

Foreword by James Redfield

NY Times bestselling author of *The Celestine Prophecy*

Sacred Stories of Transformational Joy



Crappy to Happy

True Stories of Grit, Grace, and Love



Rev. Ariel Patricia & Kathleen O'Keefe-Kanavos

Bernie Siegel, MD · Rev. Temple Hayes · Ken Walls · Janet Cincotta
Constance Bramer · Maria Lehtman · Tamara Knox · Diane Vich

Other Books by Rev. Ariel Patricia

Chaos to Clarity: Sacred Stories of Transformational Change

God is in the Little Things: Messages from the Animals

God is in the Little Things: Messages from the Golden Angels

Scanning for Signal (Co-Author)

Other Books by Kathleen O'Keefe-Kanavos

Chaos to Clarity: Sacred Stories of Transformational Change

*Dreams That Can Save Your Life: Early Warning Signs of Cancer and
Other Diseases (Co-Author)*

Surviving Cancerland: Intuitive Aspects of Healing

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Crappy to Happy: Sacred Stories of Transformational Joy

Rev. Ariel Patricia and Kathleen O'Keefe-Kanavos

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*It's the same party and we're all invited.
So, can we just start dancing already?*

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A special *thank you* to all our authors, some of whom have returned from book one, *Chaos to Clarity: Sacred Stories of Transformational Change*, to share more amazing stories. Your desire to contribute to book two is a huge compliment to us. Your stories written from the heart have brought the book to life.

To my devoted husband of almost forty years, all I can say is thank you for your endless support and understanding during the birthing of the second book *Crappy to Happy: Sacred Stories of Transformational Joy*. I love you.

-Kathleen O'Keefe-Kanavos

Thank you to my co-author Kat for continuing our collaboration and co-creating *Crappy to Happy* with me. The stories of our shared human experience are important and deserve to be told.

Thank you to our contributing authors for writing from their hearts and sharing their most intimate stories in the spirit of giving love and support to another soul living a similar experience.

And finally, a shout-out to my fellow joy chasers... you know who you are. Thank you for having the audacity and determination to keep going, even when it wasn't fun. I hope reading our book will help you shift from chasing joy to becoming joyful.

-Rev. Ariel Patricia

FOREWORD

by James Redfield

This book is enlightened — and not because it advocates some heady new theory or movement, but precisely because it doesn't!

In fact, this work transcends quick fixes and pop psychology to focus on something else: how to live life fully and spiritually in the real world of pain, self-discovery, struggle, and joy. And remarkably, what is displayed in this anthology is an authentic look at how and why joy can win.

This is a point of view much needed in today's world. Humanity continues to awaken from a materialistic sleep where spirituality has been abstracted and made theoretical, lost in an effort to solve social problems with intellectually structured platitudes about how the world might improve — leaving us to individually cope with the real challenges of life all alone.

Yet, books like this one help us face the challenges of life in a more open way, pushed along by the rising generation of Millennials, as they gain more influence. If the parents of the Millennial generation, the Baby Boomers, have been outward looking, intellectually oriented, and seeking to resolve the broad issues in human culture — minority rights, environmental protection, equal opportunity and more — Millennials naturally seem to be leading us in another, more existential direction.

Keep in mind, Millennials and their children are already the majority population on the planet. As a group they are moving well into their later thirties, the time when every generation begins to ask the larger questions in life. They seem to be asking, "I've established a way to earn money, managed to maintain key relationships, struggled to raise

children. But is this all there is? What do I really want to do with my life? Does spirituality help?" The range of Millennial influence will only increase as they become even more of the majority over time, especially if the increasing number of minds thinking the same way changes us all through a kind of cultural contagion. Soul-wise, we might all be Millennials now.

The contemporary issues we face are making our culture more spiritual and more practical at the same time. The pandemic shutdown has only reinforced this openness, spawning a new sense of spiritual consciousness centered on our down-to-earth lives and how we really feel. We have already seen an explosion in personal meditation. At no other time has there been so many people practicing prayer/contemplation in the world, and that is almost entirely because of Millennial influence.

Their — our — message seems to be this: "It is time to find deeper answers about handling life! Why are we really here? How can we be happy? We have to get out of our heads, stop pretending. Give us something that acknowledges how to overcome, to break through, to open our hearts and really help each other. If the key is spiritual consciousness, show us how it applies to our everyday existence. And please can we be real?"

Again, when these are the larger questions, it doesn't take long for all of us to feel this same imperative. Suddenly, it becomes the culture's reigning sensibility, the call of the day. We want to reassess life overall, from closer to home, and with more compassion.

This enlightened book in your hands responds to this request. The contributors cover most everything from relationships to health, grief and loss, and the secrets to living an inspired journey through it all, sustained by an increase in this otherwise elusive state of joy.

Its pages take us deeply into the issues we all face, just like our newfound awareness wants. It doesn't sugarcoat problems, but it does offer grounded solutions. What is it? The "art of the comeback."

We all meet challenges when pursuing our dreams. We all get hurt. But we can also find a way to return to a joy that sustains us. It is a mysterious joy they point to, the kind that includes a peace that surpasses all understanding, as the ancient scriptures promise — a joy that, when we get knocked out of it, can be regained.

For all the pragmatic solutions that the authors and contributors realistically recommend, their auras point solidly to the larger picture emerging: Life can be lived in a new way that we can already sense, a kind of practical illumination, where we prove to ourselves that the world we live in has a spiritual design.

This book is a seminar about this emerging truth. When the heart is opened through prayer/meditation, the wounded chatter of our thoughts and emotions can be let go of, revealing a love-based, heart-opening joy and mystical peace. This peace can go farther still, of course, into a flow of intuitive intelligence and synchronicity that guides us to when and how to give miraculous help to others. That is the key to "coming back."

Such helping always leads to an awareness of the real karmic structure of life. If we help others, we will draw into our lives people who come to help us, who present us with a miracle synchronicity. And that's the secret. When we are at our lowest, if we find someone else who is down and seek to lift them up, that energy flows though us first, lifting us as well, as it extends to the other person. And all this happens at a down to earth level.

The rewards can increase, of course. When we open our hearts ever wider, this intuitive intelligence does something even more profound.

Over time, it reveals our soul's true mission and how to fulfill it, even offering intuitions of protection along the way, if we tune in.

We are not yet there perhaps. We all still stumble. But the personal stories in this book show us how to always “come back” to this path, to the illumined journey.

...I told you it was enlightened.

The Spirituality of Joy

by Rev. Ariel Patricia

Joy is in the sweetness.

Just beyond the physicality of the emotion... there is a sweetness. Oh, what a place to be—in the sweetness.

Confessions of a joy chaser.

There it is. I said it. I was a *joy chaser*... Struggling for years to feel joy in my life, I chased one experience and teaching after another. I thought if I could just go further, dive deeper, try harder that I could break through an invisible barrier that was keeping me from the life that awaited me, and I would *finally* feel joy.

