so I let him be.

Lutik was indeed a better version of myself. He was more athletic, brave, strong, instinctive and pure. He inspired me to get better at everything, and I often found myself looking to him to improve my shortcomings. I learned a lot from him. He was a great addition to the family, Natasha and I made sure to create a great environment and home for him. This I am sure that we achieved. Lutik was more than happy to be with us. Having this experience as a confirmation and go ahead for us on our next step in the parenting journey, we knew that we were ready. Lutik drew us together and brought a sense of family to us. It was an exciting time for us as we hoped for a new beginning.

Chapter 6: Villanova

In the initial days there, Villanova was an extremely hospitable workplace for me and embraced my teaching style. My assumption was that they had observed me thoroughly and decided to give me a free hand. I delivered my best to all the students equally and wholeheartedly. Eventually, the authorities at Villanova wanted something else. They wanted the students to “have it all.” This common phrase may have different connotations depending on the context.

When thinking of it rationally, there’s nothing wrong with it. The problem comes when it is an illusion or facade. I was told that as a professor, my duty was to grade the students. To grade in such a manner that no one “did poorly.” The weak students were to be promoted as well. It did not matter whether they had, in fact, learned anything. That was supposed to be none of my concern. I was told that this was not a big deal, it was how things run, and I must go along with it. This did not sit right with my spirit.

I was in a conundrum. Stuck between a rock and a hard place. It was a mind-boggling situation. I did not want to quit my position because no one quit Villanova. That was absurd. No one ever said, “No” to the institution. It was a privilege to be working in such a place. Several visiting faculty members would openly laugh at the mere idea or thought of leaving. It was a highly paying and noble position. Having this in mind, I became more confused at what to do. I decided to remain silent until I knew the proper path to take. There was no need to rush into such a serious decision. My inner self wanted to scream at the utter nonsense and corruption of what education is meant to be. I felt estranged from the faculty members. It was hard to relate to people who accepted this as normal. Normal, decent conversations became impossible for me. I looked fine, but deep down, my mind was in battle.

Education has always been an extremely sacred entity in my sight. To abuse it and manipulate the students into thinking that they are doing well when they are not, was beyond me. It was the worst form of dishonesty. A collaboration of both students and teachers was afoot in creating students who would be unable to do much with their careers. There would be no developments nor great strides in our field. I was disgusted by it all but felt restrained. I could not do anything because I believed that my current position had no stability. I was in no position to speak up against the authority. I would be immediately fired. I had to wait for a better, permanent faculty position where I would have authority of my own before I could make any changes. This is what held me together while there - the hope that one day I would be able to make a change in the system. I went through the period quietly, doing my best to teach the students so they wouldn’t need to be “assisted.”

I did not let the circumstance influence my teaching. I was overworking, but I did not mind. The results were worth it. The institute allowed me to deliver seminars, and I provided many talks. I gave more lectures than my whole department combined. I created a chess club and monthly functions for our majors. I found purpose in my position and decided to create a fun and fulfilling side to education. My responsibility was to provide the best instruction possible, and I gave it everything. I did it naturally. It wasn’t in the expectation of being recognized or liked. I expected it to strengthen my status in the department.

When your goal is to accomplish something, take every chance that opens to get closer to your objective. Don't shy away from obstacles or innovations. There is always more than one way to get to your goals. At the conclusion of the school term, a tenure track job (essentially a lifetime position) became available. I hoped that I would be granted it because of my diverse methods of teaching and engagement. I had no idea that this period would provide me with the experience of a lifetime.

Chapter 7: Making Memories

I did not give much thought before applying for the position. I had been anxiously waiting for an opportunity to open in the department. With much confidence and enthusiasm, I applied for the position knowing that it was meant for me. The timing was perfect and aligned everything for me. It's not that I thought that I was the best candidate for the position, but it opened at the right moment. A chance at stability is attractive to everyone.

Furthermore, I deserved that position. I had worked diligently for it. I gave more talks than anyone in the department and started more activities such as chess club and game night, as earlier mentioned. All the new initiatives were made by me. I was the perfect fit for that position. I stretched myself for the department, not because I was forced to, but because it was the right thing to do. I was new in the department and had to show out and show up to take my place. The others had already, in their own way, proven themselves. The position was left for me.

Excited by the possible outcome and hope, I did what any husband would do, I discussed the potential good news with my wife, Natasha. We were looking forward to the good news and kept crossing our fingers at the possibility of being called in to sign a contract. We discussed everything to do with the position. It was perfect. And so was I. It was as though it was custom made for me. Natasha gave me hope and assured me of my abilities to do the job. She doubled my confidence.

The following days proceeded with much hope, the days filled with so much excitement and anticipation. I started making plans for the future imagining the changes that would occur, counting my eggs before they hatched. Nature decided to cut short my merry thoughts. I was jolted back to reality. Villanova did not approve of me. I did not get the prestigious tenure track appointment. To add an extra pinch to the matter, the news was delivered by the chair.

I was called to his office very early in the morning. I felt joy fill up my heart as I marched to his door. I was sure it was going to be mine. I was being summoned to be honored. Little did I know that I would be the subject of humiliation. The chair sat high on his seat like a judge in a courtroom. He looked full of his authority, happy to be highly seated. The only difference being that instead of having a gavel to impose the final judgements, his words hammered in me.

“Although that position has been given to someone else, we would like for you to stay with us as a visiting faculty member for as long as it is possible,” he said to me. These words are engraved in my mind due to the shocked state I was in. I was so disappointed that I could not find the words to express myself.

He mockingly called it “that position” as though he was aware that I had been dreaming about it. Was it that obvious? How did he know? I was never one to showcase my deepest desires publicly. Or maybe it was obvious that every new visiting faculty would want a permanent position? Who wouldn't anyway? It was an obvious desire. I felt violated by his words. He called me in purely as an act of showing his power and authority to tell me that there was someone they felt was more qualified than I was to take up that position. It was audacious of him. I had a lot to say, but my emotions overwhelmed me. I said nothing. What more could I do but wait for him to

finish exalting himself as he insulted me? I just stared at him. After he was done, I got up from my seat, looked him straight in the eye and made sure that he saw me, then left. Those were my words. That was my response. I did not plan on reacting in that manner, I didn't know what came over me, but one thing is certain, I would not change anything about it. It was the right thing to do. I am proud of myself for not putting up with utter baloney. I stood up for myself, quite literally; that was an empowering moment for me.

What was remarkable to me was that I had never been the stepping-up kind of guy. I was raised and taught to study, get a decent job and work hard to earn an honest living for the rest of my life. I was not taught to question the things around me. I was to take things as they are. To swallow the hardness of life and maneuver through them. The courage to take up my place came from nowhere. It was God's wisdom that came upon me to know when something was no longer serving me and to end things. It was the right thing to do. There was no point in staying in an institution that did not see value in the faculty. One that could not identify a potential candidate and uplift them. I did what felt right in my heart. Looking back, it still amazes me. I am proud of my younger self for this choice. Young people have a moment of bravery and a stroke of good fortune when it comes to making decisions that positively impact their lives. This decision ended up being essential for my future. It was a great decision. The greatest lesson here being that it is important to listen to your intuition; it knows what is best for you. If something does not feel right, it is not right. The campus was no longer suitable for me, so I left. I could not go back to my office and patiently wait to be promoted. I did not have that degree of patience.

When I walked out in a huff, I thought about a conversation I had with Natasha about Villanova. Despite the shame and degradation I felt, she reminded me that I could not leave that institution under any circumstance. It was a highly sought after job. Everyone wanted to be in the faculty but not everyone got the opportunity. She said that it was a tremendous opportunity and that I should not waste it because of my emotions. On my way out, her words rang true in my mind. I had kicked the tremendous opportunity where it hurt. I had kicked the opportunity in the worst possible, unforgivable and inexcusable manner by walking out on someone who was my boss, in mid-conversation while he was awaiting my response. The perfect frosting for bitter taste buds. There was no point in feeling like they had bestowed me with an honor and privilege by taking me in as a visiting faculty member. I was qualified and had taken time to prove myself. If they did not see value in me, there was no point in waiting for an unforeseeable future.

My thoughts roamed for a while over what I had done. I felt numb and scared about the future. I wondered what the repercussions of my actions would be. It dawned on me that I was in control of my future, yet I didn't know where I was steering to. I made a drastic decision without the cushioning of making plans. I wondered whether it would impact my resume and if I could reverse everything. I was torn between feeling regret and knowing that what I did was the right choice. It felt safe having somewhere to go to work and get an income, but it felt even safer taking the wheels of my life and choosing what I could tolerate and what was an absolute "no." I would not have been happy in that environment after that. I felt no regrets. One thing that I was not willing to jeopardize was my integrity and sense of worth. I knew what I could offer, and I knew when I was being shortchanged. What other expectation did the chair have beyond gratitude for the opportunity taken? When I walked out, it felt equal to slapping him, his position and his behavior in the face. The satisfaction felt equally gratifying.

I had so much optimism and hope when I went to campus that morning, and it was snatched from me by evening. I walked out in despair. I left in the evening, distraught and unemployed. The only thing that remained intact within the span of the few hours on that day was that I walked with my head held high. That provided me with enough solace to get me through the day.

The unemployment situation was the only cause of worry I had. I lost my job and was nowhere close to having another one anytime soon. There were no vacancies open and none coming up soon. Additionally, I did not apply anywhere else. If one looked at my feet, one would think that they had been axed. Even so, any rational man would act in the same manner that I did, given the situation.

Natasha gave me an ear when I got home that evening. She listened to me narrate what had transpired and how I reacted. She did not seem taciturn with me although she was typically reserved. The characteristic that was so predominant in our relationship ended up being the reason to separate us. She did not react in any way. She neither showed sympathy nor empathy. She didn't display an iota of worry or anger. She didn't show any emotion. I could only feel distance from her. She kept away and cut me off. She decided that I was not worthy of her company. I was perplexed by her reaction. Was it because I was unemployed or because I consciously unemployed myself? I could not tell. She knew that I was no longer in control of the matter. Nor could I redeem myself from it. So why could she not accept the situation? I couldn't get back the job anyway.

Not knowing what to do to mend things between us and bring her closer to me, I thought of a plan to patch things up. I wanted to give her something special that she could cherish. That is not to mean something insanely expensive. She was not wowed by those things anyway. I wanted it to be something rare and memorable. Something that would always put a smile on her face. An experience that warmed one's heart. I wanted nothing short of pure joy and bliss for her.

I came up with an experience that involved biking. I chose a cross-country bike ride so that we would spend ample quality time together, exploring the different parts of the country. It may seem unromantic to take a loved one on a biking expedition to those who are unfamiliar with the sport. Those who have experienced this phenomenon recognize just how remarkable it is. Biking trips across the country were already a mainstay of my mid-twenties. I wanted to complete the rest of the second half of my last tour with her to bring a sense of joy and fulfillment that can't be matched. And as you would have guessed, Natasha was gifted with an athletic body by mother nature. She was a natural-born athlete.

She was one of the few women who had competed with men in racquetball. A sport that is considered strenuous because it actively engages almost every muscle of the body. It was quite a workout. An hour of racquetball would make an average player sweaty and tired. Natasha could go on for hours without breaking a sweat. She had almost perfect hand and eye coordination that gave many men a hard time. Not only that but she was also a magnificent runner. Having all this in mind, I knew that she would enjoy the bike trip.

I shared the idea with her, and she hastily agreed to the bike tour. We decided that we would start from Savannah, GA and bike all the way to Austin, TX. I decided that I would take up

the responsibility of doubling back to get the car because Natasha had a tough time in the South-East heat. By this time, she had not had the chance to take driving lessons since she arrived in America. It was something she wanted to do and check it off her bucket list. This was an ideal chance to start driving lessons. She was so enthusiastic and excited about learning. I was equally ecstatic because it was an opportunity for us to bond and also because it would help me greatly as I was the sole driver in the family.

She practiced her driving skills on our drive south in Richmond, Virginia. It began well and we managed to make a stride or two in the learning curve, but we were met with the worst rainstorm ever. The storm terrified Natasha so much that she felt traumatized and became unable to drive after that. I warmly embraced her and gave her time to work through her emotions and gain confidence again. It was indeed an awful rainstorm, I understood why she was horrified as a new driver. She lost control midway and did not feel confident to drive again.

I had a dependable Ford Probe to help us through the trip. At the start, she fell ill in Georgia but persevered. She had great endurance, and I admired her for that. After a day or two, she managed to pull me (riding in front to block the wind), the whole time comforting me and cheering me up. She was a remarkable woman. Moments like these proved to me that I had made the right choice with her. Her dedication to the trip was impressive. Her excitement was over the top and contagious. I found myself enjoying her company and falling in love with her all over again. It was all worthwhile, as long as she was by my side. It was a once in a lifetime adventure.

On the ride home, things became chaotic as I drove from Austin to Memphis. I had been behind the wheel for far too long. The fatigue began setting in. It was too much for me. I needed a break. I asked Natasha for assistance so that we didn't end up in an accident caused by my fatigue.

"Natasha, you gotta drive from here," I said to her.

She shook her head. She did not want to drive. It had been custom for me to put up with her lack of empathy and selfishness. She failed to consider the other person's situation, and I was always left to understand her and compromise for her. It was becoming too much. I was not going to put up with it one more time. I wanted her to understand my situation and overcome her fear of driving. It was only right. Besides, I was going to be beside her. She would not be doing this on her own.

She refused. She wouldn't budge. It riled me up inside. It was most definitely not my responsibility to drive us all the time. I took the task upon myself, but it was too much, especially for a long journey. I was human. I had persevered with my aching body, but I was way past my limits. She still wouldn't budge.

This was confirmation of what I had always known but ignored. We were both very domineering and strong-headed individuals. Reasoning with her was meaningless. For her to listen, she had to let down her defenses and consider my words, but that proved difficult. Nor was I willing to listen to her explain her fear of driving. Neither of us wanted to lose by giving in. So, we sat in the car glancing at each other. This was short-lived because we had to move. Heaving a heavy sigh and raging inside, I drove endlessly till I couldn't anymore. I stopped in Tennessee and

pushed myself out of the car. My back was sore. I was infuriated. I had feared that I would do something hysterical or insane while driving that would cause me to lose control, but I managed well enough. I was extremely tired and angry. I could not sit in my anger; instead, I took my bike and rode off. I needed to release my anger before it consumed me.

After finding calm as I rode my bicycle and releasing all that bad energy, I went back to the car and drove. Natasha refused to look me in the eye. I presumed that she knew that it was her fault that I needed a break. I drove continuously without stopping until we reached West Virginia. I couldn't carry on, so I took a break and slept. I really needed it. Somehow, in the struggle, God granted Natasha the mercy she needed to feel towards me. She felt guilty and decided to drive. At that time, her offer did not appeal to me. It was too late for us to make up. It did not cool my anger.

We ended up stopping at Columbus, Maryland. It had the steepest hill I had ever encountered in the whole USA. I got out of the car and biked around again. This was what made me calm down. I took in the air as the adrenaline kicked in, and I swerved through the hill. It was such a liberating feeling to be one with the wind. When I was satiated, I got back to the car and drove the rest of the way. I could tell that she wanted me to ask her to drive. She wanted to mend the dispute, but I remained stubborn and adamant in the way things were. I did not want to make any requests.

She started sobbing as we traveled to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. I did not understand why she was suddenly in tears, so I refrained from comforting her or asking her why she was weeping. In my heart I knew that those tears signified the beginning of the end. Our relationship was about to end. And we both knew it. It was just a matter of time. I had sensed the shift in our relationship from the day I came home from Villanova, expressing the unfortunate news to her. We had never needed words to communicate or understand each other. Words revealed themselves through our posture and aura. It was evident to both of us that we were done.

I did not know back then that it would take much suffering to extinguish my stubbornness. I belonged to a generation of stubborn people. It was ingrained in us, and it cost us a lot. I regret letting it come between my family and I, causing havoc and pain for myself and the people close to me. I should have addressed it as the weakness it is instead of glorifying it as a strength and holding on to it. Nothing good comes out of ignoring your bad habits. It took me 20 additional years to work through my stubbornness.

Chapter 8: Downtube Restarts

We got home with our hearts heavy with the burden that the new revelation had put on us. We couldn't look each other in the eye. There was a constant nagging within me that begged for me to settle the affairs between the two of us, but I ignored it, putting it to sleep. It was difficult for me to face what my two hands had borne. I was not ready to initiate a conversation or raise the possibility of mending things between us.

I had initiated a trip so as to bring us together. A memorable adventure that would set us back on the path to a healthy relationship. What I had dived into with expectations of leaving us happy and fulfilled instead left us repulsed by each other. The irony of life. It was a memorable trip, but memorable for the wrong reasons. Neither of us would be able to forget the incidents of that journey. It was the most complex blend of events that one could not possibly label as cherishable. It was simply chaotic.

I had to confront the truth as it was and accept my situation for what it was, soon. The position I had created for myself had repercussions. I was paying for it. I had no substantial background in any other profession at that time. I was a mathematician. I hadn't expanded myself to anything other than that. This profession was my only source of income. Now that I did not have a job, I wondered where I could get money from. I tried to have an open mind skimming through various options that I thought could work in my favor, but none seemed to be aligned to who I was.

I decided to reopen the Downtube bike shop. Through research, I knew that e-commerce was the future and that many individuals were enriching themselves through eBay. However, I did not know what I intended to sell. I needed to get a product that would be worthy and get a great clientele. I took time to reflect and conclude that I would begin selling bicycle wheels, shorts, suspension forks and folding bikes because they were the most popular selling items. This business was not going to be my main source of income but a side hustle to push me through the season I was in. My intention was to try my luck on the new venture to get by until I found a real job. I had no idea that this side hustle would end up being a savior on more than one occasion.

I was glad that I picked to work in the bicycle industry. I had the expertise, and it was something I was naturally passionate about. Within no time, I was able to skim through most of my bills except health insurance. My insurance was roughly \$700 a month - a hefty amount that took a huge chunk of my income. Every month, I was going deeper and deeper into debt. It was the worst feeling in the world. I could feel myself sinking into a life I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. My goal each month was to make at least enough to pay my bills. My insurance was kept aside. That was completely unattended to. Six months into this life, I was overwhelmed by the pressure of life. I could not continue living this way. I started getting more anxious and worried about my future. It was a horrifying time for me. The status of my health insurance caused me more stress, causing health problems because of the constant worry. I often sat alone, with my forefinger rubbing the creased lines that were ever present on my forehead, thinking of how I would manage to pay all my bills. The answer was never forthcoming.

I decided to drop insurance altogether. I had never spent a day without it, but the circumstances of my life led me to forego it. Health insurance is truly a privilege. I felt relieved when I let go of that insurance. The burden of my bills lifted significantly. I was not going to drown myself in debt for it.

My steady income did not deter Natasha; things became worse day by day. We had a complicated relationship. Our egos took center stage in our relationship. We fed them daily until they took over. Life didn't grant us a pause button to reflect on our relationship. It kept moving, and we kept moving along with it, ignoring every hole in our relationship.

With time, a vacancy presented itself at the University of the Virgin Islands. It was an opportunity to get back to the employment scene and to get out of the house. I did not apply to computer sciences but purely in mathematics. I fit better in that department. Computer science cost me some of my integrity in the past, a cost too high for my liking. I did not want to face the same thing. This was a personal choice for me.

Chapter 9: University of the Virgin Islands

When moving to a new place, it is important to compare it to where you presently live. This helps in informing your decisions based on a lifestyle you have been able to maintain. This is exactly what I did. Since I couldn't physically visit the Virgin Islands, I made sure to enquire about the cost of living there. The information given to me was that it was roughly the same as Philadelphia, my current city. That worked in my favor; it was pleasant news. When I got there, I realized just how different things were on the ground when I completed the paperwork and accepted the proposal. I was not given accurate information.

Sadly, this move meant that I had to leave Natasha and Lutik and relocate to the Virgin Islands. Lutik had become an indispensable member of our household. He filled the gap of a brother and ever-present companion. It was hard saying goodbye to him. I was going to miss him terribly. I was sure that he would be affected by my absence. It was too soon for me to uproot their lives to a new place without gauging how life there would be. So, I left them.

On reaching the Virgin Islands, I was clueless about what would happen. Life there was completely different. While I did not have meager or inadequate pay (\$40k/year), the cost of living was high. I was unable to make ends meet. My salary was barely enough to pay for my living expenses back home and there. No matter how much I sacrificed and saved, I was unable to make it work. The money just wasn't sustainable.

The costs were unbelievably higher than anywhere I had ever lived or been to in the past. I reduced my needs to the very necessities only. I tried my best to cut costs to save money. My life was simple; I cycled everywhere, cutting fuel and car expenses. I had just enough clothes and decent shoes and didn't purchase more. Other than that, I had nothing. The only other thing that I needed in my life was a satisfying and decent meal. My stomach suffered greatly at the burden of island meal prices. I had a ravaging appetite that needed to be satisfied, and I could only afford rice and salsa. When put on a scale, my intake was very slim.

Life there led me to lose muscle weight every single day. I was 180 pounds when I first arrived at the Island, and in no time, I was at 160 pounds. It was horrible. Due to my financial challenge, I would force myself to starve so as not to spend more money. The costs were so inflated for every single product on the island. I wondered why this information was not the first point given to me when I called to ask about living expenses. Perhaps I would have made a different choice.

Milk cost twice as much as in Philadelphia; ice cream was more than double. Typically, a carton costs \$4 but in the Virgin Islands, it was at least \$10. You could only dream about having fish. The prices were a complete exploitation of the residents - especially for someone like me who had two residences, a wife, and a big appetite. I found it increasingly stressful, almost impossible, to maintain my lifestyle. I resolved to eat rice and salsa for breakfast, lunch and dinner daily.

Even worse than budgeting issues was seeing other people manage their lives effortlessly. I would go for lunch daily with one of my colleagues, Doug. He would sit across from me and order wholesome food, and I ordered nothing. I had the feeling of being less than and unable to

cater to my own basic needs. Doug was a kind man and offered to pay for my lunch several times since he knew of my situation. It is hard to hide some circumstances; they end up revealing themselves. I have never accepted such favors and always politely refused the offer when given. It was much better to have my dignity than to eat other people's hard-earned money. I preferred being hungry.

The situation as a starving full-time professor was deeply humiliating. I felt offended by it all. I had countless nights of contemplating how I landed in this situation. The lack of a proper and balanced diet made me deeply troubled because of my health and its efficacy. Not to mention the never-ending stress I carried with me all day long. I contemplated quitting the job and going back home but to what avail? Life was not any better there. I had started eating into my savings which were also being used to fund my other house. Another complication would be the trouble my move would stir if I went back empty-handed. I chose to accept my predicament as it was and try to make the best of it. I thought to myself that I would just finish the semester now that I had already moved.

Throughout the semester, the lack of food started affecting my profession. I was unable to function properly. I would feel faint, and my stomach would rumble throughout a lecture. My head was always spinning. For the first time in my life, I was experiencing what hunger truly felt like to an individual. The repetition of the miserable food weighed on my intellect. I had nothing to look forward to. I was not prepared for how hard it was to sleep on an empty stomach. I would toss and turn without an inkling of drowsiness. I stayed awake most nights listening to my stomach howling in protest to the choices I had made.

On the darkest nights, my bike became my savior once more. Exhaustion became my refuge when I wanted to get some sleep. I would take my bike and cycle to the point of exhaustion. This workout was free and did not require any additional costs or parts to work. The downside of this was that I would wake up doubly hungry because my body emitted a lot of energy during the evening. These occurrences made me understand the importance of food. I could hardly manage without my meals. Hunger is a cruel consequence of poverty. If only the rich or the middle class could understand how lucky they were to have full stomachs. I recognized just how the tables of my life turned from a man who was eating healthy food to one who ate just enough, and how rampant this was for other people. Many go to bed on an empty stomach.

On one gruesome night, when sleep evaded me, I decided to ride across the island in search of it. I was aimlessly riding when I came across a store that was getting rid of their Ben and Jerry's ice cream inventory. My first conclusion was that the ice cream had expired or was somehow rotten, but I came to find out that they were simply replacing the current flavor with another. There was no reason to throw them away other than a restock in their chain. I marveled at this and felt disappointed in the world. There were many people starving, me included, and these people were throwing away food. I had taken quite some time staring at them as they threw the ice cream away when one of the perpetrators of this crime noticed me.

"Take as many as you want," he said to me.

I could have carried the entire supply if my hands enabled me to. I had not tasted ice cream in a very long time. I began salivating as I looked at all the ice cream before my eyes. If I had the

ability, I would have taken every single ice cream on that rack though logically thinking it would have been a waste. I was on my bike so I could not carry as many. They would have melted anyway. So, I took only what I could have there. I ate ice cream to my fill and went to where my bed awaited me. For the first time in a long time, I did not sleep because I was exhausted but because my stomach was full.

With time, I got used to the life handed to me. I accepted my circumstances, and my stomach grew accustomed to the lack of consistent and good meals. Fortunately, two things happened. Firstly, the islands had a local gym that offered me a position. I was hired to teach abs and spinning. That job paid \$15 per class. It was not a lot, but it added to my overall income. I saw the opportunity and grabbed it with both hands. With time, I was able to pay for decent meals during lunch and even ended up putting on some weight. Secondly, my online business started making good money once Spring arrived. It took some time, but it was finally paying off. I was grateful to see the changes in my life and that life was becoming increasingly easier for me after the hardships I had faced. To my recollection, I began making \$1,000 weekly. During the end of the spring semester in the Virgin Islands, my life situation changed completely.

This presented me with two options; I could either spend the money to upgrade my lifestyle or I could invest it back into the business to help it grow. I chose the latter option. I reinvested every dollar that I earned from the business. I did not want to cripple the business with dangerous spending. I made the sacrifice to stay hungry until the business was stable enough.

I decided to order my first ever sample of a folding bike. The first step of a long journey that was ahead of me. I called the bike the 'VI' for Virgin Islands and the number six because the bike had six speeds. This felt like a sign to me. An alignment of my life to a greater purpose. I felt like the business would bloom to fruition in the years to come. Natasha believed the same, in those days. She remained silent when everything was happening. These were the days that would impact the trajectory of my future. We both knew it. We could feel it in our bones. I needed to make the right choices.

A few days later, after things started taking shape with the business, I was called into the office for some routine work. At one of the desks, a polished lawyer sat with a no-nonsense attitude. She meant business. I was asked to approach her desk. I was skeptical of why I was in that room. I had no idea what the lawyer would want from me, much less in school.

"What kind of retirement plan do you want to opt for? There are two options, either a TIAA or the Virgin Islands Government Retirement plan," asked the lawyer. She jumped right into the course of business. No small talk or greetings.

Flustered by her seriousness and the question posed to me, I heaved a sigh and thought about it. She spoke about the retirement plan as though it was very important, life and death decision. I knew that having a plan was smart and appropriate. But it was also a luxury I could not afford at the time. I had experienced first-hand that life throws its blows at you when you least expect it. It is much better to have a plan that will protect you from the storms that life may send your way.

So, what exactly did I want? The incentives they offered were not bad. The university also offered a match of six percent of the funds which made turned six percent to twelve percent. It was a good plan. The main question I had in mind was whether it was wise for me to take a plan when I did not have the money to eat. I was living hand to mouth daily. Getting food was a challenge. How was I going to survive when more money was cut from my salary? It would be impossible. I would have to forego every single meal I had. I would end up dying of hunger.

“I’ll pass on the retirement plan,” I told her.

And there began the discussion that still rings in my ears till this day, even as I write this to the whole world.

“You can’t do that,” she said to me in a condescending tone. “As a full-time employee, you must obey the territory’s laws and opt for a retirement plan.”

“As per my contract here,” I pointed out. “I have a choice. It says ‘or’ in my contract.”

“Well, that ‘or’ is an ‘and.’ I know because I am an attorney.” She made it clear to me that I had no choice in the matter. I had to take the retirement plan.

I read through my contract one more time. It was plainly stated differently. But she insisted on knowing better. She did not want to hear me out nor reason with my plight, so I approached the authorities. I found it to be a violation of my right to be forced into an agreement to cut money from my paycheck when I did not deem it necessary no matter how beneficial it was to me. I looked at her plainly and sighed. This would not be the end of it. I made my way to the Chair of the Department.

The chair had a carefree attitude that ended up infuriating me even more. In my haste and anger, I slipped. I could have presented myself and my points in a better manner, but I was overwhelmed by the whole scenario.

“This is the most outrageous situation in the world! It is absurd. To begin with, you all lied to me about the situation on this island to get me here,” I began. “The financial situation in this place has led to me starving. I am hungry half of the time, and as though that is not enough, you have decided to cut my salary using an illegal contract! You decide whether this is a territorial or a federal crime. It is illegal to take money from my salary without breaking federal law. You do not get to force me to take up something that will not serve my interest.” The frustrations of my life flooded in me at that moment, and I let it all out.

The Chair was shaken by my outburst. He looked alarmed. He looked at me the way one would look when woken from a deep slumber with a siren. He was horrified. He had been busy in his thoughts when I barged into his office, invading his space. My suppressed anger, resentment, and frustration burst out, hitting him like cold water.

After saying my peace, I stomped my feet on the way to my office. I knew that my days in that institution were coming to an end after that. I had displayed gross misconduct. How was I to

maintain my position after yelling at someone in authority? I messed things up for myself once again. I previously unemployed myself by silence, and now, an outrage would end things for me.

I had no clue what would happen after that incident. I only knew that I would not partake in the retirement plan. It was an infringement of my rights. It was a painful thing to impose on someone's salary, but especially for me since I was barely surviving. How would retirement plans benefit me if I was dead? It just didn't make sense. A day after my Oscar-worthy performance, the chair came to my office. He was unable to meet my eyes. He approached me and said, "Yan, I looked at your contract, you're right."

I was shocked. I felt relief wash over me and I managed to say, "I know, right? It's crazy!"

