

RESURRECTION PHILADELPHIA 1995 – 2002

I tried to look normal and smile easily, but my physical appearance was anything but normal. Mama sat across from me adjusting her glasses. We were having coffee. “How you doing, baby?” she wanted to know.

I had looked at myself in the mirror before leaving my apartment. My clothes hung on my thin body as if I were a hanger, swallowing up my arms and legs. The stench of my sweat stung my nose. I hadn't taken a bath in days.

My eyes were sunk back deep into my head. Dark blotches of skin covered my face. My lips were dry and brittle. Yet, there I sat, grinning at her through gritty, yellowed teeth, my lips peeling, the deep cracks around my mouth stinging me every time I tried to drink coffee. I wasn't there to see how she was doing. *I came to steal her money to buy crack*

“I'm alright,” I said, trying to sip from the cup of coffee without fully opening my mouth.

She took a long swallow of coffee and carefully sat the cup down on the saucer. “Are you really alright?” She talked slowly but her eyes were alert. I hadn't counted on this. I had hoped that she would be so medicated she wouldn't see the wreckage in my life. Every visit with her, every time I came calling, showed her how crack/cocaine was depleting my will and ability to fight against it, how my lust for getting high was slowly killing me.

“I'm doing better, Mama.” I was smiling, trying to sound convincing. “I really am,” I added.

I scanned the kitchen to see whether her pocketbook was lying around. It wasn't. “I have to go to the bathroom,” I told her. That was my excuse to get away from her and search her bedroom upstairs for money.

I tried to get up from the table without showing the strain on my face. The muscles in my legs and back ached as I walked across the kitchen floor, up the steps to her bedroom, where I spotted her pocketbook lying in clear view on the neatly made bed. The sight of the pocketbook made me anxious. I paused to ask myself if I really wanted to do this, while I gazed at the framed family pictures sitting on the dresser. Thirty years of my life pressed and passed through mind.

I snatched up the pocketbook, rummaging through it until I felt the soft, leather wallet in my hands. I took all but a single bill from the wallet. I rushed down the steps. I was anxious to feel the exhilaration of pulling long and hard on a crack

pipe, feel my lungs expand like a giant muscle against my shirt, suck all of the air out of my body to the point of feeling faint, high and lost, without memory of my past or hope for a future.

My crazed mind drove me out the door, onto the street, where I ran breathlessly for several blocks until I was sure I couldn't hear her voice if she came to the door. Nearby was a crack house. I ran straight into the waiting arms of a drug dealer.

“Bye baby.”

* * *

When the call came, I was laid up in bed feeling a wrenching pain deeply embedded in my bones. Stretching out my arm to pick up the telephone, groaning from the stiffness in my muscles, I faintly said, “hello.” My mother was on the other end of the phone.

“Your grandmother is seriously ill. I want you to come to the hospital right away.”

I hung up the telephone without asking any questions. Mustering up the strength to get out of the bed seemed damn near impossible as I laid there reciting the tasks I would have to perform to ready myself to get to the hospital. As simple as it was to do, the dreaded thoughts of taking a bath, brushing my teeth, finding a clean set of clothes among the piles of clothing scattered around my apartment, left me feeling helpless, chained to my bed. More than anything else at this moment, I wanted something to eat and to go back to sleep. I had no room in my life for another crisis, especially if it meant I had to go outside of my apartment.

I was a vampire. Daylight—the thought of sunlight beaming down on me—was frightening, even more so because I knew that I couldn't hide from passing strangers how deep into the gutter I had fallen. Grudgingly, guilt pushing me out of the bed, I got up, firmly resolved that I had no choice in the matter. I had to go to the hospital.

When I reached the hospital, I paused before walking into the main entrance, feeling a sudden nostalgia, a scathing sadness, when I reflected on that this was the hospital where my grandfather had died. Standing at the entrance of the hospital, dreading and afraid of walking through the revolving door, a cold, wet chill ran down my back.