The warrior in me was unsettled. She knew she could do this. She had fought tougher battles before. She thought if she pushed hard enough, she could make it happen. That's how we did things. We controlled them. We worked hard to achieve our goals and we didn't quit until we had won.

"We could go on that new spiritual journey or take more classes," my warrior whispered in my ear. "How hard could feeling joy be?"

"Yes! Of course, we can do this!" I would affirm, signing up for another course or excursion that promised me all that my heart yearned for.

In a few short years of being a joy chaser, I had exhausted myself and much of my finances and still did not understand what joy really was.

Joy is a vibration.

“What does that mean?” questioned my logical self.

“A vibration? That just sounds silly,” my protector persona replied.
“Don’t worry about that. You’re doing just fine.”

“Wait! How do we create a vibration?” piped in my warrior self, excited for a goal, regardless of how nebulous, and sure she could make it happen.

“A vibration is energy, a frequency,” my intellectual self proudly stated, happy to have something to show for the countless courses she had taken.

“Well, how do we create it?” my warrior pushed.

“I have no idea,” replied my intellectual self, silently berating herself for not having the answer.

I want to break open with emotion.

My angst continued. I didn’t have the answer, and my body felt that painful truth. My chest hurt... a lot. It wasn’t a heart attack; it felt more like the bones in my chest were about to split open. Trying to capture my longing, this poem spilled out.

I want to know my soul.

To feel my connection to the birds.

To infinitely live in the sunrise and sunset of each new day.

I want to break open with emotion.

For love to permeate every fiber of my being.

To fully express the ache in my chest and the lump in my throat.

I want to breathe the air of my ancestors.

To be in communion with all that is.

For the salt from my tears to clear the mist shrouding my ability to see.

I want to remember.

I want to know my soul.

Yes, that was it. That was what I wanted. Finally, I was able to express what I was searching for.

But was it *joy*?

I wasn't sure. Reading it over, a realization struck me. My yearning was for *connection*. To be deeply connected to something greater than the physical world I was living in. "To be in communion with all that is."

Reflecting more, I knew if I wanted "to infinitely live in the sunrise and to breathe the air of my ancestors," I would have to walk differently in this world. For this depth of connection, this communion, I would have to trust... and allow.

"Allow? No way!" my warrior self quickly piped up. "That's too much like the *surrendering* everyone talks about!"

"Shhh! Let's give it a chance. We've tried everything else," argued my intellectual self.

"Gentle, let's be gentle," offered my usually quiet, nurturing self.

My joy is in the sweetness.

Trusting and allowing takes practice. At least, for me it did. But I found the more I could let my warrior-self stand at ease, the deeper I could connect with and know... my soul.

Happiness is an emotion and joy is a state of being. You feel happy and you are joyful. My joy is in the sweetness. A place of contentment

with what is. A deep knowing that all is well, even when it seems as if chaos swirls around us. This is where the sweetness lies.

The powerful stories of transformation in this book may, at first read, not seem joyful. Some may seem downright heartbreaking. But if you look a little closer, you will see that, between the lines of each story, the authors have come to a place of knowing. In this knowing there is insight, peace, space, breath, and ultimately, sweet joy.

Enjoy,

Ariel Patricia

The Psychology of Joy

by Kathleen (Kat) O'Keefe-Kanavos

*Joy gives us the power to endure life's hardships
without becoming hardened.*

Humans are fragile creatures, and it is from this point of physical, psychological, and emotional truth that we often draw on joy for strength. Joy is generated from within us and is a long term state of being while happiness is a short-lived result to external stimuli. It is through joy that we feel more alive and aligned with our emotions.

Happiness will not save us from conflict or heartbreak. In fact, new research by psychologists states we might need to cry more when we are more emotionally aligned.¹ Perhaps that is why nurse Diane Vich danced before delivering bad news to families, and Catherine Paour laughed her way through open-heart surgery. However, with joy in our life, we may laugh more quickly, which appears to chase away the dark clouds of chaos.

Research into the psychology of joy and happiness has been a lifelong pursuit for many researchers, who wonder how both play into successful problem-solving and longevity, as seen in Frank Zaccari's story about his brother's horrible car accident, which left him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Determination fueled with a newfound joy for life changed everything.

Joy is bigger than happiness.² Happiness is dependent on the accumulation of external circumstances, but joy is a state of mind that animates our being.

Joy is a state of being that transcends momentary happiness.

During my most challenging times in life, I learned that joy followed by a good laugh could take away the power of whatever was holding me prisoner.³ Facing a dangerous boogey-man with the multiple and interchangeable names of Covid, Cancer, or Crisis made me dig deep into my survival toolbox. Laughter is a blessed weapon or tool because it is contagious, too.⁴

If you see two people laughing at a joke you didn't hear, chances are you will smile anyway--even if you don't realize it. The brain responds to the sound of laughter and prepares the facial muscles to join in the mirth. Laughter is a breath of fresh air that can clear a room of stale fear.

Hanging around someone who is a “laugher” is a sure way to catch a good case of “Joy,” because laughter and joy go together like peanut and butter. And although they complement each other, they are different.

Joy and happiness can metaphorically be considered siblings, but not twins.

The science behind joy shares new discoveries in experimental psychology that offer insight into human flourishing.⁵ Neuroscientist Richard Davidson, a longtime friend of Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, is a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison as well as founder and chair of the Center for Healthy Minds. His research focuses on the neural bases of emotion and neuroplasticity. Dr. Davidson says, “One can learn happiness and compassion as skills, just as one learns to play a musical instrument or train in golf or tennis.”

Based on Davidson's research, well-being, happiness, and joy are rooted in neural circuits and have four constituents.⁶

Each of these neural circuits exhibit plasticity, which means if we exercise the circuits, they will strengthen. Practicing these skills can provide change, which helps promote higher levels of well-being in our lives.

The four skills are:

Resilience: Our ability to change the way we respond to challenges

Outlook: The ability to see and savor the positive in others and situations

Attention: A focus on joy

Generosity: Generous and altruistic behavior, which activates brain circuits that are key to fostering well-being and joy.

The research found that people spend an average of 47 percent of their waking life not paying attention to what they are doing—and that an unfocused mind is seldom joyful. A modest dose of simple practices like lovingkindness might alter this circuitry.

Our brains are regularly being shaped, wittingly or unwittingly. By intentionally shaping our minds, we can take responsibility for our happiness. Like joy, sadness is often a matter of perception. Therefore, it would stand to reason that we create much of our suffering—and it would be logical to assume that we can also create our joy. It merely depends on the attitude, perspective, and reactions we bring to situations.

What is the purpose of life? Is it to get rich? I have met unhappy billionaires and happy trash collectors. The difference was not how much money they saved in life, but rather how much joy they spent.

Joy can lighten the heavy footsteps of our mortality.

We might need to tackle emotional obstacles that make joy elusive. Joy is the unleashed butterfly from the cocoon of our mind because joy begins as a state of mind that morphs into a state of being. Our soul's innate lightness of being can fly above crisis and soar on the undercurrents of chaos, because our soul has seen it all and flown through it all before.

