

GLORIOUS ME

MY JOURNEY ON THE PATH TO SELF LOVE

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Published in 2015 by
Write It Right Professional Services

ISBN 978-0-9937848-0-4

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Prologue

When I was six, I saw the red sign above my bed. It said N.P.O. in big white letters and “nothing by mouth” in small letters underneath. I felt my heart skip a few beats before it formed a lump in my throat. I contemplated feelings of sadness and betrayal while pondering my inevitable fate. My first thought was that surely someone made a mistake in the night and hung the sign over the wrong bed. When I asked a nurse for a drink of water I saw her glance at the sign. She answered with a friendly smile and said, “NO, but your daddy left you some pickled pigs feet ... your favourite, and you can have them when you come back.” Come back? I knew exactly what she meant but didn’t say anything. My lips were intensely parched and dry. A drink of cold water would have been refreshing ... anything to quench my thirst and provide relief for my cracked lips. So I continued picking the dead skin off my lips until they bled. It seemed to pass the time anyway, while everyone else ate breakfast.

Shortly after, a male nurse came into the room. I saw him show a piece of paper to the duty nurse and she pointed to me. He came over to my bed, released the brakes and said we were going for a ride. I knew exactly what he meant. A RIDE TO HELL. Then he pushed the bed out the door and down the hall to the elevator. Once inside he pushed “B.” My suspicions were proving correct. B was for basement. It was

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where all the experiments were performed. I watched the numbers change as we descended into HELL. 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1 ... B. All was quiet. A few seconds later the heavy gray doors rattled open.

He pushed the bed down a long dimly-lit corridor which smelled like floor wax mixed with Pine Sol. There was a room at the end of the hall with the doors open wide, and we were heading right for it. In my mind I was trying to block out the inevitable torture, but there was nothing I could do about it now. So I just thought about the pickled pig's feet.

There were six or seven people in the room waiting for us to arrive; all wearing faded green clothes. Their faces were covered with familiar green cloth tied at the back, exposing only their eyes. In the room there was a large overhead light that could be raised or lowered from the ceiling, and several silver containers on the counter with surgical instruments in them. Looking through the glass doors over the counter I could see jars of cotton balls, popsicle sticks, gauze pads and band-aids.

I was transferred to a table under the bright light. No one spoke, but while lying there it was easy to put names to all the faceless faces. My eyes seemed intent on piercing the souls of my would-be abusers. Around the table I easily recognized Doctors Teasedale, Abrahms, Israels, Singh, Thompson and Avery.

Yellow liquid was swabbed onto my chest, followed by a green sheet with a hole in the middle, which was placed over me. At the appropriate moment each doctor took hold of an arm or leg and held

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me down so tight that I couldn't move one inch, even if I wanted to. I felt like a lamb waiting for the slaughter.

Dr. Teasedale approached the table. When she turned toward me brandishing a long silver needle a feeling of fear and betrayal gripped me. My heart started pounding staccato. She arched over my chest and proceeded to pierce the skin with the razor sharp point.

With continuous pressure she drilled that needle into my sternum, penetrating the depths of my soul, into the marrow. With no anaesthetic to dull the horrific pain, I screamed and begged her to please stop. She was relentless and completely oblivious to my plea for help. It was useless to think anyone would save me, let alone care. The whizzing of the drill caused blood and minute bits of ground bone particles to fly around my head, and mixed with my salty tears it formed a paste that caked onto my face and hair. When it was all over, someone took me back to my room to sleep.

When I woke up, the sign was gone.

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January 5, 1977

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

This is to confirm that Debbie Hawkey, birth date November the 21st 1954, developed acute blast cell leukemia which was diagnosed in September 1959. She has been in complete remission since this time, and all medication was discontinued in March 1965.

Since that time she has remained well and all tests including her liver function tests have been normal. Further details of Debbie's problem will be provided by myself so long as Debbie herself agrees to this.

Yours sincerely,

J.M. Teasdale

J.M. Teasdale, M.B., F.R.C.P. (C)
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JMT/sk

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How inseparable life itself is from the voice. Your sexuality, your honesty, your spirituality, your physicality, your health. Everything is intrinsically linked to the voice.

k.d. lang

Prologue

The Beginning of the End

My dad loved tending his flowers. In the summer months he lovingly cared for his gigantic dahlias that grew along the side fence, bordering our house and Harry's, our neighbour. When the flowers were in full spectacular bloom, he would cut the long stems and wrap colourful bouquets in newspaper and have us kids deliver them to the moms on our street.

We lived on the east side of Vancouver. I was the oldest of three. My sister, Jennifer, was one and a half years younger than me and my brother Eddy was eleven months younger than her.

My dad, Richard, cleaned boilers for the Vancouver School Board. It was a dirty job which my mom eventually came to resent.