I trudged on into the hospital anyway. The woman at the information desk greeted me with a smile. She handed me a visitor's pass and pointed to the elevator. When the elevator door opened, two women came rushing out, nearly colliding with me, and not even stopping to excuse themselves. I stepped inside,

punched a button, leaned back against a handrail, and watched the buttons flash red as the elevator moved up the floors.

On the fifth floor, I found Mama's room easily. I looked down the corridor of rooms and walked to where there was a group of people congregating around the door of Mama's room. As I approached the room, I scanned their faces, looking for someone familiar, finally spotting my mother, who was sitting in a lone chair outside of the door. She stood out from the crowd because of the stern, indifferent expression on her face. She was not part of the noisy chatter buzzing around her head.

She just sat there, seemingly in a trance, not displaying the slightest acknowledgment of the endless chattering swarming around her. It was only after I called her name that she came alive, stood up, and brushed past the crowd to talk to me.

"I'm so happy that you are here," she said, giving me a slight smile. She motioned for me to move away from the crowd. She and I walked far enough down the hall that I didn't have worry about anyone but her scrutinizing my appearance. We stopped and leaned up against a wall. I asked her the only question I could think of to ask. "What's wrong with Mama?" The question was logical, I suppose, but I was also conscious of my appearance. I didn't want that to become the topic for discussion.

"She's been diagnosed with what the doctors are calling an 'intestinal perforation'," she answered me. "There was an abnormal growth in her stomach that burst, sending poison throughout her body. She's in very bad shape."

I was about to ask another question, when she grabbed me by the arm, "—I want you to go in and talk with Mama! I want you promise her that you are going to change your life! Apologize for what you took from her!"

She led me by the arm down the hall, to Mama's room, where she stood defiantly in the center of the crowd of women from Mama's church, releasing my arm, and holding up her hands. "Everybody move aside! I want my son to go in and talk with his grandmother!"

The forceful tone in her voice, laced with authority, brought about a quick, decisive end to the talking. The women looked disbelieving and confused as they stepped aside, opening a path to the door of the room. When we walked into the room, she asked everyone sitting around to leave the room. Once the room was emptied, she twisted around, looked directly into my eyes and smiled. "Now you can have your talk with your grandmother." With that, she walked out the door,

closing it behind her, leaving me standing beside Mama's bed.

I stood motionless, stunned by the sight of Mama's transfixed body on the bed. She breathed heavily, almost violently, desperately, as if every breath she took would be her last. Her chest heaved up and down to suck in every molecule of air her lungs could hold. Her partially opened mouth quivered and shook, laboring to grasp and hold onto mouthfuls of air. Her eyes, fully opened, were alert and recognized me. I could tell by how she tried to nod her head. The morphine she was being fed was not enough to anesthetize her thinking. I was both relieved and frightened that she recognized me, and that she was able to acknowledge that I was standing over her.

This *promise*, this *talk*, that my mother wanted me to have, I knew I had to do now, whether I wanted to or not. Maybe she would forgive me, maybe her eyes would absolve me, wipe out the years I'd spent trapped in crack houses, and heal the wound from the countless days and nights I'd spent languishing alone in my apartment smoking crack.

Her eyes flickered every time I moved. I could see the expectancy in her eyes, sensed that she was waiting, impatient, as was always her demeanor when I didn't I speak quickly enough. I bent down over her, placed my hand on her arm and pursed my lips, finding the words.

"Mama," I began, gently rubbing her arm, "I'm sorry for stealing from you." Her eyes locked on me, ceasing to flicker, just staring up at me, the intensity of her gaze almost turning me away. "Please pray for me," I asked, feeling my knees weakening beneath me.

Her red eyes watered and tears began to flow freely down her face, curdling along the curves of her cheeks. I wiped away her tears with both of my hands, hoping that having her tears wet my hands would bring me absolution, wash me clean of all I had done to destroy my life. I walked out of the room to where my mother was sitting in a chair near the door. I could tell from her straight shoulders, her stiff posture in the chair, that emotions were percolating. "Did everything go alright?" she wanted to know.

I nodded my head. I couldn't find the strength to tell her what I had said to Mama. I followed her down the hall to the visitor's lounge. The lounge was empty. She sat in a recliner in the far corner of the room while I plopped down in a chair on the other side. The television set was off. When I moved to turn it on, she motioned for me to sit back down. "I need to talk with you," she began. "I need to fill you in."

