

1

A RACE AGAINST TIME

“Empowerment is realizing you are the one who needs to say the things you’ve waited your entire life to hear.”

—Matt Kahn

“Is this Chris?” she began. Instantly, a sick feeling washed over me. I managed to take a long, deep breath, as I prepared for the call I had been anticipating for weeks.

“This is Monica from Dr. Heath’s office. Your lab results are back from pathology. The cells are abnormal and the doctor would like you to schedule a D and C as soon as possible for additional information.” I felt a wave of fear and anxiety wash over me as I tried to find my calm voice. I assured her I would consult my work schedule and make the appointment. I didn’t have to ask technical or medical questions, as I fully grasped what she had said. I had spent my career as an immuno-virologist, and now, a senior director in a Medical Device organization that specialized in women’s health care. I knew a lot about breast, cervical, and uterine health, and the impact a cancer diagnosis would have on my quality of life, or even my life itself. At this point, I was wishing I didn’t have to experience my professional work so “up close and personal.”

I put my phone away, surprised to see that nothing looked different from how it looked just moments ago, before Monica's call. The sunlight was still illuminating the changing fall leaves and the air felt clean and crisp against my face. Yet I knew, deep inside, everything about my life was going to change. The first domino had tipped. As I boarded the shuttle bus to take me to the yoga center, it dawned on me that it was fortuitous that months earlier I had enrolled in a yoga and meditation workshop in Upstate New York. This was part of my ongoing quest to live a healthier, more balanced life. *Great. Nothing like a potential life-threatening diagnosis to force the application of the things I was there to learn and practice.*

My mind was flooded with "what if" scenarios, one more frightening than the other. Isn't it funny how the mind never brings in all the potential positive outcomes? Nope ... just the kind of thoughts that scare the living **** out of you! Somehow, the phrase, "Be present and know you are okay in this moment," managed to make its way through the fear clouding my mind. I was about to encounter numerous opportunities to "practice being in the moment," a cornerstone principle from spiritual teacher and author, Eckhart Tolle. A friend had given me a copy of his book, *The Power of Now*, and at this moment I was feeling very grateful to have discovered tools that would help me as I waited for the D and C procedure.

Just breathe. You are okay right now. You're sitting on a bus in Upstate New York. Okay, so far so good. Tension is leaving my body and the fear is dissolving. This is working! Whoops. Not so fast; my mind raced ahead, conjuring worst-case scenarios. Then seconds later ... you're making progress just by being AWARE of your thoughts.

Thankfully, something my yoga teacher said helped put me out of my self-imposed misery: "Coming back to the breath as often as you need to, without judgment, will cool the agitation of the mind." I would discover many humble reminders that weekend of why yoga is referred to as a "practice."

My team's biggest training event of the year was fast approaching, and I scheduled the D&C procedure for immediately afterwards. The only person I told was my husband, Dave, still my best friend, years after our meeting in high school. For a time, I managed to keep my fears at bay with

my hectic work schedule. The results of the second call from my OBGYN would force me to now confront the truth.

"The pathologist report confirms uterine cancer. Please schedule a consult with the surgeon in Boston." I met with a highly recommended female surgeon from one of the top cancer hospitals in Boston. She was very upbeat and positive. "It is early stage, and in instances like this, we won't leave anything to chance that could cause a problem down the road." Her recommendation was a total hysterectomy, including the removal of my ovaries. She added that based on my age and menopausal status, "I didn't need them anyway." For extra convincing, she said, "This is THE most common surgery I perform in women your age." I realized she was trying to reassure me. It had the opposite effect, as alarm bells went off in my head. I recalled cases I had seen working in the laboratory. *Why is that? Is she over diagnosing and over treating? I'm in late-stage menopause and my hormones are crazy right now. Is it possible the cells are abnormal as they're transitioning? I recalled recently hearing about a work colleague who had a similar diagnosis.* Upon completing a total hysterectomy, the subsequent pathology report from the lab showed NO cancer detected. She suffered emotionally and physically for years afterwards. That certainly wasn't a path I wanted to take.

Despite my questions and doubts, I conceded that the surgeon had seen way more cases than I had. The safe thing for me to do was to follow her advice, resolve this quickly and "get back to my life." I scheduled the operation for over the Christmas holidays, to minimize my time out of work.

On the drive home, the real reason behind my unsettled feelings surfaced. I found myself confronted with a gut-wrenching decision that impacted people beyond my immediate family. A three-decade search for my birth mother—one that I had given my word years earlier to stop—would need to be re-ignited. The extent of the surgery and my quality-of-life post-surgery was directly linked to knowing my birth mother’s medical history. I was in a race against time to unlock the secrets trapped within my sealed adoption records. Past attempts using traditional search methods and playing by the Adoption Agency’s rules had failed. Becoming my own “Adoption Detective would be key in solving a lifelong mystery. My life depended on it.