He responded, "Well yeah, and the chancellor wants to talk to you."

I did not know what that meant, but by the look on his face, I was going to get it bad. My relief quickly disappeared and was replaced by worry. The chancellor was a big man from Alaska. He weighed well over 300 lbs. and was extremely intimidating. Rightly so. He was not a man to mess with. I panicked at the thought of having to face him in this situation. Yet, as a big man, he resembled my father and made me not as intimidated as other people may have been.

He said, "You know what, Yan, there are some ambiguities with your contract."
Ambiguities in my contract? That did not sound good.

I said to him bluntly, "Listen, I'm out of here. You need to extend the definition of moving expenses to include my wife and mother visiting me. Then I will choose a retirement plan." That was my final decision. I didn't think I could stay there and not go insane. I needed my support system around me to make life easier.

The chancellor thought a moment, then said, "I'll look into it and get back to you." He dismissed me from the conversation. There was no doubt in my mind that he would not "look into it," and I knew he would not get back to me as soon as possible. As far as this world was concerned, that was how things ran. One could never be guaranteed that another person would actually follow up promises. All they meant was that they did not want to prolong the conversation, so they dismissed you with a fake promise. I was used to this game. I would wait patiently to see whether anything would be done. I had mastered the art of patience very well.

On that particular Friday, a week after the encounter, no response was yet to be given to me so I decided to take it upon myself to get the answers. I called the secretary.

"Where's the chancellor?" I asked

"He's not in the office right now," she said.

"Where is he?" I pressed.

There was a slight pause.

"Who's this?" she asked.

"I'm Yan Lyansky, and I'm going to kick his ass. Tell me where he is! This is a money situation; it involves theft."

"I'll call...you....right back," she said, trying not to stutter.

I was unsure about my next steps, as has been a recurring theme in my life to this moment. I simply followed my thoughts and intuition. The chancellor was twice my size, but I was not intimidated. I was a natural-born fighter. I had no fear, not that I was looking to get into any form of confrontation with anyone, but it gave me the confidence to seek out my rights. It is always better to prevent a confrontation as much as possible. However, when an injustice is done, it must be corrected, or the cycle will never end. Someone must stand up in the place of the many people who could be victims of the same injustice.

She called me right back. “The chancellor has approved your request; you’re getting the money.”

“Okay,” I acted cool.

That was it? I was shocked that that was all I had to do to get what I was owed. I laughed at the whole situation. The chancellor kept to himself as an infallible person, but he was easily intimidated by someone as little as me. That comes as a lesson to you: no one is above your reach. Fight for what is owed to you. The universe will conspire in your favor.

On a random day, I was walking from one end of the University campus when I came across the new gym being inaugurated. They were cutting the ribbons and having what appeared to be a ceremony. At the front line of this stood the chancellor in all his glory. I felt some concern because I had to intimidate him for him to do his job. It was not right that he had to be pushed to carry out his duties.

One of my students was driving by. He waved at me while calling out my name. Unfortunately, the chancellor heard him and looked around. The moment he saw me, he went still for a moment looking like a deer in headlights. I wondered what was going through his mind. Either way, it was obvious that he was in distress. Suddenly, he picked up his 300-pound body and attempted to run. It was something out of a movie. It was hilarious. Seeing him so distraught was satisfying to me.

My time in the Virgin Islands ran its course. It was time for me to leave. As for my financial situation, the bike business was doing well. I was thankfully out of the dumps.

Chapter 10: The Parting

I was overjoyed to be back home. The best part was being reunited with my sweet Lutik. He was my closest companion. It was equally as good to see Natasha, but she did not reciprocate the sentiment. She at times looked like she had a lot to say to me and then at other times she seemed to want the silence to be a little louder if possible. It was hard to read her. To me, the silence was resoundingly loud. We were falling apart. It became more and more evident as the days went by.

We stopped sharing meals or doing any of our shared routines. Any link we had before was completely eradicated. All our precious hobbies were swept under the rug. It was no longer about what could be done to save our relationship but how long we would endure each other, when and who would call it quits. Her attitude towards me had changed when I left Villanova. Perhaps she lost trust in my decision making or perhaps she had her own reasons for withdrawing from me. Nonetheless, we ended up here with nothing to bring us together and living estranged in the same house.

I did not know what to think of what my life had become. The only thing that kept me going was a quote from Marcus, "Love nothing but what comes to you, woven in the pattern of your destiny. For what more could actually fit your needs?" I loved Marcus. He gave me the light that I needed. He talked about fate and destiny. If anything came to me, I actually needed it. Even as I complained, nothing would give me peace unless I made peace with what I had. This knowledge kept me going.

After some time, while in Philadelphia, I got an offer from Lafayette College and accepted it. It was an amazing institution. At the time, it was better than the Ivy League Schools. It was enormous, spread across 340 acres of land and was in the most pristine suburban location. The college was in Lafayette, Pennsylvania, about 80 minutes away from home. I made the decision to stay at a hotel near the college twice a week. The extended stay was about \$40 per night with a free night after purchasing 10. The hotel computer system was programmed to show two occupants in one room, even if there was just one person. I did not care much about the misstatement, but little did I know that it would end up causing me problems.

Despite my best efforts to shy away from my reality, my marital life was taking a toll on me and my productivity. I tried my best not to let it show but it was impossible to ignore the damage it had on my life. I was acting rather immaturely at both an academic level and a personal level at that time. I refused to address the issues that were separating us.

Natasha assumed I was having an affair because the hotel receipt showed two people were in the room; however, this was a system error. I was also not aware that she had been spying on me to gather details of what I was doing when I was not at home. I did not have the slightest clue that she would think that I was cheating on her. It was not even something that crossed my mind. I was an honest and proper man. I never cheated on her. Without getting to the bottom of the matter, she decided to cheat on me in the name of getting back at me for my atrocity.

Her actions shocked me. I did not think that she would be capable of doing that. Her taking revenge on me for something I had not done was hurtful. It is my belief that she didn't need the

receipt to cheat on me. She only *believed* I was cheating so that she could do what she had always wanted to do.

She started an affair with a colleague of hers to get back at me. His name was Loui, an acquaintance of mine from the gym. He was a short, athletic, dull, and somewhat slow man. There was nothing impressive about him. I didn't understand what Natasha saw in such a man. They were complete opposites, and he could not match her intellect nor appearance. I assumed it was a casual fling for her.

I found out about them when I spotted them While I was in my car one night. She had the capability of hiding the entire fling for a very long time, but she wanted to be found out. I was obviously angry when I found them. I felt betrayed by the dishonesty. We had a mutual pact that we would always be open and explicit about everything. She had broken that pact, and alongside it, my trust in her. I could never look at her the same way. I understand that she thought that she was reciprocating the damage, but I had done her no wrong. It was too late to fix things. I felt disgusted by her.

"You go with that guy tonight," I yelled. "Don't come to my house!"

That very evening, she came back home, so I contacted the cops. They did not do anything significant. She continued to meet him despite me catching them red-handed. It turned out, she was genuinely in love with the guy. This realization came to me later. She was willing to lose everything we had built together for him. Perhaps his average nature drew her to him. It was so amusing to me that the two of them were able to form a bond. Eventually, I started ignoring her altogether. I did not get jealous of Loui. I was rather shocked that he was able to get the Natasha's attention. More than that, the emotion that was predominant in me was disgust. The whole thing was indigestible.

Soon after, I decided to travel during spring break and visit the Taipei Bike Show, and stop in Hong Kong and China to expand my business. After teaching classes, I drove straight to the airport and flew out without a moment to spare. I was not too sure that I would be able to make it back for teaching. I hit up a friend of mine to cover my classes till the next day. Eventually, I altered that plan and returned a day earlier. My mother picked me up from the airport, and I went straight to my class just as my friend was about to start. That had been the craziest week of my life. I took the book from him and went on with the lesson.

I traveled to Taiwan for the biggest bicycle trade show called Taipei Cycle. Between my lessons on Friday and the following week, I managed to attend several meetings in Hong Kong and factories in China. I was improving my entrepreneurial skills every day. My motive during the trip was to develop a bicycle brand using my own products. I ended up visiting many factories to start manufacturing the bikes. I learned that my last bicycle vendor, Oyama, was a complete failure. The bikes were too pricey and of poor quality. They all needed to be repaired. My first container contained 135 bikes, and it took about 30 minutes to get each one ready. Normally bikes need a two minute inspection before shipping prep. The only positive experience I got there was learning how to fix bicycles.

While I was looking to build my business, I also had personal needs. If Natasha could have a fling without informing me, I figured I would do the same. I met a wonderful girl named Tibet, a name I considered beautiful. She was in many ways my healer. She came into my life at a time that I really needed to feel the love of someone. I had not felt love in a long time. She helped me gain self-acceptance by providing me with the distraction I needed from my chaotic life. In addition to that, she had a hyperactive libido that matched mine. This came as a great relief to me. We had the best time together.

Eventually, Tibet fell for me. She ended up dumping her boyfriend at the time to be with me for a few days. This took me aback. But in the short period of time that we were together, I truly loved her. We had a raw and real connection. Unfortunately, I took it for granted. I did not give her the attention she deserves, neither was I present during our relationship.

“Why do you like me? What’s in me?” I recall asking.

“I.....just do,” she said.

And she just did. If I got the opportunity to meet her today, I wouldn't hesitate to put a ring on her finger and marry her. She was truly a rare gem. I was a fool to walk away from her gentle love. Unfortunately, that is the type of mistake we make on many occasions. We wait for things to fall in place before we can be with someone instead of seizing the opportunity. Having the care and affection present between two people is all that is important in a relationship. I believe that to have a perfect relationship, you need not find a flawless person. There is no such thing as perfect people, so how can there be perfect relationships? A relationship is made of two flawed people trying to navigate life together.

In a blink of a moment, Tibet and I were over. It was time for Natasha and I to face our demons. We no longer had the luxury of hiding from the inevitable demise of our marriage. She moved into a new apartment. I helped her move her belongings. It was still my responsibility to ensure that she was okay, and I took that responsibility seriously. She was still my one and only wife.

Chapter 11: My Breaking

Natasha's departure left me with a hole in my heart that couldn't be filled. I was legally single. This left me feeling both liberated and conflicted. I had to take some time and reflect on the pleasant life we had together. Despite knowing that the end was drawing near for a very long time, it was not easy to see her walking out of our family home for good. We had finally let each other go. I let time do the healing on my part. I grew accustomed to the silence and loneliness.

Work consumed me afterwards. It became more of a lifestyle to me. I took to it gladly. I was not one to sit in my misery for too long. Pity parties were a foreign concept to me, I had to keep going and keep pushing forward. Life was a machine that needed to be oiled from time to time. I took some time to recover from the reality of having a broken marriage; then, I got back to working.

Sometime later, Natasha dropped by the house. I was astonished to see her. She was the last person I would have thought to be standing on my front porch when I went to open the door. I did not know what to expect from her. I opened the door somewhat skeptical of her intentions. I allowed her back in, not realizing that I would be doing it more than once. I was unable to stop her from coming. She was a fierce lady. I was hardly capable of stopping her from doing anything in the past, how could I start now? She was acting unusually. Completely different from the woman I knew. I just assumed that that was how women behaved in this scenario, so I accepted the situation.

I indulged her in whatever she wanted to do, no questions asked. I did not know whether it was a reunion or a casual fling. I was simply happy to have her back in my arms. She would come to my home, and we would have an incredible time together. Unfortunately, it did not last long. What I noticed was that every time she would come to visit, she ended up taking something from the house upon leaving. I thought of it as strange but did not think much of it. She was not a kleptomaniac, and I knew that she did not need anything from me because they were not particularly expensive nor highly functional items. It was confusing what she was doing.

She'd say, "I want to get the speakers today."

And then it would be a DVD, and then the next day something else. I had a lot of useless stuff lying around that did not matter to me. It was her presence that I valued the most. Nothing else mattered to me. The absence of what she took could not leave me bankrupt nor would it threaten my life. I would have overlooked the matter, but it was the transactional nature of whatever we had that began troubling me. I was not proud of giving in to her devices. She was using me as a prop to get what she wanted. Was it me who she came to see or the little souvenirs she would pick on her way out? It felt like she was taking advantage of me and using me to fill a psychological void.

I decided to confront her on the matter.

"Are you coming over to see me, or do you want to get stuff? If you want to get stuff, just take whatever it is you want and leave. I don't want to deal with this!" I was really angry and

meant every word I said. She looked away and pretended not to hear the question. I asked two more times. She ignored me. I then took my voice a notch higher, "Natasha?"

She looked at me and maintained her silence. I could not read her mind nor her habits. I needed to know the truth. That was all I valued in our relationship. Honesty. All I wanted was a simple yes or no. That did not seem like it was too much to ask for. I wanted her to reject my accusation and tell me that she valued my presence.

I dropped my head, unwilling to look at her face. Her silence revealed to me that she was too embarrassed to confess her actions. To control my reaction, or rather, to get a hold of the control she had over me, I did what I thought was my only resolution. I did not want us to continue with the little dance we were doing around what we had going on. I would have rather we ended things. I wanted her emotional honesty. I asked her once more to explain her actions but she refused.

She left the house without saying a word. I would have preferred for her to say anything even if it was to scream at me. But she did not give me anything other than her silence. I could not force her to speak so I just let her go. That day is seated well in my memory, staring at me as it shifts in my mind in a mocking manner. My younger self was a restless, foolish, and emotional being. There were moments where I could have handled myself in a better way. There are so many words that I left unsaid and that she would never know of. As I watched her close the door behind her as she left, I wished that I could have done things differently and turned things around for both of us.

I could have told her that I loved her, that I spent every waking moment of my life caring about her, that I wanted to have her around and I enjoyed her company. I should have held her face and looked her in the eyes and promised to be a better partner to her. I should have let her know that she was extremely special to me. I know that she would have been happy to receive my love and reciprocate it. She was just waiting for me to take charge and make her feel loved. But I was scared. Scared of rejection. This ended up compromising our relationship. Being stubborn in my ways didn't solve anything. It just ended up creating more problems.

I cannot take responsibility for all the flaws in our relationship. She was equally to blame for the position we were in. She was just as foolish and stubborn. Both of us feared the unknown and being turned down. We were too lost in our emotions and thoughts for logic to take over. It was only after she left that I realized that she loved me. That was what made her come back to me after the divorce. That was her way of expressing her love for me. The problem was that I wanted to be loved in my way. Not in the way she was displaying her love. I was too naive to understand the different ways to love.

Our relationship failed on the crucifix of our ego. Natasha's ego didn't allow her to communicate effectively. She could not openly declare her love for me. She had no reason to come to my place other than the fact that she loved me. I should have taken that as proof of her love. For that I take responsibility. Her not expressing herself was her way of keeping my ego in check. I realize now that her taking things from the house was to me from getting too hopeful about our relationship. It was just a mind game.

After our breakup, I lost my memory. It left alongside our relationship. I spent my adult years compensating for this flaw. I couldn't remember student's names in class nor chess lines, I could not remember any meetings nor almost anything important. This was just a manifestation of the torment my mind was going through. I needed to fix my emotions and thoughts. My stubbornness came at a hefty price. It destroyed my relationship with Natasha, and I ended up with a failed memory for the next 20 years because of it. She was everything I wanted in a wife and more. I was so foolish as to not take every opportunity to mend things between us. This is one of my greatest regrets. I was wrong in so many ways.

Many years after we parted ways, Natasha had a son whom she named Vladimir with her husband, Joseph. He was an excellent husband to her. A year after childbirth, she was diagnosed with lung cancer and died the year after. I have gone out of my way to honor her through her child. I buy Vladimir bikes, scooters, toys, and anything I can. I feel responsible for her ailment. It is said that lungs hold regret and resentment. I am ashamed of myself. To this day, my memory still fails me. It is caused by the fear I have within. I hope that by narrating my stories through this book, I will realize the mistakes I made in my past and somehow atone for my shortcomings. Perhaps that will help with the healing process.

Had I been acquainted with Rumi at that time, I would have been saved earlier. He once stated "If your guidance is your ego, do not rely on luck for help. You will sleep during the day, and the nights will be short. By the time you wake up, your life will be over."

He was right in more ways than one. I had wasted much of my life in the name of ego. My life was depleted because of it. I had to rectify my ways, otherwise I would be walking dead for the rest of my life.

Chapter 12: Furman

After the experiences with Natasha, I had an overwhelming urge to disappear. I wanted to go to a place where I could be distracted from the thoughts that consumed me. I needed a getaway and to find myself again. I was having trouble at work with my employees, which made the decision to move a bit hard because it would put the business in jeopardy, but I knew that it was something I needed to do. I would recover from the financial loss, but I could not function with the state that my mental health.

I got the opportunity to teach at Furman University. During this time, I got so busy working that I had little time on my plate for Lutik, my best friend. He was such a good dog, and he needed my full attention. I made my way to Furman which was heaven on earth. I can say with conviction that they paid me to hang out rather than teach because it was extremely easy to teach there. The children were geniuses, and the campus was exquisite. Once, they had a jumbo shrimp buffet lunch for faculty for \$2 each. That was how extraordinary the campus was. Bear in mind, for those who do not know, those shrimp typically costs an arm and a leg.

It was an amazing place. They had more money than they knew what to do with. They ensured that everyone could tell the abundance of the campus because they would freely give out stuff. For example, when the students wanted a trip, they would get everything required. From supplies, to transport, to gas, and even a driver. It was unbelievable. You could mention anything you needed, and the university would provide it. It was a great place to be. I have never experienced a place like it since.

Furman was the turning point of my educational journey. When I was in Temple University, which was comparatively atrocious, it was good to me. My education there was great. However, it was in the worst neighborhood to have a school. Crime was at an all-time high. Robberies were the order of the day. In addition to this, my car was stolen. It was a traumatizing experience. I was threatened with a gun once. I had grown accustomed to the fact that it was a terrible place for an institution to be located. Joy was not easy to come by when I was in Temple but in Furman, I could hardly stop smiling. It was a completely different experience between being a student and faculty.

When comparing the two institutions, Temple was better when it came to the quality of education. Furman was fun and provided a sense of security and freedom that is key for an institution.

As a parent, it would have been hard for me to choose either of the schools. I would want my children to receive the best education possible but also to be in a fun, safe environment. In addition to this, I would consider the expenses of going to a private school compared to a state school. The difference was significant. But then the exposure and quality of life is something I would want for my children. The only problem was that most of the students would be from affluent families. They had no perception of life as it is for many people, outside their cushioned lives. They were chauffeured around in Mercedes and BMWs. The student body was wealthy. I did not enjoy the high-class population, I vibe better with poor kids. The biggest question in this

case would be, which is better; a superior education in an insecure place that drains your happiness or mediocre education that is filled with joy and security?

I was the faculty outdoor club advisor, the chess coordinator, and the problem-solving group head. I made sure to be well-rounded. I made an effort to give as much as I received, which was a lot. I performed to the best of my abilities as a teacher. My students liked me, and I loved them. It was the perfect setup to rebuild my life. It was paramount for me to find a place that felt serene and safe for me to enjoy my life and find purpose in my daily life. It was truly a privilege to have found a place like Furman.

I carried Lutik with me, of course. He loved swimming in the lake and chasing after ducks. He knew not to mess with the swans; they were nasty. My mom visited often and fell in love with the place. It is my hope that my children will end up in an institution like Furman, without the rich kids. I hope that they find happiness wherever they may be and a safe place for them. That is what matters the most in life - your mental state. A mediocre education can be remedied by other things but not lost time living in an unwelcome environment.

Chapter 13: Women, Here I Come

In my early thirties, my body began getting a bit plump. I gained a bit of weight in no time. I changed my workout routine that resulted in me going from 165-pound cycling weight (after my cycling trips) to 200 pounds through pull-ups, push-ups, ab workouts and balance training. I grew big and strong, but I lost much athleticism in the process of gaining muscle. I became slower and less acrobatic.

I thought that since I was bigger and less athletic, women wouldn't find me as attractive, but it ended up having the opposite effect. They started liking me even more. It became easy to pursue women. Not just that, I hardly had to make the first move. It was too easy. I was at a point in my life where I did not want to be single anymore. So, I actively took the time to start dating and experiencing different women. I couldn't tell you just how many women I dated at this time.

Had I known that the path I chose for myself would lead to so many unnecessary destinations, I would have never taken those turns and made the mistakes that I made. My life was constantly flashing red for me to stop but I just kept going. I didn't think that there would be a traffic inspector to hand me an infinite number of tickets for my violations. Had I known, I would have slowed down.

It was on this path I had taken that I met a woman named Ranny from Indonesia. She was an attractive woman. We met online and connected immediately. I had no idea that this woman would change the course of my life completely.

(Me): Would you like to go to the beach?

(Her): Sure

(Me): I have a dog. He's a really good dog. He's with me. Are you okay with that?

No reply

(Me): Or, if you prefer, I could leave the dog and pick you up. What do you say?

(Her): I'm not sure. I need to see the dog

I understand the fear and skepticism surrounding dogs. Nevertheless, had she said that she was not okay with having Lutik around, it would have been a deal breaker. I could never forsake Lutik for anyone in the world. He was my partner. I knew that she would like him and she did.

Back then, I thought that I had the coolest car. It was a convertible 1998 Geo Tracker. I would always drive with the top down during the summer. Lutik enjoyed the car as well. It was a dream come true for both of us. The wind would blow right at the back of our heads and bring out the life in us. It was the best car I ever owned; I purchased three more in the future.

I drove to Ranny's house and asked her whether she was okay with my dog. She said that she was fine with him. We sat in the car with Ranny riding shotgun. I can't recall our first encounter to the exact details. We shared small talk throughout the drive. We did not focus on anything in particular. Somewhere along the drive, we had to stop to get some gas and then we started kissing. It happened so fast. I looked her in the eye and asked her if she was okay with it, I was getting used to acting in that manner.

She said, "Yeah, it's ok."

We got to the beach and started getting intimate in public. Afterwards I went swimming with Lutik. Our relationship started off from the first day we met. It felt right being beside her. I took her to Atlantic City. She was okay with just about anything. That did not register as a red flag to me at the time. I recall telling her everything about my academic goals and business plans. She replied that she did not date for money.

I took her word for it, but I would one day come to realize that people will always say what they think you want to hear. They will also say what is on their minds; you just have to listen intently. The word “no/not” confused me at the time, but the idea she focused on was money. Our subconscious doesn’t understand the word “no/not” people will always tell what’s on their mind. Ranny was looking for the money.

In no time, she moved in with me. I liked her enough to have her around but not enough to be exclusive. At the time, she was depressed about her job. It was terrible, and it sucked the life out of her. I did not know what I could do to assist her. The stars seemed to be aligning us together.

One morning, I received a call from an employee’s mother informing me that he could not come to work, because he was in treatment. I later came to learn that Tom, my employee, was a drug addict. This opened a vacancy, and since Ranny needed a job, I gave it to her. I asked her while we were in bed whether she would take the job, and she agreed to it. As a joke, I mentioned the intimate situation we were in and said, “So, will I be paying you extra for this? Or, is this included?”

We both laughed.

Perhaps a seed had been planted that evening that would come to grow later in our relationship. During this time, my bike company was booming. We were grossing approximately \$500,000 annually. A lot of great things were working out in my favor.

For the first time, I was becoming stable both financially and personally. My plan was to achieve all the goals I set for myself and give it my best. Soon afterwards, I started a job at Coker College in South Carolina. I was working there when I had to go on a trip to Salt Lake City for the Outdoor Retailer trade show.

Then, as was the norm, Ranny decided to do something nice for me by packing my bag and placed condoms in it.

“Wow! You're fantastic!” I was in awe of her.

As I walked out, I considered her actions and marveled at the simplicity of life. We had such a genuine friendship that melted my heart. We had a splendid time together. It was never a dull moment with her. There was nothing that could generate problems between us. We did not have any type of conflict. It was an ideal situation for us. She knew how to balance being my employee and being a close person in my life. She always put up with anything I had put up with while I was in town. We shared our troubles and wins. Our relationship was flawless and worked

perfectly for the both of us. What could possibly be better than someone who was in sync with everything I did?

Chapter 14: Vassya and Lutik

While I was at Coker, I saw a beautiful Portuguese Pointer. It was long and skinny. He had snuck into the College cafeteria. He was a stray athletic dog. He was truly free in the dog world. Not owned by any human nor ordered around. But I felt that it suffered being all alone and unable to have his needs catered for such as having a home, food and health checked on.

I wanted to find a partner for Lutik so I decided to take him in and call him Vassya. Vassya and Lutik are partner names in Ukrainian. I liked him from the first time we met. Vassya was restless and spirited. He embodied freedom and adventure. Once, after a full day of activities such as cycling and playing with Vassya, I saw the cross-country team leaving for a training run. The students offered to take Vassya so I gave them his leash. When they came back, they told me that he was pulling through the whole time. I was shocked! I had taken this dog for a cycling race in the morning and a three-hour expedition in the park in the afternoon. Yet he was still sprinting with the cross-country team. I considered myself athletic but I was not at the level of this dog. He needed a village to tame him. Thankfully, I was not going to give up on him. I was sure that he would radically change my life, and he did.

Lutik would do his best to keep Vassya occupied in the compound, but Vassya was hyperactive. He needed at least three to five hours of running plus playtime with Lutik. On the first few times we were together, he ran away on three-hour or longer expeditions. I got mad at him for getting away and not returning, but that was his nature. He had been a stray dog for a long time and was not used to having someone ordering him around. I decided to force him to obey and punched him. This did little to him, as he was unaffected. The end result of my punch made him worse than before. I regretted it immediately. He ended up being more stubborn and asserting his dominance. He was getting harder and harder to catch.

That was my call to be patient with him. I let him do what he wanted to do as far as his whereabouts were concerned. When we went to the park, he would go off hunting alone and spend all the time he wanted as we waited for him. Sometimes he would honor us with his early arrival and sometimes we would be punished by the delay. We would always wait for him. He was also excellent at finding us when we went off hunting. He was the smartest dog I had ever met.

Vassya was a hunter. He could not rest without killing something. It was in his blood. He was passive when it came to interacting with humans and other dogs but came alive when he encountered other animals. He would go around killing different types of animals. Lutik was the opposite. He didn't care for the hunting. He was always worried about getting bitten by another animal. He grew up sheltered in a home. Vassya had experience in the wild and had catered for himself for a long time. These skills came naturally to him. He paid no heed to anything and continuously attacked anything that he could find no matter the danger.

He had habits that he would never be able to get past because he was a stray dog. Once a month, he would stay away from home for a whole day. Perhaps he needed to decompress or remind himself about his roots and freedom. When he was satisfied with his adventure, he would stop a car in the street and make them call us to get him home. Eventually, with enough practice, he knew the perfect people to get him home. He learned how to identify them and make them cater

to his needs. He was on a completely different level than us. He knew how to survive under any circumstance.

I couldn't consider getting myself to Vassya's level. It would be impossible. He was intricately connected to the universe like nothing I had ever witnessed. He was never worried or nervous. He knew that everything would work out to his favor, and it did.

When he was younger, he used to run away and leap over six-foot-tall fences. He once had a multi-hour adventure before being taken to the dog pound by a stranger. The pound was surrounded by twelve-foot cages. A worker saw him running around outside his area and believed that he had left the gate open. He then put him back into the cage and locked it. Later, he discovered that Vassya got out again which made all the dogs in the kennel rowdy. Vassya scaled the 12-foot cage twice and made it down safely. The worker told us that he had never seen a dog do this in over a decade at the pound.

Vassya was a wild dog, there was no question in that. He had a great ability to overcome any adversity thrown his way. He understood that he would get everything that he accepted in this lifetime. He did not accept anything that he did not want in his life. I learned about living an unlimited life from him. He chose the life that was fit for him and pursued it. No one could tame him nor take control of his life. He was in charge of it all.

My neighbors often said to me, "That dog of yours is going to get run over."

I responded by saying, "What do you want me to do? I do my best; I play with him all the time and keep him occupied, but it is never enough."

The probability of a dog that runs wild not getting hit over an extended period of time is zero. A positive probability of a catastrophic event repeated will certainly lead to a catastrophe (apologies for the math jargon). Vassya never got hit by a car after years of running wild virtually everywhere daily. He should have been hit a long time ago, but he wasn't. This was not a random event. It was a miracle. He moved with God by his side to protect him.

I wanted to be like Vassya. To be free of all worries of the world, athletic, intuitive and smart. Lutik was the better version of me while Vassya moved with the faith that I admired. He seemed to be closer to God than he was to anything on earth.

I often joke that the only good thing that came out of my time in Coker College was Vassya. It was the worst school I had ever seen. The students were not receptive to the lessons. My students had a 0.6 GPA in my first semester, which was astonishing. I had never failed more than 10 people in my entire life before I arrived at Coker. Here, I failed everyone. Administration gave pressure to pass the students but there was no rhyme or reason to do so. They did not deserve the extra grace. I refused to be corrupted and hoped that the students would be inspired to get better and actually start learning. I was hoping to better Coker. My co-workers were grateful for my bravery to stand up to the administration that had bullied everyone else into grade inflation dynamics. I told them that I had no choice but to preserve my dignity. My soul was not for sale.

My intentions were pure and honorable, but it was all in vain. During the second semester, the students didn't put in any effort. They knew that I had a reputation for failing lazy students but seemed unable to do anything. So, I failed them as well. Eventually, I called the librarian who was a good friend. She asked me why I never turned in my grades. I was shocked by the question.

I said, "I didn't turn in my grades because no one ever contacted me to do so." I got my last paycheck. The school was satisfied that I had completed my duties.

Melissa then responded, "Well, they said you never submitted grades; hence, they created a new grading system for all of your students, and everyone passed."

What a joke. I laughed so hard; Coker was corrupted to the core. There was no line that they were not willing to cross, no worse infraction they could do, and they did it without a second thought.