Joy leads to a life of satisfaction and meaning. It is possible to be joyful even in the face of daily challenges of varying degrees. Joy is a state of mind we can carry with us through the morning traffic, and even through anger and grief, because joy is also a state of being over which we have control. Mind over matter really does matter.

The honest and personal stories in this book beckon you to join the authors on their resilient journeys. Their positive outlooks focus on joy, despite the adversity that leads to generosity and ultimately creates psychological well-being.

I hope that, like stories in *Chaos to Clarity*, the first book of the *Sacred Stories of Transformation* series, the psychological and emotional journeys in *Crappy to Happy* will leave you filled with joy.

The power of joy allows us to endure hardship without becoming hardened. It offers a positive perspective, which opens doors to new opportunities.

May these stories of transition from strife to joy be a blessing for all sentient beings traveling the long and winding road of life.



PART 1

LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Crazy Little Thing Called Love

*And I feel the call of my heart once more
And it is safe and familiar
Because I am right where
I am supposed to be*



Love Between Lives

by Rev. Ariel Patricia

A deeper connection shining through.

The sanctuary space was quiet—peaceful, really—a direct contradiction to the anticipation overwhelming me. A few soft lights and many candles radiated a soothing energy and beckoned me to breathe, to relax, and slow down my racing heart. My body reflexively listened, and as a deep breath filled my lungs, I delighted in the fragrance of lavender and lemon in the air.

Needing a moment to observe, I had taken a seat in the back of the room. I quietly observed the group of people, my companions for the evening, as they got settled. They silently busied themselves: arranging their spaces, taking out their journals, finding an elusive pen to write with, and mentally preparing for the experience to come. Their looks were varied, but most were nondescript, like me—dressed in jeans and T-shirts, sweatpants and sweatshirts, comfortable clothes that would not encumber them or their experience.

Tonight, I will experience my first past-life regression.

“Welcome, everyone! Get your pillow and blanket and find a place that you feel comfortable,” Maria, our leader, instructed.

Since I wasn’t sure what to expect, I wanted to be as private as possible, so I found a space against the back wall. I settled in, my pillow under my head and a blanket wrapped around me, creating a cocoon. Finally, I said a silent prayer, asking my angels to support me and allow me to have the full experience.

“You will be conscious the entire time, and if anything happens that troubles you, you can just open your eyes,” Maria reassured us. “Your conscious and subconscious mind will both be active. You can release any concerns and just allow the experience. You are safe and supported.”

The lights dimmed further; we closed our eyes, and soft music played in the background. Maria, with a serene tone and a soothing cadence to her voice, began a meditation to help us calm our breathing and clear our minds from distracting thoughts. My heartbeat slowed down to a steady, rhythmic beat, slower and slower until my mind quieted and my conscious mind centered inward.

We were ready to begin.

I am standing on the top of a magnificent staircase, which reaches high into the breathtaking blue sky that surrounds it. The staircase is white marble, and the steps curve downward in a long, graceful sweep, connecting the sky to the earth. With one hand resting lightly on the banister, I slowly descend. As I reach the last step, a lush garden springs up around me. Colorful flowers of all varieties greet me: some large and some tall, straining their ginger and golden faces to feel the warmth of the sun, while others seem

content to sprawl along the garden floor, creating a patchwork of scarlet and violet. Butterflies flit by and birds sing a chorus of melodies in the trees. As I breathe in the scents of the life all around me, a smile graces my lips.

Feeling safe and secure, I walk into my garden, my fingertips caressing the petals of the flowers as I pass. As trees start to dot the edge of my vision, a bubbling stream becomes visible at my feet. Walking along the soft earth beside the stream, I find a bench to rest on. I breathe deeply and look out over the horizon. The sun is starting to set, blazing an intense fire of color across the sky. I rest for a moment, but I know that time is getting short.

Not too far ahead, at the entrance to the forest, I see a gate that is painted white and arched at the top. The most beautiful white light is shining through the diamond-shaped openings of the latticework. Excited, I hurry forward, as I know I am to walk through the gate.

“Look down at your feet,” Maria prompts. “What are you wearing?”

I look down. Very large male feet, wrapped in Roman sandals, greet my eyes. I blink and look again. With dismay, I see they are not only male feet but flat and with square toes.

What? Whose feet are these? I wonder, looking for my slender, feminine feet with toenails painted red.

I must be doing something wrong. I look down again, and again, I am greeted with the same large, flat, male feet wearing Roman sandals. I am not able to focus, and I need a moment to process this information. An odd tingling creeps up my spine.

“Where are you? Who do you see?” Maria asks the group.

Her voice brings me back. I feel strange, but in this lifetime, I am a man. Tearing my eyes away from my feet, I pick up my head and look around. I am in Roman times—I believe during the height of the Roman Empire. I am wearing a short, white toga that falls loosely to my knees, tied

at the waist with a belt of some kind. I look about thirty years old and have short, light-brown hair.

People are gathered in a public square. The day is hot, and grumbles from the crowd are getting louder and more frequent. I am standing in the front of a group of men wearing togas similar to mine. Facing us is a crowd of Roman soldiers dressed in full armor with plated breastplates and helmets. The tension between my group and the soldiers is palpable, but I stand straight and hold my head high. I am fearless, and a leader to the men standing behind me.

Suddenly, before I can speak, there is a rustle in the crowd of soldiers. In a flash, an arm is raised, a body lunges forward, and a spear is thrust into my chest!

Maria is speaking again. “Leave this time and go forward in your life. Where are you now? What is happening?”

Again, I am confused. How can I go forward? Didn’t I just get stabbed? Didn’t I die?

I take a breath and try to clear my mind. I look around. I am not dead. Somehow, I survived, and I have recovered. I see myself resting; however, my confusion has taken up so much time that Maria is speaking again.

“Go forward again to the end of this lifetime, to your death scene. What do you see?” Maria asks.

Refocused and calm, I go forward. I am an old man lying on a decorative concrete bench on a hillside overlooking a city. It is springtime: the ground is covered in lush green grass; the heat of the summer has not yet started to take its toll, and the cool air has a dewy feel, as if it has recently rained. My home, a lavish estate, is behind me, and my wife of many years is by my side. Her long, gray, wavy hair reaches far down her back, worn loose today, with no adornments to restrain its beauty. Her hands are holding mine, and her eyes glisten with the tears she is holding back. She smiles at

me, her gentle smile that I have loved for a lifetime, as she tries to mask the pain, I know she is carrying in her heart.

I am near death. I pull my gaze from hers and look over on the hillside, where many adult people are gathered. They are my children and their spouses. Everyone is here for me, to say their good-byes. I am growing weary, but I am not afraid, as I am surrounded by love. I am content. My life has been a good one.

Maria speaks. “It is time to return to your body now. I will start counting backwards from ten to one. Say good-bye and start walking back through the gate. When I reach the count of one, you will be back in your body, and when you are ready, you can open your eyes.

I sighed and returned. People were talking. They were sharing their experiences, but I couldn’t talk yet, emotion coursing through my body.

I could still feel the love.