Tears of frustration and uncertainty streamed down my face as I pulled into my driveway. **“This changes everything!”** I shouted to whomever was listening.

2

HOPE AND DETERMINATION

*“I learned that courage is not the absence of fear
but the TRIUMPH over it”*

—Nelson Mandela

Later that evening, needing a distraction from the decision weighing heavily on my mind, I pulled an old family photo album from the book case. Paging through it, a particular picture of Trudy, my adoptive mother, and me caught my attention. It reminded me of how my medical diagnosis and treatment were similar to her situation. Although, she would face her life-altering decision at a much earlier age.

Trudy was in her late twenties, and about to be married. Excitement was replaced by despair as she was told heartbreaking news by her doctor a few months before her wedding. Devastated, she wondered how she could move forward with plans to marry and start a family. Sharing her situation with her two sisters, they reminded her of all she had survived in her young life. The next morning, she awoke with a plan and a promise. After all, she had survived the Depression, near-fatal blood poisoning, ridicule, and prejudice. She would find a way. Trudy’s

strict German parents escaped Germany as WW1 was intensifying. They wanted to ensure their children would have a better life in America.

Trudy's father had been a successful inventor and businessman, patenting a revolutionary prosthetic device for soldiers who had lost limbs. They left behind all their possessions, and much of their wealth, to come to Ellis Island in New York. Gertrude Olga Thurman (Trudy to her friends) was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, a city just over the bridge from New York City. It was filled with immigrants who had also arrived on Ellis Island with big dreams for a better life. Her mother, Matilda, helped support the family as a seamstress as her father, Emil struggled to start a business at a time when there was great suspicion and subsequent prejudice for anyone from Germany. Emil heard about opportunities in Philadelphia, and an area called Germantown where they could feel safe, surrounded by fellow German-speaking immigrants. The family moved shortly after Trudy's younger sister Frieda was born. Slowly, Emil was able to rebuild some of the wealth they had accumulated in Germany. Their oldest daughter, Trudy was a beautiful little girl with blonde ringlets, blue eyes and a bright smile that drew people in quickly. The family was surrounded by friends who shared a common history and language. They finally felt secure. They had no idea how quickly, and drastically, their lives were about to change. The Great Depression was on the horizon, and once again, Emil and Matilda found themselves struggling to survive. Emil's business collapsed, and they lost the money they had. With the little money they had stashed away literally under the mattresses, they decided the best thing for their young family was to get to a farm. They knew they could support themselves by living off the land. They made their way to an undeveloped, rural part of New Jersey. Trudy's earliest memories of life on the farm were complicated. It was idyllic with gardens and the animals, yet mixed with danger and excitement as her parents started having run-ins with the law.

The first time happened on a cold autumn night. Trudy and her two younger sisters were

bundled up with plaid blankets and put into the family horse-drawn wagon. The girls were told to sit in a particular area in the wagon and instructed to keep still if they encountered other people along the way. Trudy's father guided the horses out of the barn and headed into town. Along the way, they were stopped by policemen on horseback carrying shotguns. They had a brief conversation with her father, and the officers began searching the wagon. She and her sisters never moved, as previously instructed by their mother. The family was eventually waved along their way, and the trip ended in an alley in the next big town over from the farm. The wagon was met by several men, who greeted Emil and Matilda warmly, yet quickly. At this point, Matilda turned to her daughters, and asked them to move from their warm spots. Her father fiddled with a latch under the blankets they had been sitting on, and to their surprise, there was a compartment stuffed with dark brown bottles filled with liquid. Transfers of bottles and cash happened quickly, and the next thing Trudy knew, she and her sisters were re-bundled and placed back into the wagon to head home. No explanation was given for what had just occurred.

Trudy would discover years later that her father was able to keep the farm and the family afloat by running alcohol during some of the Prohibition years. Sometime after the wagon incident, Trudy witnessed something much more sinister. Everyone was asleep, and Trudy was wakened by angry muffled voices below her bedroom window, near the back door. She crept out of her bedroom and watched in silence from the top of the stairs, as two very large men in long coats pushed her father against the door jamb. A third man emerged and Trudy could see a large scar on the man's left cheek. There were angry words, a flash of something that looked like a gun, and as quickly as they came, they disappeared into the dark night. She watched her father stagger back into the kitchen. He collapsed in his wooden chair at the head of the table. It was then that he heard a noise and caught sight of his oldest daughter crouched down at the top of the landing. "Gertrude" he whispered, "what are you doing up so late? Go back to bed."