Chapter 15: The Final Goodbye

Dating Ranny was the easiest thing ever. It was simple and pure. I did not have any obligations attached to her. Even though we did not openly discuss things, we shared a house and a bed. Nevertheless, we went to two swingers' clubs and would publicly date other people. We were okay with that. The freedom I had was like no other.

The reason why I was not exclusive to Ranny is that I was looking for someone to start a family with. I wanted someone smart and educated. Someone who could raise my children and help me plan out a good future for us. A partner for life. Ranny claimed to be educated, having a degree in mechanical engineering. Nevertheless, she was not serious about anything in life. She just went with the flow of life, not having any ambition or future plans. She did not cross my mind as someone I would start a family with - at least at the beginning of our relationship.

While I was at Coker College, Natasha started visiting my family without my knowledge. My mother informed me of this. Natasha visited her frequently and also visited my aunt and grandmother. It made no sense. She had no reason to be in touch with any of my family members; we were done. If she wanted my attention, she should have simply gotten in touch with me. We were in the digital age. This was not hard to do.

Since she did not reach out to me but kept up with the visits, I decided to call her to find out what was going on and how she was fairing. After the second ring, she picked up.

"I've been told that you have become a frequent visitor to everyone in my family," I said. "I don't know what your real intentions are, but I want you to know that I forgive you."

"I did nothing wrong," she replied. "I do not need your forgiveness. Anyway, how are you doing?" That was classic Natasha. How typical of her to act in this way. Unbothered by anything in the world and acting as though she was not in need of anyone. I just laughed at her response. Afterwards, we spent time together occasionally.

One day, I opened up to her about my current lifestyle. I told her that I had been with so many women, I lost count. She confessed that she hadn't been with anyone. Nothing serious had come on her end. She was not interested in casual flings and temporary pleasure. She wanted something real. She kept on meeting men who gave her nothing but migraines. What she wanted was a man who was intelligent, athletic, amusing and owned a beach house. That was her standard.

I was shocked by her revelation. Who wouldn't want to be serious with Natasha? It baffled me. She was drop dead gorgeous, smart, and athletic. She had it all and was the closest being to perfection. My assumption had been that she was spoiled for choice, but apparently, I was completely wrong. Reading into the standard she set for the man she wanted, she was looking for a man that resembled me. I didn't get it at first, but then I remembered that I rented a beach house for my mother and dogs in Charleston. The connection made me chuckle. She was looking for me but we had long thrown away our connection and love.

I held her accountable for the loss in our bond. Beneath her strong-headedness and the courage she possessed, she blamed herself too. She did not want to get intimate with me. She said that she wanted something serious - not temporary love. I believed her. But that did not change the fact that she had broken my heart and trust. I was scared to open myself to her once again. I did not trust her to be loyal or to stay when things got hard in the relationship. I was not willing to take the risk, so I let her go.

This was one of the worst decisions of my life. It was based purely on fear. I let my emotions carve the future for me and turn down the one woman who really got me. I chose to stay with Ranny because I feared getting my heart broken by Natasha. That fear ended up ripping my heart to shreds years later.

Ranny was never going to have the authority that Natasha held with my heart. She came into my life when I had not begun healing from my situation. I formed a defense mechanism to shield myself from the pain of heartbreak. Ranny was my shortcut to love, an easy way out of my misery, a convenience I stumbled upon. She did not make me want to change who I was nor stir any responsibility in me. Natasha was the best thing in my life, she demanded for me to work on our relationship, but I chose laziness and fear instead of facing it head on.

I took the easy way out: Ranny. Unfortunately, shortcuts always fail. I now realize that I had a responsibility on this earth to fall in love and experience it as intended by God. There is no way around it. I will have to put in the work to have a meaningful relationship with loved ones. It takes a lot of hard work to maintain and grow a relationship. The shortcut created a diversion, my responsibility to fall in love does not change due to diversions.

Chapter 16: Let's be Illogical!

It became difficult to date other people while living with Ranny. She filled in the need to meet new people by matching my libido. I had no reason to sleep out nor to meet new people. As time went by, it felt impossible to find someone to start a family with, something I desired deeply. I wanted to become a father. I was sure that I would make a good parent. A year went by and I had no prospective partner for marriage. I was nowhere close to finding a partner. In all honesty, I might not have been completely serious about it. I did not give it my all nor did I try the hardest I could to pursue serious partners. I had become too comfortable in my situation.

So instead of looking outwards, I started looking at Ranny. She was still the same. Never serious about anything. She would agree to everything I said to her, never able to hold a conversation with differing opinions, maybe because she was intimidated by me. She would consent to everything. I never forced her nor coerced her into anything. She simply agreed to everything. Eventually, I saw that time was running by, and I did not want to be extremely old when my children were teenagers.

“Listen,” I said, “Would you like to have a baby?”

“Yes,” she said.

Nothing more, just a simple yes. She agreed to it without taking time to think through what it meant to have a child with me. She was already a mother. She disclosed this to me earlier. She had a son named Deken who lived in Indonesia. She did not open up about who the father was, but she said that she had been married to him, then he cheated on her and left when Deken was a year and a half old. He left his son unattended and without any child support. It often bothered me what type of a man could do that to his own offspring. I had a strong desire to bring Deken to America and reunite him with his mother; then, we would start a family. My plan was for us to live together.

Since it was a serious matter, we had to make some ground rules so as not to cross each other's boundaries. I got a piece of paper and gave it to Ranny to write on. I scribbled some statements on my paper, including rules to be followed. Some of them were that we were not supposed to fight. And if ever we got into a fight, it shouldn't stop us from communicating with each other. No television because it is a distraction. Trips are mandatory for the children to expose them to the world. The children would learn several languages. We would show commitment to be truthful and present. I would be responsible for the children's provisions and needs. She read the document and signed it. Later, she threw it in the trash bin while I was out of town.

I did not take the matter seriously. She was this way about just about everything. I let it go not wanting to begin a confrontation. We went to sleep and that was the end of that. In the morning, I heard the alarm ringing, and I put it to snooze mode. I was not ready to begin the day just yet. Before I could turn back to my dreams, Ranny told me that she came to the USA because of a flawed business partnership that would lead to her being imprisoned in Indonesia. I was shocked by this. That was the second alarm I heard that morning, and still I snoozed. I bought this hook, line, and sinker.

Chapter 17: Some Choices

We had a wedding with a justice of the peace. It was a lovely event held soon after we decided to spend the rest of our lives together. Ranny became very emotional at the wedding. Tears streamed down her face in continuous showers. I felt awry at the sight of this. A wedding was not meant to be a tearjerker; it was a happy event. We were finally legally joined together; that was cause for celebration not tears. Her tears felt misplaced. The marriage would make life easier for her. She would be able to acquire a green card and the plan was to get Deken from Indonesia to live with us. When we got home after the wedding, she approached me with the marriage papers.

“We’re married now. Here’s the marriage certificate, and here’s the pregnancy test. I am pregnant, and you’re mine now,” she stated matter-of-factly.

To say that I was shocked at her actions would be an understatement. I had never seen her act that way before. She was different now. *Mine now?* The words didn’t register well in my mind. Am I a toy? I did not like the sound of that.

“Listen, Ranny,” I said to her. “You’re free, and so am I. I’m not yours. We’re not bound to each other.”

She had changed. Her behavior shifted greatly after the wedding. It was as though she had been putting up a show previously, and the wedding was the last scene she was partaking in. The real her was coming out now. There was something about her stance that made me frightened. Two days later, I was preparing to leave for a new position at East Carolina University, but her behavior at home made me leave the very next day! I was eager to take a break from her already.

In September 2006, there was going to be a dealer bike show in Las Vegas called Interbike. I was planning on having a booth there. I started prepping for the show. I hired a friend of mine, Paul, and two models to staff the booth. Ranny would also join me on the trip. I was hopeful that everything would go smoothly, as planned. I had everything mapped out to the intricate details.

But things didn't go as planned. Ranny happened. She contemplated suicide in the streets of Las Vegas. She proclaimed her intention to end her life and that of our unborn child. I felt like a truck had just run over me. I did not see that coming. How could she think of something as horrible as suicide, especially when carrying my child? I couldn’t believe it. She said it to me, and I felt the ground shake beneath me. My legs became weak and my heart sank to my stomach. Then, she said that it was just a thought. She wasn’t going to actualize it. I told her that she had the perfect timing to pull something like that and the darkest mind to harbor such thoughts. Who has such thoughts?

After the show, I went back to ECU. Ranny actively and openly kept tabs on me. She always had questions lined up for me about where I was and who I was with. At first, I ignored it. It felt like she was just checking up on me. And then it got extreme. It felt tiring talking to her because there was nothing but an interrogation lined up for me. I felt like she was bugging me. It was too much. She was getting into my head to the point that it felt like harassment. She was crossing my boundaries and testing my limits.

I confronted her one day and asked her why the woman who was going to have my child felt the need to terrorize me so much. She was getting out of control. Wasn't it enough that we were married and expecting a child together? Why would I jeopardize what we had? It made no sense to me where she got these insecurities from. I made myself clear.

"You have to stop this now," I said. "No more of this nonsense!"

She remained silent. It was like speaking to a wall. The red flags were turning crimson now, but it was too late. The warning alarm rang once more, but I was in too deep to do anything about it. She was pregnant with my child. I decided to speak to God. I told Him that I was willing to pay whatever price as long as my child was safe. I've been holding on to that promise to this very day, paying the hefty price that comes with protecting the children from their own mother and from more damage.

I was teaching and working on my business at the same time. I would have made a lot more money if I focused all my energy on the business but there was a thrill I got from teaching that couldn't be satisfied by the business. I was not willing to lose that joy. I was actively working at ECU, a well-known institution, and I loved my job there. The coworkers and friends were all positive and upbeat people.

On one of the good days at school, I was joking around with the secretary and a student worker. I don't remember what exactly the discussion was about. It was a fun conversation and we were playing and joking around. In a casual way, the secretary picked up a yardstick and pretended to hit me with it as punishment for what I said. To return the favor and as payback, I took the same yardstick and pretended to hit her with it. We were simply playing and laughing. Nevertheless, the department chair, who was sitting in her office, came out of nowhere and yelled, "Stop it!"

Her tone was scary. It sounded like a tone that would be used at an intervention when someone was being raped or murdered. It shook me. I found it strange that she used that tone when we were clearly just playing. The discussions did not involve her nor were we disturbing her by our actions. She was interrupting a cordial engagement where she was not welcome nor required. I found it odd.

I concluded that she was not mentally stable. How can a normal person have a problem with others having friendly interactions? The secretary had a look on her face that seemed like she had just seen a ghost because of the jolting voice. The room fell silent after this. The chair did nothing. We assumed that she just had a mental breakdown at the time and she was back to her senses now. After a week, she called me to her office. I had a good look at her this time. She was a tall woman, taller than me. She had an antagonistic look on her face. She looked at me like a fugitive who had just committed a crime and she was the judge, witness, and attorney.

She claimed that I had sexually harassed the secretary. I must have heard that wrong. Sexually harassed the secretary? It amazed me how the whole situation had been taken out of context. She continued with her speech, reprimanding me for my actions. I couldn't stand her talk but I remained dumbfounded by the accusation, still unable to grasp how she came to that

conclusion. I stared at the hole in her face from which she spoke. She left gaps in her speech for me to interject and object to her claims, but I stood still and let her speak. I knew that she was trying to bait me into speaking up then twisting my response as disrespect to authority. I knew better.

I remained silent and polite in my demeanor. She must have interpreted my choice as a sign of weakness. For the next fifteen minutes, she soliloquized on my bad behavior. I thought she would stop at the end of one sentence, but she somehow found more words and ways to say the same thing. Apparently, she had all the facts on her table. She knew everything there was to know about my conduct and who I was. After she was done, she looked me in the eye and finally gave me the respect I deserved during the entire monologue.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” she asked,

I stared at her. “We were all playing and having fun until you started screaming like a lunatic,” I said.

She could not handle the truth. She kicked me out of her office. Apparently, she could dish it out but couldn’t take it. I walked out and thought that she would let go of the matter entirely. She got the facts wrong and was blowing things out of proportion. She filed a sexual harassment complaint against me in the secretary’s name. The funniest part of this is that the secretary was more surprised than I was. It was unbelievable. The secretary decided that she would compose a letter and indicate that she was not in any way or form sexually harassed. This called the chair into question. It was improper of her to file a claim on behalf of someone else claiming sexual harassment. The matter took a pause for some time.

Later in the semester, I was instructed to meet the university attorney. My conscience was clear. I was innocent. I had done nothing wrong. However, so as to finish up the matter quickly, I was open to a proposal made by the university. I was to meet with the attorney every week. The attorney was a beautiful lady who believed my side of the story. She laughed at the whole mess. She thought of it as absurd and an abuse of power. Which, in fact, it was. It was also a misuse of the sexual harassment system put to protect the rights of individuals who are violated. In the past, these systems did not exist. These laws have been put in place to protect people, not to cause havoc and falsely accuse people because of personal rivalry.

The attorney confirmed that I was absolutely innocent of any wrongdoing. The chair was dissatisfied with the amount of turmoil she had already brought into my life. All my mail to the department ended up being returned to the sender. This occurred even though I had a mailbox. In addition, my office phone and computer were removed. One after the other she went on finding ways to make my life harder. She was trying to prove a point - that she had more power than I did. She had created frustration in my life to the point of me contemplating quitting.

It was ridiculous, and it wasn’t worth the fight. How idle could she be to be plotting her next villainous move against a worker of the school? I learned from the other faculty members that she subjected a new person to the same thing every year. It was her *modus operandi* for the previous seven years. Victimizing the newbies. It was disgusting and sad. I thought that she had

an issue with me for disrespecting her, but the real issue was with her mental health. She must have been sick in the head.

There was another new faculty member who was very sweet. If I quit, he would be the subject of the chair's evil. He was too sweet and innocent to go through that. I could handle my own. So, I came back in the spring semester. Another source of motivation to come back was that I did not want to stay home with Ranny. It felt good to be the shield between the other newbie and the chair. It felt like I was doing service to the community. I couldn't let him suffer. I couldn't understand her appetite for misery, but there are some things in life that go without an explanation. It is just what it is.

During Christmas break, when I came home, it felt weird staying with Ranny. She was completely different. The events that occurred would have made any sane man run away, but I had to keep the promise that I made. I had to stay for my daughter.

My daughter was born on April 14, 2007. It was perfect timing. I flew in from the university and managed to be present for her delivery. It was the most unique experience. A memorable and cherished moment. I rushed Ranny to the hospital when it was time. One of the nurses asked if she wanted an epidural, and she quickly shook her head saying yes. She was in a lot of pain. I had never seen a needle so big. It was almost the same size as a drill bit set. It was enormous. I grew worried that she would break if they put it in her. The sight of it had me knocked out. I was on my feet but completely absent. The nurse sensed my reaction.

"He's out. Get him a chair," she said.

Moments later, my daughter was born. For her, I will forever be grateful to Ranny. Ranny did not gain much weight during the pregnancy. Dyanella, our daughter, weighed almost 9 pounds. She was an ugly baby. We joke about this, but she was beautiful in my eyes. She has grown to become extraordinarily beautiful now. She is admired by all the boys who lay their eyes on her. I loved her from the moment I saw her.

Holding Dyanella for the first time was the most memorable experience of all. Relief washed over me when I held her. She was safe and sound in my arms. I was overwhelmed by joy when I held her tiny fingers. She was so tiny and delicate; I was afraid of hurting her in any way. I held her gently, setting a balance between squeezing her and holding her. I couldn't stop looking at her face and her puffy eyes. She was precious. A sight to behold. Her scent was calming to me. I couldn't stop myself from kissing her. The tears welled in my eyes because of the joy in my heart. I never thought that I could love someone so much until I held her in my arms. The love I felt for her was extensive. And it is the same to this day. It was the same experience with every subsequent child. I feel overwhelmed by love at the sight of my children.

Ranny chose the name Dyanella. I loved it as well. I was not surprised to see her grow into a difficult little girl. Ranny's psychological state could only breed an environment that hardens a child. But Dyanella was my sweet child, and I adored her endlessly. That would never change.

On the Monday following the birth, Ranny drove Dyanella home, and I took a plane back to school. When I arrived, I received the strangest call. According to Ranny, Lutik was growling, and she was terrified that he would eat Dyanella. That was the craziest thing I had ever heard. I laughed so hard my ribs hurt. Lutik was my companion; he was our protector and was looking to protect Dyanella. She was a restless baby and cried constantly. He would never do anything to her. Dyanella was crying all the time, and Lutik interpreted it as Ranny having done something to the baby, so he started growling at her. Ranny got scared. The next day, she realized that Lutik was watching out for Dyanella. Ranny appreciated Lutik and started to grow fonder of him.

Dyanella had eczema as an infant. She would scratch herself and start crying. The more it itched, the more she wailed. This meant that she was always crying, translating to sleepless nights. Regardless, we were a complete and happy family.

Back at ECU, the other faculty members became aware of my situation with the chair. In the seven years of torture that she had reigned supreme, no one had dared to stand up to her. They were pleased that someone was able to put her in her place. I felt like I was doing the right thing. Many felt the courage I radiated and chose to speak up through me. It is not easy standing up to the face of injustice. It took a lot of bravery, and as Aristotle once said, "Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the quality that guarantees the others." It takes courage to tap into the other virtues and qualities that would assist you. How can you be righteous or honest without courage? It is impossible.

The department notified me that they would vote to renew my position. The plan was for me to pass the vote, and then the chair would veto the offer. After that, a vote of no confidence would lead to the removal of the chair. This would cause a new chair to be assigned that would reinstate the offer. The chair brought this day upon herself. Her actions came back to bite her in the butt.

I remained hopeful that the university would replace the chair with a better occupant. Someone who deserved the title and someone righteous. The rest of the faculty were amazing, hardworking, and honest.

One day at the end of the summer, I received a call informing me that things went as planned. A unanimous vote of no confidence was made against the chair and she was out. My friend happily told me that the new chair approved my hire. However, life took me on a different route.

I had opened a store on Ocracoke Island called Ocracoke Bike and Scuba. The island was famous for its great tourism and exceptional shelling. I rented a store for \$700 a month, and it was an outdoorsy surf style shop. I was knowledgeable about kayaking and cycling. I was also learning about scuba diving. I was excited and wanted to give it my full attention even though I had close to zero customers. This made the offer made in East Carolina unappealing. I rejected the offer and gave my full attention to the store.

My friend was shocked and disappointed by my decision. He asked me whether the business was making enough money for me. I said yes and told him that I grossed way over a

million dollars that year without any real employees. He was shocked because my lifestyle did not reveal my net worth. I drove an old beat-up car, cycled everywhere, and dressed like a homeless person. That hasn't changed. I was not about the lavish life and portraying an image of success.

The store had an appealing view and sense for me. It was an octagonal store with beautiful views. It was a good place to spend the day. I happily spent hours there. At the time I opened the shop, I had no idea that it would change the trajectory of my life permanently. I was making tons of money before I moved to the island. That notwithstanding, I wanted to make more and more by following the laws of capitalism.

This store changed my perspective to a socialistic one. I was making roughly \$200,000 or so yearly, and I could have easily made more. I started pointlessly spending money on nonsense. I remodeled my house, bought a truck for work, and had other discretionary expenditures. I did not care about money as much as I used to. I was the one to choose what to do with the money without fear and the constant need to make more and more. I became so happy. I was always smiling and having fun. Dyanela, Ranny, and the dogs joined me in this heaven. Nothing could be more perfect.

I released all the bitterness I had from my experience with the chair. I was glad that I experienced everything while there. I learned a lot during that period. Without her bullying, I would have never opened my little store. The lesson I had from this was that removing options you don't want in your life is necessary because it makes the proper possible. It is fundamental to remove distractions from your life. ECU was not the best place for me. By removing that option, it led me to Ocracoke which was a truly heavenly place for my family. Especially for my peace of mind.

Chapter 18: Hatteras Island

Ocracoke was an amazing place but it got boring after some time. I decided to keep the store and moved to the next island in the chain, Hatteras. This happened when Dyanella was five months old. I would take the whole family kayaking every single day. During the winter, we went to the pool in Rodanthe, to teach Dyanella to swim. Beach trips were a daily occurrence. My mother joined the party. It was a beautiful place and everyone loved it.

While on this island, Vassya went berserk. He was overjoyed to be in such a free space. He played outside all day because we did not have many neighbors. He explored the area and went back to his hunting habits. He killed at least ten nutrias outside our home on the island. He also killed birds, ducks, cats, rabbits, possums and raccoons making the perimeter of the house smell horrible because of the dead carcasses. I took him to the beach twice a day where he played with flocks of small birds by chasing them for as long as he could. The birds joined in the game. It was quite the site. Tourists would marvel and place bets while watching the show. It was a daily treat for us all.

Hatteras had a policy that did not allow dogs to go on the beach unleashed. The ticket was \$150 for each offense. I budgeted \$2,000 for a year's worth of fines. I was free, therefore, my dogs would be free as well. Fortunately, despite going to the beach daily with the dogs unleashed, I only got one ticket in two years. I became exceptionally good at evading the rangers. They knew me and knew I had my dogs running free but they never caught me with the dogs off leash. Luck was on my side.

When Dyanella was nine months old, Ranny got pregnant with our second child. While she did not put on any weight carrying Dyanella, with Hisland (our son), she got huge. It was obvious that the child was going to be gigantic. At 32 weeks, Ranny developed complications. We went to the small local hospital in Nags Head. The doctor was terrified. I did not want an unsure doctor for my wife and child, especially an unsure and terrified doctor.

We decided to take her to Chesapeake Hospital in Virginia which had better facilities. They suggested putting potassium to slow down the pregnancy, so I urged them to look at the baby first. It was an instinct I had. It took them an entire week to look at the baby; when they did, the baby was extremely huge. He weighed six pounds at 33 weeks. This suggested that when he was to be born, he would be close to 12 pounds. He was extraordinary from the beginning.

After they stopped giving her the potassium minerals, labor was immediately induced. While in labor, Ranny craved sushi.

“Are you sure?” I said, looking at her intently.

“Yes, I want it now!” she screamed.

I honored her wishes and went to get sushi for her. As soon as I got back, the baby's head popped out. At that moment, there wasn't a doctor nearby, but one came to the room just in time. I regretted going to get the sushi. I should have been there the entire time. She was in pain and people usually have irrational requests in these times, I should have stuck to my instincts. It is key never to make decisions under duress.

We were now a family of six. I named our son Hisland after the Hatteras Island that held dear memories to our family. His middle name was Pavlik, after my father. Dyanella was unable to pronounce his middle name properly and would call him “Apik.” It was a beautiful mistake and became the name that we all used. She was also unable to pronounce her own name and would call herself “Lala,” a nickname that also stuck. How magical and poetic that she determined the names that would be accorded to herself and her brother for very many years to come.

Apik was the sweetest baby ever. He did not cause much trouble growing up. All he would do was eat and sleep in repetition. He was a peaceful child and rarely cried. He was plump and healthy. His face was the cutest and burst into smiles every second. In nine months, he grew so big he caught up with his sister. They looked like twins. He had taken the genes of my family physically.

In time, he became stubborn, a trait he got from both Ranny and I. It was funny to see myself in him. We were both directly and indirectly influencing his habits. We are not to blame for what was handed down to us; it is our responsibility to change for the better. We must accept our deficits and work on them because we are the ones who will suffer the consequences of inaction. I learned much through Apik. I only hope that he will learn to unlearn some things as well.

After the birth of Apik in Hatteras, I went kayaking with Dyanella alone, initiating her afternoon nap in my arms. I took her to the pool for an afternoon swim, and later we went cycling as she slept on the back of my bike. We were still inseparable. In the evenings, we would all go to the beach as a family. The routine remained unchanged. Ranny was going through postpartum depression during this time. She didn’t want to go out much and would essentially lock herself in the house.

We lived in Hatteras for two years - two incredibly beautiful and healthy years of our children’s lives. Throughout our stay, we were dependent on the business. It covered all our expenses. Unfortunately, the economy began to sink in 2008 which affected the business negatively, requiring me to go back to teaching. This was not completely disappointing, I missed teaching, and I looked forward to academia again. The break had been amazing but it was time for me to go back. I was getting bored of the routine and peaceful life. I remember the moment that I had my final moment of realization, I was looking over the sunset on the horizon from my deck and said, “This is possibly the most beautiful thing I have ever seen; it’s time for me to go.” Many people would have chosen to stay in Hatteras for the rest of their lives. I thought that life there would be satisfying as well, but there was more in life than what was there. I had a purpose inside me that could not be ignored.

Soon after, I got a call from the Dean of the College of Bahamas. She knew that I was an island person. I never got sand fever nor grew tired of the heat. There were no shopping malls and no distractions from what life is meant to be. People think that they can survive life on the island for a long time but it becomes boring for most. Life becomes dull and after the newness of that life fades away, most begin to miss the fast life and choose to leave soon afterwards.

I knew how to keep myself busy in life. I was a swimming, cycling and kayaking fanatic.

I was a savored cookie with my PhD in math. My bicycle business was essential in allowing the move, as the cost of living on the island was astronomical. I needed the extra income to support the family. The business would allow us to live free of stress. We once had a water bill of \$750 and an electricity bill of \$800. Food was about twice as much as in the USA. Add dog food and the costs are enough to always have you on edge. But life on the island was totally worth it. Given a choice, I would relive this part of my life.

Chapter 19: My Mother

My relationship with my mom was complicated for a very long time. It was not easy for me to get along with her. I believe that many of the events in my life resulted from the actions of the preceding generation. When my father was alive, my mother would always act as a victim. I always believed that she was a victim until the time of my dad's passing, when I came to understand that she was the offender all along.

She would play games to deliberately enrage my father. Afterwards, he would end up being violent towards her. That was her goal - to paint my father as the big bad guy. She couldn't equal his physical prowess. He was 6'1" and 250 pounds with little body fat. She took time to lay her trap, and he always walked right into it. She exploited his weaknesses and frailty.

Afterwards, she would drift the attention to herself and throw herself a pity party. She would sit in her sadness and remain there. My father was indeed very harsh. I am not trying to defend him. He was morally wrong for being violent to my mother. That was completely unnecessary; he would have ignored her, but she was too shrewd for him. Even when he realized her tactics, he stayed silent.

My sister, Elena, was like a second mother while I was young. I loved her dearly. Unfortunately, she had pointless arguments with my father on several occasions throughout our upbringing. At the age of 18, she moved away from the family home. She would come back from time to time to ask for money, but it never worked. My father was made from tough love during World War II; he raised us with tough love. He made sure we earned our keep. She felt entitled to our father's money, but my father knew differently. My father and I came to an agreement quite early in my life on the subject of money. I never asked anyone for money. I would work for whatever I needed.

Once, Elena and I traveled to New York to see our grandmother. Our grandmother gave Elena money she had amassed. A whooping \$3,000 on this trip. She gave me \$50, but I did not take it. I had not done anything to deserve it. Giving me the \$50 turned into an event. Elena said she would take the money and give it to me later on. While on the car ride back home, Elena told me that she had noticed that I was envious of her because she got more money than me. It hadn't even crossed my mind to compare the money between us. This perturbed me.

I did not need the money. I did not work for the \$50 offered by our grandma. I was surprised at her taking all that money from an old woman. I lived by my principles no matter how she viewed money. She had her own principles. She had a need for money from an early age. I did too, but not as much.

My father was a man of solutions. He would always navigate a situation to find a better path instead of worsening the situation. I have grown to love and appreciate him more and more as the years go by. What I have been unable to digest and accept was the fact that he subjected himself to so much suffering throughout their marriage. It was confusing to me. He had the power to put an end to it, but he chose not to leave. He should have rightfully left my mother, but that was never an option for him. He lived in his agony daily and did nothing about it.

My mother has played the victim all her life. She identified as a victim and made that role her personality. She frequently made my father look like the devil himself. I can only imagine how hurt he felt by my mother's actions. Despite the hell he was subjected to, he chose not to modify his reality other than calling it quits with his life. He bottled up the emotions and remained in a toxic relationship. He thought that it was the only way to live his life.

Despite my acknowledgement of the mystery behind my father staying in an abusive relationship, I fell victim to the same circumstance in my life. I married a mentally ill woman and stayed with her for 15 years. In all this time, it never crossed my mind to leave her. Not because of her mental condition per se, but the ripple effects it had on the family. She was financially irresponsible and selfish to the point of not considering the children. Her mental health ended up jeopardizing the safety of our children. Nonetheless, I thought that they needed their mother and stayed. It never crossed my mind that they would be better off without her.

I came to understand the conundrum my father must have had. It is not easy to walk away from a family life built over many years. There are so many considerations to make, so many ties and layers of emotions involved. There is a familiarity that becomes comfortable. I no longer blame him for his choices; he did what he thought was best for us and what was comfortable. I had not discovered a life for myself until my wife, Ranny, shook things up to the point of almost killing me. She turned life upside down and brought a reality check to my life. I needed to reevaluate what was important to me. That was when I decided that I had had enough.

Life is never short of new experiences and opportunities to start afresh. It is never too late to rewrite your story and give it the ending you deem fit if you have air in your lungs. It is not a curse to have made mistakes in your life nor to have ignored the many signs the universe gave you. It is important to extend grace to yourself for your choices. Most importantly, when you know better, do better.

As fate would have it, I ended up marrying a woman that was identical to my mother. Psychologists must have a theory around these situations. While growing up, I learned love to be like the love I found with Ranny: a cycle of emotional abuse and attachment to the obligations we had with each other. I was incapable of noticing the red flags in Ranny because, in my mind, she ticked all the boxes of what love should be. Ranny had similar characteristics to my mother. When I reflected back on my parents' marriage, I could draw the dots of similarity to my own marriage, and I became concerned that Ranny and I would have the same fate as them, existing in a loveless and exploitative marriage. I was scared that the generational curse might continue in my family if I did not step up to put an end to it. I knew first-hand the effects that such a marriage would have on the children. They shouldn't have to grow up in such an environment.