I had seen a happy lifetime when I lived with someone I loved very much and with whom I had a large, loving family. Two years post-divorce, and as I was just starting to feel better emotionally, I was overcome with gratitude and elated with the knowledge that I had experienced real, lasting love before. A stinging sensation pricked the corner of my eyes, and I sat in silence as my vision blurred, tears sliding down my cheeks.

We took a quick break to regroup, and Maria soon explained that it was time to do the next regression. The process would be the same as before. I felt certain that, having done one regression—and coming to terms with the knowledge that I was previously a man—I would be able to relax and embrace whatever was shown to me next.

I walk down my grand staircase, through the beautiful garden, past the stream, stepping through the gate and into the light. I look down at my feet and see tall, dressy, dark-brown boots that lace up the front and come up to about mid-calf. A long, deep-blue velvet coat with buttons up the front and a high stiff collar, the type worn in the United States in the early 1800s, keeps me warm. My hair is walnut brown, grown long, with pipe curls pulled up in the back so the curls cascade to just below my shoulders, reminiscent of hair adorning a porcelain doll, complete with a blue velvet hat capped with a feather. I am a young woman in my twenties, slender and attractive.

The clip-clopping sound of horses' hooves fills the air. As I look up, a carriage drawn by a large black horse moves slowly past. I am standing on a sidewalk in what I believe to be Boston, MA. A narrow, cobblestoned street is before me, winding through the city's tightly packed brick buildings. On the brown brick building across the street, an address marker catches my eye, and I know that is where I am going.

The baby in my arms starts to squirm, and my attention is diverted to my children. In addition to my baby, two young children, a boy and a girl, around four or five years of age, are with me. They are not twins but are close in age. My son looks handsome in matching shorts and jacket. His fists are clenched, elbows bent, and a wide smile crosses his young face as he jumps with great zeal next to me, the way only little boys seem to do. My daughter looks very much like a little lady, dressed in a button-up coat similar to mine. Waiting patiently, she holds tightly onto my coat, her behavior much different than her active brother's. We are preparing to cross the street. I call my son to my side and remind them to hold on to my coat as we cross. Smiling, I take a step, a young mother happy and busy with my young children.

Maria's voice interrupts my memory, and she asks us to move forward in this life. I take a deep breath and see myself lying on a twin-sized bed. The room is small and dark, lit only by an oil lamp on a side table and the last remnants of the sun's rays coming through the lone window. Hot and uncomfortable, my sweat is sticking my long, loose hair to my face. I scream out, and a woman comes to my side. It is time.

I am in the final stages of labor and just about to give birth. My body writhes with pain as the midwife holds a cold cloth to my forehead, encouraging me with her words. The baby is coming, and with a final push, I witness the birth of my son. I am exhausted by the birth, but happy. The midwife wraps my son in a blanket and lays him in my arms. As I lie there welcoming my child, she asks me if I would like to see my husband.

"Of course!" I respond, eager to see him.

She hurries to get him. He has been waiting in the next room, and he quickly comes in. Taking my hand, he sits down by my side, and I look up at him, excited to share the birth with him. Looking into his eyes, I see into his soul, and I am not prepared for what I see. The eyes that are staring back into mine are those of my ex-husband, Steve.

What? my mind reacts.

I don't want it to be Steve! I am upset, disappointed. How could it be Steve, the man that I am now divorced from, the man that did not love me enough to stay and try to work things out? Shaken, I try to come to terms with this. I look again into the eyes of my husband, who is so lovingly sitting by my side, hoping for a different response.

Yes, it is most certainly Steve.

Maria's voice cuts through my thoughts, the haze of my disappointment. She asks us to go forward to our death in this life. I take a deep breath and

try to move forward, no longer interested in learning anything more. I am completely shaken by the fact that my husband in my former life is my ex-husband in this life.

After a moment, with little enthusiasm, I move to my death scene. It is early morning, and I wake to the sweet smell of the honeysuckle vines by my window, still fragrant with the morning dew. My body aches, and it is difficult to get out of bed. I am content to lie here for a few more minutes, as I am feeling extremely tired, and it is so early that I have yet to hear the birds' morning songs.

Rubbing the soreness from my hands, I am taken with my gnarled fingers and bulging, blue veins; gone is the smooth, unblemished skin of a younger woman. The tiredness begins to worsen and weigh on me like a heavy cloak. My eyelids are heavy, and I close my eyes, unaware that it is for the last time.

"It is time to return to your bodies," Maria says in her soothing voice. "I will count down from ten to one. When I reach one, you need to return through the gate and back into your body."

Maria begins to count. I am not paying attention. I see something off in the distance, a golden light.

What is that light? I move toward it.

"Nine ... eight ... start to come back." Maria is counting.

I ignore her and move in the direction of the light. I am getting closer. I have to see what it is. "Seven ... six ..."

It looks like a person! I can't turn away. I am being inexplicably drawn forward. I continue toward the light.

The man in the distance is standing tall and straight; his broad shoulders are thrust back, his head held high, and his legs parted but ramrod straight.

A golden light is emanating from him and luminously radiating all around him. His strength and power are palpable. My excitement builds, and I continue forward. I can now see his wings, expansive and brilliant golden wings. He is an angel! He holds a long sword, pointed downward, in front of him. His stance and presence are powerful, but inviting, and I know there is no danger.

“Five … four …”

I keep going forward, like a moth drawn to a light. My breath catches as more golden beings begin to appear. On each side of him, one at a time, alternating left and right, golden beings appear. It is reminiscent of a panel of people standing on a dais. I feel that they are there to greet me, to welcome me. There is a familiarity to them, and I believe that I know them, but I am not close enough yet to see their faces.

“Three … two … you’re almost to the gate. At one, you will go through the gate and back into your body.”

No! I don’t want to go back. I want to go toward the golden beings. Every cell of my body is reaching toward them. I need to clearly see their faces! I want to talk to them! There is such a love and a warmth emanating from them that it makes me ache.

“One.”

Pop! I go back, through the gate and into my body. I feel jarred by the suddenness, filled with disappointment, and left with a deep longing. This was not where I wanted to be. I wanted to be with the golden beings.

Numbness and confusion enveloped me. People were talking, but I was not paying attention. Questions were running through my head. Why didn’t I have more time? Why couldn’t I get closer? and most importantly, who are they?

I must ask Maria for an explanation. At the first opportunity, I raised my hand and relayed what had just happened. What Maria said next shocked me.

"Sometimes during a regression, when we come to the end of a life, our soul wants to go forward to its soul state and not go back into the body. Your soul was being called forward. In between our physical lives, there is a spiritual realm we return to. This is where we meet with our guides and reflect on our experiences in the physical state. It is there that we decide what the next step for our soul will be. This time is referred to as 'life between lives,' and the golden beings that you saw were either your soul family or your guides."

Yes, instinct told me she was right. I could *feel* the pull toward the golden light; it was familiar and welcoming. I knew I was supposed to go back to the gate and into my body, but I didn't care. I had to move toward the light. To me, this confirmed that we are so much more than our physical form.

