

GETTING TO HERE

By

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“Memoirs are only as reliable as the memory that writes them, which is to say they’re inherently fallible.” – John J. Geoghegan

That said, the details of this one are as true as I can personally recall them given the passage of time and to the extent I necessarily relied on the memories of others for events that occurred before my birth. And yes, I’ve changed a few names/places/indicia to protect individuals’ privacy, but everything is otherwise as I remember it.

Prologue

I dropped the receiver back in the telephone's cradle, numb with shock. My mind whirled, then caught and stumbled, then whirled again.

"There's cancer in that lymph node," he'd said, "but we don't know what kind. You'll need a CT scan. Pathologist thinks it's glandular. Probably stomach or ovarian."

Sometimes you hear words, but their relationship seems so distant, so foreign, that they hold no meaning. They are words about someone else.

It was like that for me.

My stomach clenched like I'd been punched, shoving the air up and out of my lungs. I grew lightheaded, dizzy, before a wellspring of disbelief rose up to protect me from the terror that threatened to choke me into nothing.

He can't be right.

He can't mean me.

I had challenged and questioned, ridiculed, even, the bearer of the bad news. It wasn't possible, I argued. It was a small lump in my neck -- nowhere near my abdomen. His patience made me want to scream. I wanted to un-know it. Any of it. All of it. That's how the human mind works. Mine was no different.

But at some point, denial snags on the pinpoint of reality. On our own mortality. That's when the world as you know it reverses direction. You were going one way, now you're going another. Suddenly and without warning. It's disorienting. Confusing. Maddening. Everything about your existence vaults directly to the forefront of your conscious awareness and makes you reconsider/regret/rejoice in every decision you've ever made.

For most of my life I'd capitulated to the life my parents wanted for me. I'd stopped dreaming of who I wanted to be and become what they wanted for me instead – a financial success. I'd spent my entire adulthood competing, clockwatching, running, chasing the money. Money, they'd said, cures all of life's ills. I'd believed them. Meanwhile, life had slipped by unnoticed; the other path left un-trod.

And now this.

I stared out my office window, still numb with shock. My desk lamp stood muted vigil, judging, its green shade casting shadows

over my face as I turned toward the window. I watched the sun's faint glow disappear along the horizon, erasing all trace of the last day of my life before cancer.

I had cancer.

I. Had. Cancer.

The sand in life's hourglass begin to pour. Unrelenting. Unstoppable. Slipping through my grasping fingers without care for who I was or what I had done with my life.

And what had I done? More important, what would I do now?

CHAPTER ONE

Chapter 1 - Family Values

I jolt, my eyes flying open as my beating heart rat-a-tat-tats an urgent alarm.

A patch of turbulent air beneath our plane has startled me from my nap, leaving the haze of a discomfoting dream drifting away with the swollen storm clouds below.

Stretching my legs straight out and arms overhead, I glance over at my wife who is cozied up across the aisle in a soft, fleece blanket draped over her private leather cocoon in Virgin Atlantic's Boeing 747 so-called "Upper-Class deck" – their version of first-class. She looks back at me and smiles, the kind of smile that begins with her brown eyes and melts into the corners of her mouth. How did I get so lucky?

Glassware shakes and clinks as friendly flight attendants beg our forgiveness for a delay in service, then continue to flit to and fro under the soft pink cabin lights when the air smoothes, offering champagne coupes filled to the brim and delicious bites of gourmet chocolate that make even the air smell edible. We oblige their offerings and indulge -- the chocolate thaws on my tongue, trailing the mild taste of cherries down the back of my throat.

I sip my champagne gingerly, squinting against the bleached sky outside the window. I remember how my dad, over fifty years earlier, couldn't get over the fact that there was a two-story airplane in the sky. He was simply amazed, and he created that same amazement in me. As a child I had dreamed of what it would be like to walk upstairs in one of these things, and now here I was. Had I arrived?