He met my mom, Doreen, at Scott's Café, a downtown restaurant, where she worked as a waitress. He was twenty-eight, she was nineteen. When she got pregnant, their mutual friends, Charlotte and Roy, drove with them over the Canada/USA border to Bellingham so that they could get married in front of a Justice of the Peace. I was born six months later, on November 21, 1954.

When I was four, we moved to Prince Albert Street. At the time, that area was populated with a mix of traditional eastern European families with lots of kids. Our main shopping area, Fraser Street, was dotted with a variety of small owner-operated shops, a movie theatre, a Woolworth's Five & Dime, and German delicatessens and bakeries displaying wicker baskets of heavy rye bread, tortes, flans and other specialty pastries in shop windows.

In the summers, there were usually about ten to fifteen of us kids who would congregate in the back alley behind Helen and Anna Brown's house to play 'kick the can.' We played for a few hours after supper, or until the sun set.

In the summer, Jennifer, Eddy, and I would kneel beside Daddy and peel dead skin off his sunburned back as he lay in bed after a hard week's work. We would start at his shoulder and carefully see who could peel the biggest piece. Sometimes the pieces seemed as big as saucers,

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and we would hold the delicate piece to show him. “Look daddy, how big this is.” With his face pushed into his pillow, he scanned the piece from the corner of his eye and smiled.

One time he told me he was going to blow up a thousand helium balloons, and we were going to hang on to the strings and float to the moon. Just me and him. And I believed him.

In the summer of 1959, a friend and I were playing in a vacant lot on the corner of our street. The lot had recently been sprayed with pesticide by the city works crew as part of the weed control programme.

The next week, following a routine dentist appointment, I lay on the couch, sick and unable to move. My mom phoned the dentist and he told her to bring me in to his office for an examination.

When he looked in my mouth and saw a flurry of white dots, he knew this to be more than just common malaise. Without hesitation, he told her to get me over to the Vancouver General Hospital RIGHT AWAY, he was going to phone ahead and they would be waiting for us to arrive.

For the next two weeks, as I was put through a series of tests, my mom and dad waited anxiously, wondering what could possibly be wrong. With no word from the doctors, they finally demanded an explanation. “Acute blast cell leukemia,” they were told. “She’s got zero chance of survival, six months to live at the most.”

I stayed in the hospital for thirty-seven days, had over one hundred blood transfusions and was in and out of a coma. I remember needles: doctors with masked faces, orderlies dressed in white, and blood, lots of blood; bags of red blood hanging from a silver pole, dripping from a tube into my arm.

I shared a hospital room with Ben and Starr. Starr had a cast on her entire body and looked like she had been run over by a cement truck. Ben’s mom wore fancy clothes with sequins, cowboy boots and shiny blue eye shadow. She looked like a country and western singer to me.

One day my mom came to the hospital to visit. I was attempting to walk down the hall, using the wall for support. As she passed me on her way to my room, she heard a faint voice. I called out “Mommy”. She turned around and did a double-take. I was very weak, terribly emaciated, almost unrecognizable; my long red hair matted from fever. We went to my room where she

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proceeded to comb out the mats but it was useless. She said “Tell the nurses to shampoo your hair and cut out all of the mats.” Instead, they just cut off most of my hair.

Finally, in September, 1959, I lay comatose, shrouded in ice cold sheets in an effort to reduce the 106 degree fever. A minister arrived to baptize me and perform Last Rites, as I was not expected to live through the night.

Miraculously, I survived the night and was sent home to die because the doctor said there was nothing more they could do for me. During this time I contracted double pneumonia and double mumps, twice each. Over a period of time I also had a variety of other childhood illnesses including chicken pox and measles, and developed excruciating arthritis in the back of both knees. Many nights Dad swabbed murky green liniment on them. The rubbing created friction and heat and temporary relief as I lay writhing in pain on the living room floor.

While I was in the hospital, I had a piggy-bank that visitors would drop money into. Once home, my friend, Julie, and I, shook all of the coins from the piggy-bank and arranged the money in piles of quarters, dimes, nickels and pennies. She was in grade two so she knew how to count. We had a total of over thirteen dollars. I had been collecting small ivory colored envelopes, about two inches by three inches, that my medication came in. One day, I put an assortment of coins in several of the envelopes and attached a paper clip on top. Then I went door to door in my neighborhood. In those days, mail boxes were built into the front door. If nobody answered when I knocked, I would kneel down, prop open the mail box flap and say “Hey, do you want some money?” If no one answered, I would leave an envelope in the mailbox and continue on my way.

One night I sat upright in my bed. Peering out the orange corduroy curtains I could see that it was still dark outside. I heard my mom yelling again. “YOU STUPID FUCKING ASSHOLE,” and then a loud BANG. I had grown accustomed to that sound ... a potted plant hitting the dark brown paneling in the downstairs living room. She was aiming for Daddy’s head ... but missed.

When I got up in the morning, I went in the living room to survey the damage. There was dirt on the floor and another plant, broken into pieces, scattered nearby.