After the death of my father, my mother and I became a bit closer. She assisted me in the early stages of having a company. She was in charge of shipping and hiring of personnel. With the business experiencing exponential growth, we needed to make adjustments and recruit a few individuals. The working environment turned chaotic. My mother needed money to fill up the vehicle with gas as she was helping out with shipment, so I handed her my credit card for that purpose.

I did not foresee her misusing my account for vanity. Ultimately, she used it for shopping and non-essentials. She would go into Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman Marcus, and other stores to shop 'til she dropped. She was exceptionally good at misusing money. I spent an entire year trying to reason with her to reduce her spending, but it was all pointless. She continued to exhibit financial irresponsibility. So, I did what I had to do. I took the credit card from her. Her behavior was astonishing.

Later, my mother asked me to create a bank account in her name alone. She said that it would be a rainy-day fund for the future, should I divorce Ranny. It sounded reasonable, and I believed her intentions. I opened an account in her name and put \$150,000 in it. She would spend the money from time to time, and I would also utilize it for certain business dealings. Other than that, I did not spend it. Furthermore, since it was not in my name, I did not know how much the account still held nor how the money was being spent. I trusted her, so I did not worry.

Around the same time, my sister was “complicated,” and my mother enabled her habits and gave my sister a pat on the shoulder as though she was perfect and incapable of any wrong. At the same time, she would harass me for being imperfect even though I was not that bad. I had a lot going for me, and I was generally an upright person. The treatment she was giving me was beyond my comprehension. I assumed that a mother treated her children equally, but my mother was not a typical mother.

Ironically, the same thing happened with my children. They judged me based on an unfair scale of perfection. One minor mistake was unforgivable in their eyes. They judged their mother based on total incompetence. Anything she did that was below average was praised. She received flowers for doing the bare minimum. Goalposts need to be equal for everyone. Continuously switching goalposts creates more issues.

My mother continued ruining the little that was left of our relationship. I once read somewhere that what we feed ourselves is what we replicate. That was true in many ways. I could find flaws in my mother for how she was and what she would always be, I could mention them to her, but there was no point in it if she couldn't see the problem in her actions. She treated us the best she knew how to. She raised us in the way that she knew. She fed into us what was already in her. She could not give us what she herself did not have. She was incapable of it. There was no point in expecting her to change.

I have always been afraid of replicating the mistakes that my parents made with my sister and I, which were the mistakes that had been replicated from generations prior to theirs. I wanted to break the cycle of trauma that had been passed down. The broken legacy was going to end with me. It is my hope and belief that this book will help others bring closure to the endless cycles in their lives like those that plagued my family for generations. Perhaps by reading this, others may be aware of the toxicity that has existed in their families and somehow find a way to end the cycle.

Despite our strained relationship, my mother traveled with me wherever I went. She went to the Virgin Islands, Furman University, Charleston, and Hatteras with me for about five years.

She enjoyed tagging along, and I enjoyed her company; she was great with the kids. We led a happy life in our own way.

Baba Adela is my mother's mother, my grandmother. She was the coolest person in our entire family by all scales. She was extremely hard-working, generous, smart, and funny. She had numerous positive character traits that people admired her for. It would be hard to pinpoint a single trait that stood out in her. She embodied every virtue. They all came naturally to her.

While I was in college, I lived with her for a few years and grew extremely close to her. I adored her, and she loved me the most out of all her grandkids. Everyone knew that I was going to be "special" in my own way, and she agreed.

She was overjoyed when Dyanella was born and doubly so when Apik was delivered. She loved her great grandkids with her entire being. We tried to spend as much time with her as possible. Ranny adored her as well and always told Baba stories about going back to school to get a master's degree. I was surprised at those stories. However, they remained just that, stories.

Unfortunately, Baba died under unnecessary duress. I will not get into the details of her cause of death because she wouldn't have wanted it. She was wonderful for most of her 97 years on earth. I miss her so much. My baby's middle name is Adel, but my mom calls her Adelia, after my grandmother. I hope that my daughter will grow up to be half the woman my Baba was. I did not see my grandmother much after I left Philadelphia, less so when we left the USA in 2009. Had I known that her time was nearing, I would have dropped everything to be with her. Her life was precious. I live in honor of her life. This is how I choose to honor her presence and impact in my life, by being like her.

Chapter 20: The Bahamas – Year One

After our stay in Hatteras Island, the family moved to the Bahamas. I got a great position as a faculty member in the university's math department. Whenever I fell short of money, I would get support from the business. My entire salary went to rent, utilities and health insurance. It was a cycle of constantly working to survive, but I was happy.

Despite my hard work and efforts, we were the poorest family in our neighborhood of Sandypoint. To be fair, everyone else was super wealthy. It was a beautiful neighborhood with about 500 houses. Almost everyone had a dog, child, and a boat. That was the standard. Fortunately, due to the recession, we managed to get a good deal on the house for \$2,500 per month while everyone else was paying at least double. It was the perfect timing for us. This was a sign that our stay here was meant to be.

It was never a dull day on the island. I was athletic and always found some form of amusement to occupy my time. It also helped that the Bahamas had one of the world's greatest resorts: Atlantis, a world-class yoga ashram (Sivananda). They also had great gyms with state-of-the-art equipment. In addition, there was a chess federation which grew to become my hobby. I was basically in heaven on earth.

The first two years there were the best years of my life. I was actively involved with the kids. We would go to the playground for two hours daily. Afterwards, we would go swimming and kayaking as a family, a tradition of ours. All the rich people would come with their motorized boats and we would scurry up with our kayaks to make way for them. They looked down on us like we were a bunch of hillbillies. They were not used to seeing people like us. Eventually, they came to find us interesting and cool when they saw that we were enjoying our kayaking and cycling virtually every day. We had a great dedication to what made us happy. We did not care about the opinions of others. We had each other and that was all that mattered.

In the Bahamas, Lutik and Vassya were having the time of their lives. They swam alongside the kayak on our trips to the beach. Every day they would tirelessly swim and run beside the canal while I paddled the kayak. Since we moved quicker than them, I made sure that I was traveling in both directions to keep us together. Once we got back to the beach, Vassya would join me in my morning swims while Lutik would watch over the kids. Vassya was a great swimmer who gave me a tough time in the short swimming sprints. I gave him a hard time during the longer distance swims.

It became something that tourists spent their time spectating. Everywhere we went we would somehow draw the attention of people. I spent an hour every morning with the children playing at the beach. These were the most memorable moments. Ranny almost never joined us. She was still going through postpartum depression. I took up my position and spent time with the kids to give her space. We had a lovely time.

Living on a canal was fantastic. In the morning, the stingrays would enter the canal system behind our house and in the evenings, they would leave with the sun. You could observe them from the backyard, like a flock of birds flying in the ocean. You could also see some barracudas

swimming here and there. They were not the big ones so there was nothing to fear. At the beach, we could swim with the sea turtles almost daily. Overall, it was a wonderful experience. No moment of the day was short of having something special. The best part of our house was the massive dwarf coconut tree in the backyard. The Indian and the dwarf coconuts were as sweet as sugar in comparison to the others. I would chop the coconuts for the children daily and we would all enjoy them immensely. The juice was delicious; the children constantly asked for it. The inner jelly was the best part. Fresh young coconuts have jelly on the inside, mature coconuts are hard on the inside. It's important to chop then before the jelly harden. No one liked the coconuts after the inside hardened.

I also took the kids and the dogs to the beach in the mornings. The children would chant begging us not to swim. It was their little joke for me. They wanted to swim; I wanted them to swim; everyone wanted to play and have fun. So, they said it as a prank. I laughed and they laughed at their own joke. They knew that I wouldn't let that happen. They both took off their clothes and ran to the water making all kinds of sounds. It was beautiful to watch. Every day was sacred and filled with beautiful moments. The first year in the Bahamas was a dream for everyone.

Ranny was not well this entire time. I understood that the recovery process from postpartum took time. I did my best to support her in my way. I would take the kids off her hands so that she would have time for herself and to rest.

Each year, Ranny would go with the kids to Indonesia for a couple of months to meet her side of the family and to spend time with Deken. They went to water parks and safaris. Ranny had a huge family and the kids loved that they had very many cousins and a large family to be part of. They also enjoyed traveling to amusement parks. Our children's lives were filled with so much adventure and love. We did a good job of exposing them to a life of freedom and the endless opportunities to have fun.

At the end of the first year, the conflict with my mother escalated. Our family house was in bad shape when my father passed away; it was about 29 years old. My mother decided to buy a condo and moved. Since she moved out, I decided to renovate the house to make it homey again. We had grown up in this house, and I saw it as a sacred place that hosted all the great memories we had and was a remembrance of my father.

I ended up spending around a \$150,000 renovating the house. I did not think that the house being in my mother's name would be an issue. It was our family home, and she was my mother. I spent an additional \$20,000 on landscaping which was totally worth it. The transformation was notably impeccable. I installed brand-new wood floors in the house. I redid the driveway and the walls because they were sagging from being attached by nails rather than screws. We erected a large shed and concrete deck and completely rebuilt one side of the basement while the other was partially done.

The house was completely transformed. It became more appealing and felt like home once again. I felt proud of making the changes and improving my childhood home. It felt like my responsibility to take care of the house as the only man of the house. I had done nothing to inherit

it, so this made me feel worthy of it. I had at least done something to add onto the house. I also took on all the property taxes and bills.

Despite all my efforts, my mother got the idea of selling the house and keeping all the money because it was in her name. Naturally, my sister supported her. I was beyond angry and bewildered. I did not care about the house being sold but denying me a single cent from the sale was an atrocity. I had spent all my savings on that house. Why wasn't she concerned with it prior to that? It angered me that she watched me do everything to make the house better only to ridicule my actions in the end. I got frustrated and stopped paying the expenses.

While in the Bahamas, I emailed her and told her that I wanted all the money that I had kept in her account for my future. I could no longer trust her to have my best interest at heart. I had come to learn that she was only looking out for herself. I was simply a means to an end for her. She replied saying that she had deposited the money in my account. I checked my account and nothing was deposited. I asked her once more, making sure that she got the account right.

"Of course, it was the account you told me about. There was \$124."

I checked my account again, and she had actually sent me \$124. I could not believe it. My jaw dropped. From the \$150,000 I had deposited for my safety, she had used it all. I only used a fraction of that money on business transactions but that was all. I expected to get roughly \$50,000 to \$80,000 returned. I wondered what she had done with all that money. Was she using the account to pay for the house expenses after I stopped? My head started pounding. There was something wrong with her. She had no empathy or sympathy for her son. It was then that I also concluded she would actually sell the house and would keep all the money to herself. She had proven to me that that was all she cared about. She ended up doing exactly that.

I could not believe that my mother could play me like that. I got flashbacks of her with my dad, and it was the same. She would constantly play games to get what she wanted no matter the cost to the other party. She was doing the same to her own son, making herself a victim. She was draining the life and money out of me for her pleasure and selfishness. I had been relying on that money as an emergency fund, but it was gone. Were these the rewards of putting your trust in your mother?

I decided that I would not suffer in silence like my father did. I hired a dispute attorney to file a conversion case against my mom. It was going to be a straightforward case as she had thrown away most of my stuff from the house, without my consent. There was also an element of fraud in the case. I knew my mother and sister would team up together. They were birds of a feather. She would find a way to scheme and dump the money on my sister, forcing me to go against her even though that was not my intention.

She offered to have a settlement for the case, which I agreed to. I simply wanted my money back, nothing more. However, it was all talk. She did not give anything. I decided to cut all ties with her while I was in the Bahamas. I lost a huge amount of my net worth in an instant. I wondered whether I would be able to recover from the damage she had done to my accounts. It felt like I was

starting from scratch again. I expected to carry the weight of the betrayal and resentment but I did not. I did not get any flashbacks that stifled me with regret. It took some time but it faded away.

The next year began in the best year of my life. I played with the kids and dogs and kept active. I focused on the good things in my life. I couldn't keep myself from smiling even if I tried to stop. I had a lot to live for. I learned that hoarding money is not the best way to use it. I let go of it and my life improved. I released the hold that it had on me, opening my palms to receive more. Moving forward, I decided that I would share everything with those in need. This was a better way to live my life. It was more purposeful.

Chapter 21: The Bahamas - Year Two

In the first year of living in the Bahamas, I became the Bahamas National Chess Champion. I hadn't played competitive chess in 15 years but I had something in me. I was not expecting to get to such a high level that fast. It was as though I had never stopped playing. The shocking thing about this win was my wife's reaction. Ranny was not pleased at all. Maybe because I was good at a number of things like swimming, cycling, math and now chess. Her reaction was unexpected. I was her husband. I thought she would be happy. We were one; my win was her win. That was not the case. She was livid.

The Bahamas marathon came to my attention during our second year in the Bahamas. This was a hard task. I wasn't sure that I wanted to take it up. It took everything in me, the very last drop of sweat my body could emit, to finish. I had only run a marathon once in my life in my youth when I was a bit skinny. This marathon was a big deal for me. It would prove a lot to myself. I was 35 years of age and weighed 205 lbs. I was the heaviest runner in the marathon group.

Unfortunately, I didn't do much training. I didn't have enough spare time to do so anyway. The only training I had was one long run while pushing my kids in a stroller as they slept, just a week before the marathon. My body felt sore and was aching for the next week. I thought about quitting because I wondered how I was going to survive the marathon if that simple training proved to be difficult. On the day of the marathon, I was still sore from the training run and my legs had not loosened up. The marathon track was mapped such that I would cross the front of my neighborhood, Sandport, twice. Because of this, Ranny and the kids would be present in the stroller to watch as I ran. This gave me motivation to get to the finish line.

I rode to the marathon with my neighbor who was doing a shorter race. I did not have any money, keys, or my phone. I was hoping to return home with my family after the race. My first hiccup during the race was when I crossed my house for the first time (around mile 16) and did not catch sight of Ranny nor the children. I met many of my neighbors who came out to watch us run and motivate us, but my entire family was nowhere to be seen.

Nevertheless, I ignored my unsettled heart and remained hopeful that they would be present for the second round. They weren't. It was the 22-mile mark. I was so disappointed that I felt like there was no point in running anymore. I wanted my family to be present as I accomplished something remarkable, and Ranny let me down. I was looking forward to waving at them and seeing their proud faces as I hit the different milestones. Their absence was a thorn in my side. It drilled inside me and left a mark. I stopped running and began walking.

I started hallucinating as I walked. I couldn't control my mind and keep balance in my body. I peed and the hallucinations stopped. It was the weirdest thing. Turns out, urine is toxic to the body. In response to the peeing, my body became dehydrated, and I started drinking more water that would lead to me hallucinating again. It was a continuous cycle that I couldn't stop. The marathon turned into a nightmare. I considered giving up altogether but I dredged on, realizing that my life was at risk.

I eventually got to the finish line somehow. I still had hope that my family would be waiting for me there and that there was a plausible excuse or reason why they had taken so long. They still weren't there. I was stranded with nothing on myself. I didn't have money, nor a car, nor a friend to help. My feet could no longer hold my weight. I was extremely fatigued. I felt helpless and lonely even at the end of this great accomplishment. It felt meaningless. I had finished the marathon just before the 6-hour mark. It felt like a wasted experience despite it being the biggest event on the island all year round. It was so big that it shut down Bay St, the main thoroughfare on the island. You couldn't get around the island because of the marathon.

I was abandoned at a time when I needed the most support. It left me heartbroken. I did not deserve this. I had done nothing but be a good father and husband. All I wanted in return was to share precious moments with my children and to have their presence during important milestones in my life. I ended up hitching a ride with one of the people who was running the short race. When I got to the house, it was empty. From my calculations, it would be at least two hours before Ranny got home. I waited patiently until she got home.

I asked her what in the world she was doing, and she said that she had been shopping. It took her longer because the roads were closed for the marathon. I proceeded to ask her if she knew that I was taking part in the marathon. She looked oblivious of that fact, completely blank despite my repeated mention of it. A part of me gave up on her on that day. It went to show that she did not value me and the things I cared about. She only remembers things that were important to her, like shopping and all the different ways she could misuse money. I stayed in the relationship because of the kids. They were too young and innocent.

Apart from that experience, the second year ended up being the best year of my life. Apik finally learned how to swim and bike. We spent hours in the playground having fun. The dogs were happy to go to the beach and fight playfully at home. Kayaking was a daily routine for us and the kids made so many friends. We would go to the playground when it was empty and in a short time, it would be filled with children. We were the life of the party or the playground, in this case.

I was teaching upper-level classes at school and my students grew to become my friends. I had the entire class attend my Group Theory study to prepare for the final exam at my home for three nights in a row before the final. We would start at 4 pm and they would leave after midnight. My kids enjoyed their presence and the students would play with them. Ranny was gracious enough to feed them and I tutored them. It was a good time for all of us. We always had company over either for chess, math, or playtime.

My fitness level was off the charts. I was a lean, mean cycling machine, and I taught abs on campus. My body and mind were in harmony. I was peaceful and content with my life. This was paradise for me, and I was much happier than when we were in Hatteras. There, I was as happy as ever. It was perfect for my spirit and mental health but bad for my physical body. I was getting fat, lazy and stupid while there. I was not living with purpose hence I was unsatisfied.

The Bahamas engaged my mind by providing me with high-level math courses that I craved for and opportunities to expand my boundaries like the chess tournaments and the yoga ashram. I

cycled to school daily and swam with the kids and dogs. I did pull-ups in the playground and ran from time to time. I ended up building my body for something extraordinary in the future though I didn't know it at the time. I just exercised because I enjoyed it.

Chapter 22: The Bahamas – Year Three

From the exquisite views to the activities, the Bahamas was an amazing place for us. I never regretted moving to the island. It opened up my mind to another level. I challenged myself physically and mentally. However, crime is a major endemic on the island. I had not been victim to it until one unfortunate day.

I went to the beach with my friend Scott and the dogs. At the time, my car was a 1999 Suzuki Vitara Jeep. It had a soft top and was very easy to break into after unzipping the window. Scott and I left our watches in the car. In addition to that, I had a few thousand dollars in cash that I was planning on depositing in the bank. I left it under the driver's seat and covered it with dirty underwear.

Unbeknownst to us, a local was watching us keenly and suspiciously. He broke into the car as soon as we were out of view of it and stole the watches, leaving the money. The dirty underwear trick worked perfectly. From then on, I always keep dirty underwear in the car for security. No one wants to touch dirty underwear. Not even desperate thieves.

Not long after this incident, I started having trouble with my ear. I was in a lot of pain and suffered, especially after swimming. I got to the point where I couldn't ignore it any longer so I went to visit the ENT specialist. Apik tagged along. I had a parental instinct that he was also having a problem with his ears. He was an unusually quiet child, and I always thought that it was because of some conductive issue with his ears. I hoped to be wrong about it, but I wasn't.

The ENT specialist examined me and told me that my ears needed cleaning. The skin inside the left ear canal had dried up and tore off creating congestion inside the ear cavity. This was new to me. The specialist pulled gobs of junk out of my left ear. The right ear was alright. I was shocked to see the amount of filth that was in my ears. Next one up was Apik. Since he was three years old, the doctor took more care when examining him. Apik was not cooperative at first but I insisted, and he caved to my request. When he was checked, the specialist found that he had more junk than I did. About 10 times more. This was shocking to both of us. Only the Lord knows just how much Apik had suffered in silence.

I at times think that I went through that pain so that we could be led to the ENT specialist. We would have never known that Apik was suffering if I had not needed to be checked. Sometimes we go through tribulations to solve the problems around us. Everything that happens to us is not coincidental. There is a reason for every sorrow. I also believe that the problem we had was a metaphor for our stubbornness; neither of us were good listeners. The specialist stated that the gunk from Apik's ear was otherworldly, and that he had never seen such things inside an ear. The fact that Apik was not screaming in pain all that time nor did he fall ill made the doctor doubly shocked. After his ears were cleaned, Apik started to speak properly.

Our life in the previous two years was a repetitive cycle. We had to purposely ignore some of the adverse effects of the environment around us that were caused by the inhabitants of the island. The people in Sandypoint were living what I would call a defensive lifestyle. I was familiar with the lifestyle. When my bike business was flourishing, I had so much self-confidence, I was

walking in the clouds. Nobody could tell me anything. I was succeeding in life. I held myself as more valuable in comparison to others. At that time, I did what everyone in Sandyport was doing, I protected my assets. I didn't want to lose my wealth or drain my accounts. It led to me being depressed. I was caged by my own lifestyle and was unable to take risks. I chose to live in the shell of the things I could control for two years until I finally broke free and relearned how to "live."

When I looked at the people in Sandyport, I was reminded of my previous self. It took me time to get out of that mindset and reset myself to being open to the world and its experiences. If I had stayed that way, I would have been poorer and more miserable. I chose peace of mind instead. It is the greatest wealth to have. I have learned with time that money is like manure. The analogy is disgusting and stupid to some but it is the truth. When we keep ourselves stuffed with money, we become constipated. Being constipated carries negative effects on our health physically and mentally. When we disperse or let go of the money we were greedily holding on to, we become free. Beautiful things begin to happen. Just like manure, when held inside can cause discomfort, but when spread, it makes plants grow.

There are exceptions to the Sandyport analogy. One of them was a woman by the name Sarah and her husband Omar Sr. Sarah used to bring her children to the playground daily. Her son, Omar Jr, was the kindest and sweetest child I had ever known. He just looked and behaved like he would grow to become a fine man. I would always urge my children to mingle with her kids because they were excellent. I had hoped that by being in their company, they would be positively influenced.

Most of the people in the playground were minions. A mirror image of each other. They were all living a defensive life. One guy particularly struck me as odd. He had the biggest boat in the entire neighborhood. That was a big deal because the pricing in the Bahamas was twice as high as in the USA. We saw this guy every day, and he would always have a surreal expression on his face. I would always wave at him but he wouldn't reciprocate. I repeated this every time I saw him for two years before I gave up. He was completely dismissive. He had a pleasant woman for a wife, but her kindness did not rub off on him.

The children in the neighborhood, who were typically angels, were different as well. There was an eight-year-old who once fought my kids when they were three and four. He literally picked fights with kids half his age. I tried to gently reproach him and talk sense into him by telling him that it was bad manners to fight, but he responded by kicking me in the butt. His brother immediately reacted by saying, "Not again!" He must have been causing trouble for a very long time. I had every reason to believe that that child was pure evil. Therefore, I told his father that his child was going to be at high risk of causing trouble, but he remained adamant that his kid was not at fault. I added that he should tame his child's habits when he was still young before becoming out of control. Instead of taking my advice and correcting his son, he decided to forbid him from going to the playground anymore. In the four years I lived there, I never saw that child again. Odd.

After some time, the political parties in the Bahamas made living for foreigners difficult and uncomfortable. Everything wrong in the country was blamed on the foreigners be it the lack of money, corruption, or crime. I was just a math professor who was underpaid for the amount of work I did. I had to get money from overseas to help with our livelihood. There was no financial

benefit that I got from staying in the Bahamas. I was losing a small fortune. The logic behind their reasoning baffled me. I began changing my mind about the place slowly.

Around this time, Ranny was heading off to Indonesia with the kids and suggested shipping bikes there because USA sales were plummeting. She proposed that she would sell them in Indonesia. I was famous in Indonesia because of my bikes, so it felt like a great idea. Expanding the business was always something I had in mind. I sent three containers worth approximately \$300,000. We came to an agreement that she would wire the money to me after she sold the bikes. This did not go as expected.

In the second month of her stay in Indonesia, Ranny got sick. I could not get in touch with her and nobody contacted me to keep me updated on her condition. She was in the hospital and the kids were too little to make a phone call. She was depressed and hospitalized. It was later confirmed that she had Dengue fever, which had taken over a month to diagnose. After some time, Deken contacted me. He informed me of her condition. I was so worried about her health. She was unable to talk and this ended up affecting the kids as well. I decided to fly over after four months to help. I had to fly to the USA first then took a connecting flight to Indonesia. I found that she was recovering but was not at 100%. I was confused about what to do and how to do it.

I had always wanted her to bring Deken to America so we could all be one big happy family but it proved to be very complicated. After I arrived in Indonesia, she asked me to submit his papers to the Indonesian embassy for Deken's green card. I was unsure of her request.

"But why should I? Isn't that done by a relative?" I asked.

"Well, you're married to his mother; I have a green card."

"You are the mother."

"Just do it," she pressed.

I did not want to argue with her. I had only been there for two days. I went ahead and submitted his papers at the embassy, and we returned to the Bahamas as a family.

I recall a conversation I had with Ranny when we got back from Indonesia. I had been so worried about her. I thought back to how she left and her plans for the bike business. It dawned on me that she was probably setting a life for her and the kids in Indonesia then unfortunately she ended up getting sick. It all made sense to me. But I needed to find out from her instead of assuming that those were her plans.

I said, "Ranny, did you plan on coming back here? At all?"

She answered, her voice unmoved, "Honestly, I was so depressed living here with you that I didn't want to come back at all." She then added, "However, I was more depressed without you."

I found it comical but kept my thoughts to myself. Things got back to normal, at least to some degree. Ranny still had mood swings, but we were trying to make things work. The children were back to enjoying themselves. A few months later, Oma Achum, Ranny's mother, and Deken joined us in the Bahamas. Deken was a great kid. He was smart, sweet, and gentle. He was a bit on the heavier side but after he started going out and playing daily, that changed.

During this time, Ranny went back to America. She claimed to have important matters to attend to but did not disclose to me what those matters were. Afterwards, a representative of the US embassy in the Bahamas came to the college looking for me. That was odd, but I presumed that Deken's green card had been processed, so I went with him to the embassy. There was no other logical explanation. Immediately I arrived at the embassy, they began interrogating me for fraud. I came to learn that the birth certificate I had submitted for Deken had been forged, and that his father's name was removed. That was news to me. I didn't understand why the birth certificate was fake. There was no valid reason for it to be forged. It was illogical to me so I told them that they weren't making sense.

I pointed to Deken and told them that the child was real and present. That the certificate indicated his name and that of his mother, how could it be fake? They looked at me as though I had horns growing out of my head. They told me that I would be in for a serious crime and could face imprisonment or deportation unless I had a valid explanation. The interrogation lasted over an hour. I gave them the only thing that felt logical to me at the time, I gave them Ranny's number and told them that she flew to America. Thankfully, she didn't pick up when they called. They let me go after torturing me to the point of paralyzing my rationale. I went back home trying to act normal, but I had so many unanswered questions churning inside me.

Did Ranny know that the birth certificate was fake? Did she purposefully set me up? Did she know that they were going to call? Is that the reason she flew off to America? It was all very confusing. I could not comprehend any person doing that to the father of her children or to anyone at all. I tried to go on with my day as I would any other day but it was almost impossible. I took the children to the playground and was half present.

I remember Dyanella climbing a tree and me numbly telling her not to go too high. Dyanella ignored my instruction and kept climbing higher and higher until she climbed 20 feet up. And then the inevitable happened. She fell; her arm was broken. She screamed in pain and cried her heart out. I hurriedly picked her up. I got her grandmother and rushed to the car to go to the hospital. I was driving at an unreasonably high speed and crashed the car. It wasn't too serious, so I continued to the hospital. I took her to the very best hospital.

Dr. Bowe checked on her and placed a cast on her arm. He claimed to be the best doctor on the island, which I considered a red flag. The healthcare on this island was inadequate and inefficient. Many doctors at Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH), the public hospital on the island, did not have graduate degrees. I trusted Dr. Bowe despite his arrogance, but it was misplaced. The cast was not properly placed. He used an old plaster cast instead of fiberglass. This was unbelievable considering he was attending to a four-year old. He did not re-cast it after the swelling went down nor did he go one joint above and below the break. Dyanella's arm ended up not healing properly. She ended up breaking the same arm in the same place afterward. We had Dr. Bowe reset it; however, I did not trust him.

I took her to Dr. Grimes who could not believe how the arm had been aligned. He fixed the cast and Dyanella healed perfectly. Enough damage had been done. We no longer went outside for hours to enjoy the day; we would sit inside disturbed by what had happened and traumatized by

the events. The circumstances surrounding the fake certificate had caused a ripple effect to the breaking of our daughter's arm and us not playing as much.

Our communication became poorer as the days went by. Ranny wanted to take Deken to Tamberly, which was an expensive school in Sandyport. I was in favor of homeschooling. Being an educator, I knew that more learning would be done at home. In addition to that, I could not afford Tamberly at the time.

Ranny accepted the responsibility and took it upon herself to handle the situation. She claimed to generate income from Indonesia through some sort of business interests she kept private. When, in reality, she was stealing my money from the bike business venture in Indonesia. She bragged about having a Capital One credit card which she would use for family expenditures. Previously, she had never paid for anything in the household, but now she was spending on everything. I wasn't moved by her sudden change. She sent Deken and her mother back to Indonesia after the embassy debacle. Logically, maintaining them was not the problem. Ranny forced them to go back. I believe she was nervous about the consequences of the fake birth certificate.

Her cousin, Sances, helped manage the business returns and warranties in the USA. He was an honorable man and hard working too. He opened a Philadelphia food store and I employed him on the side. Later, I randomly decided to check my bank account and realized that Ranny had been funneling money from my account to pay for her Capital One credit card. She had done this for a year. I rarely checked my bank statements because I never misuse funds, I never imagined she would steal. I decided to confront her.

"Ranny, are you using my account? Are you stealing from me?"

"I'm not stealing from you. I told you about it," she said dryly.

"You told me? You told me? At what point did you tell me?"

She never said a single word to me about using my bank account.

"I did. I remember very well."

"Ranny, everyone knows I'm the cheapest guy out there. You think if I knew, I would be okay with you spending money on this expensive stuff?"

We had a huge fight about the money but she wouldn't budge from her original claims.