I pushed myself down deeper into the soft seat cushion. Images of my

grandmother gasping for air raced through my mind. I cringed every time I thought about her.

“Mama is dying,” my mother said solemnly.

A knot formed in my stomach. I pictured Mama lying in a casket draped over with flowers. The unsettling image caused me to cry. I wiped my eyes, not wanting to show any semblance of resignation.

“The doctors have told me that they can operate,” she went on, “but the operation would probably kill her. Mama is 87 years old, you know. I don't want to make a decision without you. What do you think we should do?”

The gravity of the question nearly lifted me out of the chair. I was being asked to help to decide whether an operation was worth risking. I dug my butt deeper into the seat cushion. I repeatedly asked myself what Mama would want to be done. What would she do, if it was me, not her, dying with surgery dangling as a possible cure?

I thought about Mama's indomitable faith in Jesus, her unflappable, determined belief in the power of God to heal and resurrect life, finally deciding, as I sat there across from my mother, that in the end my decision wouldn't really matter.

“She's in God's hands,” I answered my mother. Mama would always say those words when faced with an impossible problem or decision. Mama's way of dealing with a problem was either to shift the weight of a decision onto the shoulders of God or accept her powerlessness in a matter. “What do you want to do?” I asked my mother.

“Mama will not survive surgery.”

“Then why are you asking me what to do?”

“Mama would want you to be a part of the decision.”

I felt cornered. I didn't want any part of it. If my decision was the wrong one, I would have to live with it, along with all of the other mistakes I had made in life.

“I'll go along with you. Don't allow the surgery.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes. I'm sure”

* * *

The flick of a switch turned a prayer vigil into a death watch. Mama's feeding tube was removed. She was given a stronger dose of morphine. The morphine sedated her to the point that she was no longer conscious enough to open her eyes. I was told by a doctor that, “she's feeling less pain.” Even though she was heavily sedated, she was able to hear the voices around her. I

studied Mama's face. Her breathing was more erratic.

My mother, worn down and tired out from having been at the hospital a day and a night, was sleeping in the visitor's lounge. Minutes later, she came into the room. She walked over and stood next to me, looking down at Mama.

"How you doing?"

"Fine," I answered.

I wiped Mama's parched lips with a wet cloth. A sheet of sweat covered her forehead. The anxiety clamping down on my gut became too much for me to bear. I left the room. In my heart was the hope for a miracle. Mama would frequently point to the many miracles Jesus had performed, which was a cornerstone of her faith. Money, food and shelter were the by-products of never questioning or doubting Jesus. But she was a realist, too. Whenever she was sure something was meant to be, she accepted it and moved on. She wasn't a worrier. If she made a mistake, she would say that without mistakes she wouldn't need Jesus or her faith.

* * *

I had predicted it, but I never thought the tragedy would come to pass while I was reeling from Mama's illness. I had known Phyllis Hyman but not long enough to call her a friend. I had worked for her, yet not side by side with her and so I could not call her my boss. When the news of her death came over the radio, I was lying in bed trying to cope with Mama's ordeal and the demons of my addictions.

I came to be associated with Phyllis through a mutual friend, Glenda Garcia, who was her business manager and legal adviser. Privately, Glenda often expressed her concern and frustration with Phyllis's heavy drinking and dependency on prescription medications. Glenda lamented managing her money because when Phyllis would demand access to money, she was helpless against giving her large sums of money, believing that she might use the money to feed her addictions.

"The more you drink," Phyllis would often joke with audiences when performing, "the better I sound!" She could have done standup comedy. She was that funny, that animated on stage, poking and humoring audiences with lively monologues.

Off stage, however, she could be dark and brooding, verbally abusive when drinking, yet compassionate, generous and loving when sober, particularly with children, to whom she would give thoughtful gifts. While performing around the country and throughout the world, she donated to the families of needy children.