Another fight. She always left after a fight. Where would she go this time...and for how long, I wondered? It could be a few days or as long as a month. This time she left at the end of May

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It wasn't until years later that I found out that Dad had insisted that baby was not his and gave our mom an ultimatum. "Give the baby up for adoption or leave." She chose the latter.

From there, our lives went steadily downhill. Dad started drinking to drown his sorrow and I developed coping techniques to help deal with the loneliness and loss. At night, my salty tears were my only comfort. I went inward to find solace from the chilling nightmares and emotional abuse of my neglectful alcoholic father, the loss of a mother, a sister, a family, a life

In 1959/60 I was watching television evangelist, Oral Roberts, on our black and white RCA television in the living room. Dad was a staunch atheist and would never have approved of me watching such a show, but I enjoyed it and watched the Sunday morning broadcasts when Dad wasn't around. Oral Roberts would proclaim that if I believed that Jesus healed then I would be healed too, "For it's by faith that you are healed," he said. So I put my hand toward the TV and believed what Oral Roberts, Jesus and the Bible said.

I became an outpatient at age five and made regular visits to the hospital every Wednesday for the first five years.

Dr. Teasdale, a woman, and a highly regarded British doctor, had treated me since my first visit at age four and a half. I was the first person in Canada to reach the five-year milestone after experimental bone marrow transplantation.

Reader's Digest offered ten thousand dollars for my story but my dad and doctor said, "No." It wasn't until years later that I found out and the reason they said no was because I would have been considered a miracle child. As Reader's Digest was circulated in over forty countries, they assumed that people would come from everywhere on earth, wanting me to pray for them. In spite of what anyone thought, I am a miracle child. The odds of my survival are close to a staggering one in two hundred million.

Over time, I developed an intimate relationship with the hospital support staff, nurses, pharmacists, haematologist; even the elevator operator, a matronly woman who sat on a wooden stool with her red hair pinned behind her ears and her head always buried in a paperback novel which she tucked behind the silver railing when passengers came on board.

One day when I was five, I was at the hospital for my routine blood work and noticed a large wicker basket full of shiny red apples on the counter at the reception desk. I wanted one of those

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apples, so I stood on my tip toes and tried to reach, but due to my height, was unable. From the other side of the counter, a woman's brown hand, gave me an apple. "Here you go," she said in a soft voice. It was Mrs. James; she was from Jamaica. She added, "You know, we never saw a kid with such a strong will to live." I nodded in agreement, even though I wasn't sure what those words meant. I took the apple and went to my seat.

Nancy, the haematologist, would swab my index finger with alcohol and cut into it with the razor-sharp edge of a stainless steel blade. With one end of a rubber tube attached to a glass vial, she positioned the other end in her mouth so that she could control the flow of blood and draw the exact amount into six or eight vials. Then I would go downstairs and wait for Dr. Teasdale. I was usually bored out of my mind until she was ready to see me about three hours later.

Until I was about ten years old, I was escorted to the hospital, but as I got older, I took the bus by myself and waited for Dad to pick me up at 5:00 p.m. I remember clearly the time Scottish head nurse, Mrs. Jennings, was having a casual conversation with Dad. As she rested the elbows of her portly frame on the other side of the Dutch doors, I asked rather curiously, "Where is Mrs. Davies?" She was a nurse I had always liked but hadn't seen her for several months. Mrs. Jennings took a small note-pad from the pocket of her starched white uniform and a pen from behind her ear and scribbled something on a piece of paper. I became curious when I noticed her deliberately turning the pad from my sight and showing it to Dad. He nodded in agreement. From where I was standing I could see that it started with the letter L., and then she told me that Mrs. Davies had died a few months previous.

When Dr. Teasdale was ready, I followed her into the examination room, stood on the step stool and hopped up onto the narrow examination table. After a series of routine questions such as: "How are you today?" or "How are you feeling?" I would lie on the table. She would feel the glands in my throat and then put her hands inside my underpants and feel my groin area.

In the deepest recesses of my memory, I remember that some of the nurses had told me that they too had never seen a kid with such a strong will to live. Years later, I often wondered if those words caused me to struggle through situations and events that no ordinary human was meant to endure. Unbeknownst to me at that time, those words, *we never saw a kid with such a strong will to live*, would end up being my silent mantra throughout my life. They had a safe refuge and burrowed deep in my subconscious memory and became the main motivation for how I lived my life.

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This was a sharp contrast to the vile words of my abusive alcoholic father, who repeatedly criticized me and proclaimed, “You’re just a stupid fucking bitch who’s never going to amount to anything.”

As the years progressed, so did the words ... they became more vile.

You stupid fucking bitch, YOU ARE never going to amount to anything. How many times would I hear those words in my head, ten thousand, one hundred thousand, a million perhaps, as a constant reminder that I was worthless and unlovable and IT was all my fault. I came to believe that if I wasn’t sick my mom would not have left, leaving my dad with three kids to raise on his own. Of course I believed him and identified heavily with those words.