Chapter 23: The Bahamas – Year Four

As was the custom, Ranny and the kids flew to Indonesia for a two-month trip, and I was left alone. I played a lot of chess to improve myself and ended up becoming extremely good. I won the Bahamas International, Bahamas National Chess Championship for the second time and every other tournament that year. I won the inaugural award for the top chess player on the island. I loved the game. I felt it through my body for the first time. Chess was a part of who I was.

Previously, when I was still new to chess and learning, I thought that people who said that they could look five or ten moves ahead were geniuses. That was not the case. Chess was a gift from God. No human can analyze all possibilities when it comes to the game. The possibilities grew exponentially with every move made. It is impossible to search all possibilities. When I became good, the moves came naturally to me, like a deep meditation. A mixture of instinct and practice. I only needed to check if they were optimal. Chess is not played by humans alone. God enables your mind to preempt the next steps. Your role is to gauge the optimal move to make. The miracle that is played on a chessboard is a blessing to observe.

I competed in the 2012 National Chess Championship with the assistance of my trainer, a Croatian grandmaster, Jankovic. Ken Gibson, the reigning champion, was my opponent in one of the biggest games. We were the two top players in the competition. The game becomes more and more interesting when two top players are competing. The intensity of it is endearing. We ended up in a dreary drawn situation with a symmetrical pawn setup that offered few tactical options. All the dynamics one has in that position are the same for the opponent, making it nearly impossible to win symmetrical pawn endings. Nonetheless, I ended up winning that game with a deep concept that surprised my trainer.

Going into the last round, I was up a point on second place and playing the second-place player. He needed to win to become National Champion, while I needed only a draw. On my way to the tournament hall, I got a flat tire on my bike. There was a 15-minute late forfeit rule in effect. I was always late to everything. I grew worried that I would have to forfeit the last game because of the flat tire. I started running as fast as I could while carrying the bike. Thankfully, I got to the tournament in time to play.

Something funny happened: my lungs expanded due to the running and my mind became amazingly clear. I opened up and felt refreshed. It ended up being one of the best games I ever played. I won in about 20 moves. The ideas I had and the moves I made were somewhat new, nowhere to be found. I impressed my trainer because of the level of the game. The moves just came to me from God. I became the National Champion in the first and fourth year in the Bahamas. During this competition, expanding my lungs and opening up my soul deepened my meditation. I was able to focus and connect with God in an intense manner. I began to practice this to think more clearly in my daily life, and I changed my competition routine to include lung work before games.

During my time on the island, my game had evolved from the first year to the last. In the beginning luck was on my side but with time I grew with consistency, perfecting the craft.

Ranny and the kids came back from Indonesia. She was back to her old habits. She was stealing again a week after the nationals. I was livid. I also discovered that Sances was giving his payments from me to Ranny. I told him to stop; he deserved the income he was getting because he worked for it. He continued giving her his salary. I couldn't watch him waste his salary away on Ranny, who would throw it away by simply shopping. It was ridiculous. Perhaps I would have been able to swallow it if she was doing something meaningful with the money, but she was not.

I told Ranny that it was about time she got herself straight. She had to start making something out of her life. She acted as though I was out of my mind and made no sense. I was angry at her because her behavior was childish. I told her that she could go sleep in the car that night. She went to the car. Soon afterwards, the police came and took her and the kids away. And they vanished in thin air. I had no clue where they were taken or who they were with for two weeks. I searched for her everywhere, worried that she had done something unspeakable to get back at me. I was worried that she did something to herself or the kids or maybe decided to leave for Indonesia.

I came to learn that she was at Dr. Major's house. He was my best friend on the island. Ranny had acquainted him with the woman who became his second wife. He flew all the way to Brazil to meet a girl called Nia. A short while later, they got married. They were the same age. She was a true beauty. He thought that he owed Ranny for putting them together, so he let her stay at his house without telling me. She in turn cooked and did some house chores. In addition to running away from our family home, she went to an attorney, Mr Alexander Mailless and filed for a divorce. Not only that, but she also filed a restraining order against me stating that I was abusive.

I was amazed at all that she could do. Shocked that she could cook up lies to paint me as an evil husband. She had triggered me on several occasions, but I never lay a finger on her. I kept my composure and let her do her thing. I was not going to fall into the same trap that my father was in.

Her restraining order took me back to my twenties when I was learning how to fight with amateurs. My trainer forced me to battle against a female fighter who would humiliate many men. This was against my natural instinct to fight a girl. I was in the ring with her for a total of 45 minutes. I let her pound me the whole time and did not attempt to strike back. I just took it all.

And now, my wife was accusing me of being abusive, doing the very thing I could never do, even to a fighter. She gained nothing from the allegations. She was in good shape so how was it possible for her to be a victim of abuse? The case was dismissed by the judge who laughed at the whole scenario. The court did not understand why she would file such a case. She acknowledged never being hit by me. The judge was also bothered by the fact that I was disallowed from seeing my children before the hearing. He ordered that the opposing counsel ensure that the kids were made available to me but this order was ignored.

During this time, Ranny had a nervous breakdown. She started seeing a mental health therapist in the Bahamas three times in a week to help her condition. She became suicidal again. It was something that happened often. She took a knife and threatened to kill herself in front of the kids. I was horrified! Exposing them to fear and trauma of losing their mother. They never should

have been exposed to such nonsense by their mother. Oma Achum came to the Bahamas again soon after. She came with a girl named Yayuk to marry Sances. Unfortunately, Yayuk could not get a US visa so she had to go back to Indonesia.

Ranny remained at Major's residence. He was a dear friend of mine, and I knew that the children were safe with him. I would go a long distance from my place to his residence every day just to spend time with the children. I was the only one to take them out and play. She had complicated our lives. I was furious at her for creating the unnecessary burden and trouble of this distance. She had taken the kids from where they were comfortable and where they could freely enjoy themselves to a place where no one was able to look after them. Ranny would never take the initiative to take the kids outside. They remained in the house where they were virtually imprisoned. She would do nothing but sit in her troubles crying. Can you imagine the psychological impact that had on the kids? Whatever she was trying to prove was pointless. Nothing good could have resulted from any of this.

On one of the days I was going to see the kids, I arrived filled with anger and bitterness in my heart. I saw her sitting and wallowing in her depression. It hit me there and then just how depressed she was. She had been depressed since the day Hisland was born and he was four years old. It had been a whole four years of her suffering. I really saw her for the first time in the midst of my fury. She needed help and a support system to get her through the depression.

I decided there and then that I would stop complaining and would put up with everything for the sake of the kids. They would never be ok for as long as the mother was not ok. Their mother had to get better. Instead of putting the blame on her for not doing anything to get better, I started asking myself what role I could play to make sure she was getting better. I tried my best to be adaptive and available for her. My goal was to make things work.

I took the kids to Atlantis every day because it was directly across from Major's house. We would feed the turtles at 2.00 p.m. and the stingrays at 2.30 p.m. To feed the nurse sharks, we would have to take a few extra fish from the stingray feeding. We enjoyed the water slides and visited the aquariums as often as we could. During the day, we would play in the pools and finish our day at the kiddie water park where they made new acquaintances. We were such frequent visitors that we were admitted to the aquarium's nursery. Ranny never joined us nor participated in any activities; however, Oma Ochum frequently joined us. As I became more accepting of Ranny's condition, she became even more crazy. She was deteriorating rather than improving.

Ranny was set on getting a divorce. She wanted us to get divorced then remarry. It made no sense to me. What exactly was the point of the divorce if we were not separating? It would take a toll on us and on our children. Why would she want to put them through the trauma? She shouted that she wanted to start over and this was how it was going to happen. She was unable to communicate clearly what she really wanted to achieve from all this. Recently, I came to understand it was the bikes in Indonesia that she thought she could procure from the divorce.

At this point, we were still not living together. She stayed at Major's house. I tried my best to understand her but it was impossible. She was a complicated human being. We would meet every day and do all sorts of stuff. The embassy grew suspicious of us. They took several photos

of us being intimate together and sent them to Ranny's attorney. Ranny got mad at me when her attorney called her with photos.

How was that my fault? I was equally as shocked as she was that there were photos of us being taken by someone. I did not know how I would understand her nor judge her. How could I blame someone who made no sense. It was impossible to reason with her. The court hearing for the divorce was in March 2013. Her attorney made me an offer: Ranny would move back with the kids if I wouldn't contest the divorce and move out of the house. It was an easy one to decide. I would do anything to ensure the happiness of my children. I accepted. I would sleep in the car with the dog. It was a non-issue.

When Ranny heard this, she said, "No, I want you to stay in the house too." The messages I got were conflicting. One moment she wanted me out and the next she wanted me in.

"Why did you have your attorney say something else then?" I asked her.

She kept quiet. I stopped trying to make sense of the situation at all. After that, the first stage of the divorce was over. We moved back in together. There was so much more drama coming. I knew it in my soul. She didn't think through what she was doing, but once she set things in motion, she did not want to stop.

Fortunately, the kids were doing better. I learned about an energy healing concept called ThetaHealing® at the Sivananda Yoga Ashram. I enrolled for two classes with Narayan Jyoti as the instructor. I wanted my family to get better and that had to start with me being whole. In the first healing class, the group started talking about spirits. I could not believe my ears. I opened them wide since this was new information. They were very assertive and sure of what they were saying. The group consisted of psychics, and I was the only mathematician. I tried to make sense of everything. At the end of the first class, I was granted the gift to manifest anything I wanted. I asked for a happy family.

On that very day, after the class, I received an email from my mom. She wanted to make up. I told her that we could have a conversation after she deposited the money she owed into my account. For the first time ever, without being pushed, she deposited some money. It was remarkable what had just happened. It was somewhat of a miracle. I remembered the prayer I made in the Ashram. It worked. My family was starting to get back together.

The next class started the next day. At the end, I was given another manifestation. I gifted it to Ranny. It felt like a new beginning for the family. The Ashram helps with everything. After taking the classes, I decided to pursue yoga studies. The ashram offered a TTC, or Yoga Teachers Training Course, which was the most rigorous training program. I was able to fit the May TTC into my schedule after finishing teaching at the College. TTC requires all students to live at the Ashram in a tent for a month. Wake up bell was at 5:30 a.m. and evening Satsang ended at 10 p.m., so the days were full.

I took the kids to an Easter session that was taking place in the Ashram. Dyannella was ecstatic to interact with the others and to learn from the teachers. The joy she felt having an

interaction with other people and the trainers made me rethink my stance on homeschooling. Dyaneella needed a structured environment to blossom. My son was not as receptive nor affected like Dyaneella. I concluded that she belonged in school. She was more responsive to a professional setting to learn. I decided to take her to Tamberly. I went to get her admitted to the school, but unfortunately, they rejected her. It made no sense. I questioned their decision.

“Your daughter’s mother has outstanding dues,” I was informed by the authority.

It was then that I remembered Deken. The child was taken out of the school because Ranny never paid the dues. What type of a mother does that? Neglecting her responsibility. Keep in mind that the problem was not money per se; it was her irresponsible use of it. She defaulted on paying his fees, but never lacked money to go shopping. Ranny was notorious for not paying her debts. She just kept incurring more and more expenses without having the knowledge nor the income to pay it off. I assumed that her intention was to appear rich and successful to outsiders. A pointless endeavor. Whereas, I looked like a poor cyclist but had no debt record in my name.

I came home hopeful that after some consideration they would take Dyaneella. When I arrived, I found an email from Ranny’s attorney stating that she wanted to proceed with the second stage of divorce. What nonsense was this? She was getting out of hand. We had been sleeping on the same bed for months now doing everything that couples do, but her drama was never-ending. She just kept up with her divorce threats and stunts. I was unsure about her objective. If this kept on happening, I would end up in a hospital. I approached her that evening.

“Ranny, here I am before you in my authentic self,” I said. “I present to you everything that I am and everything I have. I’m here for you!”

She shook her head. I don’t know what that meant but I assumed she was rejecting me.

"Ranny, I'm not in any way ok," I tried again. "I want you to put an end to all of this trouble."

I offered her the bicycles in Indonesia and all the money I had in the US so as to end the divorce. That was when she agreed to end it. She took all the money. When it hit her account, she changed her mind again. She did not stop the divorce. That was the end for me. She had pushed me to my breaking point.

“You have to move out now. This is enough! We made a deal, and now you won’t honor it?”

I demanded the cash returned and all revenue from the bicycles. Sadly, I received nothing. But that didn’t come as a shock to me. She moved out of the house and went to Dr. Major’s house yet again.

Chapter 24: Lutik's Death

There were a lot of horrible things happening in my life at this time but the saddest was yet to be faced. Lutik was unwell. He had a large tumor on his rear right side that was cancerous. His failing physical health took a toll on me. He was family to me; we had been together for over a decade now. I could not handle his loss of strength. He had always been there for me through thick and thin, even when I had no one by my side. I still wonder how I was able to go through the period in which he was suffering. It was too much to bear.

We decided to move back to America on August 1, 2013, after four years of living in the Bahamas. I sent the kids and Ranny two days ahead of me. They were staying at Sances' house in Philadelphia. I packed up all our belongings and sent them to the MailBoat. When I went to go pick up my stuff in Florida, I was provided with less than half of the boxes we had originally shipped. Half of our stuff was stolen in the Bahamas. I did not know what to do. What could I have done wrong? I was juggling a lot of thoughts at once, and they eventually crashed into each other. Crime in the Bahamas was the biggest issue on the island; it was going to catch up with us one way or the other. I laughed once it dawned on me that we were robbed during our exit. It was a final act of goodbye. And it would be the last time that the Bahamians took something from us.

After leaving the Bahamas, I began looking for a job. The business was not doing so well. The containers of bikes Ranny had taken to Indonesia reaped nothing. Out of the \$300,000 I invested, she gave me \$10,000 years later with promises of more money to come, and which never arrived.

Lutik stopped walking after a few days. I took him to the vet who claimed that there was nothing that could be done to help him. They asked me whether I wanted to put him down since he looked dreadful and was in so much agony. I was taken aback by the question. It hadn't crossed my mind till then. My throat dried up. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't ignore his misery. It was painful to watch him agonize. But I couldn't let go of him just yet. I didn't want to be the one to take his life away.

I thought about someone to advise me. No one came to mind until I thought of the Swami in the Ashram. He was the only one I trusted completely. I called the Ashram to speak to the Swami.

"The Swami is not on the Island Yan; we have Krisna Das here. You can speak to him," they answered. He was my yoga instructor during TTC and second in command at the Ashram.

I told him about the situation I was in. He didn't give me a direct answer; instead, he was philosophical in his assessment. That was not what I wanted. I had not gotten an answer. Krishna Das was ambiguous with his statements. I was not in the mental state to decipher meanings to his statements. I would not put Lutik down if he didn't tell me to put Lutik down. That was what felt right to me. I took Lutik and left the vet.

After some time, I was fortunate to get a teaching position at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. My apartment wasn't going to be ready for another week, so I stayed

at a shabby place with Lutik and Vassya. On the very first day I went to campus, I told my boss that my dog was dying.

“For some people, dogs are like family,” she said to me. There were no truer words than those. Lutik was my family. He stuck by me even when my own wife turned against me. He had always been loyal to me and an intentional partner to me. He was my world. I started crying uncontrollably in her presence. She had no idea that I was that close to Lutik. I had more connection with him than anyone else in my world.

After two weeks, Ranny came with the kids to see Lutik.

“Why is he still alive?” Out of all the words she could have picked to formulate a sentence, she chose those. I looked at her shocked by her words. I didn’t say anything to her. It was a trying time for me, and I was finding it hard to let go of Lutik.

He was in terrible shape. There was no reason to prolong his life. His body had started decaying while he was alive. It was too much. We went to the vet the next day and had Lutik put down. That was one of the most difficult days of my life and the toughest decision I had ever made. I was forced to say goodbye to my most devoted companion. My children had always known me to be strong and in charge but on that day, I couldn’t contain myself. I wept in pain like a child for 30 minutes straight. My Lutik was gone.

Two days later, Ranny started her drama. She said that she was leaving with the children.

“We are in the USA now; you are mentally ill,” I told her. “You will not get the kids when we go to court.”

In the Bahamas, men were never considered for parental custody. Things were different in this nation. The best interest of the child is considered, not the gender of the parent.

She changed her mind instantly and stopped the drama.

After a few weeks, she was in a panic-stricken state. She frantically walked around the house. I asked her what was going on.

“I have lost everything in Indonesia, all my houses, store, everything!” I pointed out that she shouldn’t have put our family through the trauma of divorce and constant drama. Karma was finally at her doorstep.

At this point, she borrowed money from me for her sister’s business and used my bicycle money to help pay back for her mother’s house. I never approved of any of this. She just kept making stories to extend the time she needed to pay me back. I was getting sick of her games. There was always something going on in her life to warrant her not having enough to repay and needing more from me.

Chapter 25: Bennett College

Bennett College was an institution that I was deeply attached to. It was one of two women's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU); many of the students came from underprivileged environments and some grew up in foster care. I was hired to teach them math. I felt a sense of responsibility there which I had never felt before. I felt positioned to devote all my compassion and commitment when teaching the children. I learned how to perform to the best of my abilities as both a teacher and a counselor. It was an excellent position for me.

My children started attending public school at Jesse Wharton Elementary School, an impeccable school with an amazing sense of community. There was always something new that the children learned every day. They would recount their great adventures when they got home. It was beautiful to watch them develop so quickly and get an interest in different things. I can still see the joyous jogs they would make to inform others of the exploits when anything wonderful happened. They couldn't stay still. Moments like this were the joys of being a parent.

These were the years in which impeccable growth both physically and mentally happened. I remember each day vividly. I remember their impish behavior, their curiosity about everything, the trouble they had doing simple tasks like wearing shoes, fighting to not go to sleep and desiring to always play. It is beautiful to watch children going through the different stages of their lives and discovering themselves. They started doing kids' triathlons; this is like an adolescent party. They had so much fun.

Ranny would do nothing all day and kept talking about getting a job, but she would not go out to get one. Her major interests were shopping and complaining. One day, she went and registered herself for Spanish classes at the community college when she said that she had gone in search of a job. I questioned her decision. She said that she needed to learn Spanish before she got a job as though it was rather obvious. I had no idea what type of job she was looking for but knowing Spanish was not a job requirement in the majority of jobs in America, I let her do what she wanted and dropped the conversation.

From then on, she slowly and steadily deteriorated. Her mind and coherence became hazed. She was never good at decision-making skills. She was always selfish about her decisions, and it became more noticeable. This had been the case from long ago, but now she was at a point where she couldn't make decisions even for herself.

One year she wanted to become a professional photographer, then the next she wanted to become an import/export specialist, the next, a computer programmer, then an AUTOCAD developer, followed by a Python programmer. It was always something different every year. She couldn't focus on one thing. She had a broad range of interests that were all outside her field of study. I began to wonder whether she really had a degree in engineering or if it was all talk. Eventually, I concluded that her degree in mechanical engineering was probably fake. What remained a constant in her life was her drama. It got to a point where we were unaffected by it. We became immune to all her theatrics. It was an unfortunate consequence of having her in our life.

During my third year in Bennett, I decided that it was time for me to leave. Bennet was going through a rough financial path, and it was affecting the quality of students. I gave my all to Bennett and did my best. It was time for me to find a new challenge and adventure. A vacancy presented itself in Hawaii at Kauai Community College and I applied for it. The interview was done over the phone. It went extremely well, and I waited eagerly and patiently for their response. I was expecting an offer to be made since we connected during the interview, but they did not respond. I was in dire need of employment, so I pursued other options.

Around this same time, I was invited to give a talk at Lake Superior State University. It was always freezing cold in northern Michigan. I had my third child on the way and couldn't rely solely on the business. I needed to expand my stream of income. I didn't want to go to Michigan; it wasn't an ideal place, but since the Hawaii offer had not come through, I was left with no choice. I paid for airfare to Michigan and prayed that I would get a call from the college in Hawaii. My flight was with Delta Airlines. For some reason, Delta had a computer breakdown on that day. They canceled almost all their flights. This looked like a sign for me to go to Hawaii. I called Michigan and told them that the flight was canceled.

"That's alright. We'll reschedule your talk," they said.

"Thank you." I replied.

At the time I didn't know that I was supposed to give a talk so I was so glad that I called. The next day, the flight for Michigan was overbooked and they were paying passengers to reschedule their flights to a later date. The booking queue was full of chaos. I stayed patiently at the airport, waiting for my flight to be called so I could board the plane when my phone started ringing. It was the Vice Chancellor from Kaua'i. I picked up the phone.

"Listen, I'm at the airport. I'm supposed to fly to Michigan for a talk," I said. "If they make me an offer, I'll take it. So, if you have anything to give me, now is the time."

I went straight for it. They needed to know that I wouldn't sit back and just wait on them.

"Let me check your references, and I'll call you back," he said.

I was sure my references were solid and that they would give outstanding feedback. Moments later, he called back.

"I have an offer for you."

"I accept your offer," I said, smiling.

I went and tried my best to play a fast one on Delta Airlines. I needed to get a refund on my ticket since I wasn't going to Michigan as planned.

"I want to sell my flight."

“Okay, do you want to fly tomorrow? We’ll give you a \$500 refund.”

“No, I won't. I just want the refund.”

They happily gave me the refund, and I happily took it and headed home. I was glad that Hawaii rescued me from the weather in Michigan.

Chapter 26: Khaki in Hawaii

I was happy to learn that I was having a baby again. My kids were ecstatic when they discovered that they would have an additional member in the family. I was developing a routine to sustain the family. For business, I had a container of bikes on the way. Things were looking up for my family. Hawaii insisted that I arrive a week early for meetings. I let them know upfront that I would not be able to show up earlier than the date agreed upon. My wife was nine months pregnant. I needed to be at home with my family. They understood and told me to come after the baby was born. I appreciated the gesture.

The container was going to pass a drill that I was used to by then. It was inspected by the customs authority, which took ages. They would check the containers for weeks and then bill thousands of dollars. I recall that this particular container was released on August 18 and was going to be delivered on the 19th. When it arrived, my employees and I did the unloading smoothly. On the 20th, Ranny went into labor and gave birth to our third child, Dyanisa, born in our third year in Greensboro. I call her Baby.

Baby's birth was miraculous. After she was born, everyone rushed to the scale to see her weight. I remained seated and observed Ranny. I saw a spirit leave her body. It was resoundingly clear to me that the spirit was protecting Baby. Unfortunately, there were some complications during labor but it was nothing that couldn't be solved.

I knew Baby was special from the beginning. She is the smartest person in the family, and more talented than Apik. I was meant to leave for Hawaii on the 21st but I had just had the wildest three days of my life. I asked for an extra day and was granted the leave. I left for Hawaii on August 22.

I was picked up in Kauai, the garden island, by the chair of the department who happened to be an attractive young woman. Her boyfriend, a shy mathematician, came along with her. I looked at the couple and found it amusing to match them up. It was funny that every so often, sharks like her always fed on the nice timid fish like her boyfriend. He was the nicest guy I had ever met while she looked like an exploiter.

I had been in contact with a woman who was going to rent me a room in her house prior to the journey. It was affordable, which was exactly what I needed. I went straight there to settle down. I was met by her husband who cordially welcomed me to the house. His name was Khaki. He was well into his 70s. His wife was off the island for a while.

The ocean in Hawaii was different. It knows when a storm is near and it becomes violent in relation. After just a week in Hawaii, a hurricane passed close to Kauai. Previously, I swam in every hurricane and tropical storm while in Hatteras so I planned on doing the same in Kauai. I went to the beach in Lihue and met some locals. I asked them about swimming in the ocean and they advised me not to go when the surfers were not out. These surfers were nowhere to be found. I decided to go anyway. The ocean was wild and treacherous but I didn't have the option of getting out because the beach was full of lava rocks which rip your feet apart when you walk on them.

The combination of the wild water and the lava rocks created a conundrum. Somehow, I got out. Afterwards, I began paying more attention to any advice given, more so the warnings.

One day, out of the blue, Khaki sat across from me and we began a conversation.

“Listen, my wife is a lot younger than I am and is very attractive,” said Khaki.

I didn’t know the direction in which this conversation was headed but I gave him my ear.

“I can’t really keep up with her libido,” he continued. “I know that I don’t satisfy her. I wouldn’t mind if you had sex with her.”

“What?” I jumped. He caught me completely off guard. There was no way that I would engage her in any way. I was not interested in having an affair.

“Yeah, she’s coming back in a week,” he shrugged. I stared at him for a brief moment reading his facial expression.

“What... No. No, I’m okay,” I stammered. “I’m not interested in that. Maybe you could find someone else.”

For the next half an hour, he kept trying to convince me. This was the weirdest request I had ever received. I was not going to indulge him. I didn’t know how I was going to get in his head and stop him from pestering me. After a long period of going back and forth, he revealed his actual agenda to me.

“You know, if you’re interested in men, let me know,” he continued. “I’m available.”

And that was the moment I concluded he was insane.

A week later, as he had mentioned, Khaki’s wife returned. She was indeed a very attractive woman. She acted just as strange as her husband did. Her actions practically screamed, “Can’t you see me! I’m right in front of you! Aren’t you interested?”

I was not interested. They had a messed-up situation going on between them, and I didn’t want to get involved. I decided there and then to leave the house. It was becoming too uncomfortable for my liking. Perhaps that was why the room was so cheap- to lure potential sexual partners.

At this time, while in Greensboro, my children were going to Madison Elementary which was right across the street from our neighborhood. Ranny wanted to register them into a new charter school but it was new and in flux. We decided to keep the children at Madison until we learned how the new school operated. Additionally, that new school was 15 minutes away. It wasn’t the right move yet. The children also loved Madison.

My mom moved in to help around with Baby and the kids. Ranny needed an extra set of hands. About a month into my new position at KCC, I got a call from Gate City Charter Academy. They wanted me to pick up the kids from school because their mother was yet to show up. I asked, genuinely confused, what my children were doing in that school. I had no idea that they switched schools. We had discussed the pros and cons of each school and decided that Madison was the better school.

I asked my mother about this change, and she said that she had no idea what was going on. Ranny perpetuated this fraud and forced the kids to go along with it. Her life had become a long scheme of continuous frauds.

Back in Hawaii, once I left Khaki's house, I saw a physical therapist was looking for a roommate for her oceanfront place. She seemed like a good roommate. The house was amazing and it was only \$1,200 per month in Kekaha, the western part of the island. During my stay here, I learned that the people in Hawaii have issues unlike those on the mainland. Melissa was my roommate's name, and she was no exception.

I decided to get out and explore Hawaii, something I knew I would incredibly enjoy. I also started hiking and going camping on weekends. It was extremely exciting for me. The trails were treacherous and the oceans more violent than any place I had been. The beaches were beautiful though. I once went for the Hanakapiai hike, which has one of the most glorious waterfalls on the island.

That day a local girl went for a swim in the ocean along that trail and died swimming. She got stuck in a whirlpool. The power of the ocean was phenomenal. It is impossible to fight the ocean when caught in a whirlpool. The only option is to take in as much air as possible and swim to the bottom. Then, try to swim out of the center as far as possible. Using the earth to protect from the powerful water is the only way out. If you stay in, you will die. It is better to try and find a chance at surviving.

I was informed that the current on the southern part of the island was one of the strongest in the world. A kayaker can get pulled out far into the Pacific Ocean. I avoided that region completely. However, I tried kayaking in Kakaha. I went out twice, flipped and was dumped in the ocean both times. Previously, I had flipped kayaks only twice in more than 1,000 trips, speaking volumes on the strength of the ocean.

I continued exploring and learning new things every single day. When I would head back to my place at Melissa's, my entire positive vibe would be ruined. I had a hard time tolerating her tantrums. I decided to quit the place even though I had paid rent for the month. I had no backup plan and neither had I started looking for a new place. I had no idea where I would go. I was completely stranded. But that was better than living in a negative environment.

Out of nowhere, I remembered my old friend Yakov.

Chapter 27: Yakov

I have known Yakov for a very long time. He was a physically fit man who played soccer professionally in his 20s. He is now a homeless man in his 60s. However, he had no interest in getting a home. He put in a lot of work and effort towards making his life more respectable, but he preferred living outside. He must have known something that I was yet to discover.

I was skeptical and scared about living the homeless lifestyle. Yet something inside me felt curious. Fortunately, I had an Infiniti QX4, an old high-class Nissan Pathfinder, which turned into my home. The first day I slept in the car, I kept the windows down, fearing that I would die of suffocation. Rain poured in that night. All my stuff got wet. My optimism about this lifestyle dipped. I wasn't sure that I would be able to live this way.

After a couple of days of living homeless, I felt like I had it. I could hack this lifestyle. I realized that I never really needed a house to live in. I could live comfortably without one. Eventually I understood I could survive without the car or anything at all, God provided me the ability to problem solve. That is all I need to survive; I can exist in whatever place I set my mind to. This was the secret to life; when people think that they need a place to stay, they end up doing a lot of idling. Essentially, they will have a place to sit, so they end up sitting most of the day at home. It's a waste of energy and ability. You become a slave to the house and fall into the trap of idleness. When you are homeless, you are always up and about. You have no time to sit because there is no place to sit. You're forced to work and live freely in the true manner we were created to live.

I managed to work out 5 or more hours daily, I took time to study chess, and I did more than ever in my life. My mind and body felt free, and my mind was tame. This led to me always having a wonderful night's sleep and productive days.

I learned the island way of greeting: shaka. I didn't think much of it, it was just a gesture like any other similar to waving but different. It is a hand gesture in which the thumb and little finger are extended outwards from a closed fist. It symbolizes approval and solidarity. I felt a special energy flow through my body when I used the symbol. I ended up carrying the symbol with me wherever I went because it brought a sense of strength and joy. The greeting was one of a kind, as were a lot of things in Hawaii.

Chapter 28: Goodbye Hawai'i

Hawaii operated by its own system. There, individuals live by their own rules and guidelines. It was a whole new world to me, everything completely different from what I was used to. Harassment was the operative social currency there. It was the order of the day.

