P R O P O S A L

A MAN BEFORE HIS TIME

The Heroic Story Of A Young Marine's Battle--Against Bullets, Bullies, And Cancer

By James Curry

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A Battle for Life

Turning Crises into Blessings and Pain into Power

> "The lethal snap of the enemy's AK-47s was unmistakable, bullets hammering us day and night. Mortar shells and roadside bombs were also a daily threat, planted to rip us apart.
>
> Welcome to War in Iraq.
>
> While most teenage guys were glued to their cell phones thinking about college finals or the next big weekend party, I was gripping an M16 rifle, worried about whether I was going to get shot by a terrorist or blown up by an IED. All the while, I was fighting for a cause I didn't understand, and driven by motives I'd never fully examined.
>
> I was 19.
>
> Day after day, it was kill or be killed. I was close to death, but not dead. I was surrounded by the dying, but was determined to live. In between missions, my job, as a Junior Marine, was scrubbing away the blood of the wounded and dead left behind in Humvees.
>
> Many of us went home in boxes draped with flags. It was all so arbitrary, life or death—a bullet or bomb away.
>
> I escaped death in Fallujah, but the end of combat was not the end of the battle. At 24, I was diagnosed with cancer.
>
> What young man ever thinks of dying in his 20's? At that age, you feel immortal, invincible, entitled to a limitless future.
>
> But for me, coming so close to death--wrestling against it and knowing it so intimately—turned out to be a blessing. It forever transformed my view of what's truly important in life, defining the true meaning of being a man."
>
> *A Man Before His Time*

In *A Man Before His Time,* **JAMES CURRY**, a three-time Peabody Award winning network news journalist, makes his literary debut with a harrowing coming-of-age story, encompassing military combat, a life-threatening medical challenge, and family trauma, all before the age of 25.

Recounting the author's tumultuous personal history, this 275-page memoir is an uplifting tale of suffering and survival. It graphically captures the realities of war, the terrors of battling cancer, and the challenges of healing childhood wounds. But no obstacle derails the author's determination to conquer adversity and survive as he turns

crises into blessings, and pain into power.

Inspired by the author's million-hit CNN blog *The Curry Chronicles*, this is a timeless story of courage, perseverance and hope in the face of extreme suffering and danger. We follow the author's arduous journey—first, as an abused child; then as a combat Marine during the height of the Iraq War; next as a homeless veteran; then as a cancer patient, diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. In the end, Curry triumphs as the youngest producer ever hired by CNN.

> "There I was, reduced from a healthy former Marine to a powdery white, emaciated, bald, bag of bones. I couldn't even walk up a flight of stairs without being completely out of breath. That's what radiation did to my heart and lungs."

The 21-chapter book, cinematic in scope, alternates in flashbacks between Curry's military service, family back-story, medical crisis, and his prodigious ascent as a TV producer. In a concise, dramatic narrative, the 29-year-old explores not only the exterior events of his life, but, as he notes, "the psychological elements of what motivates a young man to escape into the military and fight his own personal war, before and after it."

Continually challenged by the vagaries of fate, Curry is forced to mature quickly as he fights for his life:

"I learned that a battle is not a defeat, that an illness is not a curse, and that no adversity is too big to conquer. We have inner resources that we never even imagined. There's always a way."

* * * * *

Raised in a modest household in Lansford, Pennsylvania, James Curry was a victim of childhood domestic violence, targeted by an abusive stepfather (actually his paternal uncle), while neglected by his absentee father, who died young from a drug overdose. To escape the nightmare of seeing his mother battered, James obsessively watched TV news at the home of his protective grandmother, whom he adored. The five-year-old boy would sit with his "Ma," spellbound, as she read the newspaper to him, or watched the news, planting the seed of his future career.

Though offered a journalism scholarship to Temple University, the teen rashly follows a different path. Provoked by continuous homophobic taunts from his stepfather ("*Tell your faggot son to quit doing his own laundry!*") the enraged 17-year-old finally explodes

one night, punching his fist through a plate glass window.

Within days, he impulsively enlists in the Marines to prove himself a man. “It was the perfect escape. One minute, I’m a high school junior considering a journalism major; months later, I’m a Marine recruit.”

Having never left his hometown, not even for summer camp, we follow Curry as naïvely green recruit, so skinny at 98 pounds that commanders fatten him up with extra food, and get him up to 128 pounds. At graduation, he stands proud, “out to prove to my stepfather what I was made of, and that I could make something of myself in spite of his insults and abuse.” Curry is summarily deployed to Iraq, where “death, survival and constant fear” become the norm.