Sitting in the crow's nest of such a magnificent feat of engineering reflecting on my father's frugal life, I can't decide if he would be proud of me, or horrified at the amount of money I've paid for the tickets – easily three times the cost of a coach class seat, and then some. Sure, I went a little crazy, but it is my wife's sixtieth birthday and I want her to have the epic adventure of a lifetime, beginning with this first-class, transcontinental crossing of the pond. It is extravagant, in the most non-dad-like way I could imagine. But

living with cancer has taught me a thing or two about not saving every dollar until God knows when, so I splurged. (Sorry, Dad.)

On this journey, I fancy myself as one of "them." You know, one of the "haves," as opposed to the "have-nots." One of the rich people. By which I mean the *really* rich people. Rich like tech money from Silicon Valley rich, or Hollywood movie star rich. Though far from being dirt poor, I haven't been spending my weekends hanging out with Richard Branson or Mick Jagger either. I've worked for every dollar I have, like most everyone else I know. I have made money, though not gobs of it. I have the nice house, the nice car, and a nice-sized bank account, but I'm not flying high on a family trust, lottery win, or skyrocketing stock options. Yet no matter how much I make it never seems to be enough. Will it ever be? There is always the urge to make more, work harder, to keep my nose to the grindstone, just as my parents taught me.

But on this day our fellow passengers treat us like kin, commenting on this or that detail of various international flights they have taken to places far more remote than London, our destination. To them we must appear a power couple -- me the storied attorney, my wife the successful consultant -- fully accustomed to being perched high atop jet airliners. But what they don't see is the guilt I carry to sit among them. Though I had money in the bank to pay for these extravagant tickets, my angst at the time of purchase had been nearly overwhelming, thanks to my father's frugal ghost whispering in my ear in his signature southern drawl: "Ya'll are wastin' money on a first-class airplane seat?" "Don't you have more important things to do with that money?" "Shouldn't you be flying coach and saving that money for retirement?" The voice was always there, challenging and questioning my every move. Airline tickets. Furniture. A pair of shoes. Did I truly need them?

I had struggled to set aside my inherited miserliness and adopt a money-be-damned approach to my wife's milestone celebration. In the end, I would manage to do so, but just barely. Though living with cancer had changed my outlook on many things, my father's influence persisted. Even so, money is no match for knowing one's days are numbered or that our *laissez faire* attitude about life is grossly and inexorably misplaced. The minute you realize, no, understand, that life really is as short as they say, you can never see things as you thought they were before. Then, each moment becomes special, and special moments are to be celebrated

with sumptuous indulgence and delight. Then you understand that life must be cherished and experienced and lived, and if you are lucky enough to have a few dollars in the bank to toss into the wind in a splendiferous embrace of life's special occasions, then you should. Indeed, you must. For you can't take it with you, and money is a poor replacement for memories left unmade.

Once we were onboard, I'll admit it was fun pretending to be one of the super-rich, even for a few hours. Who wouldn't travel like this if money were no object? I mean, what's not to like? It's posh, that's for sure, from the signature pajamas to the fully stocked and tended bar, classic chrome barstools and all. Virgin rewards its upper-deck ticket holders with many amenities, beginning with a lavish airport lounge filled with specialty cocktails and gourmet treats.

Carole and I had arrived at the airport that warm September morning and been greeted by a smiling brunette with a pair of gold Virgin Atlantic wings pinned to her red vest. Glasses perched at the end of her nose, she took our tickets, reviewed our passports, then handed us our boarding passes and pointed us toward the elevator that would take us to Virgin Atlantic's Clubhouse at San Francisco airport.

"Have a lovely trip," she added, waving her eyeglasses toward us, their chain still dangling around her neck.

"Thank you," we replied in unison, then rolled our carry-on bags into the elevator and pressed the button for Level Five, the one with the small brass plate reading "VA Clubhouse" next to it.

We stepped out to the warm greeting of another red-vested Virgin employee, who invited us to explore the lounge amenities. Having spent decades traveling domestically for business, I can attest to the fact that this place was special; complete with a beauty salon featuring nail polish ranging from petal pink to cerulean blue, executive locker rooms with steam showers, and a special hammock area where gleaming white egg-shaped pods swung from the rafters, brimming with soft, red cushions. It was an oasis amidst the hustle and bustle of an airport teeming with thousands of travelers on their way to everywhere.