There were social cliques or groups and rival groups amongst them. It was unbelievably like something you would expect from children. I was a white man, being harassed by white people at work. The natives in Hawaii got it worse. They were harassed to no end. Unfortunately, they were unable to quit their jobs because of the high cost of living. When they got home, they would narrate the oppression to their families. As a result, when the kids went to school, they would bully and beat up the white kids.

It was a vicious cycle of discrimination and racism. I couldn't continue staying in such an environment. I felt sick to the stomach watching this go on. I didn't want to continue the next semester in Hawaii. I didn't want to bring my kids to this environment that would lead to them being harassed in school for no reason.

During my second week at the College, my boss approached me in my office and started verbally abusing me. I was shaken by her actions. I couldn't believe that 30 years of teaching experience had led me to this moment where a blue-eyed blonde was harassing me. I tried to make sense of her words and actions but it was impossible to understand. I told her to get the hell out of my office right away. I was not going to tolerate impunity or disrespect. I was not going to sit in silence and allow the abuse to fester.

Turns out, this only leads to a worsened situation. The system in the school does not handle complaints very well. I tried to file a complaint, but the system would not process it. It wasn't forwarded to the next stage. The person in charge of the Title IX process was a really nice guy but completely incompetent. He was unable to process claims, so the school has zero complaints. This was by design. All the complaints disappeared making KCC look like the paradise it wasn't. What a facade!

I did not stop there; I was relentless in my pursuit for justice. I requested a meeting with the vice chancellor to set matters straight. During the meeting, we discussed a wide range of topics for 45 minutes. He let me go on and on about the abuse and failed system while saying nothing. He was not going to do anything about it, since I was speaking ill of his favorite person. He made the encounter I had seem normal, as though being abused is something to accept.

I yelled at him the entire time; it was completely unacceptable. When I left, the secretaries looked at me like a foreign species. No one had ever stood up to his authority. Especially not for as long as I did. It was out of the question. They wondered where I had been all this time. It was a positive change to the dictatorship the institution had turned into. Later, I attempted to get a vote of no confidence against the vice chancellor. I was unsuccessful; however, it changed the power dynamics at the college. Afterwards, I learned that the Vice Chancellor decided to retire. My friends at KCC thanked me for making the change and standing up to the system. It only takes one

act of bravery to change a system created to oppress people. What gives people power is the fear they instill on their subjects. Once that is overcome, a revolution is inevitable.

Chapter 29: Hawai'i Tourism

Throughout my stay in Hawaii, I learned that the rainy season in Hawaii started around Thanksgiving, late in November. This was the worst time to come to the island. Hiking and swimming expeditions were limited due to endless rains. The best time to travel was summer. The island was peaceful and serene during this time.

One of the most beautiful places in Hawaii, which made my stay there completely worthwhile, was the Nepali Coast. It is believed to be the place where spirits entered and exited this manifestation of creation. I have always been a spiritual person, so this place was very special to me. I found it interesting to be in the presence of its majesty. I actually had a spiritual experience while here that I will always cherish. Apart from the spiritual element of this place, it was one of the most exquisitely phenomenal places in the world. It had a myriad of waterfalls flowing. The site is breathtaking. I was able to hike to the top of Waialeale's summit to see how the waterfall begins from rainfall. Waialeale is one of the wettest places on earth.

The line separating the arid desert of Waimea Canyon from the rainforest on the north coast was another extraordinary illustration of nature. It is wonderful. My belief is that a dry canyon and a rainforest were physically divided by a line that God drew himself. It is a scientific wonder that can only be explained by the extraordinary. One is left absolutely speechless when one looks at such marvels of the world that coexist in nature. There is literally an invisible line that separates the two sides and prevents them from taking the effects of each other or interfering with the different systems. The uniqueness and difference in everything glares at you when looking at this place. A place with so much life and bursting with colors while the other is dry.

During the last days of my stay in Hawaii, I spent time with a dear student of mine by the name Gavin. He was a good, athletic, and ambitious kid. He was going through a rough patch in his life at the time. We hung out at the gym the day before I flew out. I had a gym membership, but my card wasn't scanning. The gym had issues with everything; my membership card was no different. I ignored the process and walked in knowing that I had paid my dues. Gavin was using his brother's card, and they let him in. Later, the owner came to me and gave me a hard time. However, the problem was the card that they issued. Eventually it escalated, and the owner started screaming and calling me names. He was half my size; I was in shock. He went on to say that he never liked me and asked me why I was there.

It was blatant disrespect, but I didn't want to cause any trouble. He was begging for a fight, but I knew better and ignored his antics. Gavin told me that that was a sign for me to leave the island and never come back. I agreed.

Before I came to Hawaii, my expectations were that it was a place I was meant to be in. At my age, I knew that some things cannot be forced no matter how hard you try to fit it into your life. Eventually, it would run its course. To find the place where you belong, you should be open to understand the things that don't fit into your life and take yourself away from them. If you spend time in the places that do not serve you and where you are not supposed to be, you will never be placed strategically for your purpose, and you will end up nowhere close to your goals. Remove

the things that hold you back and step away from the places that keep you from moving forward, and you will eventually find your path.

Chapter 30: The Story of Bob & EOU

After Hawaii, I went back to Greensboro to become a bicycle delivery man for Jimmy John's. It was a great job for me. I learned how to commute at a whole new level. I could fly through all the red lights at top speed, and merge into traffic at high speeds. Apart from that, it was a job that involved a lot of movement, which I loved. I worked there for eight months before I left for a teaching assignment at Eastern Oregon University.

In September, I moved to Oregon to teach at EOU. Right away I met Bob. I rented a room in his house the first trimester. He was an old, one-legged man. He was a pleasant man whom I enjoyed spending time with. I believed that he needed someone compassionate and someone who would give a listening ear to him. He narrated to me the tragic accident that ruined so much of his life.

One day, he went for a routine check-up at his doctor's. The doctor took his test results and said that he needed to get some more tests done at the hospital. Then more and more tests followed and eventually the hospital created a problem while testing. His kidneys became an issue. They had to do more tests on him. Then his kidneys started failing. The doctors ended up removing a vein from both of his legs to implant into his kidneys. This one action led to the loss of one leg, and almost both. He was about to lose the second, but they managed to save it. Bob began a cycle of powerful medications after the surgeries. He claimed to be on more than 20 different prescription medications. He became aloof and ended up in a semi-vegetative state for more than a year.

Eventually, Bob's kidneys recovered on their own and were fully functioning. He became fully conscious again. The doctors claimed they never saw anything like this before. Imagine what would have happened had they simply left him alone. He would have both legs and a fuller life. They created complications for no reason. Sadly, this is often the case in the medical field.

In addition to their reckless decisions, during the surgeries, doctors did not replace his intestines properly. This led to a continuing long-term issue. Thankfully, he recovered from the debilitating issue after struggling. He was living a happy life now, satisfied with a smoke and some brandy. He found joy in the little things and was always smiling. I grew fond of him.

Bob had experienced first-hand that doctors created problems for their patients. He didn't go back to the doctor for a very long time. His experience saved my life during a time of severe illness just a few months later. Looking back, I would have been unable to survive had I chosen to see a doctor. He saved my life.

He had a daughter in New York that grew up in LaGrande, Oregon. She had gotten the best of both worlds, a rural upbringing and the city life. He tried to hook us up for a chit chat but it ended up not working out. He wanted her to work with me in my business. Unfortunately, she arrived in LaGrande after I left for winter break.

Bob and I had a falling out at the end of the fall semester. I chose not to engage in the drama and left his place. I lived in my car for a couple of days. During this time, I had a Chevy

Suburban which I thought would insulate me from the freezing cold. The mountains in Oregon were no joke. The temperature fell well below the freezing point throughout the winter. The wind drafts flew right into the car. My sleeping bag was rated for 40 degrees, but it couldn't insulate me from that cold. It was unmanageable.

After the fall term, I flew back to spend time with the family. I wanted to bring them back to Oregon, but my children grew up in Hatteras and the Bahamas. They are more accustomed to the warmer weather. They wouldn't be able to manage the ice cold in Oregon, especially my daughter who was most sensitive to the cold. So, I flew back to Oregon on my own and decided that they would join me in the spring trimester starting around April 1.

I could no longer live in my car, so I rented a little room to live in. It was a warm and pleasant space. My respiratory problems had improved when I was in Hatteras and the Bahamas. Things started changing when I moved to Greensboro and got worse while in Hawaii. I realized that I wasn't as quick and my mind was foggy. I couldn't think clearly. I was unaware that this was connected to my breathing problems. I had trouble breathing, causing me to gulp for oxygen all day which in turn raised my blood pressure. This really messed up my mind and body. I was in a dazed state for a while.

Going to Oregon in the winter made breathing almost impossible. I couldn't find a way to improve my breathing. Previously, working out helped my sinus and breathing problems. Working out for 5-6 hours per day in Oregon did nothing. The cold was too much. My sinuses were not functioning, and my blood pressure skyrocketed to 190/120 on average with super spikes that were much higher. I was always in a state of hallucination. I didn't dare go to hospital for help, I didn't want to be screwed up as I recalled Bob's story.

I was living outside my comfort zone and my body was unable to adjust to my surroundings. After a few weeks of bad lectures and living in a dazed state, I broke down. I was out on a bike ride, and I simply started crying. I couldn't control myself. I had been through a lot of physical torment and it was too much. This illness was the worst. I was not strong enough to fight it. It angered me that I was not in control of my body anymore. I had a baby and two amazing kids. I knew that they needed me alive and present. Ranny would not be able to raise the kids on her own; she always messed things up.

I was dying and my partner was not ready to step up in case anything happened. I didn't have an emergency fund set up for situations like this. I had not set up my family for success. I considered myself a failure. The worst part was that I had kept my illness a secret from everyone. It was my problem. No one else was responsible for my troubles. Hence, I did not want to trouble anyone with my problems. I pretended to be ok and acted tough. I ended up losing hope and became worse.

It was a dark time for me. It was at this time that I learned that the underlying basis of life is hope. When hope exits the door, life dwindles and nothing is left. I felt completely lost. I believed that I had fallen short in every aspect of my life, particularly in my family. I began making farewell calls to my friends that evening since I was sure that I was passing away soon. I made peace with it. I sobbed as I prepared for my departure.

An interesting thing happened during this time. I started feeling better. I started sharing more and more with others. I realized that I wasted a lot of energy hiding the truth and it imprisoned me. By sharing the truth, my energy was spared and focused more on getting better. I began to heal. The lesson I learned from this was that to change the reality or truth of your life, it has to start with speaking the truth and acknowledging the challenge you are facing. Otherwise, there is no way to change the circumstances. It sounds dubious, but it is what helped me heal.

I hit rock bottom and made my way back up. I intensified my workouts for 6 or more hours a day. I used peppermint essential oil for my breathing, and I cleaned up my diet. I made sure to prevent making mistakes because they could prove to be fatal. I fought my way through the semester and managed. I was still dizzy and light-headed most of the time, but I gained back much of my mental abilities.

During the peak of my illness, my vision started diminishing, my hearing abilities were poor and my ability to solve math problems was broken. I became stupid. However, I knew that God had a plan for me and I trusted it. Everything started coming back to me slowly, my vision improved and my hearing was back. I knew that sicknesses damaged the body. I didn't know that the body could regenerate itself. A healthy diet, frequent exercise, and a positive spirit can do wonders to the body. I am living proof.

Eventually, I went to the health clinic, the only one in LeGrande, as it was a tiny town. They told me that I needed blood pressure medicine. They were unable to diagnose the true cause of the problem. I visited the clinic two or three times, but my memory of the time is still a little hazy. I soon realized that they were not going to help in my recovery. I had to push the issue aside until I got a proper diagnosis. It might take years, but I didn't have an option. I was willing to go above and beyond for my children. I lived for them. I started experimenting on food, exercise, sauna use, essential oils, and everything else just to find a cure. I proceeded with ruling out options if they did not work out.

It came to a point where I bought life insurance for about \$150,000. If I was going to die, I wanted the kids to have enough money to pay for the house and basic needs. I wanted to get a higher amount but I knew Ranny. Any extra money and she would end up misusing it, then create drama. I wanted to leave just what was enough, nothing in excess. I told the human resource department representative that too much money is a problem.

He looked at me as though I was the dumbest man alive. He asked me how *too* much money was a problem. I thought to myself how one person was enough to teach me that lesson, that person being Ranny, a person I thought was my life partner.

The family came to Oregon in the spring semester. I drove our van to Las Vegas and left them with friends because the vehicle broke down in. The people installing the walls put a screw through the main wiring harness causing the car's electrical system to fail. Ranny and the kids ended up renting a car to get to Oregon. They stopped in Los Angeles on the route. It was the kids' first cross-country trip.

They had a deep affection for EOU. They were in school at the time, so we established a habit of cycling there each morning. They found the wind gusts amazing and a brief amount of exertion. I can still see their tiny figures riding away from home, scanning the streets as they rode off. Their school was two blocks from the university, so we biked together to school, and then they came to campus after school. Apik liked playing Frisbee golf and volleyball near the student center. Dyaneella enjoyed spending time in the photographic lab which included the red room for processing film, and she liked producing clay art in the lab.

She joined Apik in playing volleyball with the college students. At first, the college kids had reservations playing with my 7- and 8-year-old children, but they allowed them to play as a favor to me. On the second day, a student spiked the ball which then hit Apik's head and traveled approximately a mile up into the air. As it came down, his team got it over the net and scored. Someone instantly said that they wanted Apik on their team from then on. Everyone laughed. I was a proud father. The kids played volleyball from then on. They did not need me to get them in a game; they had earned the right to play on their own.

Later in the semester, I took the kids on field trips. We went whitewater rafting, hiking, camping in Wallowa Lakes, trail clearing, ice caving and climbing. All these trips were organized by the outdoor club. My kids had a blast! They had an active 3-month trip in Oregon.

We had to go pick up the broken-down van from Las Vegas on the way home. I took the kids in our Suburban, and we visited one of my best friends, Walt, and his three boys. I gave the kids \$50 and an extra \$20 each every day while I resolved the van issues. They loved Las Vegas and the freedom they had there. We went to a show, "Ka," and Ranny took them to see "O" a few months earlier. I cried at the end of the show. There were numerous performers; some did some fighting, others climbing, rowing, acrobatics, archery, balance and much more.

My children had experience in all of these things. I got them nice archery sets in Oregon, and they spent time training in a facility. They would climb the EOU wall, and Apik became an expert climber. Kayaking had been our thing for years, and we often worked on balance with the Bosu ball and Indo board. I was so proud of the life I had created and all the activities they took part in. I was sad because I saw it ending soon, I was not well.

I decided to let the kids fly back and I would drive back the van alone. I didn't trust the van to be completely fixed and I couldn't risk their well-being. They took a direct flight to Raleigh and I started the three-day drive home. The van ran well. It was not as bad as I expected it to be. The journey was hot and extremely tiring, but I kept on going.

Upon my return, Ranny asked about buying cell phones for the kids. I mentioned that we agreed not to buy a TV so that the kids would remain active and interactive. The same would apply to phones. That would actually be worse than having a TV. Hence, I suggested we wait till the time was right. She agreed, or at least that was what she led me to believe.

I couldn't do much work due to my ailment. I still had breathing problems, so I would lay around a lot because it helped me breathe, especially on my left side. I decided to occupy myself with other interests. I watched a movie called 'Back to the Garden of Eden'. The movie inspired

me to create a food forest, something that felt like a calling to me. I began a routine of loading wood chips and planting trees and bushes. I started getting truckloads of chips, about 20-30, but then I started getting commercial deliveries of wood chips. Altogether about 25 major dump trucks' worth.

My property was about to undergo a major transformation. It was physically hard for me but I felt better every time I put in an effort. I ended up having over 1,000 strawberry plants after three years and about 500 trees and bushes. I also planted exotic trees like jujubes, guavas, olives, pomegranates, black currant, lemons, tangerines, kiwis, paw paws, mushrooms and many more. I also planted every type of common fruit tree. Unexpectedly, working in the forest improved my ability to breathe and my mental state.

I got to meet Josh, my next-door neighbor who became instrumental in building the food forest. He had lived next to us for a few years but we barely interacted in all that time nor got to know each other. After we began talking, he would join me daily for three years after I started working in the food forest. He was pretty much cohabitating with us. We all enjoyed his company immensely.

Not long after, I had a problem with one of my dental crowns that needed to be redone. Then I got a second one redone. I became suspicious and thought that my teeth could be the cause of my breathing issues. I wanted to get one more tooth pulled but the dentist checked it out and said that it was ok. He thought that I was crazy for wanting my tooth to be extracted. I wasn't sure what was happening to me but I kept visiting the dentist frequently.

Chapter 31: GTCC

I was unwell when I got back from Oregon so I wasn't in a hurry to get back to work far from home. Nonetheless, I applied for jobs. The few local jobs I applied for didn't pan out so I took a semester off to heal. In retrospect, I think I would have been more suitable for any position that would help with my recuperation. Even if it was a job paying minimum salary. The distraction would have been nice. I started feeling more fatigued from being jobless. My breathing and blood pressure worsened.

My children were accepted at Greensboro Academy, which is a local charter school. Madison Elementary had been working out very well. Dyanella was on the A/B honor roll consistently and Apik loved playing at the school. Madison was a three-minute walk from the house and a quick bike ride. Greensboro Academy was a great school, but it was about a 25- to 30-minute drive, and they didn't have buses. This meant that we had to do two one-hour round trips per day. I don't like driving, but Ranny volunteered to drive. We examined the metrics of both schools on GreatSchools.com. Madison had been a good school a few years prior, but it's rank plummeted. Greensboro Academy was a perfect 10 on all fronts. There wasn't much of an argument to keep the children in Madison, so I relented.

Dyanella told me that they played a game at lunch on their second day at Greensboro Academy. The goal was to take a banana far into one's mouth without eating it.

"Is this what you are learning at the new school?" I said. It was preposterous but I tried not to show my disbelief. Then I continued to joke around by trying to play the game. I asked her if I was good at the game, then we proceeded to other jokes.

In the spring, I took a teaching position at Guilford Technical Community College (GTCC), a local school. It was an interesting place. They hired me with an offer on the phone. Less than two hours afterwards, they told me that I would work as an adjunct the first week. It was a bit confusing because the changed position would mean a five percent pay cut on my side. I chose not to make an issue of it but to assume the best. I didn't agree to a pay cut, hence I did not think they were doing it. In the end I felt compelled not to work for a place with shady offerings and indecisiveness. Eventually, their behavior came to affirm my decision because they became deceitful more than once.

Around the same time, Vassya got sick. I also continued visiting the dentist frequently. I had normal cleaning, a few fillings and three crowns replaced. I became super suspicious of my teeth as the cause of my breathing ailments.

Chapter 32: Vassya's Illness

Vassya didn't like me in his youth. We never truly bonded when he was new to the family. He was stubborn in his ways because he was a stray dog. It took some time, but we got there after Lutik fell ill. Vassya was seven years old at the time. He began to actually like me. Later, he used to get along with a neighborhood dog back in 2015 named Ruger. At the time, Ruger was only a puppy when Vassya began playing with him nonstop. They were a great duo; it was nice seeing them running, playing, and wrestling again.

Unfortunately, Ruger grew to become as wild as Vassya in his youth. Ruger ended up hurting Vassya frequently while playing, so Vassya started to avoid him. I wanted to find another partner for him so I went to the animal shelter in search of one, but Vassya declined the addition. Lutik was his best friend, and he was not going to be replaced. Vassya was content being alone with me.

In March 2019, as we were walking around the house with Vassya, I noticed an open wound on his body. I was petrified. He hadn't been bitten nor hit. He wasn't back to his previous escapades. It was confusing what might have caused the wound. I tended to it and put a cover on it, but it wouldn't heal. I used a long list of medicines on it including vodka, hydrogen peroxide, grain alcohol, goldenseal, triple antibiotic, Honey Wound Gel, liquid goldenseal, fish oil and more. I started using the medicines together, using two or three at a time. Nothing worked, so I went to my local vet for help. He misdiagnosed it many times. After about a year, I learned that it was a mass cell tumor. Vassya was misdiagnosed by our neighborhood vet throughout, which challenged his capacity to fully heal. He became quite ill, and I had to carry him often.

As a young puppy, Vassya didn't like me. His attitude towards me changed dramatically after he became ill. He needed someone to love him, as we all do, and I was obliged. He warmed up to me, and we became close. One day, I was carrying him down the flight of stairs when I tripped. Everyone knew what would follow, my kids and Josh watched in horror. Ninety-nine out of a hundred times someone trips on the stairs while carrying a dog, the person falls on the dog. Vassya was a sick dog; to imagine me falling on him would have been horrific.

I don't remember how it happened but it was nothing short of a miracle. I was stumbling for multiple steps trying to balance a 65 lb. dog in my arms who hindered my visual spectrum and worsened my instability, but I saved the fall. My subconscious took over and saved the day. That was the day that I knew that I loved him, and he knew it too. We both smiled at each other. This was not a simple 'I love you' made by word of mouth. It was pure and genuine, shown by my actions, I made the impossible possible because of my love and dedication to Vassya. I cried upon this realization and I think he shed a tear or two as well.

Chapter 33: Coastal Carolina University

I took a couple of camping trips to Hatteras with the kids in the summer. The sky was amazing with as many stars as there are specks of sand on a beach. It was a beautiful time. Baby loved it, but she started crying the first night and did not stop for a while. She was used to breastfeeding at night, and I couldn't offer boobs. Eventually, she stopped crying and was apologetic. She wanted to stay at the beach to play. We went everywhere together; kayaked on the sound side, played on the beach, and went to the playground. It was like the good old days. We had full days and we all loved it.

In Hatteras, my breathing improved greatly. I expected it to be an integral part of the solution. On our second trip to Hatteras, I was offered a position at Coastal Carolina University via a telephone call from the dean, Michael Roberts. My friend Andrew, a fellow math Ph.D. and a chess player from Temple University (we hung out as graduate students), had worked there for more than 15 years. The university was near Myrtle Beach, so I assumed it would help my breathing problems.

I was given a \$1,000 relocation allowance, so I rented a room at the Doubletree for a week so the kids could play and ease into the place. The hotel permitted pets, so I was able to work on Vassya's wound daily. I wanted to do all that I could for him. On the second day, Vassya was dehydrated in the scorching summer sun at the beach. He couldn't get up and move. His condition was getting worse, but he wasn't going down without a fight. I forced him to eat a handful of fish oil capsules which brightened him up and enabled him to walk again. I began using the fish oil tablets to improve his hydration and regulate weight. His open wound was creating dehydration problems.

In the end, I visited a fantastic vet in the Outer Banks who had treated Vassya when he was a youngster. Dr. G is a wise, competent, and decent individual. I took Vassya on a five-hour one-way trip to see Dr. G for his mast cell tumor and other problems. Things turned around instantly, Vassya was running and playing the next day. After a month, Vassya was completely normal. Then it all changed, he lost the ability to walk. I called Dr. G, but he was shocked and couldn't explain his condition. I ended up carrying him everywhere. I kept him hydrated and fed him manually. I kept an eye on the outside temperature to keep him out in the fresh air for as long as possible before bringing him inside to warm up. This went on for a couple of weeks and he began to improve and walk.

My neighbor eventually revealed that they use chemicals in their pond to prevent algae growth. They grew suspicious that the poisons were the reason for Vassya's health issues because they had seen Vassya drink from the pond. This revelation helped make sense of the latest problem, I was no longer wasting time pondering nonsensical reasons for the setback. Once I understood Vassya was poisoned, I was able to find a solution around it. I used goldenseal to clear his system.

With time, he began to feel better. He would occasionally reach one end of the street; then, I would carry him back because he would be unable to do so by himself. He was getting better by the day. Eventually I took him to the woods where he would leap and pounce. He was the happiest in nature and enjoyed taking walks in the woods. He was 15 and still hyper athletic.

Soon the tumor came back, but it wasn't as bad. Through experimentation, I learned that grain alcohol drained and dried the tumor, so I finally had a non-surgical solution. He was better but he was not back to his normal self. Eventually, he went back to the poison pond and drank from it once more. He stopped walking again. I started treating him once again and he started improving. Unfortunately, it was clear that he wanted to die.

A couple of weeks later, he didn't come home after sitting outside. I found him lying not far from the pond. There were some flies surrounding him. He had passed away. I picked him up and took him home. He had gone there to die. I felt bad that he chose death. I wished I could have done better for him. The kids and I buried him in the yard not too far from the garden. The kids did the best job decorating his grave. They placed little stones around the grave. I added flowers and wood chips. When they bloom, they will take the shape of the moon. And every season, the place would be beautiful. And that would be Vassya's resting place.

Coastal Carolina University was a dynamic public institution with great potential for both teachers and students. I was appointed as a visiting assistant professor for the 2019-2020 school year. I was looking to start a new page in my life. It was a blank page that I was hoping to fill with my great ambitions. I was still suffering from the effects of the consequences of my sickness which began in Oregon. I was exhausted and sluggish. However, I continued with my routine. I would exercise for more than five hours daily allowing me to function normally.

My children adored Myrtle Beach and the Coastal Carolina University campus. It was close enough for me to commute on the weekends, and I could bring the family to the beach a few times during the semester. They would stay at the DoubleTree hotel, which Baby adored and still talks about as the big white house.

I knew my physical condition was not at its best, but I did not want my students to suffer and lag behind because of my personal problems. I decided to do more than 20 study sessions to maximize their learning; this way they would stay on track. My head wasn't in the right headspace, but my work ethic was still intact. I knew what I had to do to get by and what I must not do no matter what the condition was. I was trying my best not to let my health get in the way of my teaching.

I had never experienced a worse student body at a big university. The algebra students knew little and had a poor work ethic whereas the calculus students had no algebra knowledge. Calculus is an unreachable fantasy without algebra. It turns out that the calculus class was for the students who were late registering' it was the last math class to fill up and is a bad sign. The main ingredient in the recipe of failure. My coworkers call the students "different."

I was trying my best to get things into their heads using every single tactic I had. Some of them just couldn't understand the concepts despite my efforts. Unsurprisingly, there were a lot of student complaints. Most of them were frivolous. Students that are not ready to learn cannot be trusted to evaluate the course nor the instructor. After the complaints, the department had four faculty members observe my class to see whether I was performing well.

The first faculty member congratulated me. He said it was one of the best lectures he had ever seen. The next two faculty evaluations went smoothly, but the final one was awful. Unfortunately, this was the one that the chair came to observe. I was extremely nervous that the chair decided to join and it showed. It was one of the worst lectures ever.

I was called to see the dean. When the dean questioned me about the cause of my subpar performance, I confessed to him that I had given an unsatisfactory lecture. However, my overall performance was not poor since I had three excellent evaluations. It felt like he had chosen to begin with an intimidation tactic to have me submit to his whims. I was not comfortable with his tactics nor tone during the meeting. Fairness and propriety are qualities that we need as individuals and for the people around us. I did not see the need to accept an incorrect judgment based on a poor single lecture. He persisted in using the one lecture to establish my essence as a lecturer. It caused our interaction to turn tense. It was clear that his justification was faulty. His evidence was unitary and inconsistent with all the evidence.

He additionally mentioned the student complaints. Everyone knew that the students at Coastal were not real students; they complain about everyone and everything. I told him as much and he didn't deny it. About 10 percent of the students at Coastal are good, smart kids who will succeed at everything they set their minds to. The other 90 percent were lost; it makes no sense to use evaluations from these students. Most universities discard evaluations from first year students, because students need to prove themselves before they can be recognized as evaluators. Many students are just passing through; those opinions should carry no weight.

During our meeting he said that I must prepare my lecture beforehand with great care. I answered that I had always prepared my lectures with great care. I added that 99 percent of all my lectures were good and my preparation was always excellent.

"Was that preparation the cause of your horrible delivery of your lecture? It couldn't be caused by just your nervousness," he responded.

It was a question that had boggled my mind as well. I did not know what else could have caused the terrible lecture. I answered that perhaps it was meant to be. He found my response to be preposterous, intertwined with faith and religion. It made no sense to him. I saw it as a test of my worthiness. God gave me a bad lecture to see how Coastal would respond to it. The majority of math lecturers are unqualified and are there to keep churning out students.

They pretend that these people are credible even though they could not even give a legitimate algebra lecture. The lecturers knew how to kiss the rings of the superiors to be kept. I was qualified, I did well in most of my classes, I had a strong work ethic, I didn't see a cause to kiss the ring. I would have stayed at Coastal for many years following my recovery if they had welcomed me for who I was.

I wanted the time and effort I had put into this place to be worthwhile. In addition, one poor speech did not spell the end of the world. They had been totally ignoring the other nearly flawless talks I had done. It was normal for me to make errors from time to time, I am human after all. I

didn't think it was a big issue. Everyone makes mistakes. Therefore, I was allowed at least one screw up.

In this manner, I was done with the fall semester after which I went to visit the dentist's office. I was finally diagnosed with what had troubled me for so long. I had an impacted (sideways) infected wisdom tooth. It had been inside my mouth for nearly 30 years! Usually, this would cause excruciating pain, but somehow, I was not in pain although I had all the symptoms.

While I was leaving the dentist's office, Dyanella called me to inform me that I had received a notice of termination from Coastal Carolina. The timing made me smile. God had other plans for me. Coastal was not going to reap benefits from my healing. Without the termination, I would have stayed there as an underpaid lecturer for many more years as a thank you for helping in my recovery. Obviously, I didn't owe my recovery to them. They were not worthy of that accolade.

Once again, God opened another path for me and removed all the unnecessary stops in my way. Pain, misery, and disgrace had come my way since going Coastal was definitely not the best course for me. Coastal had a habit of terrorizing people, and I had the experience of suffering through an institute like that before - East Carolina University comes to mind. Institutions like this act in this manner because they are sure they will get away with it. Rarely will anyone ever stand up against the unjust behavior of superior authorities once normalized.