The author provides a unique behind-the-scenes account of warfare during his seven-month combat deployment. He describes the tense anticipation leading up to missions and the scenes of death that surround him. On two occasions, he’s almost killed. The first is in a Sea Knight cargo helicopter under heavy enemy fire as a hail of bullets rip through the air: “I can remember reaching around my neck for my dog tags to ensure there wouldn’t be any trouble identifying my body in the wreckage scattered across the ground below us. I sat there gripping the butt stock of my rifle tighter and tighter, feeling helpless.”

The second close call comes a few months later, in a ground firefight where he is trapped inside a “soft” Humvee, one not properly reinforced for combat with steel plates, leaving his platoon vulnerable. Many of his comrades are killed by bullets that easily puncture the truck, but Curry escapes unharmed, infuriated by the senselessness of deaths due to inadequate military equipment.

Curry reveals the complex emotions of comrades whose psyches are ravaged by the daily carnage. Post-traumatic stress is rampant, one of his fellow Marines committing suicide due to combat stress. Curry forges on, “almost like a robot,” his emotions shut down.

Active combat duty is followed by three years in the Corps’ elite embassy program, where in India, Western Africa, and then Canada, Curry is handpicked to work on security details for high-level government officials and celebrities—everyone from President George W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and First Lady Laura Bush to Bill Gates and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

At last Curry returns home, “ready to conquer the civilian world,” though disoriented and unprepared. “The Marine Corps had sheltered me from practical life lessons, and without the warm blanket of the U.S. government, I was adrift on my own.”

Estranged from his family, with little money and no place to live, Curry winds up homeless, living in his car in the parking lot of a cheap hotel in El Paso, where he works as a $6 per-hour security guard. (“Being a highly trained United States Marine and working as a rent-a-cop was both insulting and a blessing, as I could at use the hotel showers and eat leftover food from the buffet.”)

* * * * *

Now determined to become a news producer, the 22-year-old starts calling up news managers at local TV stations and eagerly applies for entry-level positions. He’s repeatedly rejected until one receptive news director finally gives him a break and hires him as a part-time producer—at $8 per hour.

He rise is meteoric: After the job in El Paso, he gets a better one at a San Diego TV station, followed by a great one, when, at age 24, he’s hired as the youngest-ever producer at CNN International.

The wide-eyed newsroom prodigy (the network’s "Doogie Howser") is now brushing elbows with such CNN stars as Anderson Cooper, Don Lemon, Wolf Blitzer, Natalie Allen, Larry King, and Christiane Amanpour: “At first, I was a little intimidated, surrounded by those CNN icons, some of whom mistook me for an intern— producer—because I was 24 and looked younger.”

James, third from right, with his CNN team

Curry works a ten-hour overnight shift as a junior producer, and the narrative captures his unique view of such seismic stories as the 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden and the

2012 Sandy Hook massacre: “Reporting world news had never impacted me emotionally, but covering a school full of murdered children is another thing. I kept visualizing those little bodies shot and sprawled inside the bloody hallways of that elementary school. There were tears everywhere in the studio. Every morning, when I got home, I found myself watching the Home Shopping Network!--to remove those images from my brain.”

As time passes, the author describes how CNN sometimes capitalized on the personal lives of anchors. “Don Lemon was black and gay. This ended up being a huge ‘hit’ for stories such as the Trayvon Martin killing and the online bullying phenomenon. We used to joke that if a story didn’t include blacks, bullies, or gays, CNN wouldn’t cover it.

“Additionally, some of CNN’s ethics were questionable,” Curry reveals. “For example, we had a series titled “*Eye On …*” Fill in the blank of any foreign country we featured. It was actually a paid advertisement disguised as an objective CNN report—one way the network could fool the audience and still make money.

“So reporters would be sent to interview government officials who aimed to promote their country for tourism. The governments paid for the coverage, but that fact was never disclosed. Once, a CNN reporter went off script, angering a government minister from Poland, who said, ‘These are not the questions I paid to be asked!’”

Curry thrives in this fishbowl, intrigued by the inner workings of the network. But a few years earlier, after only a year on the job, the 25-year-old had come down with a persistent sore throat, and a subsequent x-ray revealed a mass--the size of a tangerine—located in his chest, between his heart and lungs. It’s soon diagnosed as stage two Nson-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a virulent disease predominantly seen in people over age 60. As the cancer has already invaded part of his lung, Curry’s oncologist breaks the news that he’ll now undergo both radiation and chemotherapy.