I lay there, wrapped in my blanket; my muscles released their tension, and as my head rested lightly on my pillow, a comforting warmth permeated my body and an unexpected smile found its way onto my lips. I had much to contemplate, to process. I thought of my wife from Roman times as she gazed at me with a deep love in her eyes, and I knew that I had felt true and lasting love, which was a welcome balm to my raw and still-bleeding heart. My husband from Boston—although it had initially upset me to recognize my ex-husband, Steve—confirmed for me a deeper connection shining through, a recognition of my soul seeing an old friend. My golden angels, the beings from whom I felt such a profound pull... I now knew I was connected to and guided by them. That was enough.

I reveled in the fact that, in one evening, I had received absolute confirmation that we are not alone. I had been shown that we not only travel through lives with other spiritual friends, but we are fully supported and guided by loving beings, such as my golden angels. My eyes filled with tears as this truth permeated my human shell and settled deep within my soul. The pain and the loneliness that had threatened to suffocate me since the divorce was finally being released.

My Child Was Still My Child

by Lorilyn Rizzo Bridges

Our love for each other saved us.

The phone call came as my husband Peter and I were preparing for a two-week trip to Sicily to explore my ancestry. It was my oldest child, Teddy. I immediately sensed something was wrong. Really wrong.

Teddy was a couple of weeks shy of turning twenty-nine and lived more than 3,000 miles away in Los Angeles, but we spoke frequently. We've always been extremely close, especially when Teddy teetered on the brink of national stardom in the music industry back in the early 2000s, and since choosing a music career behind the scenes.

Lately, Teddy had been experiencing tremendous success professionally, but physically had been struggling with some serious issues; stomach pain, bouts of nausea and anxiety. I was disappointed and concerned to learn Teddy had taken to smoking copious amounts of weed and cigarettes to cope. It clearly wasn't helping. His health issues were only getting worse.

"Hey, Momma..."

Teddy's voice sounded small and sullen.

All it took was those two words.

I could tell that Teddy had finally hit a wall. In those two words, I could hear pain, despair, frustration and—worst of all—a lack of hope.

Call it a mother's intuition, but I knew if I left for Sicily, I'd be coming home to a nightmare. I decided on the spot to postpone our trip until there was a specific plan in place. I contacted "Teddy's Team," and they, Teddy, and I worked to find a program and a facility where Teddy could finally address these issues.

Feeling Teddy was in good hands, my husband and I left for Palermo. We explored the countryside and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. Three days before the end of our trip, I was eager to return to our villa, because it was the first time in two weeks Teddy was able to take phone calls.

As my husband perused the travel guide to find a restaurant for dinner, I grabbed my cell phone and headed to the enormous baroque parlor, where I flopped down on the sofa.

I had a million questions: *How was the facility? What were the programs like? And most importantly: How was it going with addressing "those issues?"*

"Hey Bud!" I exclaimed. "It's so good to hear your voice! How are you?"

"I'm good, Momma... really good.... How's Sicily?"

There was something in Teddy's voice that made me take pause.

"I'm... good..." I replied, while my *momma mind* was busy trying to access what was worrying me.

Silence.

"Mom?" Teddy had sensed my voice trail off in thought.

"Yep! I'm here, Bud."

"Hey Mom, I need to tell you something."

My mind swirled. What could it be? Teddy sounded more clear-headed than I'd heard in years, no longer numb from the weed. So, what was the news?

"Mom?" Teddy's strong, calm, confident voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Yes?" I heard myself say.

Teddy inhaled deeply. "Mom, I ..."

Have you ever thought about your very first memory?

Don't ask me why, but right then, at that very instant, I had a flashback. I was sitting in my crib crying... I mean, I was exhausted from crying. I was cold, wet, and hungry.

It's a memory, but it's actually more like an all-encompassing feeling... a feeling of being alone... scared... vulnerable.

It was a feeling I'd tried to suppress most of my life... a memory I feared remembering. Because most of my childhood felt this way. The word "childhood" suggests a pleasant, carefree time when one is raised by their parents, but that couldn't have been further from my truth. Honestly, if anyone raised me... it was my older sister.

You see, I was born to a severely phobic, clinically depressed mother and a father who battled multiple addictions. My world was broken. We can summarize my "childhood" by comparing it to being on a jumbo jet where the pilot and co-pilot were both passed out cold.

I spent a lot of time daydreaming, imagining how I could fix my world. I dreamed about how wonderful my life was going to be when I was a grown-up. I dreamed of being the best wife and mother in the world. I wanted to have a ton of kids and a dog, and live happily-ever-after in a big old farmhouse. I'd make quilts, bake cookies, and plant

vegetables and flowers. Most of all, I was determined that my own children would have a magical childhood.

I was going to do everything differently from my parents. So, when I met a guy in college who seemed to be the opposite of my father, I married him. He was twenty-two, I was twenty-three, and I naively ignored every bright red flag that warned this was not the right man for me.

My head convinced my heart I was doing the right thing. But, by the time I wondered if I'd made a big mistake... I'd delivered a beautiful baby boy named Teddy.

Life is funny.

After all those years daydreaming about being the most perfect wife and mother, I had become Martha Stewart *and* Mrs. Brady on steroids.

I had Teddy, then another baby boy, then a baby girl... and I was so busy working hard to make everything perfect, I hardly noticed my world was broken once again.

No matter how hard I worked to fix everything, my marriage was unraveling, and my children's father was barely there for them physically or emotionally.

After twenty-three years of marriage, he asked for a divorce. What followed was a nightmare. It was a high-conflict Family Court struggle worse than anything you could imagine.

Once it was settled, my kids and I began to heal, and eventually little miracles began to happen. I reconnected with an old friend named Peter who I'd known since high school. We shared how our personal lives had turned out very differently than we'd hoped and we realized we had much more in common than our failed first marriages.

After a four-year courtship, Peter and I married. It felt like everything was finally falling into place for everyone.

Everyone, except maybe Teddy.

As I sat in Sicily clutching my cell phone tightly, I knew something was up and that Teddy was about to tell me something important. I tried to push those old memories of feeling alone and scared and vulnerable from my mind. I held my breath as Teddy inhaled deeply...

“Mom, I... have always believed ... and felt ... *and known*, I am a woman.

I said nothing.

“Mom. I. Am. A. Woman.”

Complete silence.

“Mom?”

No air in the room or in my lungs.

“Mom?”

My mind raced, thinking, *Oh God, please don't say ‘Mom’ again because I can't answer... I want to... I want to say whatever it is you need to hear right now... but I can't say a word.*

I felt like I had been pushed onstage in a play, but I didn't know the lines.

I finally manage to say one tiny word, spoken like a broken whisper.
“Okay.”

I didn't even know if I had meant to phrase it as a question or a statement. It felt as if someone else had said it.

What. The. Heck!

Time stood still... I'm not sure for how long.

It was midday, but suddenly, the parlor was as dark as midnight and there I was, sitting alone on the sofa. Those old memories engulfed me once again. My world felt like it had broken wide open.