After Coastal turned me out the door, I took a high school teaching position at Early College at Guilford once COVID hit the States and schools shut down. I worked with the best high school kids in the area. I taught two sections of calculus and one in statistics. It was here that I met Rumi, a very good student. He told me that he wanted to help the community with the COVID outbreak. He asked if there was anything he could do. I got him working on a paper to estimate the COVID daily cases in Guilford County.

We employed a polynomial error correction term with an exponential regression. Rumi did a fantastic job. He eventually persuaded me to create a free online analysis course. I made lectures available online at MathPhD.com, which became a company offering to publish student papers for high school students. Eventually, it transferred into a government contracting business. Thus far, it has not been successful, but I believe that it will be very soon. I was led on this path for a reason and I trust this path.

Chapter 34: Back to Hatteras

In 2020, I rented a waterfront house in Hatteras to give Dyanisa the same opportunities that Dyanella and Apik had. I want all my kids to receive the same amount of love and attention from me. When I took Dyanisa there, she was beyond ecstatic. It was the right move.

Baby learned to bike and climb trees. The trees on the island grow horizontal making it safe for kids. She loved kayaking and paddleboarding with me and Apik. She went to the playground daily and cycled to her friend's house for playtime. Twice daily, we walked the beach and climbed the dunes. She had a blast for a whole seven months. Then Ranny's drama started.

Chapter 35: The Recent Past

This part of my life is riddled with so much pain and regret. It has held some of the most excruciating moments in my life. A culmination of the many silent signs that I chose to ignore. A revelation that came too late in my life. I would have liked to believe that the troubles in this chapter of my life began with Ranny's desire to get a Tesla, which I purchased after some persuasion in 2019, but the reality is far more complex.

Ranny is my wife, well, ex-wife. She had some flaws, but so does every human being. I was willing to look past them, and I did for a very long time. Trying to be as considerate as I could to her mannerisms and be accommodating of her shortcomings. Nevertheless, her flaws ended up breaking our family. Ripping it to shreds. She left nothing but pieces of who we were as a family.

Among the many flaws that she had, the one that remained a constant was her financial irresponsibility. Money is essential to the running of the family, and with me being the sole provider, her financial choices make a significant difference in the maintenance of the family. Ranny didn't pay for any of her, nor the family's expenses, yet she would steal money from my credit card and UPS accounts every month. It was becoming unbearable having someone with no regard for the financial implications of her actions.

To give context to my concern, at one point she opened an Old Navy credit card in my name without my knowledge, maxed it out. then proceeded to default on it. This sank my credit score. This was most definitely a crime, but for the sake of our children, I decided to resolve the issue at home and not involve the police. She was the mother of my children after all. Knowing very well that that would be my reaction in the matter, she had the advantage and leeway of repeating the same mistakes over and over.

The pattern to be followed would be for her to steal money via my credit cards, bank transfers, and/or shipping accounts. After I found out about either action, she would start an argument and escalate matters, changing the subject completely or finding ways to explain her actions. Finally, as a final attempt at getting away with my actions, she would try to defuse the situation and keep the money she took by attempting to have sex. It was her method of seeking absolution for her mistakes. She repeated this pattern for more than 10 years and I mindlessly allowed it, not realizing the gravity.

Her theatrics and behavior displeased me. I wanted to put a stop to it, so I struck a deal with her. I decided to buy the Tesla she wanted, and in return she would get a job and stop using my accounts. In addition, she was to pay for the Tesla in installments and help out with the house bills. She happily agreed and took up a waitressing job. However, as you may have guessed, nothing changed. She continued misusing my accounts and neglected to pay any household costs. I confronted her on the same, asking for accountability for her part of the bargain and she argued that paying for the Tesla was a house bill. To say that I was aghast would be an understatement. She would always be the same person no matter the circumstances. I weighed my options and decided that since I was unwell at the time with three kids to consider, I had no choice but to tolerate her impunity.

The Tesla got a lot of traction in the house. It was a source of pride and joy to the kids. They loved it dearly. Despite my reluctance to buy the car, it was indeed a good car. It makes for a great family car, and it was my way of supporting Tesla's expansion. That was the main motivation behind my purchasing the car. Tesla was struggling with sales in March 2019, hence I stepped up to assist in my small way by purchasing one car. The flip side of having such a car is that it would attract a lot of attention to the family, which I disliked. People gawked at us and would ask multiple questions that never seemed to end. I didn't appreciate this side of owning a Tesla.

During this period, my daughter Dyanella spent a lot of time in her room. She hardly left for a couple of years, which was unusual given the fun we would have together outdoors as a family. It was an unexpected change in her mannerism. Ranny had bought her a phone without my knowledge. I tried to engage Dyanella in other activities but failed each time. Unbeknownst to me, she was busy using her phone which kept her away.

Somewhere around January 2021, she woke up crying, and I went to check up on her. She explained to me that she couldn't see herself doing anything other than "bad jobs." This took me aback. I didn't understand the source of these tragic thoughts. She has a high potential of becoming whatever she chooses to become. She could decide to do bikes, dance, swim and compete at high level; she could become a doctor or vet as she aspired as a child or become a Circ de Soleil acrobat. I assured her that she could do anything she put her mind to, but she remained adamant about her belief that she had no choice in the direction of her life. This perplexed me, so after giving it some thought, I emailed the bicycle factory and informed them that Dyanella would take over the bike business the next year. I would try to ensure that she had a great career no matter what.

A short while after that incident, Dyanella started discussing suicide publicly. She would cut herself to the point that her arms were covered in cuts. I didn't know how to react. I felt a deep sorrow for my child to be hurting herself. Unsure of what to do and lost in the tornado of parenting, I offered my love the best that I could. I was still unaware of the phone she had. Unaware of the many things that would cause her pain to the extent that she was exposed to without proper guidance.

In March 2021, the Tesla crashed itself while on autopilot. An unexpected incident, I must add. I was behind the steering when this happened. The physics behind it is that the car hydroplanes with high probability due to its low profile (it is close to the ground). There is an inverse correlation between hydroplaning and the height of the car. And because the height is minimal, all Teslas have a higher probability of hydroplaning (compared to other cars). I also purchased the rear-wheel-drive version, which isn't advisable for a car that is prone to hydroplaning. Then we have autopilot; it's built as an autonomous driving solution. Unfortunately, it doesn't work or rather it did not work in my case. Autopilot constantly tried to crash into obstacles and didn't learn from earlier mistakes.

What happened on this unfortunate day was that I was on my way to work when the car started hydroplaning at 55 mph; the front end drifted to the left, while the rear of the car stayed in the same lane. Then autopilot engaged, speeding the car; however, it was not straight. The acceleration force made the car spin on the highway at 55 mph. The combination of low profile,

rear-wheel drive, and autopilot together, are a design flaw in my opinion. I tried to find a way to halt the spinning and to avoid being T-boned by approaching vehicles. Unfortunately, I made the wrong move. While I managed to stop it from spinning, I ended up speeding directly into the median. I was fortunate to survive. The main lesson being that if ever in a similar situation, let the car spin out since there is almost no chance that someone would hit a spinning automobile head-on. The car would have slowed during the spin. Stopping the spin resulted in a high-velocity collision. By allowing it to spin, the speed of the car would be reduced, and the likelihood of surviving a collision would increase.

Thankfully, I survived the accident ending up with just a concussion and whiplash that made me unable to concentrate for some time. Naturally, Ranny suspected I had something to do with the crash. In truth, I never wanted the car because of the fraudulent manner it was purchased but I would not risk my life to destroy the car. I held no hard feelings towards the car' it brought joy to my children after all. The fact of the matter is that the Tesla model 3 RWD is a flawed car.

Ranny was not the only one mad about the accident. Dyanella was quite upset. She continued locking herself in her room. Her isolation lasted for about two years. I tried to approach her and help, but she declined. All I got from her was remarks that I had totaled her dream car, and she was really mad at me. This made me question her love for me as compared to material items such as the car. She ought to have been relieved that I had survived the accident with little damage. but she focused on the lost car. It was bewildering to me the matters that she held to be important. I grew scared that she might end up like her mother.

A couple of weeks later, Dyanella and Ranny had a big fight. Ranny had promised to take Dyanella to her favorite bookstore in the morning. They left in the morning and returned after 10-12 hours. Dyanella was furious because she had been at the bookstore for less than 5 minutes. Ranny prioritized herself and made her tag along for more than 10 hours. They had an argument that led to them calling each other names and lots of complaints were made against each other. Ranny handed Dyanella a knife and an empty pill bottle and told her to go kill herself! Dyanella went to her room and overdosed that night on prescription medicine just as she was tempted to do by her mother. It was a sobering moment realizing the negative effects this woman had on our children.

Dyanella came to me and told me about the overdose. She regretted it and tried to throw up to no avail. I gave her some hydrogen peroxide that enabled her to throw up and flush her system. Hydrogen peroxide is an unstable molecule. Hence it reacts with most drugs in the stomach. The reaction increases the volume in the stomach, which induces one to vomit. It worked! Dyanella threw up instantly! She was safe!

At 2 a.m., we all had a family meeting, considering the severity of the situation. I asked everyone to apologize to Dyanella for everything we could have done to cause her pain. She deserved to live in a peaceful environment. We were to start over as a family. I could not ignore what had just happened. Things needed to be set right. Ranny got upset and belligerent; she never apologized for anything. This has been the trend for 15 years. She starts trouble and escalates drama but never apologizes. I have always taken the blame and apologized to minimize the

problems at home, never making her take accountability for her actions. Unfortunately, it ended up enabling her bad habits, and Ranny kept getting worse.

On that very night Ranny threw a fit.

"That's it, I'm moving out!" and she departed shortly after 2 a.m.. It was typical of her to direct the attention to herself by doing such things. This time we did not let her get away with her behavior. Dyanella received apologies from Apik and myself. Ranny returned the following day as if nothing had happened. I pitied the kids for having a mother that consistently made things worse for them. One of us had to be responsible and carry the cross. Unfortunately, I always took up that burden and sheltered her flaws under my wing. But she had too many faults to be hidden; Ranny became a master in the art of sabotaging one's family & children.

This was my last straw. My patience and grace grew thin. What kind of mother was so selfish as not to prioritize her children's anguish? I had struggled with this question for many years, pondering on the needs of my children and having a present mother, but she was causing more damage than if she wasn't there. It was pointless offering her grace. Ranny had been in a terrible state for a long time. She never recovered from the nervous breakdown; she had only gotten worse. For 10 years, we all hid her problems under the carpet and walked on the same carpet every day, pretending not to feel the discomfort. We never tried to clean the dirt under the carpet. And now it was beginning to contaminate our home, starting with our daughter.

My notion had always been that Ranny would improve eventually. It never happened. When it comes to mental health, it's the person's willingness to fix what's inside. On the outside, we can only offer a peaceful environment and room for self-discovery and improvement. But that was all we could do. The work was personal. Covering up for her condition did not help. The only way to fix it was for her to accept that she needed help. However, she was content in being depressed, and blaming others for everything. She made it a lifestyle. Over time, she became significantly worse.

I made a conscious decision to cut all forms of communication with Ranny. The incident with Dyanella opened my eyes to the damage she was causing our children. We stopped being intimate, which came as a blow to her because she used our intimacy to cover for her reckless behavior and to steal money from my accounts over the past 10 years. She was generally only interested in sex and money.

She was defeated as soon as she realized that I wouldn't fall for her tricks and that sex was no longer something I desired. Sex had been her form of apology, and now she was left with no means of recourse. No escape from being held accountable. She was now unable to use my credit card or demand payments from me. I was tired of the cycle we had lived in for many years. Little did I know that this change would bring much more damage.

Chapter 36: Child Protective Services

We had a visit from Child Protective Services (CPS) following Dyanella's suicide attempt; the CPS representative assigned to us was named Ms. Bontreva Wilson, a huge, angry African American woman. Every cynical and domineering person has a supporting advisory that upholds their behavior, and Ms. Wilson was no different.

After Dyanella's suicide attempt, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. I needed help, and I believed that she would be able to assist us as a family to sort out our issues by providing guidance and direction. I was wrong. She made matters worse. When she arrived, I told her that I needed help and appreciated her effort in coming by. I explained that both my wife and child have been suicidal. I told her that if she couldn't help me, she could have my kids because I was at my limit. This was my cry for help. I had failed to keep things under control, and I acknowledged that I needed her to make things right.

However, Ms. Wilson seemed to have an issue with successful white men - something that had not crossed my mind. Why would it anyway? This was someone working in an organization meant to serve the best interests of a child, not to vindicate white fathers. She had a vendetta against white males. I cannot pay for what our ancestors did many years ago. I learned about her discrimination from her coworkers. The fact is that every time she interacts with a successful white male; she complicates the situation. She is the only CPS caseworker with a dismal track record with white males. What are the odds of that?

Unfortunately, CPS has no system to carry out checks and balances, so Ms. Wilson freely terrorized people. Keep in mind, CPS is an entity of the state, hence they have sovereign immunity, meaning they are immune to any lawsuits. They can screw up endlessly with the full protection of the state. A body that is meant to protect the dignity of families and serve the best interest of the child should be monitored and evaluated.

During her first visit to our home, she discovered that Ranny had a nervous breakdown and had been suicidal twice. She was also told that Ranny gave Dyanella a knife the night that she tried to commit suicide and told her to kill herself. In addition, she knew that Ranny moved out on that very night. Nevertheless, the blame was placed on me because I was a successful white man. It made no sense.

She predetermined the facts of the case despite the actual facts being presented. She made her judgements before the investigations and inquiry began. She gave Dyanella the option of staying with her mother or moving into foster care while she was in hospital. She manipulated Dyanella into making her choice by telling her that I wanted to place her in foster care, which was a lie. I loved my daughter, and that was why I was fighting for her safety.

She set out on a witch hunt, and I was the forsaken witch. She brought up an incident I had with Apik years ago that was forgotten to all of us. Apik had a rebellious streak, especially towards me. One day, we had an argument about something and, in an attempt to cool him down and get him to apologize, I laid on top of him. I was simply obstructing his path so he would remain still until he apologized. I lay on him gently, not crushing him or stomping on him. My mother phoned

the police as she was confused. When they arrived, and upon inquiring what had transpired, they asked Apik to apologize to me, but he declined. They felt sorry for me and left after realizing that they couldn't help, the kid was too stubborn. Ms. Wilson brought up the 911 call and tried to turn it into a serious matter.

I agree that on the surface, a call by my mother to 911 didn't look good, but it would have been logical to find out from the police what had happened and what they discovered upon arriving. The entire picture of that incident needed to be drawn and presented. She did not want anything to do with those questions. The 911 call served her interest hence she stopped there.

She then claimed that I had a mental episode with a doctor on call at the hospital while trying to reach Dyanella. Another false accusation. Thankfully, I recorded the entire conversation and played it for Dyanella. The truth of the matter was, the doctor was angry because I told her she needed a plan of action to hold Dyanella, a legal requirement in these types of cases. The doctor said that she was working on a plan. I told her that if she did not have a plan, she had no legal justification to hold Dyanella. I stood my ground, respectfully, and we repeated the same thing five times. The doctor grew frustrated and stormed out. Listening to the recording was emotional, knowing I was accused of wrongdoing. The only wrong to be found on the recording was the doctor getting frustrated and yelling at me. I was a father looking to help his daughter at the hospital. I wanted things to be done as they should be and for my daughter to get the proper treatment. I was logical and respectful the entire time. Dyanella was shocked by the recording since it was the opposite of the story told to her by Ms. Wilson. Ms. Wilson claimed it was on her file and nothing in the file can be changed, so I was guilty of this charge despite the obvious falsification.

After several attempts to set me up, I refused to communicate with Ms. Wilson. I asked CPS for a different case worker but they refused. I was informed that caseworkers can't change. You get what you got. What a flaw in this system! During our last conversation, Ms. Wilson made a clear threat and intimidation about her role in damaging my life.

"Dr. Lyansky, it would be in your best interest and benefit to stay in my good graces," she said. "You do not understand how deeply this could affect your life and that of your family."

My response to her was that I would not take part in her fake investigation. I needed a judge, and I was willing to take matters forward. I told her that I was not going to let her manipulate my family. I responded to her with the same anger she showed. She was wrong to treat me in that manner, but so was I. I should have softened my stance. In truth I did not know the severity of damage she could cause. My sense of entitlement got in the way of my family's best interests. At times it is better to humble yourself. That was a mistake, and I regret it to this day.

Chapter 37: Investigation Summary

Ms. Wilson claimed multiple things during a meeting:

1. She stated I had a mental episode during my meeting with the doctor at the hospital. Thankfully, I recorded the conversation. The doctor was belligerent with me, while I was polite and proper.
2. She claimed I said she could take the kids into foster care. This was a complete misinterpretation of my frustrations. I was seeking help and expressing the dire need for assistance from her. She disproportionately turned my “request for help” against me.
3. She said I tried to poison my daughter with hydrogen peroxide. She did not consider that it saved my daughter’s life. The doctors affirmed my choice and corrected her. However, she said she could not change the file's contents; once input, it must stay, so she said.
4. She claimed a ridiculous fault when my son was stubborn, and I laid on top of him. She stated that I was a danger to my kids whereas the fact of the matter was that my child was rebellious, and I was trying to cool him down.

Following her cooked lies, she told Ranny to file a restraining order against me. Furthermore, she told her to claim false and dubious things so as not to be left empty-handed - conspiracy to rob me of everything I valued, my children. Ranny was undoubtedly ecstatic about the sympathy and advice she was getting. She had found someone to guide her through a greater fraud. While she got sympathy from Ms. Wilson, I got the exact opposite, contempt. What a turn of events.

In the beginning of May, just as advised by Ms. Wilson, Ranny filed a restraining order and instructed Dyanella to inform me that I had to speak to her immediately or else she would serve me, making it effective. I refused to communicate with her. I would not fall victim to her theatrics once more. I knew that she wanted to blackmail me.

A week later, Apik hit me in the back of the head with a ball as I was on a balance board. He drilled me so hard, and I was yet to recover from the car accident. He caused a concussion. I took him by the chest and threw him down. I asked him to apologize, but he refused. So, I started beating him. I paused more than 10 times in between asking him to apologize, but he refused. He was as stubborn as nails. His reluctance to offer an apology for a deliberate hit was not acceptable, I couldn't let him go. What lesson would I be teaching him? I applied more pressure on him repeatedly until he eventually gave in and apologized. Little did I know that it was all part of a set up. Ranny and Dyanella videotaped the entire incident. I know that corporal punishment is not the best course of action, but allowing him to get away with yet another assault is also unacceptable. Hence, I was forced to make a choice between two horrible alternatives. It was a lose-lose proposition for all of us.

Ranny updated the restraining order to include the beating of Apik. She needed money from me and sex was out of the question, so she repeated the Bahamas restraining order/divorce concept. She was getting desperate for money. Josh informed me that she had a video of me hitting Apik. Despite having knowledge of this, I refused to speak to her. I continued doing my daily

routine. I would work in the food forest and go about my business. Ranny decided to switch up her methods and went back to working in the garden. In the past, I appreciated her assistance, and it got me excited. Afterwards we always ended up having sex, but this time it was different. She worked for four days in a row while she would typically work in the garden only 5 or 6 times in a year. I remained unmoved and ignored her. She got the message loud and clear. I was no longer interested.

On May 14, 2021, Ranny called the police and had me served. Ms. Wilson advised Ranny to claim that she was not an English speaker and that she required a translator for a proper course of action. This demand caused an immediate eviction by the police for two months though the standard duration was seven to ten days for a hearing. Her other claims included assertions that I did the following to her:

1. I made her sleep in the car more than 10 times. Ranny often slept in the car, that is the truth. But on her own volition. After Door Dashing, she often sits in the car on her own in the driveways for hours on end talking on the phone. She ended up sleeping in the car at least twice a month and comes in the home between 2 and 8 a.m. I asked her to stop the behavior several times but she continued. Since she is an adult, I cannot force her to do anything different. I asked her to sleep in the car once, in the Bahamas in November 2012. It happened after I found out about yet another theft of my accounts. She called the police who took her away with the kids, and she ended up filing for a divorce. This is what caused her nervous breakdown. Just once. I know that it was wrong of me to ask her to sleep in the car. I deeply regret it. And I never did it again. Afterwards she would sleep outside in the car as reverse psychology on her own volition. I estimate she did it approximately 40 times over two years.

2. That I beat up Apik without cause. The truth of the matter is, as narrated earlier, he provoked my actions deliberately. It was a setup created to trigger me into acting in that manner. I was teaching him a lesson. I regret all of it.

3. That Dyanelle's suicide was caused by me. This accusation pained me the most. Especially since I made a deliberate effort to seek help for her and constantly involved her in the house and in activities. We were close to each other and had a great father-daughter bond. She only loved me in the family. She used to curse at her mother, beat up her brother and attempted to kill her sister three times. Yet I was the reason for her suicidal thoughts? This was completely deceitful and had no basis. She was the one who handed her daughter a knife and an empty bottle of pills and asked her to end her life. Not me.

The police approached me while I was working in the garden.

"Tell me what happened today," an officer asked. I had no clue as to what they were talking about.

"I have not talked nor been intimate with that woman in over two months," I said. The whole thing was hilarious. The police confirmed my account with Ranny and were confused. She had a 50B order typed up and ready to serve. It was served to me on that day. This was not new to me; she had done the same thing in the Bahamas. When I found out the date of the hearing, I was shocked. As were the police. Her lie that she needed an Indonesian translator was taken as fact and ended up pushing the date of the hearing for two months.

Before relocating to Hatteras, I spent the next two days sleeping in my truck while waiting for the current situation to play out. Josh was trying to mediate a resolution, but nothing happened. Afterwards, I stayed in the beach house with my mom. I shuttled back and forth between Greensboro and Hatteras. I missed Baby each day. Before having to leave her in Greensboro, she cycled 2 miles per day, went to the beach twice daily, and to two playgrounds daily - one in Frisco, and another in Avon.

The court date arrived. I arrived with tons of documentation to refute the fraudulent reports. Ranny arrived with Apik and Baby, no lawyer and no documents. Dyanella was in Charlotte. The judge was an older white man; he would have ruled in my favor no doubt, given the evidence I had to present to the court, but it wasn't meant to be. Nothing happened. The judge informed us that they could not procure a translator, hence the trial was to be pushed to the next month.

Meanwhile, Josh took my place in my house. He stayed there all day, taking the kids out, helping Ranny cook, painting the deck, feeding the chickens, and working on the food forest. I was happy and appreciative that he was helping around the house; otherwise, they wouldn't have managed.

Chapter 38: CPS Frauds

I have expressed my frustrations with CPS. I assumed that by approaching CPS, I would get the support I needed for my family and children. Sadly, it ended up being the reason for the wreckage in our family. I attempted to have Ms. Wilson removed from our case but was told that I could not choose a case worker.

Eventually, I wrote to CPS, threatening the agency and Ms. Wilson with my intention to pursue legal action. Since plaintiffs and defendants are not allowed to speak to each other, Ms. Wilson was taken off my case, but the damage was already done. There was no redemption for my family. Dr. Nelson was assigned as a case worker for the family. She talked to me once to get information on the family and what was going on. She never called again nor did she respond to any of my voicemails. She had to have known that Ranny was not fit to be a mother and needed mental help during her investigations, and yet nothing happened.

Unfortunately, despite my quest for justice, the integrity of the inspection was jeopardized because of favoritism. Ranny would get calls from both Dr. Nelson and Ms. Wilson the day before a house inspection; they knew she couldn't handle a surprise inspection. Despite the warnings, the house was always a dump, reflecting the chaotic state of her mind. Josh remained at the residence to take care of the children and took note of all CPS visitation warnings. Scheduling house inspections was against policy because it defeats the purpose of seeing how people really hold themselves. Josh's mother worked for CPS for many years, so they were aware of the policies.

On the day of the hearing in July 2021, I developed a hemorrhoid that twisted inside my body. I have never experienced anything like this before. I am generally extremely regular with bowels, but this ended in mid-July. I wasn't concerned at first but after a couple weeks it became worrying. It was tough for my body. I couldn't eat because I couldn't pass out waste. It was becoming serious. I was scared of the possible damage this condition would cause.

Otherwise, my mind was at war. I was in a dilemma. I didn't want to pay Ranny money for the kids again. I did this in 2013 and it didn't result in any change, I did not want this again. I was not going to encourage her bad habits. But at the same time, she had my children, and I did not want them to suffer, especially knowing how selfish their mother is. The war kept intensifying inside me, but I was determined not to give in. I would have my day in court and prove her to be unfit.

I got my hearing in mid-August. Ranny came with an attorney, Ms. Lindley, and Dyanella. To my knowledge, Dyanella loved me dearly. I was taken aback when I saw her in court supporting her mother. Moreover, Josh told me that she was saying some brutal stuff about me. I could not believe it. The news shook me to the core. She was my precious baby. Her turning on me felt like a nightmare. It still does.

I presented my evidence, stating my grounds on the evidence of fraud by Ranny. However, that placed next to the video Ranny submitted with me beating Apik was nothing. The judge, a woman, was understandably furious after watching the video. There was a lot of static in the video other than when Apik sobbed. My voice was muffled by the static, that was very odd, and it hid

the reason for the beating and the circumstances behind it. The judge made fun of me for not having an attorney present in court. Afterwards, a report from Dyanella's therapist was read. If I thought the worst had been said and done, I was wrong. The report stated that:

- I hit her
- I made her sleep in the bathroom
- I talked about sex with a banana. (Please recall the Greensboro Academy story).
- I body-shamed her
- I controlled her diet
- I controlled her hygiene
- I forced her to work out
- She lived in fear of me

To say that I was utterly shocked by these claims would be an understatement. My sweet girl had lied for the benefit of her mother. I felt disappointed and broken by these claims. The judge called upon Dyanella, and they went to her chambers to talk. She came out looking more upset than she was before. Dyanella admitted I never hit her, nor did I hit her mother. Nevertheless, she was nervous about it all, which made the judge conclude that I was a horrible parent. It didn't cross her mind that the nervousness was because she was lying. But I guess it was not my day. To put context to the claims made:

Firstly, I never hit her, as she later admitted to it being a lie.

Secondly, when she was 4 years old (10 years before the case), she had a temper tantrum, and I placed her in the bathroom and told her that she would sleep there that night if she didn't calm down. After 30 minutes, she was calm and I took her upstairs into her bed. She never actually slept in the bathroom.

Thirdly, the assertion made concerning oral sex was by Dyanella. I joked about HER mentioning it to ME. The rest of the claims were completely false.

They won the case. The judge ended it early and granted a restraining order for two years. However, the computer system would only permit a 1-year order plus the 3 months already given. Hence the order was for 1 year. Please understand there were no records of mistreatment or any police record of any allegations made against me. I felt lost afterwards; I couldn't see my children for a very long time.

After that case, the only thing on my mind was finding work so that I could make Dyanella (Lala) as happy as she was in Oregon. I got an interview at St Mary's in Maryland. It was a considerably better environment than EOU. The setting was an adolescent playground. During the first round of interviews, I made known the troubles I had with my family, which was my primary motivation for applying, to make my children happy. The interview was scheduled for 1 p.m. on the day of the hearing. Had it not ended early, I would have left so I could get that job. Making Dyanella happy was most important. Luckily the case ended early. The downside is that I lost, which left me emotionally wrecked.

My emotions were all over the place. I had just lost the case and discovered that my daughter didn't care about me to the point of blatantly lying to the court. The world could not stop to give me time to process all my emotions. It just kept moving, so I had to do the same, just keep moving.

I had a four-hour job interview immediately afterwards. It went well. I performed admirably during the interview and managed to give an outstanding one-hour lecture. I was amazed by my ability to compartmentalize and perform despite it being the worst day of my life. I expected to get an offer from St. Mary's but the position was for computer science faculty and I usually teach math. I applied hoping that I would get two of the same Java programming courses and a database class. However, after the interview, they mentioned that I had three distinct preps for classes I had not taught in over 20 years. This was really bad news, especially since school started in three weeks. I needed to get the job offer so I could start planning and preparing.

As I waited, I saw a spike in site views on MathPhD.com, a new startup I developed. I assumed it was because St. Mary's was investigating. This was not an issue since I had been running Downtube as a full-time math professor for more than 20 years. I gave them a week but no offer came. They must have been nervous about my allegiance. I am an honorable man. Once I signed a contract, I would stick by it. As time went by, there was a lot of pressure since I couldn't teach courses I didn't know. I decided to send an email removing myself from consideration since the scope of tasks was growing larger and the amount of time was too little to prepare.

After I lost the case, I found that I had 10 days to file an appeal. I hired a lawyer and filed it right away. The lawyer explained that the judge had overstepped her authority in many instances during the case, and I had strong grounds to file for an appeal.

She asked for a copy of the video of me beating up Apik. Josh tried to figure out what Ranny's intentions were at the time but was stumped. The only conclusion was money. It's always about the money. In addition, Dyanella told Josh that she would change her testimony if I bought the family a Lucid Air car worth \$150,000. I refused to take her offer because it would permanently damage her psyche. I was not going to let her become a version of her mother.

Throughout this period, I had not had a bowel movement. I was losing myself physically, emotionally, and mentally. It was too much. I told Josh that I would give Ranny everything she wanted, including the house, cars, bicycle business, bike inventory and cash. I called Ms. Lindley and informed her by voicemail. Immediately I let go of all the frustrations tied to my assets, I was healed. The hemorrhoid left my body. I could poop. This showed me that my mind was full of shit, literally and figuratively. I needed to work through removing the parts of me that were toxic and causing damage to my body.