There was no mention of this peculiar incident the next morning. Trudy's parents were very rigid and she knew there would be hell to pay if she were to ask him anything about what she saw. She told no one. Not even her sisters. The story would finally be told years later, Christmas Eve, 1964. After a few rounds of spiked eggnog, Trudy finally found her chance to ask her father about the night that left her with nightmares. To her utter amazement, she learned that the man at the door was Al Capone (Scarface), along with his two bodyguards who he never traveled without. Emil elaborated for his audience, who were sitting on the edge of their seats, mouths open. He said that as Capone's reputation grew, he insisted on being unarmed as a mark of his status. But he never went anywhere without at least two bodyguards when traveling by car. He preferred to travel under the cover of night, risking travel by day only when absolutely necessary. He would eventually become the czar of Chicago, running gambling, prostitution, and bootlegging rackets. The night Trudy saw him, Capone was upset about the bootlegging operation Emil was conducting and threatened Emil with serious repercussions if he didn't stop. For a few moments, the family was stunned into silence. Then everyone started recounting stories of the strange sights and sounds coming from the back of the barn, and the night they were the decoys sitting on top of the bootleg whiskey. Emil's illegal activity not only kept the family afloat, it would provide connections with a wealthy clientele that would save Trudy's life.

While out playing in the fields with the dogs, Trudy fell onto an old shovel hidden in the dirt. Raised to be very proud and independent, she cleaned herself up, and never mentioned it to her parents. A couple days later, she developed a fever, and her sister noticed a red stripe coming up from her ankle. By the time the story would come together so that Trudy's German-speaking parents understood what was happening, Trudy's legs were covered with boil-like sores. She became delirious, as her fever was raging. Desperate, her father reached out to one of his "secret" customers, a wealthy physician from Philadelphia. He examined Trudy, and said that with the

speed the blood poisoning was occurring, he had to act quickly if they were going to save her legs. Dr. Schmidt knew he needed to let the poison out if she had any chance of ever walking again. He opened his black leather surgical bag, and took out several knives. He used alcohol and a flame from the lit stove burner to sterilize the instruments. Trudy was given some type of anesthetic to manage the pain, but methods were very crude in the early 1930's, in rural America. Dr. Schmidt made his incisions, and in some cases, cutting into the shin bones of each leg. Trudy's wounds were wrapped with bandages soaked in an herbal antiseptic solution that had been passed down through generations of women healers. Penicillin had been discovered in 1928, but wouldn't be commercially available until after World War II, around 1945. Dr. Schmidt additionally prescribed a diet consisting largely of bone marrow spread onto bread to support the buildup of new bone tissue. What they lacked in technology, they made up for with practical wisdom and ancient healing secrets.

Miraculously, over time, Trudy recovered with both her limbs intact. She would, however, have deep gouges along her shin bones of both legs. Trudy had gotten used to being teased for her thick German accent by the children in school. Now, as a young teenager, she decided it was best to cover her legs with thick stockings, even in the summer, to avoid new ridicule. It was around this time that the outgoing, happy child was replaced by an introverted self-conscious teenager. She put on weight as her body began changing during puberty; her obsession with her weight would plague her for most of her life. What Trudy had going for her were her survival instincts. She had proven herself a fighter, surviving the barbaric yet life-saving kitchen surgery a few years earlier.

Life for everyone changed dramatically as World War II wore on. As more men were drafted to serve, women were needed for jobs that only men had done previously. Trudy wanted to do her part, and she got the unlikely job as a large crane operator in the Philadelphia Navy

Ship Yard. Trudy would joke about the stares she would get from the men in the shipyard as she climbed up into the crane ... all five-foot-two of her, dressed in khaki overalls and a hard hat. She even overcame her fear of heights, to do her part for America. Years later, she would describe those few years as some of her favorites. She gained a sense of purpose beyond herself and an appreciation for her determination to go far out of her comfort zone. "It was a letdown after the war to go back to a desk," she would tell her younger sisters.

