

Chapter 13

Slow Climb

“Teresa.”

“Teresa,” I said again, my voice faltering from the thought of diving into what could no longer be avoided. “We can’t go on like this. We need help.”

She mumbled something unintelligible, nodding her head slightly.

Silence.

“I guess that’s a yes,” I said.

I couldn’t have imagined a darker start to our visit with the therapist. Teresa had not uttered a word in the last twenty-four hours and hid under the shadow of her hoody as we drove into town. We labored our way through the rain and into the large monolithic gray building, trudging up to the therapist’s office as if our legs were cast in concrete shoes. In spite of the paprika colored wall of the office, the light seemed to dim as we entered. As if the January weather had followed us into the room.

“I’m Dr. Miles,” she said as we took opposite ends the couch, each of us clinging to an armrest like a lone rock outcropping in a turbulent sea. A wall unit stood opposite the couch housing various African fertility figurines, a small computer workstation and

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an assortment of books. I tilted my head slightly to read the spines of a collection directly across from us. *The Essential Neruda*, Hesse's *Siddhartha*, *Transitions* by William Bridges and Jung's *Symbols of Transformation* anchored the stack.

"Tell me, Teresa," Dr. Miles said, drawing my attention back to her as she leaned back in her wingback chair, resting her heels on a footstool. "Where would you like to start?"

"I don't know," Teresa said. Her chin quivered and tears dripped like sap from a wound.

Teresa had my attention. I could count on one hand the times I'd seen her cry in the twenty-three years we'd been together. Even while giving birth to all three kids, she'd never shed a tear.

"What is bringing you and Rick here?" the therapist said, maneuvering.

"I guess I'm fed up," Teresa said.

"Fed up with what?"

"Everything, like our house for starters. After twenty years nothing is finished and it's already starting to fall apart," Teresa said, her voice cracking.

Oh God, not the fucking house again. How many times did we have to have that conversation? I hugged the rock outcropping tighter and bit my lip.

"Okay. What else?" Dr. Miles said.

"Rick doesn't listen to me," Teresa said.

"Help me understand what it means when Rick doesn't listen," Dr. Miles said.

"Does he turn his attention to something else like the television, or a book?"

“I don’t know,” Teresa said. “He just doesn’t listen. He says he does but he really doesn’t. He just makes his mind up what he wants and argues with me until I’m too worn out to push back.”

Teresa extracted a wad of tissue from a pocket and blew her nose while the iron radiator ticked in the background. Even in the damp of January, the central building heat was overwhelming for the small office. Dr. Miles sat calmly in her armchair, the red wall behind her glowing and I wondered how much thought she had put into the color. I found it comforting.

“Can you give me an example?” Dr. Miles said.

“Okay, how about the garage?” Teresa said, shooting a daring look my way.

Oh great, here we go again. The garage, the GARAGE!

“What about the garage?” I said.

“I never wanted it to be so big. I remember telling you when you decided it needed to be big enough for a shop and a bonus room, that I just wanted it done before Katherine turned thirteen years old.” Teresa blew her nose again and collected herself.

“And here we are now with Katherine almost out of high school and it’s still not done. And now we are out of money. The last loan was supposed to go toward finishing it but we are having to live off the loan because Rick’s business is not doing well.”

“But the kids are using it!” I blurted out, not able to contain myself.

“Hold on Rick,” Dr. Miles said. “You’ll have your opportunity.”

“It’s not finished,” Teresa said with finality.

I couldn’t argue with that. It wasn’t finished. And she was right. More than I was willing to admit freely. What had started out as a two-car carport had mushroomed into a

monstrosity. To make matters worse, I'd decided to build it myself to save us money. I had made the decision back when I was in my thirties and had a big fucking 'S' tattooed to my chest. Before I had learned the wisdom of *just because you can, doesn't mean you should*. Thirteen years later, the bonus room still wasn't done and my energy was waning fast. Yeah, I could see her point. Dreaming big ideas was never my issue. Getting shit done? Well, that was another thing altogether.

“How do you feel when Rick comes to you with an idea?” Dr. Miles said.

“Like I said before. He's already made his mind up. He's asking me so he can tell himself he did, but he's not listening. Even when it's a really good idea, I just don't believe what he says anymore.” Teresa said.

It was even worse than that. I kept the bad news from her. Things that she needed to hear like when I'd lost a client, or when there wasn't enough money to pay ourselves, or that I'd decided to send out resumes because I didn't think the business was going to last much longer. The truth was she didn't know how dire things were with the business because I didn't have the balls to tell her. And yet she sensed that things were bad. But at the heart of it this wasn't about the business or her ability to hear difficult news. This issue was about me. I couldn't talk about tough stuff with her, which really blew my mind when I thought about it. In most every other aspect of my life, whether my work or other relationships I didn't fear difficult discussions. And yet with Teresa I found this to be a no-man's-land. A place I was unwilling to go with her. A place full of uncertainty and doubt in what I believed about myself.

We ended the session with the simple advice that we needed to talk more. About the difficult stuff. Our drive home was met with silence, save for the road noise from the tires meeting the pavement.

I contemplated all that had been said in the session and where we were in our marriage. The most perplexing aspect that I was confronted with was how it is that after twenty years of marriage I was just now coming to terms with this impasse. While in the past I had always wondered how it was that couples that'd been married for many years would end in divorce, I suddenly found myself having empathy. The sanctum that had existed between us now seemed inaccessible and I felt wholly responsible for allowing it to happen. Intellectually I knew that not to be true, that it was both of us that created the result we were now dealing with but it didn't feel that way.