"I felt like, ‘What the fuck?! How did this happen to me?! I must have really pissed off God for some reason.' As Marines, we knew our lives were expendable. That had been drilled into our brains from day one. The

mission always came first. But death outside a combat zone seemed unfair. To have survived five years in the Marines only to be stricken with cancer felt just *wrong*. Suddenly, all of my professional success meant nothing, while the desire to live now meant everything."

Curry's battle against the disease begins, and he describes suffering through months of torturous chemotherapy and radiation: "I've never been so sick in my life—including the time I was hospitalized after eating contaminated foods in India and Africa. I was constantly nauseous and vomiting, in addition to coping with hot flashes, bleeding, shortness of breath, difficulty swallowing, and mood swings. I lost all of my hair—and 30 pounds. I couldn't even look at real food and subsisted instead on my "chemo kit," nausea medication, Ensure, gingered candies, fruit, and Jell-O."

As this ordeal unfolds, Curry calls upon an iron will:

"When a doctor says the word 'cancer,' a lot of people think it means their time is up. It's not. Maybe it was the Marine mentality in me, but even though my own *doctor* thought I was going to be dead in a year, I refused to believe it. I consciously made a decision that cancer wasn't going to kill me--or dictate how I lived my life. Even on the worst of days, you can't let it defeat you. I never missed work—not once. It was the only thing that kept me sane. I wouldn't quit."

> **"Pain isn't death. In the Marine Corps, we say that '*pain is weakness leaving the body*.' If you punch a tree over and over again, your hand will be toughened and calloused, and you will be able to take far more pain. I discovered that I could handle pain and grow from it."**

Nor would he ignore his education. Having already earned a degree in political science while in the Marines, Curry now enrolls in an on-line graduate degree program in journalism, "studying on chemo days," as he was hooked up to an IV.

Now, four years later, Curry's health is stable, his cancer in remission as he begins a new chapter in his career. After leaving CNN and Atlanta for a move to the Fox Business Network in New York, he's consumed with booking guests and directing content as the senior producer of *The Independents*, a libertarian show providing a provocative view on the day's news. Working 12-hour days, he's energized and optimistic about his future, though he lives with the knowledge that he's more susceptible to contracting other forms of cancer within

the next ten years.

Beyond his physical recovery, Curry describes an epiphany of spirit: "Oddly enough," he says, "as the cancer fight began and my health deteriorated, the relationship with my family *improved*. So, in a weird way, cancer was a blessing. Tragedy makes it okay to say and do things you should already be doing--like saying 'I love you.' After being estranged for so long, I could finally forgive and let go of the past and all that resentment and anger."

In a touching finale, we see how battling cancer creates within Curry a new warmth and humanity, allowing him to open up and change in unexpected ways: "Now I'm very emotional. I can finally cry, at any time, in front of anyone. I can open up to friends about how much they mean to me--with words I would have previously been embarrassed to say out loud.

"I'm also much more physically demonstrative. That I learned in cancer wards, where displays of affection surround you. So cancer taught me that being discreet, or worrying about what other people think, is something we don't have time for. We've been humbled. And cancer has *freed* us to say and do the things we *knew* we should be doing all along. That's being human. *That's* being a man. And that's a lesson that, as a guy in my 20's, I might have learned much later on—or not at all. But I learned it in a cancer ward."

* * * * *

–CNN Anchor Natalie Allen: *"James demonstrated the same grit and mental toughness battling cancer as he did as a Marine in Iraq. At work, he refused to skip a beat, cheerful as always. You'd never know that he had survived lymphoma AND a war. But with quiet resolve, he did it all."*

James Curry is a three-time Peabody Award-winning news journalist, currently a senior producer at CNN. His meteoric rise in broadcast journalism began at age 22 with an entry-level position at a local TV station in El Paso, which was followed by a promotion to the San Diego market. Just two years later, at age 24, he became the youngest producer ever appointed by CNN International.

With a passion for covering foreign affairs, he was soon producing newscasts anchored by veteran anchors Wolf Blitzer, Anderson Cooper, Christiane Amanpour, and Natalie Allen, covering such stories as the killings of Osama Bin Laden and Muammar Gaddafi; the earthquake in Haiti; the BP oil spill and the ending of war in Iraq. His news team's Peabody Awards were earned by covering the Syrian civil war, the Gulf oil spill and The Arab Spring.