After the war she worked for a company in Center Philadelphia. It was during her lunch break when she literally ran into a young man at the Woolworth's lunch counter. His name was Joe, and he worked around the corner at Globe Ticket Company as a machinist. They had an instant connection and became fast friends, meeting for lunch as often as they could. Joe lived in North Philadelphia with his Aunt and Uncle and Trudy lived with her parents over the bridge in South Jersey. Joe was thin, about five-foot-six with deep set brown eyes. Years later, many people would say he resembled the singer, James Taylor. His family also came through Ellis Island. After a short courtship, they were engaged. Joe surprised Trudy with a very special and significant ring. Like Trudy, he had experienced obstacles in his young life. His twin sister died during their birth, and he was what they called a "blue" baby. He had been born premature, not expected to live. He surprised everyone, only to have his mom die a few months later from childbirth complications. With the help of an older sister, his father did the best he could, but tragedy struck again. Joe's father died in an accident when Joe was just three years old, and he was raised by his aunt Josephine in a small apartment in North Philadelphia. Miraculously, Aunt Josephine had safely tucked away Joe's mother's engagement ring. Trudy understood deeply the significance of the ring as it was the only possession he had from his mother. There was a mutual understanding and appreciation for what they had both survived, and they looked forward with anticipation to the life they would create together.

Unfortunately, there would be more obstacles to overcome. Months before her wedding, Trudy was given the medical diagnosis that her uterus was full of fibroids. At that time, the prevailing treatment was a complete hysterectomy. She contemplated waiting to do the surgery until after her wedding, but her blood count was so low after years of losing blood that she was not given the option of waiting. So just months before her wedding day, she lost her ability to ever bear a child. Her two younger sisters would also receive similar diagnoses. All three sisters would never be able to start a family. Two years into Joe and Trudy's marriage, the desire to start a family intensified. Joe had been raised a devout Catholic, and they sought help from Catholic Charities to adopt an infant. However, Catholic Charities declined to help them. They were considered a mixed married couple as Trudy was Episcopalian, so they were turned away.

A work colleague recommended a lawyer who could help them. The terms included money upfront to cover fees and medical costs, and then the process of locating a baby would begin. Time was running out for them. They were on the edge of being ineligible to adopt, being in their mid-thirties; few questions were asked. Three months later, they received a healthy and beautiful baby girl, whom they named Elizabeth, after Joe's mother. She had light-brown hair, a button nose, and dark brown eyes. With loving adoptive parents and two sets of doting aunts and uncles, Elizabeth was cherished and showered with love and attention. Just shy of Elizabeth's first birthday, Trudy and Joe received a phone call from the lawyer. Initially thinking this was a normal follow-up call, they soon discovered the news was far from normal.

"Well, you see, sometimes, these things happen. You just can't predict. Women are so unpredictable, you know?" the lawyer stammered. "You'll need to return the baby. The birth mother has changed her mind."

Their beautiful Elizabeth had been secured by an unscrupulous lawyer, through a process referred to at the time as "the black market." Trudy and Joe quickly discovered they had no legal

recourse and were informed that since the adoption wasn't done "legally," they had no options but to return their Elizabeth to her birth mother. Trudy sank into depression, barely able to get out of bed and dress for work. The thought of facing her friends and colleagues, and people in the local shops asking about Elizabeth, was more than she could bear. As time reduced the intensity of her pain, Trudy became more determined to adopt legally. They returned to Catholic Charities and explained that they would do whatever it took to adopt. Trudy would need to leave her faith, convert to Catholicism, and cover the adoption legal fees and medical costs in advance. They said "yes" immediately, having no idea how they could get that kind of money on Joe's machinist wages. A radical plan was agreed upon. They would sell their green Rambler, and Joe would walk to the train station, and travel across the bridge to downtown Philadelphia. Trudy would use the bus for errands. It was a sacrifice they were both willing to make. Miraculously, Trudy's younger sister, Frieda, and her husband Charles stepped in. They "loaned" Trudy and Joe the money for the adoption fees. There were many anxious hearts as Trudy and Joe, her sisters and their husbands, anxiously awaited the arrival of the new baby. This was Trudy and Joe's chance to start a happy new chapter in their lives together.

Sometime late August in 1956, Joe and Trudy's dreams were realized. They drove into center city Camden from their suburban home, and parked outside the large iron gate of the Catholic Diocese. It was foreboding to all who drove by. But not to Trudy and Joe on this day, as they were picking up their 10-week-old baby girl. They chose the name Christine, as she was the "light of their world." The initial excitement and joy Trudy felt, though, would be followed by other troubling emotions. Fear enveloped her as she worried that she could not maintain the standards Catholic Charities had imposed. After all, her first daughter had been taken away. Maybe she was not worthy of being a mother. Deep feelings of inadequacy would live in the shadows of Trudy's mind and impact those closest to her. I learned about my adoption when I

was three years old. Trudy and Joe had the perfect explanation. They told me, “Most parents have to keep what they get. In our case, we picked you because you’re special.” I grew up surrounded by my parents and two sets of aunts and uncles who loved me like the child they weren’t able to have. It took years for my obvious questions to surface.