Finally, I spoke again: "Okay. I'm just not sure what to say, Honey. I had no idea. I had no idea you *ever* felt this way..."

"I know." Teddy replied. "I made sure you never knew."

How could I have not known? It was my job to know everything about my kids, to anticipate what they needed before they even knew. I was a horrible mother, even worse than I feared. *How did I miss this?*

"Teddy, when did you start to feel this way?"

"As far back as I can remember... definitely around age five. I've always felt this way, Mom. I just never gave it much thought. When I was young, I just figured everyone felt the same way. And then when I realized other people didn't feel the same way I did, I felt ashamed and just kept quiet about it. I never thought there was anything I could do about it. So, I just dealt with my feelings privately. I would explore what made me feel normal and comfortable only in private... I never wanted anyone to know.... I was *terrified* someone would find out."

Suddenly, I felt terrified. I'd seen movies about kids living with these deep, dark secrets and the horrible side effects caused by all the buried fear and shame. Addiction, anxiety, depression, behavioral issues ... even suicide!

Teddy had been dealing with this all alone. Anything could have happened. At that moment, I felt overwhelmingly grateful. My child, at the age of twenty-nine, finally felt able to open up.

Time... a safe setting... and skilled therapy had all helped to pull back the layers that had numbed his reality for so long.

I no longer cared about the years lost or the decades it took for Teddy to finally feel safe enough to share. What mattered was that we were given a second chance.

“Mom, I love you. I know this is a lot to take in right now, but one of the group sessions is starting and I have to go. We’ll talk more when you get back to the states... okay?”

“Okay,” I answered. “No problem, Honey.”

“Okay, great. I’ll talk to you in a couple days.”

“Hey Teddy — I love you, Bud. *I love you so much.* And listen to me. This is all going to be okay. No worries, all right?” I said, reassuring myself more than Teddy.

“I know, Mom. I love you. Bye, Momma.”

I had no idea what to expect.

I don’t know how long I sat there with my silent cellphone in my hand. I was scared and confused, but also grateful and terrified, all at once.

Eventually, Peter came into the room. I could hear him asking me, “How’s Teddy doing?”

I looked up but couldn’t answer.

I. Could. Not. Speak.

Never in my life had I been completely speechless, until that moment.

Eventually, I simply said, “Teddy is a woman.”

And just like that my life changed in an instant. And once again my world broke wide open.

When I returned from Sicily, reality hit.

Late one night, I felt an overwhelming sense of dread, loss, worry, guilt, and grief. That night, I wept inconsolably for the past and for the future. I wept for the end of a reality I'd known since the day Teddy was born.

I wept for Teddy, for my younger two kids, for my parents, and for myself. And when there were no tears left to cry, I dried my eyes and took a deep breath.

There was no point in looking back. It was time to move forward, to heal our world—but how?

I knew nothing about the transitioning process my child was about to begin. So, I did what everyone does: I turned to the internet, googled “*transgender*,” and went from there.

I ended up handwriting seven pages of definitions for words I'd never heard before. I watched a bunch of fascinating and enlightening Ted Talks. I'd never met a transgender person (that I knew of), and it was reassuring to learn they were just regular, everyday folks. I found a therapist who worked with families (especially moms) going through this type of enormous change. I also discovered Facebook groups and connected with local organizations and support groups.

There was plenty of new information to take in and understand. But there was one thing I knew with 100 percent certainty....

Teddy was still Teddy—the same heart, same soul, same spirit.

I knew my child was still my child.

The only thing that had changed was that Teddy had made a decision to finally transition into living her authentic life. With the help of qualified medical professionals and counselors, she would make the necessary changes to finally align her outward expression of gender to match her authentic gender.

Of course, transitioning to a woman would affect not only Teddy, but our whole family. For thirty years, Teddy's family had only known her as male. This, I believe, is what causes the greatest conflict for families. We need time to catch up to understanding this reality, which is new to us but not to the person transitioning.

Teddy asked me to tell her brother and sister. They were both tremendously supportive.

I had no idea how the rest of the family would handle this information, knowing everyone processes things in their own way and in their own time. Once again, I was grateful for the depth of love and support our family showed Teddy.

Growing up is not easy. Parenting is not easy. Life is not easy.

Sometimes, our world can break wide open and things can feel pretty crappy.

But we gain our strength and equilibrium from the love and support of those around us. Therefore, it is up to all of us to cultivate a supportive environment of kindness, inclusivity, and—most of all—faith, hope, and love.

Idle Gatherings

by Janet Cincotta

The moment you speak the truth, the cheering gets louder.

Every so often, my best friend Kate and I indulge in a relaxing meal at our favorite restaurant. We let somebody else set the table and we linger over a meal we didn't have to prepare, leaving the cleanup to the kitchen crew.

I think my husband hates these dinners, as he imagines the two of us dissecting his brain by candlelight, right there in the middle of the restaurant. I'm a doctor and Kate is a nurse, so we could do it.

The truth is, we do sometimes speculate about the workings of his mind, as well as a few other parts of his anatomy, but there's more to it than that. When we get together like this, we like to brag about our dogs and our grandchildren. We find things to laugh about that no one else considers funny. And sometimes, we quilt. We gather up the tattered scraps of our lives—the bright bits of hope and happiness, the faded snippets of sorrow and worry, the ragged fabric of disappointment and despair—and between courses, we stitch them together again. And that takes time.

So, it wasn't because we'd wolfed down our meal that night, nor was it because the service was especially snappy—but when our plates were empty and our waiter rushed in to clear the table, we were not ready to say good-bye. We had finished the evening's dissection and patched up our lives, but we hadn't even touched on world hunger, social injustice, or the sad state of our teeth, hair, and nails. We still had work to do.

When our waiter appeared with the check, Kate waved him away.

Then, just as quickly, she called him back. Normally, she shuns dessert, and she rarely drinks coffee—so when she ordered one of those thick, warm brownies topped with ice cream, chocolate syrup, and whipped cream, accompanied by a mug of strong black coffee, I knew something was on her mind. Something that called for comfort food and caffeine.

I ordered another glass of good red wine.

When her dessert arrived, Kate pushed her plate toward me. "Here," she said. "Let's split this."

This is the definition of a friend: a person who offers to share comfort food with you when she's about to deliver bad news. Someone who spots the ticking bomb in your life, warns you about it before it can detonate, and sticks around for the aftermath, to make sure you survive.

A true friend carries emergency supplies wherever she goes. In case there's blood.

The conversation went something like this:

"No, thanks," I said. "So, what's on your mind?"

"What do you mean, what's on my mind?"

"Dessert? And coffee? At nine o'clock? Something's up," I insisted.

“Okay,” she said. “You’re right. It’s just that I’ve been wondering about something. Do you think your husband would ever have an affair?”

Well, sure enough, that took me by surprise—although, truth be told, I’d been wondering about it myself. I’d watched my closest friends go through it, so I knew the signs. The distance between the couples grew, and the silence deepened. Disbelief morphed into denial, and denial dissolved into heartache. And then, divorce finished them off.