Before the trial to get an appeal, I got a copy of the video, which was 3:48 minutes long. My voice was clear as day. I begged Apik to apologize several times in the video and he refused. The video in court was under 1 minute long; it had been edited. The video played in court was fake! The judge acknowledged that she was prejudiced in the hearing and allowed for the appeal to go through with a different judge on the bench. However, I did not want to file an appeal. It all felt dreadful and exhausting. I didn't want Dyanella testifying against me again. It would take an

emotional and mental toll on her. I didn't understand the reason for her lies, but I didn't want to make her mental health condition any worse. She was suicidal just a few months prior. So, I decided to forgo an appeal to reconcile with Ranny.

Ranny carried herself as though she was considering reconciliation throughout this time, but after the 30-day appeal window passed, she revealed her true self. She told Josh she didn't want to reconcile. I was blown away. She wanted a divorce and half of my assets. My sacrifice was made out of genuine love and intention for my family, but she was a wolf in sheep's clothing. She did not care about the trauma that this was causing the children.

Later in 2022 I received information that Ranny was using Lala's name to launder around \$200,000 via PayPal. The account was opened fraudulently when Lala was 9-10 years old; minors can't have PayPal accounts. Lala's account allowed Ranny to launder funds with no tax liabilities. Had Lala died, there would not be any consequences, since no one knew of this fraud - not even Lala. At this point, I realized, Ranny tried to get the maximum amount of money from me and kill her daughter simultaneously to cover for her frauds. Additionally, she knew my health was not good after EOU. If I died, she would get everything, so she wanted to ratchet up the pressure.

I still didn't understand the magnitude of the offenses. However, I knew that Ranny would get nothing. That's how karma in the world works. The good are always rewarded and the bad punished. She had screwed herself. I was finding a better place mentally and was recovering from the emotional damage. It might take some time, but I will eventually be fine.

Chapter 39: Divorce Again and Again

Unsurprisingly, Ranny filed for a divorce the day of the hearing. She claimed that she was married but did not mention the divorce petition in the Bahamas. To be fair, I was unsure of our marital status. We got a Divorce Nisi in the Bahamas in March 2013, the first stage of a two-stage divorce. I thought that having the Divorce Nisi and a change of residency in August 2013 to the USA would create a divorce in the USA. I got an attorney in the Bahamas to get a copy of the divorce which I never received in 2013.

To my shock, I was notified that a Divorce Absolute had been finalized on August 14, 2013. I had been divorced for eight years without knowing! This divorce was definitive, irreversible, and recognized by the USA. All foreign divorces are recognized in the United States which rendered the fresh divorce petition null and void.

How was it that I had been divorced for such a long time and didn't know? My Bahamas attorney informed me that it was impossible for it to take effect unless I couldn't be served. I had a residency in Sandyport and was a math professor. Being served should have been easy. He drew no conclusions on how that was possible. After giving it some thought, I remembered that in May 2013, I lived in the Sivananda Yoga Ashram to help the family heal as part of my yoga teacher's training course. Ranny visited me daily and used that time to attempt to serve me knowing that I would not be home. She screwed herself with this divorce. The divorce was real and final. There would be no division of assets since we were not married. Why did she do this? It was to steal the bicycles I sent to Indonesia. I didn't care about those bikes anyway. I sacrificed everything for my kids.

As it turns out, the bicycles, cars and everything that I owned remained mine. She was targeting my assets but ended up with nothing. The house was owned equally by each of us but that was under the false pretense of being married. I had been living a lie for a very long time. And to think that she was acting ignorant when fraudulently stealing. All along she was the mastermind of her own demise.

In December of that year, I sued for \$250,000, and the following March I filed a second suit for \$3 million. After the fraudulent nature and scams were in the open, I thought that her attorney would abandon her, but I was wrong. Ms. Lindley stood by her side. Perhaps they were birds of a feather and had a lot to relate to. I could not understand why she would represent someone who constantly lied and never paid for anything.

Ms. Lindley wrote a response stating that she would be representing Ranny in the fraud cases. The problem is that I filed the fraud cases pro se, representing myself. Nonetheless, I was using the Spagnola law firm for the custody case. Ms. Lindley was not permitted to speak to me directly in the custody case according to protocol. However, she was forced to communicate with me directly in the fraud case, as we are opposing attorneys. It would be impossible to resolve the conflict of interest in these cases.

Ms. Lindley has written untruths in multiple legal filings. In addition, her office worker told Josh that he had to move out of his own house. He had picked up some items from my home

on my behalf. Not only was he forced to leave the property where he had been helping watch the children and the food forest, he was told he had to leave his own home.

Around the new year, Ranny called Josh at 12:30 a.m.

“My mechanic said my husband should buy me a new car,” she said.

“Does your mechanic know you don’t have a husband?”

She went too far and I was not amicable to a resolution. At this point she became paranoid. She would ask Josh about cameras and recording devices in the house. She was starting to lose whatever was left of her mind. At some point in January, she kicked Josh out of the house permanently. He suspected that there was a lot of drama considering her mental state. One of the neighbors noticed that the children had not left the house in over six months and called the CPS. During this time, Apik gained close to 50 pounds. He was 12 years old! He went from being hyper-fit and active to being obese. Sadly, he blamed himself for the mess.

A new case worker was assigned to the family, Ms. Knight. She was aware that Ranny was not mentally well, just as the other case workers. When she arrived, the house was a mess, as usual. She did not take my calls nor answer my voicemails. Same as before.

Ms. Knight became aware that the house was constantly a dump and that Dyanella was left alone in the house over Thanksgiving break for about a week. Ranny had claimed Dyanella was at Erna's in Charlotte. Ms. Knight discovered the truth and concluded the child was left alone for an excessively long period. Instead of trying to fix the situation and bring back a sense of normalcy, she decided to let the status quo continue.

She informed me that they were not in the business of severing families. That struck me as ironic! They were doing the complete opposite to my family. Which is better: to let children remain with an unfit mother despite the many signs and evidence that prove that she does not care about them? Or letting them stay with a parent who cares about their well-being? The pretense in the agency marveled me! Not only did they destroy my family, but they refused to grant me justice for the damage caused. They refused to look into Ms. Wilson, the investigator or into any of the findings presented. After discovering that Ms. Knight phoned Ranny to arrange a final home inspection, I gave up on CPS.

In March 2022, in a final attempt to get justice, I went to CPS's offices to talk to the superior about the inconsistencies in the protocols being followed and the many violations of rules committed by the case workers. Upon arrival, I was notified that no one was allowed into the CPS department. I requested to have an audience with the head of CPS, Mr. Josh Cannon. However, I was only allowed to talk to his administrative assistant in the hallway.

The assistant heard the circumstances surrounding my case and informed her boss about her findings. I was given a chance to talk to him for 15 minutes on the phone. I expressed myself and told the whole story in full detail. The main point that caught their attention was the fact that no one from the department phoned me back. He seemed ok with everything else. This struck me

as odd. They were not interested in finding out the facts of the matter and correcting the myriad of mistakes made by the case workers.

My belief in justice and the whole system was broken further that day. There was no recourse nor a place to express one's experience with the agency. How then were they to be checked? They act as a dictatorship imposed on families - an institution that carries much value and importance in the upbringing and safety of children. It is so sad.

A statistical hypothesis test on Ms. Wilson would demonstrate the discrimination and bias on white males. Yet no one was willing to take a moment and investigate the claims made. CPS is of the opinion that they are above errors and poor judgment. It is completely unacceptable and is a disastrous recipe for our nation and families to be subjected to such authority without recourse.

Dr. Nelson, Ms. Knight and Mr. Cannon were uninterested in being the change and rectifying the wrongs. They refuse to carry out a fair and thorough investigation of claims. Ms. Wilson was happy to screw yet another white guy. Dr. Nelson cared little for the case. Ms. Knight didn't want to stir problems in the workplace. Mr. Cannon dismissed any hint of a flawed system.

Chapter 40: Family Fraud

Ranny had a friend called Erna Mardiana. I had known her for over six years. She is a financially successful woman with a high-paying position at Wells Fargo. She is well educated and has two amazing kids who grew up with our children. They went on several vacations together and even completed a triathlon together. There was a great bond between our families. Her current spouse is a wonderful man and her ex-husband was an equally amazing person. Everyone loved them.

Ranny visited Erna almost every weekend. Erna has been a key player in creating a fake profile and account of me being a serial abuser and a mentally unstable person. She created a GoFundMe for Ranny where she stated that Ranny is a survivor of an abusive relationship (in the same standard as Amber Heard). I mention her here because it boggles me that this woman who had known me intimately and shared precious memories with me could go ahead to create a false image of me publicly. She has seen firsthand that I am a present and good father. I do everything for my children. I was confused by her actions, but in December 2022 I received financial data from subpoenas taken that implied they may be co-conspirators in financial money laundering.

In 2016 Ranny started moving (laundering) money. About \$100,000 per month for over a year. As soon as this started there were suspicious payments made to Erna. Ranny is not stable enough nor mentally fit to come up with such a plan and execute it properly. She needed help from someone who had the know-how with these matters. Around this same year, 2016, Erna claimed she was going to help Ranny get a job at Wells Fargo. This never came to manifest. However, she started moving massive amounts of money around this time.

After Dyanella spent multiple weeks at Erna's place, she began telling Josh negative things about me. She was back home not long before the August hearing. During that time, she must have been fed lies and promised monies to lie. The child was recovering from a mental health crisis and they took the opportunity to corrupt her young mind. It's obvious that such behavior warranted high risk for the child's mental health. I am certain that was part of Ranny's plan. To sacrifice the child to make sure her money laundering in Dyanella's name could never be traced. Ranny would then blame me for Dyanella's mental health problems, getting rid of me simultaneously. Killing two birds with one stone, as they say.

Ranny has never been OK mentally. We have established that by now. She needed support to continue with her lavish life. She was not getting that from me so Erna and Sances helped her financially. Sances is a top notch guy. A pure soul with the purest intentions. He knows that Ranny is a mess, and we joked about it constantly. Yet he finds it in his heart to be generous and support her in any way she needs. I love and respect him for his generosity. Erna is the complete opposite. I see no viable positive features in Erna, she is the epitome of drama. She encouraged the separation and ruin of a family with lies. Karma implies this will surely come back to her one day. We reap what we have sown.

We all make mistakes, but it is important that we remain honorable in our misgivings. Otherwise, the past will always find a way to come back to bite us.

Chapter 41: Frauds Listed

Identity Theft

The amount of fraud surrounding Ranny is uncountable. Despite the circumstances surrounding our relationship, Ranny was still using my UPS account for business purposes after the restraining order. She also attempted to rent a U-Haul in my name in October 2021 (after filing the 50B). Fortunately, I received a message on my phone and canceled the transaction immediately. A year later she was still using my credit cards illegally. She had expected me to take responsibility for her drama, but I was done being her provider and savior.

Mail Fraud

I also realized that she was committing mail fraud for years on end. She was shipping purses to Indonesia but would never use her name as the shipper. She used names of friends, family and associates. Many people, including but not limited to Grandma, Josh, Erna and Reni (her friend) were all documented as shippers of her many packages without their knowledge or consent. Ranny shipped packages in anyone's name as long as she knew their address. She sent over 1,000 parcels in this capacity. When I discovered that she used my co-worker Andrew for a parcel, I begged her to stop but she never did. She simply went on while concealing her behavior.

Identity Theft, Money Laundering, (possible tax evasion)

PayPal has a policy against minors having accounts so Ranny committed two frauds" identity theft, and money laundering. That account has inflows of \$200,000! She knew how to move fraudulent money all too well.

Family Fraud

Soon enough, I found Ranny's ex-husband, or so I thought him to be, at the time. She stated that his name was Paul, his last name being Monterroso (as is Deken's last name). Whereas the truth is that his name was Victor Pablo. I contacted him and asked him about his ex-wife. He revealed that he had never married Ranny, and that he did not even know her. Despite this, he was accountable for the young child and sent money monthly. I wondered why Deken never came to the USA. Apparently, Ranny had access to the money and decided to leave him with his grandmother so she could utilize the money for herself. All this time, I was blamed for the child not coming to America whereas she had a whole con going on.

Money Laundering

In 2016 and 2017 Ranny moved over \$1,000,000 through Bank of America. She continued to launder funds through multiple banks after this account was closed.

Insurance Fraud

In March 2020, Ranny was in a car accident. She talked to the insurance company and admitted fault, but she claimed to be me. Hence, I have an accident from 2020 on my driving record in which I was not in the car and not on the police report. However, my insurance rates are sky high.

Unemployment Insurance Fraud

In addition to stealing from me and moving large amounts of money, Ranny collected unemployment insurance from the beginning of the pandemic. I still don't understand the magnitude of her frauds with the government.

Credit Card Fraud/Identity Theft

She opened an Old Navy credit card in my name without my knowledge.

Immigration Fraud

Deken's immigration paperwork was fake.

Being around her numerous frauds and at the center of her manipulative behavior, I made a video acting as the victim, which I rightfully was. This was completely atypical. I quickly deleted the video and learned my lesson.

The universe isn't appreciative of people who play the victim; they get punished. Despite being through many trials and tribulations, I have never been, neither will I ever be, a victim. I learn from my mistakes and move on with honor. It is never advisable to play the victim. In every situation, learn the lesson and move on, the world does not owe you any reprieve from your loss. It only owes you lessons to act as armor in the future.

In January 2022, Ranny's attorney banned Josh from the property. He was unable to ship bikes and parts. Lindley's office also told him that he had to move out of HIS family home! I can't imagine the nerve to make such a request. He was the only one keeping my house and family together, and he was stopped from helping the kids. The bicycle business was on hold for two months because all bikes were stored in the garage and shed. This led to huge losses to the business, meaning that my net worth crumbled. Ironically, Ranny wanted child support from the monies she sabotaged.

In March, Josh transferred the bikes to a warehouse and the operations restarted smoothly. He also took care of the chickens until January. Afterwards, he asked them to be taken to his house. The request was ignored. Ranny's plan was to bait him into trespassing to get the chickens but he never did. Soon after, all the chickens died and two bee colonies also collapsed. Over 100 mature 4-year-old blueberry bushes were run over by a lawnmower. Everything has been sabotaged in order to get me to breach the 50B. Sadly, this doesn't work, it just makes everything worse.

Chapter 42: Final Frauds

In the summer of 2017, Bank of America closed Ranny's account due to "financial issues." That same month, she asked me to join her account with SunTrust bank, which I blindly obliged. I was not aware that she wanted to use my name to launder more money. She started moving \$10,000 to \$15,000 in that account and a similar amount in Wood Forest Bank. I realized that our family was a cover for her money laundering scheme and the 50B meant that I could do nothing.

The 50B renewal hearing was scheduled for early August but was rescheduled because Ranny claimed a need for a translator. It was delayed until late August. Then, Ranny saw Josh and his dad at the courthouse, the assumption being that they could be witnesses against her. She broke down crying and ran out of the courthouse never coming back. Her attorney was able to delay the hearing again because of a translator request. It was moved to September 27. Ms. Lindley tried another delay for a translator request, but the judge got a translator on a language phone line.

Josh's mom joined him alongside his dad this time. Ranny came with Erna, and another woman I didn't know. Outside the courthouse, Ranny and her friends surrounded Josh, verbally assaulted him, and Ranny hit him with her purse. It was bait set to get a reaction, but he did not bite. Josh's mom interjected and told them to leave. The ladies entered the courthouse screaming and riled up in Indonesian. An officer told them to stop or they would be removed. They were looking for drama. Ms. Lindley claimed a lot of nonsense in an attempt to extend the 50B such as: I lived at Josh's house; I biked in the neighborhood; I hacked a computer; I placed a sign on Josh's property stating "24-hour video surveillance," and more. I could not believe the number of lies they were willing to attest to in court.

Ranny began testifying and responded in English, forgetting to wait on the translator. The room fell silent. Everyone was shocked at the need for a translator if she was fluent in English. She moved on to claim that her car was shot by someone on a bicycle via the translator. Then she claimed that the translator did not interpret her statement correctly, and that what she said was that she was shot by a guy in a sedan that looked like Josh.

The claim of incompetence was not taken lightly by the translator. A big fight ensued between the two. The translator said that she could not work with Ranny. She claimed that Ranny changed her story too much and a new translator was procured. After a few minutes, another translator was called upon, but the judge said that it was completely unnecessary since Ranny understood English.

My lawyer turned to me and said that I had just won the case. Ranny was a horrible witness. She held no credibility. She claimed abuse and made-up stories that made no sense. I told my attorney to take her out which would help with the custody case. He failed me and only asked a few questions, none addressing the lies she made. I was called up as a witness by Ms. Lindley. I testified honestly but considering that I am a professor and assertive in speech, I came off as arrogant. I knew that my tone could be misconstrued as having an ego, but I never addressed the problem.

Afterwards, my attorney asked the judge to drop the case because I was proven innocent of all allegations. The judge declined. Sam inexplicably failed the case. He didn't call Josh's family despite them waiting for eight hours to testify. He had actually told me that Josh's mother was a great witness. Yet he did not use her, nor his father, nor Josh. The judge extended the 50B for Ranny, excluding the kids, for another year. Sam blamed me for not getting my psych exam right away. Essentially, he blamed me for his incompetence. I would have won that case easily without him. Sam not only lost that case, but he lost the custody case for me.

After realizing the mistake he made, he wanted to drop me for the upcoming custody case for not "following his instructions." I felt he was using me as a scapegoat.

The new subpoenas started rolling in. PayPal found additional accounts in my son's name with minimal funds, and an account named bikepartz with over \$400,000 inflows. I suspect that Ranny sold a lot of bike parts using this account, going back as far as 2006. This took me back to 2010. I had an account with Bell Sports, and we sold an incredible number of helmets. Approximately \$500,000 per year. After Apik was born, Ranny suffered from postpartum depression, and this part of the business fell apart. I was losing tons of money. My intention was to close it in 2008, but Ranny protested, so I relented. After the losses extended into 2010, I shut it down. I ended up owing Bell over \$100,000, but I had tons of inventory. I made a bargain with Bell Sports, and we agreed on returning the stock product for refunds, and then I would pay the difference. After the exchange, I still owed close to \$100,000. I thought it was a scam, but now I know it was Ranny that ran the scam. I believe that Ranny was stealing through our entire relationship, even before the kids were born. This is probably the cause of her mental health problems. The fear and lies she had to live with are not easy to manage.

Our family has been a cover for her ill intentions. She used me for fraud and theft. It was a business to enrich her from the onset. And my eyes were blinded by my undying love for the children. I saw the best in everything and ignored all the red flags and alarm bells. I was a fool, and in many ways, I still am.

Chapter 43: Recovery

My life was a mess after the restraining order. I was dealing with a lot of damage and change within a short span of time. I became overwhelmed and couldn't manage my emotions. It was too much. I decided to take up counseling. I met many people from various backgrounds who were on the same journey of healing as I was. We would meet every Sunday to discuss our lives. The running theme was toxic relationships. I got the feeling that they did not want to heal from the trauma, they just wanted a shoulder to lean on and someone to identify with their problems. This went on every week.

My life story touched everyone in the room. They were shocked that so much had happened in my life and the injustice of it all. They were impressed by my workout routine (six hours per day), and the focus I put in different activities to dissuade myself from the trauma. These were people who carried their trauma for years and allowed themselves to linger in it every day. Their wounds were open and prevented them from moving forward. They made me think that counseling was not the path for me. It was taking too long for them. I didn't want that to be my story. I decided to focus on helping myself and others to move forward.

I resolved to deal with my trauma independently, using tools that I trusted. I began an impractical, far-fetched fitness and chess program to occupy my mind. In October 2021, I began an eight-hour workout routine. I was 50 years old when this began.

Fortunately, I got a job teaching at Allen University, a small HBCU in Columbia, SC. I started this journey sad and unmotivated. My energy was not right. I was constantly falling into depression and losing my train of thought. The students were not generally strong, but I liked them. My coworkers were the best, wholesome individuals.

I adjusted my workouts to six hours a day, to minimize the risk of injuries. The focus of all routines was to lengthen my spine. I went back to cycling several hours a day, then performing 200-300 pull-ups daily, meticulously. Balance work was essential, along with lower back exercises. At my age, those workouts were stone-cold nasty, but I managed. It gave me purpose and uplifted my soul. I would use spare time to relax in the sauna while doing some stretching work and later work on my lower back by hanging upside down.

My breathing improved and I could focus on my meditations better. All this culminated in being better mentally, spiritually, and physically. My burdens were lifted during this time. At the end of the semester, I offered my gratitude to my students for helping me improve. They were the driving force behind my ambition to get better. They thanked me for assisting them with their course work. It felt great to create new long-term friendships and connections that were mutually beneficial. That was exactly what I needed: to fill my void with new experiences and people.

I became a new human being. I morphed into a better individual. My judgment and reasoning improved. My lesson was that focusing on positives was the best remedy for any kind of trauma. You need to step back and remove yourself from a space that makes you focus on the needle in your side. Focusing on your trauma would not solve anything, and often makes matters worse. One must be productive to move forward. Life keeps moving with or without you. It does

not pause. Staying still does not get you anywhere; a wandering mind is the devil's abode. For when one is not learning, he is unlearning. You are either improving or not, there is no in between.

After being offered an opportunity, I decided to conduct a mutual psych assessment with Ranny in May 2022. This would prove what I was trying to tell everyone about her mental state. However, with time, I realized that she would be unable to complete the exam. I felt horrible about the situation, I understood she was likely to become suicidal if she was found incompetent. I didn't want to continue with the devastation and agony of this whole thing. I told my attorney to put an end to the hostilities. I fear what this would mean for my children. I did not want Ranny to suffer; she is still the mother of my kids.

Regrettably, my lawyer informed me that Ranny is not interested in any agreements to spare us the court process. I had volunteered to save her. It made me feel good about myself, allowing her the chance to be a mother. But she wanted to push me to the edge. Ironically, she is taking herself over the edge. Karma works in interesting ways.

Chapter 44: Elucidation

It has been 18 months since I was removed from my home via fraud, and robbed of my children and life. Words cannot express the agony of being uprooted from the only life I knew. They were my everything. In addition to this atrocity, I have had nearly no interaction with any of my kids throughout the process and timeframe.

My lawyer thought that a reintroduction would be in the cards months ago but was shocked to realize that none of that would come to play. He says that he has never seen anything like it. He was unfamiliar with the extent of this cruelty.

Consequently, my mother was also banned from seeing or talking to her grandchildren. The reason for this is unknown. She has been nothing but a protector and support system for my children, and yet her relation to me has cost her valuable time with her grandchildren.

This period has taught me a lot about myself and Ranny. I spent years overlooking so many things. I've had time to reflect on the 17-plus years we spent together. I cannot fathom why a mother would use her children and expose them to cruelty in exchange for money. Did she not feel responsible for her children? They were hers as well, but the responsibility always fell on me. They were just a means to an end for her. A means to get more money and engage in fraudulent dealings. That was the extent of her need and love for them, purely conditional on the benefits she reaped from having them.

Perhaps her past had some part to play on the mother she became. When she was born, her grandmother made her mother give her up to her aunt. Ranny's mother had eight children, while her aunt had none. Ranny was traded for money. That was implanted in her from an early age. Children were a profit center. This led to her repeating the same cycle with her children. Deken was paid for by his father. Apik and Lala were paid for by me in 2013. Now it was Baby's turn to provide income. Lala is set on the same path as her mother and grandmother before. I desperately wanted to avoid this fate for my daughter.

Ranny remained a mother only by title and not actions. A mother sacrifices her being for her children. It was the opposite for Ranny. The children were the ones sacrificing for her, constantly being forced to go with her needs before theirs were met. The only reason she lives with them is because of the financial advantage. That is the only thing tying her to them. I accepted all her drama because I was convinced that the children needed a mother by their side. I'm not so sure anymore.

Now that I have had time to reflect on our union, I've come to realize that in the 17 years that we have been together, she has never bought any of the kids a toy. She would fill her days shopping for clothing that mirrored herself for them, but never got what they wanted. She showcased herself as the richest woman in the world by the standards of her dressing and made the children dress in the same manner, not considering their discomfort and taste.

My greatest concern is that her beliefs and character will be passed on to my kids. The only way to save Lala is to allow her to see the consequences of her mother's actions, to see the

damage that comes with having such traits and selfishness. She needs to see with her own eyes the damage that it could cause the people around her and herself. It is the only way. I hope she will pick the best path forward. Lala has been set up for trouble by her mother, but I hope she will overcome it. After all, she is a smart and brave girl.

Baby is too young to understand what is going on. Ranny uses psychological blackmail against the children. They need to support her or else she will fall apart. This was part of her MO for a decade, I played along far too long and encouraged her habits, never holding her accountable for her own actions. That is my regret.

Her plan to deprive me of my kids to get money has utterly failed. At one point, I broke and wanted to offer her everything, but it ended up costing me the opportunity to end the nonsense. Today, I am unwilling to give her anything; it is the only way to save Lala!

I still have hope that we will be reunited soon. I wish that I could share my new life with my children, my goals and every aspect of it. I want them to feel proud and happy to be my children. They should know that I have goals and aspirations for my life. Some include gaining a grandmaster title in chess and being an Olympian representing a small country like Barbados, Bahamas, or Micronesia. I am also looking to get back in the ring and have a professional fight next year. There is so much I have in mind and so many plans to execute my lifelong dreams that I'd want to share with them like the good old days.

I'd have wanted them to know that I decided to go to my home country, Ukraine, in May 2022 to fight. Unfortunately, they did not allow foreign fighters in the country at that time. Many Russian spies were volunteering and compromising the Ukrainian military. Hence, Ukraine only accepted fighters with Ukrainian passports. Maybe May 2023 will be different. My illness and adversities have given me the courage and resilience to fight and face everything in my life head on. There is raw and genuine ambition in my blood.

My wish is for my children to live in our family home after all is done and dusted. I'm happy to have put an effort into it for them. I made a food forest with 500 fruit trees and bushes that could feed the entire neighborhood. I plan on buying a home close to the beach, where five acres of land would be enough to grow food and include an animal sanctuary. I have had this dream since childhood.

I would like for them to have two dogs and a cat. And for all of them to get along with the animals in the sanctuary. I'll include bees in the garden and harvest the honey. I would like for us to go across the country via bicycle in the summer and explore. I would like to make up for the time we have lost by carrying out many activities together and building our bond. Ranny would not be invited, but I wouldn't keep her away from her children. She is their mother; I will honor her as such. I would never do her the way she did me. There is no honor in separating someone from their children.

I will approach parenting differently; I will talk about everything with my kids. Apik comes to mind when I ponder on my dating life. We share a lot of similarities. I don't want him to go through the same mistakes I made. My parents never discussed intimacy and sex with me. Hence,

I repeated the same errors they and the generation before made. It is important for parents to speak freely on the subject. My kids will diverge on a different path.

There are three landmarks that have been pivotal in my life: one was Villanova, my first job that carried many lessons and taught me about freedom. The second was the Ocracoke store which gave me strength and hope. The last was breaking up with Ranny, which is a new lease on life. These three incidents have made me who I am today. Each has left me more resilient than ever. The pressure in each case turned into an ore under constant heat that turned into gold. I am a new and better version of myself.

We are a product of the lives we have lived. Nature has a way of taking us to where we are meant to be, where we deserve to be. We carry the reflection of our lives with us wherever we go. It's in the crevices on our foreheads and in the way we move and interact with people. Our life story spills in our actions. There is no hiding from reality and the judgment that comes from the choices made during one's lifetime. The day is coming when the truth shall be laid bare and unmasked. Then justice shall prevail.

Chapter 45: Final Clarity

Recently, I received a call from a woman crying on the phone. She informed me that Ranny was her best friend, and Ranny was sleeping with her husband and broke up her family. I asked her when it started, and she said that it dated back to August 2021. This started when she was babysitting for Ranny. Ranny left her to babysit in order to be with the woman's husband. The woman was confused and broken. I told her that Ranny used sex to extort money from me even though we were together. It was her tool. It didn't surprise me that she would do the same to other men.

I informed her that Ranny could not date just any man. Her mental health issues would be a red flag. She had to get someone's vulnerabilities from inside information, such as her friends. That was always her goal, the money. It is my suspicion that she messed around with multiple husbands of her friends for money.

The Door Dashing finally made sense to me. It was astonishing just why she would do that for so many years. It was not stable, nor was it profitable, and it ruined her cars. The only benefit to it was providing cover so that no one would know where she was. She can work over men and use door dashing as a cover. Pretty clever of her, I do admit. Clever but abhorrent behavior.

The other piece of knowledge that came to my attention was that people claimed that Josh and I were a gay couple. This caught me off guard. It was completely ridiculous. I laughed so hard that her friend was shocked at my reaction. Only someone as cynical as Ranny, who uses sex for money, would think of claiming that Josh and I are lovers. She must have found it hard to believe that I could live without her. Josh and I are good friends who honor each other.

I emailed my daughter on a daily basis from Oct 2022 onward, never receiving a response. I finally received a response in January 2023, it was unexpected. Part of her message described her current situation. However, there were undertones from the lawyer embedded in the message. Her underlying request was for money in exchange for access. Like her mother and grandmother before, Lala was selling access to Baby in exchange for money. Paying would encourage more improper frauds, so I ceased communication. Two days later in court the attorney confirmed she knew Lala was emailing me, so she concluded I didn't need access to the children.

A few weeks later, I went to Apik's school. He could not stop shaking once he saw me, We stayed together for an hour; he was shaking the whole time. The last time I saw him was in the summer. We hugged and kissed, and he helped me. His fear was real, but not caused by me. He is showing tell-tale signs of an abused child.

During a January Superior Court hearing, Ranny's attorney claimed a 50B defense for fraud (which is not a legal defense), plus she claimed there was a problem with the psychological exam. I took my court ordered psych exam in a timely manner. In more than six months, Ranny refused to take her exam. The judge did not allow me to respond with proof of fraud; she ended the case on the spot and ordered me to pay almost \$6,000 in attorney fees for Ranny. The judge

also signed a gatekeeper clause so I could not file a motion to set aside. All of these acts are beyond improper in the justice system.