Curry's thriving career was threatened at age 25 when he was diagnosed with stage two Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. His ensuing battle against the disease was documented on his popular blog, *The Curry Chronicles*, and followed by a million-hit article published on CNN.com entitled *After Cancer, My Real Fight Began*. With his cancer now in remission and his life transformed by it, he shares a message of hope for all cancer patients and survivors.

Before embarking on his TV career, Curry served five years in the United States Marine Corps. Beginning in 2003, during the tumultuous years of the Iraq war, he was deployed on combat duty in and around Fallujah, narrowly escaping death in both ground fights and helicopter missions. After his active combat service ended, Curry, who eventually advanced to sergeant, was selected for the Marine Corps' elite embassy program, and was stationed first in India, then in Western Africa and Ottawa, where he was hand-picked to work on security details for President George W. Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and First Lady Laura Bush, among others. It was his Marine experience that prepared him for his work as a producer highly skilled in foreign news coverage.

* * * * *

A native of Pennsylvania, Curry grew up in an atmosphere of domestic violence, where he was relentlessly demeaned and abused by his stepfather, Charlie (the brother of Curry's biological father, who died from a heroin overdose at age 36). Curry and his three siblings watched in horror as Charlie routinely tormented each of them and their mother, who did little to protect her children from these physical and emotional attacks, making the environment at home a cold, dangerous place to be.

During these chaotic years, Curry turned for comfort to his maternal grandmother, "Ma," the heroine of his childhood. Ma instilled in him a fascination for the news, while providing the love and safety he lacked at home. At age 15, excelling as a reporter at his own news-related web site (while grieving the death of his grandmother), he dreamed of a career in journalism... a goal that would make her proud.

But at age 17, rather than accepting a scholarship to Temple University, he impulsively enlisted in the Marines after a violent altercation with his stepfather, who called him, yet again, "just a faggot." With a flawed self-image, and bent on revenge, the 98-pound Curry marched into boot camp, afraid and intimidated, but eager to focus his anger and resentment into becoming a model recruit. He soon became a Marine, gaining 22 pounds in muscle.

After his military service ended, Curry was unprepared for civilian life. Broke and alone, he lived in his car while working as a rent-a-cop for $6 per hour at a run-down motel. But his dream of becoming a TV producer sustained him, and it wasn't long before he got his first job at a local El Paso TV station.

The rest is history. Determined and ambitious, he not only earned a Master of Science degree in journalism (having already earned his Bachelor of Science in political science during his Marine years), but he quickly rose through the ranks at CNN.

Yet the post-traumatic stress of what he witnessed in Iraq, together with the rage and resentment leftover from his childhood, lingered within him. This left him troubled and estranged from his family, and he began to detach himself emotionally from the world around him. It wasn't until he was diagnosed with cancer that Curry had a spiritual epiphany, finally breaking down his walls and becoming more forgiving and compassionate, appreciative of other people.

Today, at age 29, James Curry is truly a man before his time... someone who has witnessed far too much death and dying, and has come to appreciate the true value of life.

Collaborator Biography

Bestselling author and veteran celebrity interviewer **Glenn Plaskin** specializes in writing celebrity memoirs, self-help, and inspiration-oriented books. His published work includes: ***Horowitz****: The Biography of Vladimir Horowitz;* ***Turning Point****: Pivotal Moments in the Lives of America's Celebrities*; ***Katie: Up & Down The Hall****: The True Story Of How One Dog Turned Four Neighbors Into A Family*; and ***The Power To Change Today****: Simple Secrets To The Satisfied Life,* and numerous ghostwritten projects.

His profiles have appeared in the New York Times, New York Daily News, San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Family Circle, US Weekly, Ladies Home Journal, Cosmopolitan, W, and Playboy. His interview subjects have included Katharine Hepburn, Nancy Reagan, Calvin Klein, Senator Edward Kennedy, Audrey Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, Leona Helmsley, Barbara Walters, Diane Sawyer Donald Trump, Al Pacino, and Meryl Streep. His TV appearances include Oprah, The Today Show, and Larry King Live. He lives in New York City. Visit the author's web sites at www.ghostwriteyourbook.com www.glennplaskin.com and www.katiebook.com.