Divorce would have come as no surprise to me. I’d been toying with the idea myself, praying about it as if it were acceptable to pray for help with a mortal sin, to pray that my husband would commit it and let me off the hook. *“Please, Lord, let him be man enough to go. Let him leave a note on the kitchen table, empty his closet, and make off with the hard drive and power tools. Let him be the one who breaks the covenant of our marriage and forsakes his children.”*

If only he would be a man about it, I thought, I could immerse myself in self-pity and bask in the warm glow of righteous indignation. I’d already contemplated all the delicious ways I could console myself after he left. Perhaps a new wardrobe would help. Or a cruise. Or a new puppy.

It would be just like him to brood over it in silence, work out every detail without a word, and then, when everything was just the way he wanted it, to drop it in my lap right at the kitchen table. All while pretending nothing was wrong.

I’d already erected an emotional barricade around the man.

I allowed him work without interruption, to come and go without a word. I vowed to keep whatever troubles I had to myself, to take on the intrusions and distractions of our existence without a fuss. I didn’t

nag him for help around the house. I didn't ask him what he wanted for dinner, or what he thought we should get his sister for her birthday, or what color I should paint the bathroom. I didn't bother him when I was lonely or bored or sad or worried. I'd already learned to live without him.

Still, we are devout Catholics, and in the Church, marriage is considered a sacrament. Irrevocable. Eternal. There's a lot of pressure to make it work. And my husband was a respected leader in the community, a man known for his self-discipline, honesty, and integrity. I didn't think he would stoop to divorce. If I was willing to tough it out, I figured he should be, too.

"No," I said. "I don't think he would."

Kate hesitated as though trying to decide if I could handle the truth. She brushed some crumbs off the table and watched them fall to the floor

"Well, he is," she said. "He has been for a while."

Bam! There it was. The other shoe had dropped.

She proceeded to fill me in on the details. Who he was seeing, how long it had been going on, who else knew about it, and where my husband and his girlfriend had been spotted together. She shared an office with him, so she knew the truth, and like the brave friend she was, she spoke it.

This took a while to sink in, but it made sense.

It explained where he was all those nights when I thought he'd be home. Why he never asked how my day went, or how the kids were doing in school. Why he never told me how attractive he still found me, how he enjoyed my sense of humor, or how much he admired my work. Why we never sat down to chat over a cup of coffee.

I'd given up hope he would ever get up from his damned computer, kiss me tenderly on the back of my neck, and run a bath for me with lavender bubbles. I wanted him to pour a glass of wine, sit down next to me, and pile bubbles on my head the way he did with the kids when they were little. After which we would fix a bite to eat, finish off the bottle, and curl up together for the night. The way it should be.

While Kate waited for me to sort this all out, I tried to imagine what it would be like to be loved by someone when you had been cast off because you were too old or too heavy. To have someone welcome you into his life when you were feeling obsolete. To go off with someone who would overlook your imperfections and embrace you in spite of them. I tried to envision what it would be like to walk away with another man, smiling and warm and loving—but I couldn't. Instead, I saw myself alone on a path in the woods. Alone on the beach at sunset. Alone in an empty church.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No, it's okay. It's fine," I said. "At least, now I know."

Meaning, finally I knew the truth, and I understood it. A sense of relief washed over me like a passing shower on a summer day. At long last, I saw a way out. A legitimate excuse to call it quits. A compelling reason to move on after forty-two years of marriage. I wasn't surprised. I wasn't angry, or hurt, or bitter.

The truth released me.

If that surprised Kate, she didn't let on. She knew what I was thinking.

Marriage is not meant to be lived in solitude, fear, or regret. It is not meant to be an empty promise. A dead-end road. A prison. If this is what

your marriage feels like, you may want to appeal your case. Jump bail. Free yourself.

Marriage should be a safe haven. A welcoming embrace. A soothing balm for everything you imagine is wrong with you, but isn't.

Your spouse should be your rock. Your anchor. A wellspring of understanding, affirmation, and consolation. If it feels like you go to bed with a stranger every night, you might be happier with a puppy. If your husband is shifting sand, the tide may already have gone out. If he is thistledown on the wind, let him go.

When you do, I hope you have a friend like Kate, because you're going to need someone who knows how to patch up a broken heart, to soak up tears, to sit still and stay calm when the tectonic shift occurs. It helps to have someone to walk in the woods with you. Somebody to watch the sun set with you and to kneel beside you in prayer.

Which is why, I believe, women gather like this, at their favorite restaurant for a bite to eat, or around the kitchen table for a cup of tea, or for a brisk walk on a well-worn trail. You can't tell by looking at them what they're up against. You can't see their broken hearts or crushed spirits, so it can be hard to pick them out of the crowd. They get out of bed in the morning like the rest of us. There is nothing strange or special about the way they dress. They get their children off to school, and tend to the house, or go to their jobs. They are right there behind us in the checkout line at the grocery store, on the treadmill next to us at the gym, and around our kitchen tables. Wherever we go, we encounter people whose pain doesn't show so we don't recognize it. If we did, we would gather all of them in. We would hear them out and lift them up.

These are not idle gatherings.

They are sacred circles that comfort and support us, connecting us across time and space. The forces that keep us connected are brute strength, manifest wisdom, and pure joy, which, when you think about it, should be impossible.

It isn't, though.

When your path in life takes an unexpected turn, it may lead you out of the woods. When the sun goes down, you get to watch the stars come out. If you can sit together quietly and patiently, applause breaks out. The moment you speak the truth, the cheering gets louder. If you accept it, the whole universe celebrates.

By the time Kate and I were ready to leave that night, the regulars had all gone home. While the kitchen crew cleaned up and the bartender mopped the floor, we started gathering up the leftover fragments of our patchwork lives. I swear, I heard applause.

We packed up the pieces that still didn't seem to fit and left the rest on the table behind us. The cheering grew louder. I smiled.

Let the celebration begin.

Forgiving Betty Tyme

by Misty Tyme

*I had to give up the fantasy that she would
tell me how sorry she was.*

My mom, Betty Tyme, had an hourglass figure, deep black hair, and large, round, crystal blue eyes. She was born with a talent few have, and beauty that she used skillfully. Her soulful singing voice was phenomenal and seeing her perform live was a magical experience.

Betty Tyme knew how to work a crowd and charm any man she had in her sights.

She was always at the center of any party. Her life resembled a juicy novel that was set in the heyday of Hollywood, with cocktails, sex, and rumors of the Mafia. My mother and the famous Elizabeth Taylor could have been sisters. With more than looks and talent in common, they both collected husbands. My mom's husband count was six, plus one live-in boyfriend. She had five children, although she didn't look like it. Marilyn

Monroe would have envied her figure—and she knew Marilyn, along with many of the other big names back then.

After her first husband (who was the true love of her life and rumored to be in the Mafia) had left her, she fell back on her incredible talent, eventually earning a record contract with Dot Records. She worked at all the big clubs in Los Angeles, Palm Springs, and Las Vegas. She named me Misty, inspired by a song.