We finally settled down at the opposite end of the lounge in plush, Virgin-red chairs. Turning our attention to the theatre-sized wall monitor in front of us, we caught the tail-end of the latest round of an equestrian competition somewhere in Normandy. As we settled

in, a man wearing the company colors approached with the first of several glasses of better-than-good champagne.

"Will you be dining with us today, ladies?" he asked with a smile.

"Yes, we will," I replied. After a few moments glancing at the offered menu, I added, "I'll have the Kumamoto oysters and the green salad, and maybe some of your delicious cheeses."

"And I'll have the filet mignon salad," Carole added, handing her menu back to our host. She looked so content. So utterly happy. In just a few days she would turn sixty. Sixty.

No one is prepared for the way age creeps up — stealth, unwelcome, determined to steal your nimble fingers and tight jawline — and she was as surprised as anyone ever is when sixty finally came knocking. But the grace and beauty with which she greeted her birthday milestone inspired all who knew her. A determined, self-reliant woman, Carole had lost her mother to breast cancer during her senior year of high school, the emotional abandonment of her grieving father shortly thereafter, and survived a horrible automobile accident as a young woman that left a goodly portion of her back burned and scarred. But she soldiered on.

After putting herself through college and nursing school, she navigated the medical field from bedside nurse to cardiac ICU to a place of prominence as an FDA regulatory consultant in the medical device field. She reinvented herself more than once, serving as a psychologist for a decade or more before having the temerity to fall in love with, and marry, me -- a woman with stage four ovarian cancer. She was strong and capable and wise, and as beautiful a human being as I had ever met. And I counted among my greatest blessings the fact that I woke up next to her every morning.

Carole had undergone a two-tier spinal fusion just a few months earlier and was still sporting a back brace on her birthday trip. And though she pulled through the surgery like a champ, I well remember the terror I felt at the possibility of losing her on the operating table.

For several hours, her life was left in the hands of people who were virtual strangers to us. They were accomplished and capable, but we had never had dinner with them. We weren't friends. They knew nothing about us, of our lives, or of our love. And I was powerless to do anything but wait; just wait, and consider the cruelty of the fates who would have finally delivered the love of my life, only

to snatch her away again. The thought of spending the rest of my life without her was simply unthinkable.

It was on that occasion that I truly understood what Carole lives with by being married to me. Absent some unexpected and tragic mishap, surely she has known from the beginning that I will die before her, and she must contend with that understanding with each new day. For her, losing the one she loves is not an abstract concept. This breaks my heart, for there is nothing I can do to stop it. It is our common understanding of this truth that makes each moment we share more precious than the last.

Each delicacy arrived quickly, the salty/sweet oysters sitting wet and shiny alongside a plate of artisanal cheeses bearing Roquefort that smelled as blue as the veins threading through it. Green baby arugula and spiky frisée were arranged lightly on another plate's center, topped with freshly crumbled sheep's milk feta and finely chopped, sugary walnuts. We shared bits and nibbles from our plates with one another, giggling with delight in our little extravagance.

After finishing our lunch we forced ourselves to indulge in a crème brûlée that was as lovely as it was delicious, the raspberry dollop in the center spreading over the warm candied crust like a tiny starfish. Carole surrendered a groan of delight as the first bite reached her lips, her sweet tooth finally satisfied. I followed soon after, my own taste buds cheering with confectionary delight. Having allowed ourselves plenty of time to catch the flight and enjoy Virgin's plentiful amenities, we read books and dozed with full bellies until we were summoned for our flight. By name.

This was a distinctly different way of living. It revealed the shameless seduction of what money can buy, the seduction that leads so many to sacrifice so much in the name of amassing wealth. On the surface it is opulent and grand, alluring, beguiling even. But there is a shadow side too, for underneath it is empty and shallow, with nothing to hold up the grandeur except, as is so often the case, broken dreams and crumbled lives. There was a price to be paid for this kind of lifestyle, and the price was high. I knew this. I knew this all too well.