MARKETING & DEMOGRAPHICS

Combining the appeal of a military memoir with a medical survival story, *A MAN BEFORE HIS TIME* is geared to a mass-market audience, uniquely targeted to millions of U.S. veterans and their families as well as cancer survivors worldwide.

In the tradition of such books as *American Sniper (*William Morrow*), Shadow of the Sword: A Marine's Journey of War, Heroism and Redemption* (Ballantine Books), and *The Trident: The Forging and Reforging of a Navy SEAL Leader* (William Morrow), the 275-page book reflects the current popularity of military memoirs--a trend noted in the *New York Times*: http://nyti.ms/1wCqaGZ.

In addition, as the narrative shifts to Curry's medical crisis and battle against cancer, the book strongly resonates with the self-help and inspirational market, mirroring the appeal of such bestsellers as *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* (Scribner), *A Life on the Toilet: Memoirs of a Bowel Cancer Survivor* (Amazon), and *Shrinkage: Manhood, Marriage, and the Tumor That Tried to Kill Me* (Thomas Dunne Books*).*

The story further expands with Curry's meteoric rise as a TV producer, first in local markets, then at national networks in Atlanta and New York.

As a senior news producer at CNN, the author is uniquely positioned to partner with a publisher in effectively promoting his debut book.

With access to fellow producers, hard news and entertainment media, and anchors and TV personalities, Curry will actively initiate coverage on TV and radio programs, in newspapers and magazines, and in all social media, as described below.

A MAN BEFORE HIS TIME is targeted directly to:

- A demographic of 2.8 million U.S. veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and their families
- An audience of 14 million U.S. cancer survivors, including 500,000 current long-term survivors of Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma
- A secondary worldwide market of readers who annually spend $693 million on inspiration books.
- A base-line audience of 1 million visitors to Curry's CNN blog: *After Cancer, My Real Fight Began*: http://cnn.it/1sqZlZM

PUBLICITY INITIATIVES

Telegenic and articulate, Curry is an accomplished public speaker who has appeared before a global audience on HLN: The News and Views network, and National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. He expertly communicates his message of conquering adversity, using stories from his own life, and those of the veterans and cancer survivors he knows. In partnership with the publisher, his media campaign would include:

TV:

Author will facilitate interviews using his extensive contacts in local and national TV markets, starting with CNN and FOX.

- Pitch major network and cable morning shows.
- Pitch news shows such as MSNB's Morning Joe and Rachel Maddow, CNN's Anderson Cooper 360, HLN's Robin Meade, and Fox & Friends.
- Pitch local affiliates in New York City, Washington DC, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Dallas, and Houston, including cities with prominent military populations, such as San Diego, Atlanta, and Seattle
- Pitch daytime talk shows such as Dr. Phil, Steve Harvey, Meredith Vieira

RADIO

- Pitch public radio programs such as National Public Radio's Morning and Weekend Edition, Tell Me More, This American Life, The Diane Rehm Show, The Tavis Smiley Show, The Leonard Lopate Show, All Things Considered
- Pitch talk radio shows hosted by Bill Handel, Bryan Suits (both former combat veterans), Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, John Gambling, Tom Joyner

PRINT MEDIA

- Pitch all major newspaper book reviewers, hard news and medical reporters in features and front-page sections, etc. news
- Pitch major newswires such as Associated Press, Reuters, Bloomberg, etc.
- Pitch major newspaper magazines such as Parade, New York Times Magazine, USA Today Magazine, New York Magazine, Washington Post Magazine, etc.
- Pitch major service-related magazines such as Family Circle, Woman's Day, O, Good Housekeeping

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

- **Facebook:** A dedicated Facebook page will be developed and managed to build an on-line community of readers and supporters
- **Twitter:** A promotion campaign using Twitter will be executed to build a community of followers to sustain interest in the book.
- **SEO:** A robust search engine optimization program will be implemented to build links from promotional sites for the book to blogs and other media outlets.

- **News-Oriented Sites:** Salon, Slate, Huffington Post, Daily Beast, etc.
- **Web Site:** In advance of publication, author will create an interactive web site, allowing visitors to share their story and read excerpts from the book. It will be promoted in all social media, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, X, Y, and Z. Also included: Guest posts on the Huffington Post, plus linking the book with trending topics (such as #VAScandal and #CancerSucks)
- **Book Trailer:** A dramatic 3-minute video with music and narration to be used in a national ad campaign, made available on the author's web site and in social media marketing.
- **Cancer Survival Outreach:** The author will align himself with multiple organizations devoted to cancer survivors, marketing his book through promotions and on-site advertising, at his own expense. He will also produce a celebrity launch event, with proceeds going to a chosen charity.
- **Speaking Engagements**: At his own initiative, the author will schedule guest appearances at veteran groups and cancer societies.
- **Self-Funded Marketing:** The author will hire a publicity firm to create a marketing plan that complements the efforts of his publisher.