In the meantime, there were several anxious moments before I began school that let me know things were not entirely “normal” in our house. I sometimes heard strange sounds coming from the basement. It took me a while to get the courage to open the door to the cellarway to check it out. As I crept down the stairs, I saw my mother on her hands and knees frantically scrubbing the cement floor. I quietly backed up the stairs before she saw me knowing not to mention what I had seen. The next anxious moment directly involved me. My mother sewed beautiful dresses, decorated with lavish hand-stitched embroidery. Periodically she’d dress me up like a perfect little doll, and we’d travel on a train ride, ending at a large church-looking building. It had a formidable black ornate fence surrounding it and inside, wooden carvings and heavy drapes that made it hard to see anything. My mom was tense and worried. I recall a sense that it was important I “pass” inspection. Years later, I asked one of my aunts about the strange place. My mother and I had been in the main convent for the Sisters of the Catholic Diocese. She explained my mother’s strange behavior in the basement and why we were at the convent. Trudy, she explained, was in constant fear the nuns would come to the house unannounced and inspect her housekeeping. Or they would see me during one of the convent visits, and would find something wrong. My mother’s unarticulated “fear of losing me” was the driving force of her frantic behavior. Fortunately, none of my mother’s fears of unannounced visits were realized and the trips to the convent finally ended. Her worries did not, and her resulting behaviors had an impact on me and my father. As I got older, I struggled to understand her manic/depressive behaviors, and the pressure I started to feel to be perfect in everything I did. My foundation was

shaken to the core one night. While in my bedroom doing homework, I was interrupted by loud voices. I came out of my bedroom to check out what was happening. Two suitcases were sitting by the front door. I heard my mother say to my father, "I'm done. I've had enough. You figure it out." I remember the terror in the pit of my stomach, as I lunged at her legs, holding tight, begging her to stay.

She did stay... and her version of working it out meant not speaking directly to my father for weeks. No explanation was ever given as to what had precipitated such an event. My imagination ran wild. "Was it about me? I was doing the best I could. Did it have something to do with the 95% grade on my science test? She had been upset that it wasn't a perfect 100%. Dad had stepped in to defend me." I assumed the role of peace-maker between them and vowed to "do better." A truce was eventually established between them. For me, though, the damage was done. I had tried to understand the "why" behind her behaviors. Yet my predominant thoughts ranged from unworthiness to fear of abandonment; and were accompanied by two supporting characters, Sad and Mad. They would live in the shadows and rear their unpredictable behaviors as I entered my adolescence and later when I was a young adult. I survived by burying feelings I didn't feel safe expressing, deeper and deeper. It would take a life-threatening diagnosis to dive into the shadowy depths, years later.

Fortunately, my mom's younger sister Frieda offered me refuge during my teen years. Her given name morphed into Footh when I was a young child struggling with the correct pronunciation. An unbreakable bond was created with Aunt Foothsie, that served as my lifeline. Well beyond her last breath at the age of eighty-six, our bond continues thirteen years later.

She was the one during the early years who had given me unconditional love and acceptance. No strings attached to my grade-point average, or performance on the hockey field. She also had an impact on my career choice. The guidance counselor at my college prep Catholic

High School, steered me to a major where I could have a job AND raise a family. I recall sitting across from a woman who had given her life to God as a Dominican Sister, thinking “How can she give me advice about my life? I don’t know if I even want kids.” In 1970, there weren’t many progressive counselors suggesting independent careers to young teenage girls. My aunt inspired me with her early work experiences after high school. At the time, she was dissuaded from applying for a job as a bank teller. The hiring manager said, “Women aren’t capable of handling money because of their poor math skills.” And as an additional insult, “You can’t depend on them, because they get pregnant.” Undaunted by the “belief of the day,” my aunt became the first woman bank teller in Philadelphia. It became evident to everyone that she was smart, great with money, organized and efficient. She was featured in a newspaper article and became a catalyst for other women venturing into the male-dominated world of bank tellers. She took the road less traveled, and showed me what was possible with belief and focused determination.

3

PROMISES MADE

*“Acknowledging the good that is already in your life
is the foundation for all abundance.”*

—Eckhart Tolle

There is a shared experience that most adopted adults can pinpoint. It’s the exact moment when the reality of being adopted hits them. For some, it comes with incredible trauma as “someone slips” and they discover that their entire life has been a lie. Or for many Indigenous children who were taken from their parents, their tribes, and their culture, an inner knowing that they don’t fit with their adopted families. For me, it happened during science class. Mr. Naughton began the morning with the science of genetics, and asked us to state our ancestry. Students began sharing where their grandparents and great-grandparents came from. When my turn came, I automatically responded, “German and Irish. My Mom’s parents had come from Germany as the war escalated and my Dad’s from Ireland, through Ellis Island.” Moments later I was overcome with the realization that “I have no idea what my nationality was!”