Making our way to the front of the lounge, we collected our boarding passes from the attendant and turned toward the elevator that would take us back to the first floor. There we were met by a handsome older man, his silver-white hair closely cropped to his

head. He wore the same uniform we'd seen upstairs, his with a discreet Virgin Atlantic logo over his name badge.

"Good afternoon, ladies," said our host. "Please follow me." He then personally escorted us to the check-in area.

"Priority. Upper Class," the sign read. Something within me sighed a great big ahhhh. By now, the guilt of spending money I should have saved had evaporated. I had fallen headlong into the luxury, becoming a willing participant in the fraud I felt I was perpetuating on the "haves" all around me.

"Have a lovely flight, ladies."

"Enjoy your day, ladies."

"Is there anything we can get for you before you board, ladies?"

We shook our heads and thanked our escort, then another attendant whisked us away to the jet bridge where smiling flight attendants directed us upstairs and away from the economy crowd below.

Upstairs.

I was going upstairs on a plane.

I lingered for a long moment before climbing the spiral stairs on Dad's supercalafragalistic, amazing double-decker plane and remembered how my childhood fantasy first began.

* * *

"Did you see them double-decker planes?" Dad said with his usual drawl, pointing his fork across the meatloaf toward the new Zenith colored television in the living room. We always ate dinner with the television in view since the single living area of our small south Florida home mandated that the TV be in the same room as the dining table. Only Dad's easy chair divided the two spaces, which had to remain in the reclined position during our meals so we could see the television over it. Though colored TVs had been around for several years, we were the last on our block to get one because my Dad wouldn't capitulate until the tube in the old black and white finally burned out.

"You're teasing me, Daddy!" I said between bites of my Dad's favorite meal, tangy tomato sauce dripping from the ground beef chunk stuck at the end of my fork onto the mashed potatoes at the

edge of my plate. Mom, still rattling around and fussing in the kitchen, clanged pot lids over the hot food before joining us.

"Nope, look over yonder. Right there on the news." My father nodded toward the colorful screen to which he was riveted and through which Walter Cronkite shared the latest aviation news. Just nine years old and still very much Daddy's little girl, I was interested in anything that interested my dad: car races, wrestling matches, baseball, and definitely a double-decker airplane.

My dad loved planes, though not in a way that would draw notice. A flight engineer in World War II, he trained and flew third seat during his enlistment, though he was never sent abroad. The only hint at his interest in aviation was the affection he and my older brother shared for electronic model airplanes, and his occasional enthusiasm in moments like these when something caught his fancy, or inspired his awe.

"Oh Daddy! That's so c-o-o-ol! I want to ride in one of those planes someday. Can we go see them?" I pleaded, wiping my mouth with one of the paper napkins that lived in a holder in the middle of the table next to the salt and pepper.

"Sure can," he answered, equally enthusiastic. "We'll drive out to the airport on Saturday when we go fill up the car."

"You two have fun," my mother said as she entered the room, still wiping her hands on a dishtowel before sitting down. "I'll be getting my hair done."

That was our weekend thing, just Dad and me. He would drive for miles to save a few tenths of a cent on gasoline, and I usually went with him. Only as an adult would I wonder out loud about his rationale; it seemed he spent any savings by driving the forty-five minutes or so it took to get to his favorite cheap gas station. But somewhere along the way we'd always stop for barbeque or fried fish sandwiches, followed by either two dollar pony rides – pigtailed flying behind as I bounced along holding tightly to the make-shift handlebars attached to the saddle horn – or a visit to the airport viewing area where we could park our car in the gravelly, dusty side lot, roll down our windows, and watch the planes roar into the sky with their jet engines while I clapped my hands tightly over my ears. The pony rides were for me (obviously). The plane watching for him, though I liked both. And as long as we were together, it didn't matter to me what we did.

Dad was a traveling salesman whose territory stretched across the southeast corner of the United States and included Florida, Georgia, and Alabama, where he grew up. He typically left on Sunday night or Monday morning, returning on Thursday evening around dinnertime. The rest of the week it was just me and my mom holding down the fort as my brother, fourteen years older than me, was already grown and gone. Dad worked for the paycheck, and Mom ran the household. She also managed the family finances, saving half of every penny my father ever earned. Back then, such a thing could be done.