POTENTIAL TESTIMONIALS:

- Anderson Cooper, CNN
- Don Lemon, CNN
- Dale Dye, USMC and media personality
- Wolf Blitzer, CNN
- Robin Meade, HLN
- Montel Williams
- Joy Reid, MSNBC
- Angela Chen, Wall Street Journal
- John Vause, CNN International
- Dr. David Mulford, Former U.S. Ambassador to India
- David Wilkins, Former U.S. Ambassador to Canada
- Christian Amanpour, CNN
- Asieh Namdar, CCTV anchor
- Jake Tapper, CNN anchor and military advocate
- Gavin Preson, M.D., author of *The Managed Healthcare Blues*
- Byron Harmon, author of *God Gave Me Some Bad Advice*
- Gio Benitez, ABC News
- Woody Roseland, cancer survivor advocate, public speaker, author

- Lt. Col. Seth Folsom, USMC, author of *The Highway War*
- General James Mattis, USMC (ret)
- Lt. Cmdr. Greg Matos, PhD, USN, author of *Shattered Glass: The Story of a Marine Embassy Guard*

COMPETING & COMPLEMENTARY BOOKS

Military

No Immediate Threat: The story of an American Veteran, Kerri Fivecoat-Campbell (ASJA Press, 2005)

My War: Killing Time in Iraq, Colby Buzzell (Berkley Trade, 2006**)**

Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10, Marcus Luttrell (Little Brown, 2007)

Making the Corps, 2007, Thomas Ricks (Scribner, 2007)

House to House: An Epic Memoir of War, David Bellavia (Free Press, 2007)

Shadow of the Sword: a Marine's Journey of War, Heroism, and Redemption, Jeremiah Workman (Ballantine Books, 2009)

Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, *Laura Hillenbrand (Random House, 2010)*

*T**hrough Veterans' Eyes: The Iraq and Afghanistan Experience,*** *Larry Minear (Potomac Books, 2010)*

Shattered Glass: The Story of a Marine Embassy Guard, Greg Matos (Two Harbors Press, 2011)

American Sniper: **The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History,** Chris Kyle (William Morrow, 2012)

Outlaw Platoon: Heroes, Renegades, Infidels, and the Brotherhood of War in Afghanistan, Sean Parnell (Harper Collins, 2012)

The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life that Follows, Brian Castner (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013)

The Trident: The Forging and Reforging of a Navy SEAL Leader, Jason Redman (William Morrow, 2013)

Cancer Survival

It's Not Like That, Actually: A Memoir of Surviving Cancer --And Beyond, Kate Carr (Vermilion, 2005)

The Last Lecture, Randy Pausch, (Hachette, 2008)

What Helped Me Through, Julie K. Silver (American Cancer Society, 2008)

Before I Die, Jenny Downham, (Ember, 2009)

After Ever After, Jordan Sonneblick (Scholastic Press, 2010)

Mortality, Christopher Hitchens (Twelve, 2012)

The F- It List, Julie Halpern, (Fewiwel & Friends, 2013)

Radical Remission: Surviving Cancer Against All Odds, Kelly A. Turner (HarperOne, 2014)

Dying To Be Me: My Journey from Cancer, to Near Death, to True Healing, Anita Moorjani (Hay House, 2014)

The Hardest Peace: Expecting Grace in the Midst of Life's Hard, Kara Tippetts (David C. Cook, Amazon Digital, 2014)

Fight Back With Joy: Celebrate More. Regret Less. Stare Down Your Greatest Fears, Margaret Feinberg (Worthy Publishing, 2015)

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A REASON TO LIVE

- The Gift Of Cancer-

"We have no right to ask when sorrow comes, 'Why did this happen to me?' unless we ask the same question for every moment of happiness that comes our way."

-Source Unknown -

Atlanta, Ga., December 23, 2010, 9 p.m.