I learned, from Glenda, that Phyllis had went into treatment once or twice and, the last time she went into a rehab, she abruptly left, announcing that she was happy with her life. I sensed then that she had given up on herself, that something catastrophic was going to occur, that depression and addiction would win the battle and the war.

Would my life end in the same way? Am I a destined to crash and burn as Phyllis had done? Was prayer and faith enough to deliver me from depression and addiction?

* * *

Mama's frail body jerked back and forth, something we hadn't seen before. Something imploded within her, something that was terrorizing her, goading her, fiercely pinning her to the bed, wrenching her eyes, inflicting excruciating pain. Tears streaked down her sweaty face, filling the corners of her gaping mouth. Mama, it seemed to me, was fighting something elusive in her semi-conscious state. Was it a nightmare, a memory, or was it death that she was struggling against?

A thick, dark, brownish, murky liquid formed in the corners of her Mama's mouth. Suddenly, she gave out a loud, rumbling, gurgling sound, pushing more of the muddy liquid from her mouth. The ghastly sound rattled in her throat. I moved closer to her, my heart pounding in my head, sensing--but not wanting to believe--that she was dying before my eyes.

She finally laid still. I was horrified, yet fascinated, wanting to know where death had taken her. I longed for her to speak to me one more time. I needed to know whether being the rock of faith had taken her to heaven. I needed to know this for myself, whether my own mangled life had any chance of being resurrected.

* * *

The next three days, I agonized over my grandmother's passing, having mixed feelings that I had witnessed it all, not fully knowing whether God had delivered a message to me through her death. I experienced premonitions that Mama was watching over me, my thoughts, my feelings, my every movement. No matter where I was or wherever I went, I felt her in my midst, warning me, begging me, pleading with me, praying to Jesus that I seek His forgiveness, and deliverance from my sins and pain.

Yet, I was confounded by how to do all of this. Had I not already prayed? Had not Mama already repeatedly prayed that God remove my lust and need for

drugs? What more could I do that had not already been done?

Sometimes, as if a stealth, the temptation to smoke crack would sneak into my mind. The worst times were late at night when I was alone in my apartment, all sweaty, anxious and paranoid. Often I would take the phone off the hook so that no one could call me and invite themselves over to get high.

The day of the funeral I woke up tired and restless. My mother had given me money to put a suit and a few white shirts in the cleaners. As I was getting dressed, I couldn't shake the feeling that I might have the AIDS virus. The night sweats were scary, very uncomfortable and messy to sleep with. Putting on a crisp, lightly starched shirt, I searched my mind to remember if I had ever had sex while high on crack, something that guys regularly did. I was scared to death of catching a disease. The recurring night sweats, however, made me believe that I might have slipped up during one of my crack binges. I knew better, though. I had never mixed sex with drugs. I tied my tie, slipped on my jacket, and pushing the thought out of my mind, I headed out to the funeral.

* * *

I slept well for the first time in months. The night sweats had stopped. I climbed out of bed looking forward to the day. I looked in the mirror, feeling pleased with myself. My face was beginning to fill out. I held up my arm, ran my fingers along a muscle. I had put on some weight, too.

I turned on the light to get a better look at my face. My brown complexion was coming back. The crusty, dried skin was beginning to soften, my eyes looked brighter, my lips felt full and moist. I felt alive. I picked up a shirt and massaged the cotton fabric between my fingers. In the pocket was a check for five thousand dollars. The money was my portion of money coming from Mama's will. I hadn't allowed myself to think about the check.

Until now.

Carefully, I slid the check out the pocket, delicately unfolding it, as if it might vanish or crumble between my fingers. It was a personal check. My eyes followed the dips and curves in my mother's signature. The check had been dated for today, one day after we had buried Mama.

I had watched the coffin being lowered into the ground while everyone else walked solemnly to their cars. I had stood off to the side, observing the indifference and speed of the gravediggers' work, unable to pull myself away until the last particles of the copper colored, rocky dirt had fallen on the coffin.

I gazed at the ground encasing Mama's coffin, took one final look at what I knew was there.

Don't Tell Me What To Do, A Spiritual Memoir
Chapter 10

There lay years of memories, a proud, decent woman, the one person who had loved me with all of my flaws.

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