Like most parents who were raised during the Great Depression, mine set the example for my brother and me to follow. Work hard, save your money, don't buy things on credit. These were the Golden Rules learned from our earliest years. My parents had survived hard times and spent most of their lives doing without. But eventually, they finally got beyond barely making ends meet to actually making headway. And getting there had been an all-out team effort. It was an effort I long admired, and a relationship I would strive to emulate.

My father was born into a long line of farmers, making my mother the proverbial farmer's wife when they married. Though I never heard her complain about spending the majority of her life raising children and being a homemaker, she often shared fond memories of nursing work she had done during World War II. Her countenance would soften and that faraway look would come to her eyes as she wandered back in time to the days when she thought she might get a nursing degree. But marriage and pregnancy had changed all that. And as a southern woman in the 1940s, she received little encouragement to forge her own trail. Married she was, and married she would stay. Her dreams of anything but motherhood and keeping house remained just that: dreams. Her dreams would later find their way into my own life.

They lived a simple, frugal existence. My dad, ever the scrapper, was forever stocking up on things like extra rolls of toilet paper and paper towels when they were on sale. If there was a per-customer limit, and there usually was, he would drag my mother and me to the store with him and stick us in different lines, our arms loaded with paper products. I was as embarrassed as any kid would be who doesn't want to be seen standing in a shopping line with armloads of toilet paper.

He never missed a sale on peanuts or Spam at "The Walmart," as he called it, and no glass jar, plastic container, or rag ever made it to the trashcan. He saved almost everything, falling just shy of becoming what one might call a bona fide hoarder. He made it a point to only keep things he thought might be useful in the future. Rubber bands. Lengths of used Christmas ribbon. Plastic bags from the bread Mom brought home from the grocery store, along with the green twist-tie that held it closed. Otherwise unusable soap pieces were gathered together in old knee-high stockings, the ones with runners my mother had thrown out. He would tie a knot in the open end of the netted bundle of bits, then hang it next to the outside sink he had fashioned with a water hose and ten-gallon washtub. Recycled baby food jars were converted to hold nuts and bolts. He nailed the lids into a two-by-four, then hung the board so that the lids faced downward over his workbench where he could mount the jars so they could be opened with a quick twist; handy, but out of the way when their contents weren't needed. Clever, that man.

My brother and I were well aware of our father's thriftiness, which became even more apparent when the time finally came for us to clean out our parents' home after they had grown too infirm to live alone and had moved into an assisted living center a few miles away from my brother's place. While going through spider-webbed closets and dusty old bureaus, I found an old pair of underpants that my father had literally worn until they were almost transparent.

"Oh my God," I exclaimed, holding up the faded and nattered boxer shorts for my brother to see.

"Look," I said, turning the shredded britches from right to left under the overhead light, dappled with dead moth wings. "You can see right through them!"

My brother laughed. "I'm not surprised," he drawled, sounding just like my dad. "I'm not surprised t'all. I found an old mop handle the other day that I had already put out by the curb for the trash," he added. "When Daddy came home he saw it, thinking a neighbor had thrown it away, and took it over to my house and put it in my garage."

I wadded up the britches and threw them toward the overflowing wastebasket in the corner of the room. Apparently my brother's garage was quickly becoming a junk hideaway. I chuckled again. Getting rid of this stuff was going to be harder than I thought. As long as Dad was still driving a car, he was going to be making

daily trips home from the care center to snoop around the house and see what we were keeping and what was getting tossed before the house went on the market.

Years later, long after both my parents had passed away, I found those same shredded underpants in the back corner of my father's bureau drawer at the assisted living center. He must have come back to the house under cover of darkness and rescued them from the trash.

Growing up, I'd heard enough tales of my parents' youth to fill a book. Mother had spent her childhood picking cotton under the glaring Alabama sun, beating down on her bonneted head like a thousand angry bees. I could picture the sweat pouring from her scalp and down the sides of her face, dripping into her eyes as she bent forward time and again, dragging the heavy sack behind her. Her days began early, too early for a nine-year-old child.