How had I not seen this before? How could I miss this **not** so insignificant point? On my

way home from school I thought, *the conversation at the dinner table is going to be very interesting tonight!*

Barely able to contain myself waiting for the right time to ask my question, I finally blurted out, “What is my **real** nationality?” I imagine they had dreaded the day this question would eventually surface. There was a long silence and shared glances between my parents. My mother was the first to speak. She said they just didn’t know. Not the response I was expecting. She explained that the Catholic Charities adoption process was private and secret. The young birth mothers were told that their babies would have a better life with a couple that could care for them. The adopting parents were told horror stories of what could happen if the child were to discover their birth mother. Therefore, legal adoption documents were sealed away, and only a few pieces of non-identifying information were provided to the adopting parents. That night at the dinner table, I found out that my birth mother had lived somewhere in South Jersey, had gotten “into trouble,” and was a teenager when I was born. They had no idea what her nationality was. The genetics class had awakened a sleeping bear, and I wanted more. I made a promise to myself that when I turned 18, I would find out my nationality and medical history. Fully understanding what my parents had experienced and sacrificed, no one, not even my aunt could know my plans. I knew that trying to explain that I needed more information would be translated as “they weren’t enough”. The risk of hurting them was too great, and not an option.

Not long after my adoption epiphany, my world turned completely upside down. It happened during my last few months of high school. I was excited to graduate and start college in the fall. Signs that there might be something wrong with my dad started to surface when he was in his mid-fifties. It happened after dinner occasionally at first. Then almost daily. He developed a condition where he had trouble keeping his food down. The doctor said that he had a nervous personality and they gave him medication to “calm his nerves.” I watched as he gradually lost weight, and intuitively knew that his doctor was wrong. Around my mother’s

birthday in February, while lifting heavy equipment at work, Dad developed a hernia that needed to be surgically repaired. We lived just over the bridge from Philadelphia, and his doctor wanted him to go to University Hospital in the city for the procedure. The routine pre-operative blood work came back, and his hemoglobin (red blood cell count) was dangerously low. This meant that he was bleeding internally, somewhere. At that time, the only way to find out what was happening, was to do exploratory surgery. My mother and aunt waited in the Operating Room lounge, not anticipating the extent of the bad news they were about to receive. Hours later, the surgeon would tell them that dad had metastatic cancer. Which meant that when they opened him up, they saw the cancer had spread everywhere, and there was nothing more they could do. They closed the incision and took him back to his room. My aunt asked how long he had. "Well, we can never be certain," the surgeon explained. "It's a very aggressive and advanced cancer. He could die within the next two weeks. We'll do our best to keep him comfortable." My mother and aunt were waiting for me in the living room when I got home from school. It was obvious they both had been crying. "How did we get from 'Dad's just going in for a hernia operation,' to he'll be dead in two weeks?" I asked, trying to absorb the doctor's message. "His doctor missed this for over a year. He insisted dad's problem was due to his nervous constitution. He never did any tests. If he knew what he was doing, dad wouldn't be dying right now," I cried out.

Ten years later, I finally found solace. A surgical resident specializing in breast cancer was doing a rotation through our laboratory. She offered another perspective about the lack of an accurate diagnosis. Dr. Janet explained that the treatment at the time for patients with esophagus cancer consisted of a disfiguring surgery, followed by inserting a feeding tube to survive. She suggested he would have suffered for years, with no change in outcome. My father would never have wanted to be a burden to us. Her medical explanation helped me release the guilt I had carried all those years. My intuition had told me early on that something serious was wrong with

him. There are no words that convey the agonizing pain of knowing you are going to lose your dad in two weeks, and there is nothing you can do to change it. What seemed especially cruel was I had just started to get to know him. I had exited the “know it all” phase of my early teen years, where I had no patience, and started to see him for who he truly was...a smart man of great patience and kindness. He had always accepted and supported my choices. And in many ways, nurtured me in ways my mother couldn't.

Dad died exactly 2 weeks after his diagnosis, totally alone in his hospital room. For my mom, the trip to the hospital in Northern Philadelphia was challenging both emotionally and logistically. Therefore, her visits were infrequent. The call from the hospital came on a Sunday evening, while mom and I were watching *The Wizard of Oz*. Not only did the flying monkeys and the melting wicked witch scare the heck out of me, I would forever associate anything Oz with my father's death. I sat silently as the reality that I would never see him again settled over me. There were no tears left to cry. I just felt numb. Later, as I struggled to fall asleep, a deep sadness enveloped me. I wasn't there to hold his hand, and tell him how much I loved him. The idea that someone should be alone in their final hours just tore at my heart. I vowed silently to my remaining family, “I promise to comfort and support you in your final moments as you cross over and take your last breath.”