Mom was singing at the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas when a music director for the big nightly show found out she was pregnant and said, “If you have a girl, name her Misty,” after the hit song, released in 1959.

The spotlight loved Betty Tyme, following her everywhere she went; it needed her, and she needed it. “I am the star,” she would say. Not only was she a star onstage, but she needed to be the star in every aspect of her life.

If anyone or anything threatened to outshine her, it brought out my mother's dark side.

It is common for mothers and daughters to have struggles. However, my mom did not struggle—she battled. If you were not a skilled debater, it was not a good idea to tangle with her. She would detect your weakness and, in a few sentences, you'd be so terrified, you'd admit to anything. My mother had lifelong clashes with relatives, neighbors, and even random strangers.

Her passionate ability to argue made all her children's lives rough. She, and whoever she was currently married to, would get into alcohol-fueled arguments that either ended with them passing out or walking out. Betty kept her children fed and clothed, but she did not manage to shield any of us from the chaos of her choices. Children who grow up in

this type of pain, as many children do, often develop a deep resentment over the childhood lived and a longing for the childhood that could have been.

One drama would pass, and then we would move on to the next adventure, or the next marriage. As a result, we would change schools and houses about every two years. All of us children always had the sense that we were in the way of her career or our next stepfather. When I was about twelve, she yelled at me, “If I had not had children, I would have been a big star.”

I have a sense that she was right.

We knew we were loved, but we did not know if we were safe.

Betty Tyme made big leaps in her life. She leapt into relationships, projects, and even businesses, feet first. Most of her leaps were uninformed jumps from a cliff. All the men she picked abused her. She had been beaten, raped, and left by the men who supposedly loved her. She was always left with her children and no partner to rely on.

Was my mom, Betty Tyme evil? Did my mom want to hurt us like this? None of her children ever felt she was trying to hurt us. In fact, mom always made a big deal over birthdays or any holiday. Her ability to cook was legendary, and our table was always filled with warm, wholesome food. She had a hard-working and adventurous spirit, which all of her children inherited.

She just made seriously bad decisions.

If you had the guts and nerve to ask her version of past events, you would get a very different tale. Mom was never wrong when it came to the decisions she made. She felt she was making choices that would provide for her children. These choices included marrying men whom

she did not love. One of the men she married had tried to rape her best friend. But mom was losing her house in a foreclosure and she felt she needed him, or we would have been homeless.

As I grew, so did my seething resentment toward my mother and my difficult family life.

During the first day of my senior year of high school, I moved out of my house. I worked two jobs and finished high school early. I had to get away from the vodka-driven quarrels that happened like clockwork every night. Surprisingly, my mom was excited for me. She helped me decorate and made sure my cabinets were full of food.

Years later, when I was married and had my first child, she was supportive and helpful. My mom loved babies. The trouble would begin when the babies grew into young children. If they mentioned their other grandmother, she was instantly jealous, feeling the spotlight pulled from her. If one of the kids did not notice her and tell her how pretty she was, she would exclaim that the child was a brat.

When Husband Number Six left her, after cheating with the neighbor, Betty Tyme picked herself up again and started singing. She began singing at a local club and put out a new CD. At age seventy-four, she still had a remarkable voice. She also had a new boyfriend, and they moved in together. Her grown children were thrilled. Mom was always easier to deal with when she had a romance in her life.

A few years later, the live-in boyfriend noticed some changes in her behavior. He explained that she would make plans to do something and then totally forget. When he would mention the plans, she would fly off the handle, accusing him of drinking too much. Soon, the live-in boyfriend left, because my mom's behavior had gotten more difficult

than usual. The boyfriend was less abusive than my mom's six husbands, but no match for my mother's ability to disagree.

I went with my mom to her family practice physician.

The doctor skillfully distracted her by having a nurse take her away for a test. That is when he told me he was sure she had dementia. Because her musical ability had remained intact, her brain had been able to hide her disease longer than normal. But alcohol had taken a toll. Even in her late seventies, she would drink two to three screwdrivers a night, heavy on the vodka, light on the orange juice.

She had many head traumas from all the spousal abuse. Her poor brain was both pickled and bruised. My mom's downward slide came fast, changing the diagnosis to Alzheimer's Dementia. Soon, she could no longer live alone. My older siblings tried to help, but it became apparent that I was the one who would need to handle her care.

The next step was a locked memory care facility. I found a great place not far from my home. It was warm and lovely. She would have her own apartment, minus a stove, as she could no longer be trusted to cook. Call me evil or a genius, but I knew I would have to lie to get her there. I told her that I had found a senior living apartment complex that was like being on a cruise ship—with a full restaurant and eligible men. I had her interest immediately.

What I did not mention was she would no longer have her car or the option to cook. She would also have to give up her beloved dog. She thought the apartment was too small and she noticed the kitchen was without a stove. I lied again and told her that this was not her permanent apartment, as they were remodeling hers. Because of her disease, she believed me.

Soon, she did not notice the lack of a stove or that she never moved into her remodeled apartment. Her downhill slide accelerated.

She still had a whopper of a temper and would show it—until the day came when she forgot why she was mad. That is when Alzheimer's Dementia became a blessing. You have to remember why you are mad to stay mad.

Then my mother lost the memory of almost everyone in her life, including the men who hurt her and all the regrets of lost stardom. As her anger fell away, she truly was in the moment, because the moment was all she had. However, she never forgot the first love of her life, the handsome Italian she had married when she was just seventeen.

Even while caring for her, I still held onto much of my bitterness.

But I would stuff it down so I could do this job as lovingly as possible. I saw her every day. Sometimes I would be at her facility three times a day. I was in charge of all the decisions in her life. I would take her out to Sunday brunch each week and take her shopping.

My mom was still experiencing the consequences of her life decisions, even if she no longer knew why. Only a few of her grown children and grandchildren would visit. Other family members had a hard time even calling her. She was the poster child for how not to live your life.

One day near Christmas, when I was visiting her, she looked up at me and asked if I was Misty. I said yes. She took my hand and tears rolled down her face. She said that she loved me, and she did not know who she was anymore. At that moment, she was not the lady who made bad decisions that hurt her children—she was just a little old lady who needed me to hold her hand and tell her that I loved her.

Living in the moment with my mother allowed me to start working on forgiving her.

Throughout her whole life, she strived for admiration and love. She demanded it! Now I felt sorry for the woman who never could find completeness in knowing that she was perfect just as God had made her.

I had to give up the fantasy that she would tell me how sorry she was for all the drama she put my siblings and me through. She did not remember the pain, and she was no longer self-justifying her past. I realized I could still love her, even with all the mistakes she had made. My bitterness melted away.

A few months later, she became ill and her health declined rapidly. She saw the love of her life, the handsome Italian first husband, a few days before she died, although we never saw him. In a very clear voice and with determination she said, “I have to go. He has come to take me on a date.”

I held her hand and told her to go.

I imagine her now in heaven on a magnificent stage, singing and dancing, while six husbands cheer her on.

End of Excerpt

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Crappy to Happy

Rev. Ariel Patricia &
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