And yet as difficult as our relationship had become, as difficult as it was for me to imagine how things would get better, I wouldn't let go of hope, especially for the kids. I knew they were taking in everything that was going on and I didn't want the difficulty we were enduring to be the final word.

"Look," I said to the kids as they were gathered in the living room, wide eyed with concern, "I know you hear Mom and I arguing."

They nodded their heads in silent unison.

"It's important for you to know that while Mom and I may argue and disagree over things, we still love each other and we love you. It is normal for parents to disagree and sometimes those disagreements become arguments. But we aren't going to split up or divorce or anything, okay?"

As I heard myself saying those words, I wondered if I would end up proving myself wrong. That my assurance would end up hanging over my head for the rest of my life like a politician promising no new taxes and my kids would learn to forever doubt my promises.

“Why are you arguing?” Michael asked, matter of fact and without a shred of judgment on his expression. I held his gaze for a moment and relished his question. I hung onto Michael’s words when he spoke as his quiet disposition offers so few.

“Because there are things in life that sometimes are very difficult and Mom and I have different ideas about how we should deal with them. Right now it’s about my business, which has been harder to get going than I had hoped. Sometimes when there is not enough money to do all the things we want to do, it can be very hard to talk about it and we end up arguing,” I said.

“I can sell some of my toys,” Michael said.

“Yeah, me too,” Adam said, and ran off to his room to start his collection.

“Are we going to be okay?” Katherine asked with concerned eyes.

“Yes, baby. We are,” I assured. “Whatever hard times we have to face, we’ll be okay because we are together.”

“And what is the most important thing of all to remember?” I asked as Adam rushed back into the living room with an armload of toys.

“Love!” Adam said, reciting the answer I had drilled them on repeatedly over the years, imparting Mom’s wisdom.

“That’s right,” I said. “With love, we’ll get through anything.”

I glanced toward Teresa hoping for a look of acknowledgment but she averted my gaze, staring obliquely at the pile of old toys Adam had dumped on the coffee table. She got up and headed into the kitchen to start dinner and I began sorting through the toys with the kids, showing them how to set up an eBay auction.

So began our long journey, as best described by Portia Nelson's poetic musing, *Autobiography in Five Short Chapters*:

Chapter I

I walk down the street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I fall in.

I am lost... I am hopeless.

It isn't my fault.

It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter II

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I **pretend** I don't see it.

I fall in again.

I can't believe I am in this same place.

But it isn't my fault.

It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter III

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I **see** it there.

I still fall in... it's a habit... but,

my eyes are open.

I know where I am.

It is **my** fault.

I get out immediately.

Chapter IV

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I walk around it.

Chapter V

I walk down another street.

We began our slow climb out of the hole we had dug for ourselves, painfully learning the self-induced traps and snags that caused us to go back to that dark place. In the beginning, each conversation was as if walking in knee deep mud and the temptation to quit tortured my quiet thoughts. Yet I stuck with it, and while I still felt love for Teresa, that too was changing and the uncertainty around it wasn't helping my resolve. I didn't know where our marriage was going, only that right now it was in a virtual stasis. Barely tipping in favor of preservation. I never do well standing still.

Sure enough though, there was a small trail of crumbs that kept us leaning in. Small affirmations that indicated our ascent. A glimmer of a smile in the morning, laughter at a TV show, cheering for Adam at his football games. Or a disagreement over something that surprisingly ended in mutual understanding and peaceful resolution. Over time these small victories accumulated and overshadowed the dark clouds.

“You and Teresa look like you are in a much better place,” my sister Yolanda said at some point during a visit to Seattle.

I paused and thought about it, trying to imagine how our disposition appeared to others, then and now. It struck me how different we could appear to others in spite of our efforts to paste a smile on it, and yet how natural happiness can flow out without the need to explain it.

“Yeah, I guess you are right. It feels much more effortless now,” I said, feeling satisfaction yet none of the celebratory victory I had hoped for in the darkest moments. True enough, things were not like they were before. Yet we couldn't undo what had happened and the experience had changed both of us, immeasurably. I would like to say for the wiser but I'm not certain I get to claim that for myself at this point. Certainly I am

more knowledgeable and aware of my faults. Of Teresa's, and she of mine. And we seem to accept them with more grace. All of which has led me to my current understanding of success in marriage, which it is about enduring. Enduring long enough to survive the fall of expectations that either person had coming into it to begin with. Enduring long enough through the mistakes, bad decisions, poor behavior and things said that could not be unsaid. Enduring all of those things long enough to see the person on the other side. Enduring long enough to respect and cherish the companionship of that person that emerges, and want that person more than the one that had entered in the beginning.

Our marriage is far from perfect and I still have to make my peace on occasion that we are each on our own journey. And yet I shudder at the thought of not having Teresa in my life. We have worked beyond imagine to get where we are. No doubt it will be challenged in ways I cannot envision, and yet I am more certain than I have ever been that we will continue to find our way with each other. Not because it is easy, or comfortable, but because this hard forged relationship has fused us to each other at a cellular level. My hands know the softness of her skin and the shape of her small frame before it is a conscious thought in my mind. Even the slight scent she leaves on her pillow shares a sanctuary in my senses that has no beginning, but only seems to have been there always.

These intimate knowings have become cherished as our bodies fail, protest more and show the signs of time.

I wouldn't want it any other way.