A few days after his funeral, I had the first of what can only be described as a “mystical” experience. Snow had started falling earlier in the day, and I looked forward to the possibility of no school the next morning. I awoke just past midnight to the sound of scraping noises as if snow was being shoveled. Why would anyone be out shoveling snow in the middle of the night, I wondered? I pulled back the heavy comforter, and crossed the dark room to my front window. My heart was pounding as I slowly pulled the curtain aside. I don't know what I thought I was going to see. Pressing my head against the cold glass, straining to get a better look in the darkness,

the sound suddenly stopped. Fumbling my way back to bed, I wondered what had just happened. What tricks was my mind playing on me? Curiosity and apprehension about what I might discover in the morning kept me awake for a while. When I awoke, the sun was bright and shining through the curtains. As my feet hit the floor, the strangeness of the night before came to mind. Looking out the window, from a distance, it appeared our driveway had been shoveled. Pulling on my boots and parka to take a closer look, I rushed outside. The sidewalk had about six inches of undisturbed snow. The driveway, on the other hand, was clear down to the tar. Maybe a neighbor was trying to help us out, knowing Dad had died a few days earlier I reasoned? Except...

There were no footprints in the snow. Not one boot print! As I surveyed the situation, a soothing feeling came over me, and Dad instantly came to mind. That's when I remembered this had always been our thing together. I shoveled the porch steps and the sidewalk; Dad shoveled the much larger driveway. "What is this all about?" I wondered. "Is he letting me know he is somehow still here with me?" I ran back to the house and excitedly shared what had happened last night with my mother. And more importantly, my discovery in the light of day. Mom smiled and gave me a long hug. To her credit, she didn't discount my conclusion. She was still in shock over the unexpected passing of her husband, and especially worried about how she would manage the bills with him gone. I think she wanted to believe the same thing I did. That he was still around, and somehow, we would "be all right."

The second experience happened a few months later. It convinced me there was way more to life after death than I certainly understood. In what I can best describe as a waking dream state, I very clearly saw my father standing at the foot of my bed. He looked different from the last time I had seen him post-surgery, pale from the loss of blood, surrounded by monitors, and tubes poking out everywhere. 'This' Dad, standing at the foot of my bed, was smiling, vibrant and healthy. There was a luminosity around him, and I wasn't scared. He told

me how much he loved me and that he was really proud of how I was looking after Mom. He explained he had stayed close since his leaving had happened so quickly, and had been “keeping an eye on us.”

He continued that **now** it was time for him to go “further away.” He emphasized he would still be watching us. This would be the last time I would experience him so directly and clearly. He asked me to trust what I felt when I thought of him. And to know that he was thinking of me at the same time. I woke up to a tear-stained pillow, and the recognition that something miraculous had happened. Dad’s words offered a new understanding and comfort that he was only a thought away. I wondered if it was easier for our loved ones to communicate with us when we were in a dream state, when the doubting mind was off.

Wanting to know more about this experience, I asked my mom and aunts. They explained it away as “wishful” thinking. Except, I hadn’t been thinking. What I did know for sure is my sadness lessened after that night, and for the first time since he died, I had hope of a path forward. I just didn’t know what it was.

Dad’s death the last few months of my senior year threw my college plans in total upheaval. I had been accepted into a small Catholic college in Horsham, Pennsylvania. Dad’s company was relocating the summer before my freshman year in college and we had planned on moving. There was no money for me to go away to college, but with scholarships and commuting to Gwynedd Mercy College, my career plan was set. With Dad gone, and Mom struggling emotionally and financially, there was no way I could complete the plan of attending Gwynedd Mercy. My parents did not have mortgage insurance on the house, and after paying medical bills and the funeral, there wasn’t much left from his life insurance policy. Narrowing my options further, my chosen major relied on a very specialized approach. The program offered a Bachelor’s of Science in Medical Technology with a one-year internship at an approved teaching Medical

Center. There were only 32 colleges in the country that offered this career and Gwynedd Mercy College was one of them. I had a passion for science and changing my major was not an option I wanted to consider. With all the changes, this would be one of the most challenging to maneuver through.

“What’s the chance of finding another program close to home?” I worried aloud to my aunt.