At our annual holiday party that December, exhausted CNN staffers crowded around the buffet, enjoying a rare night out on the town after months of working overtime, covering a string of breaking news stories in 2010. The year's coverage began with the devastating earthquake in Haiti, followed by the BP oil spill, trapped miners in Chile, and an erupting volcano in Iceland, not to mention the Iraq war ending and the signing of ObamaCare.

As reporters, crew and staff consumed jumbo shrimp, pizza, stuffed meatballs and tons of alcohol while dancing, flirting and playing pool at a local concert venue, I found myself relaxing into the feeling of being part of a team. I was amazed and only slightly intimidated by the presence of famous partygoers like Anderson Cooper, Wolf Blitzer and Candy Crowley sharing war stories and inside jokes as they sailed around the room clinking glasses with Natalie Allen, Don Lemmon and Sanjay Gupta. I couldn't quite believe my eyes and my good fortune.

Here I was, at 24, on a first-name basis with television news icons, covering international events for CNN as a producer, all of it the fulfillment of a dream that began when I was a child watching the news with my grandmother.

So as the ball dropped in Times Square on our CNN New Year's special, I cruised into 2011 feeling utterly fantastic. It didn't bother me a bit that I was the low man on the network's totem pole, assigned to the worst shift in TV news... the "graveyard" from 10 pm to 8:30 am. No matter how tired I felt by morning, even when breaking stories demanded that I work overtime, I never objected. Nor did I ever consider calling in sick. The adrenaline rush of covering news and the camaraderie of our team energized me.

As for the money, I finally had an adult salary. Having once been homeless and working for $8 an hour, my new paycheck was a blessing that allowed me to buy a small two-bedroom house in the suburbs of Atlanta. That was my gift to *me* that Christmas.

A few days into January, Atlanta was in a panic as a record-breaking blizzard buried the city in a blanket of snow. Compared to the mild weather we were accustomed to, this act of God was a complete anomaly, with high winds and drifts of powder up to four feet. There were collisions everywhere as cars skidded across the icy roads or wound up stranded and stuck.

We dubbed it "Snowpocolypse," an event that sent the local news stations into overdrive. CNN, which wasn't prone to panic, deemed driving to work unsafe, and provided hotel rooms for many of its employees. But I drove back and forth each night, enjoying the adventure of it and the opportunity to stay put in my new house.

To keep me company, I had my younger brother Michael, then 22, visiting me from our hometown in Lansford, PA. Two inches shorter than me at 5'7", with fiery red hair, he resembled a leprechaun, and he could be just as charming as one... smart, clever, and mischievous. He had come to stay with me during the holidays, seeking respite from his longtime struggle with drug addiction and numerous scrapes with the police back in Pennsylvania. As he told me over dinner on the night of his arrival, "Jimmy, there isn't anything that I haven't snorted, injected or swallowed. It's amazing, I'm still here."

Addiction was something that seemed to run in the Curry bloodline. My father had died from a heroin overdose at age 36. And it now scared and worried me that Michael was on the same path. So I was only too happy to help and support him in any way I could. We had a number of heart-to-hearts about what he was going to do with his life. I encouraged him to consider either college or a military career, and even took him to an army recruiter, knowing how much the service had helped me.

He took a skills test and did well on the reading section, but poorly on the math.

"I knew I was too stupid for this," he said in the car as we drove home.

But that was not the case. I knew that his self-image was terrible, that he didn't think he was worth a damn. He was so used to being in trouble as a kid, and stuck in his role as the family fuck-up, that he believed that failure or addiction was his only destiny. It wasn't.

To counter his low self-esteem, I continued to encourage him to pursue a new path, and he was receptive to it. Meanwhile, without any close attachments in Atlanta, I was just happy to have him with me.

* * * * *

January 11, 2011, 7 pm

On that Tuesday night, something very strange happened. Michael and I were looking forward to devouring a dinner of ham with all the trimmings (store-bought, since neither of us could actually cook). But when I took my first bite and attempted to swallow, my throat erupted with excruciating pain. It felt like razor blades slicing through my esophagus as the food made its way toward my stomach.

As I bent over, my face beet red, Michael stared at me, puzzled, thinking that I was choking, so he jumped up to help by pounding on my back. Once the food finally went down and I was able to talk, I told him that I wasn't choking on anything, but that it hurt to swallow. My mouth was completely dry, my throat sore, and the reflex to swallow had disappeared. I then tried a second bite of food, and the same thing happened again. It was terrifying. What was wrong?