She'd wipe her face with the back of her hand, leaving a dirt trail across her brow as she faced the endless rows of cotton stretched before her. Endless miles of misery in a day that began at dawn and wouldn't end until the sun set. Each cotton boll sat motionless in the heat, waiting for her tiny hands to tear at the place where the boll met the stalk, bloodying her fingers and leaving the plants naked as she filled her sack. Scorched from the heat and thirsty all the time, her reward for clearing one row was only to make heavier the long burlap bag she dragged behind her down the next.

She told me time and again of her imaginary escape. "I used to tell myself every day that I would get out of that place and never go back." I imagine her entire body lightened for a moment at just the notion of getting away. My father shared similar experiences from his own life on the family farm.

Theirs was the south. The blazing-sun-cotton-picking-too-poor-to-own-their-own-slaves south. The poor, white, mule-plowing south. My parents' south.

It was the only south they had ever known.

This was their backbone. This was the life of the parents who raised me to be a hard worker. To be frugal. To save every dime. To never give up.

The last of nine children, my father was also the last to let go of the apron strings that tied him to his mother and her hopes of keeping the family farm alive. He and his bride had returned to the

failing farm following the war. After a couple of backbreaking years toiling away in the scorching Alabama heat, my father finally called it quits, moving on to a job that provided a steady paycheck and insurance benefits. His mother sold off what remained of the farmland. There was simply no way for a single-family farm to make it anymore. So, at the behest of his older brother, my father became a tree trimmer for a utility company, driving the highways day after day to clear tree limbs from overhead power lines.

The work was arduous, and dangerous, because of the amount of tree shimmying it required, but it paid well; certainly better than farming ever had. My mother was grateful both for his change in career and the opportunity to move out of her mother-in-law's house, welcoming the chance to get out on her own and start a family away from the misery of cotton farming.

Her children, she vowed, would never pick cotton. They would have a better life. An easier life. A life filled with opportunities she'd never had. This, I imagine, is what all parents want for their children. But I think this is especially true of parents' who survived the second World War. The desire to make a better life for their children may be what drove them to raise us as they did – to work steadfastly. To never take a job for granted. To never quit. To become financially secure. At least these are the things an entire generation learned from them.

And so, with a pioneering spirit and a fist-full of cash, my parents bought a twenty-four foot Airstream trailer and called it home. It was all they could afford.

Not long after their new odyssey began, their first child arrived. Still poor, but snug in their tiny Airstream, the joy of my brother's birth brought with it the promise of a brighter future. It was the late 1940s, and my parents were happy, in love, and on their way toward realizing America's dream. But as with most American dreams, things changed. Within just one short year the newest chapter of their lives would already be re-written.

* * *

I reach under my window seat to pull my own fleecy-soft blanket from its pouch and drape it over my legs. It smells mildly of lavender. The remnants of my dream flutter soft as curtains in the back of my mind, creating a breeze of mild discontent in the midst of

this sublime pampering. Am I feeling guilty over my extravagance? Perhaps it is still that, so I try to shrug it off in favor of embracing the moment. A lifetime of hard work has gotten me here, I tell myself, but not without consequences. I know that now. Having cancer has taught me so much. Too much. But it has given me a chance to turn my life around and see things as they truly are.

Dinner, complete with metal silverware and crystal wine glasses, is about to arrive. Wine bottles tap the lips of glasses throughout the cabin as attendants pour grape varietals, white linen clothes draped over their wrists.

“Red or white, madam?” I hear a steward say somewhere behind me. “Or would you prefer champagne?” I reached across the aisle to take Carole’s hand.

“Happy birthday, my love,” I whisper. Toasting her with my own champagne coupe. “Here’s to your epic birthday adventure.”

I don’t know how much time I have left before my disease kills me, but I know that I don’t have any to waste. I also know that memories, not money, last forever. And this trip will be worth every penny if it creates even one more.

CHAPTER TWO
Chapter 2 - The Early Years

I cried the first time I heard the whole story as told through the eyes of the mother who raised me - the story she tried so hard to forget.

[TO BE CONTINUED...]