Evidently high, as a branch of Rutgers University offered the same program at their South Jersey campus, in Camden. This was great news as commuting was easy with the trains. I could keep an eye on my mother and accomplish my career goals. Rutgers gave me late acceptance and I started working as a phlebotomist at the Inner-city Hospital close to campus. Patient rounds started at 5:00 every morning and afterwards, I’d take the train to my classes. Between the early morning hospital rounds and the late nights on the train, I managed to survive the streets of Camden unscathed. I like to think my dad was operating as my “guardian angel.”

Turning eighteen is a milestone birthday for most teenagers. My eighteenth birthday was noteworthy for reasons beyond the norm. This would be the first birthday without my dad, and the day I called Catholic Charities Adoption Agency to begin the quest for my birth mother’s identity. Feeling my dad’s blessing, I secretly made the call while my mother was out running errands. An additional catalyst for wanting to know my medical history had emerged. The relationship with my best friend in high school was progressing into something more serious. Dave was a year older, and while I was headed to college, he had moved to Chicago to apprentice as a glass blower. He was the youngest of four brothers, and unfortunately had experienced the deaths of multiple first cousins on his mother’s side, from Cystic Fibrosis. If we were to marry in several years, not knowing if I potentially carried the gene would impact our decision about children. I had created a list of questions for my appointment with the social worker from

Catholic Charities Adoption Agency. Going alone did not seem like a good idea, and with Dave in Chicago, I asked my best friend, Mike, to go with me for moral support.

Upon arrival, we were escorted to a small cubicle with a table separating us from the Social Worker, holding my files. She picked up a handwritten piece of paper from her desk, and was about to hand it to me, when I asked, “You have an official-looking folder that looks like it contains a lot of information. Am I going to receive that as well?” She responded, “You can’t have the folder; however, I have this Xeroxed sheet from your folder.” There were multiple black smears visible on what looked like an official record. She explained further, “The adoption records in the state of New Jersey are sealed. When the birth mothers agree to the adoption of their babies, no one has access to the information except Catholic Charities.”

“My adoption was 18 years ago, surely things have changed since then?” I inquired. Incredibly, I would be asking this same question for the next three decades.

She handed me the sheet along with the handwritten note, adding, “Some states have opened their adoption records. New Jersey is not one of them.” There was nothing of substance to read. The relevant information was underneath the black smudges. To know that I was so close to getting my mother’s name and address, the hospital of birth, yet couldn’t see through the black marks was beyond frustrating. I felt powerless and small. I set it down, as tears welled in my eyes. Hoping for more, I picked up the handwritten note. The note contained the following information:

My birth mother was seventeen when I was born.

Nationality was listed as Irish.

School records showed she was a good student and liked to dance.

Physical appearance included that she was five feet, five inches tall with a slight build, brown hair and brown eyes.

My voice began to break as I asked, “That’s it?” The tears rolled down my cheeks and my emotions vacillated between sadness, frustration and downright anger.

“There’s no mention of my birth father. What about him?” I asked.

“We aren’t allowed to provide any information on fathers without the birth mother’s consent,” she responded.

“How long will it take?” I asked

“Since it’s been 18 years, we have no way of contacting your birth mother.”

“WHAT....” I exclaimed. “You don’t keep updated information? Aren’t the birth mothers required to report in, especially with any major health changes?”

This seemed like a very realistic question to ask, and the point where the meeting really went off the rails.

“We are not a detective agency. We do not follow the mothers nor do we require anything from them. What did you think you were going to receive today?” Her tone expressed frustration with my apparent lack of appreciation.

“I was looking for updated medical information. I am studying to be an Immunovirologist, and we now know many diseases are hereditary. I have a right to my medical history,” I responded.

“I understand protecting the rights of the birth mothers, to a point. How about the rights of the adoptees?” I asked.

From the look on her face, I had clearly pushed her to her limit.

Her voice rose an octave. “Why is this so important? Do you have some type of disease?”

Taken aback and stunned at the insensitivity of her question, I managed to say, “I’m going to marry someone who has cystic fibrosis in his family. If there is cystic fibrosis in my ancestry as well, it’s highly likely we would choose not to bring children into the world who might not

live to see their thirteenth birthday.”

She stood up, signaling our appointment was over. As she motioned us toward the door, she restated that they weren't a detective agency and I should be grateful for the information provided. Turning towards her as she closed the door, I was surprised by the absence of compassion on her face. Understanding she was bound by laws, there had to be a better way. Once we made it to the safety of the car, I doubled over sobbing. Mike offered compassionate support and we rehashed the few new facts revealed. My birth mother was Irish, we had the same hair and eye color, we were both good students, and both loved dancing. Discovery that we shared common traits left me wanting more. I resolved to never abandon my search efforts. This was just the beginning.