I didn't eat or drink anything else that night. Michael finished his dinner quickly and put the food away while I collapsed on my bed. I figured since it was flu season, I was just getting a sore throat and it was no big deal. After all, I'd escaped death twice in Iraq, so how serious could this be? Like any 22-year-old, I decided to just ignore it

But the next few days were hell. I hardly ate anything, and when I did, I had the same exact reaction, experiencing pain beyond anything I'd ever known. I couldn't get anything down. After four days of physical weirdness, I stopped eating completely and was trying to manage on liquids only. But even drinking water was painful. It even hurt to swallow my own saliva.

Yet, whether it was Marine stoicism, denial, or just plain fear, I procrastinated about going to a doctor. My brother however, was not impressed by my "tough" behavior, and although I had been in the role of *his* mentor and protector, he now mobilized into becoming mine. I'd never seen his nurturing side, but he definitely showed one as he expressed his concern.

"This is serious, Jimmy," he urged. "I know you think you're iron man, but human beings are supposed to be able to swallow food and water. Something's wrong. This just isn't normal."

Of course he was right. But I hated calling those insidious doctor offices and being put on hold, so I used that as an excuse not to call at all. But Michael wouldn't accept that, and finally, on Friday afternoon, January 14th, he took matters into his own hands and called my internist. He was put on hold for more than an hour, but got me an appointment for the next day -- a Saturday no less -- at 3 pm.

As I sat in the waiting room with my brother, we joked around, both of us in a good mood. I really wasn't worried. I felt Michael had over-reacted, and that if I just waited it out, my symptoms would go away. A few minutes later, I was put in the examining room, and in walked Dr. Margaret Wadsworth, a family practice internist in her mid-40's, pleasant, but not overly warm. She certainly wasn't the kind of doctor that gave you the Warm Fuzzies, though I liked her somewhat spiritual approach to medicine, advocating the use of meditation to "balance" physical and emotional health.

She took my history, and at first seemed skeptical of my description of the pain. My impression was that she had seen a million patients that day, all of whom thought they were dying, while in reality they only had a common cold. She examined the inside of my mouth and throat.

"I don't see anything abnormal here," she said. "Have you been injured in any way? In a fight or accident?"

"No. Nothing at all," I replied.

"Mmmm. This might be a case of severe heartburn."

"Absolutely not," I told her, knowing the difference between a little acid and a razor blade.

She then gave me an oatmeal cookie to eat so she could observe my reaction to swallowing. And there it was again, the incredible pain. I actually spit the cookie out, and from my extreme reaction she could see that this *wasn't* heartburn.

"Just to be safe," she said calmly, "let's take a chest x-ray and a complete blood panel, and I'll get back to you on Monday."

On my way out, despite the pain of that cookie, I felt relieved as Michael and I got into the car to drive home. After all, I'd followed his advice and seen a doctor, and she didn't seem overly concerned, so neither was I. It couldn't be anything that serious. At most, I must have some kind of infection. She'll give me some pills and we'll call it a day.

Then, about fifteen minutes later, while still driving, my cell phone rang. On the screen was Dr. Wadsworth's caller ID.

"You need to come back to the office now," she told me in an urgent tone. "We need to talk."

"I'm on my way," I told her, turning my car around.

I felt scared shitless.

When we got back to the office, the first thing she did was show me the x-rays.

"Do you see the shaded area here?" she asked, pointing to a large dark spot between my heart and my lungs. "It's a three-centimeter mass... about the size of a small tangerine."

Oh my God. I couldn't believe something that big, that foreign, could possibly be inside my young, perfectly healthy, invincible Marine body.

"A *mass*? What does that mean? Is it a tumor?"

"We don't know what it is at this point, and we don't want to speculate about it, but it's definitely abnormal, and it could be one of many different things. We won't know until we do a biopsy, which I'd like to schedule right away."

The phrase *right away* sliced through me like that cookie. This was serious.

We booked the biopsy for the next day, and then drove home in shock. Michael's reaction, like mine, seemed non-existent. We didn't know how to react. So we didn't talk about it.

The first thing I wanted to do was call my mom, even though we had never really been close. I'd always felt that she'd neglected me as a child in favor of pampering and pacifying my abusive stepfather. I'd been angry ever since I left home at 17 to join the Marines, and I blamed her for not protecting me against his continual verbal [and sometimes, physical] assaults. I'd been holding on to that resentment for years, but I now had a powerful urge to call her. I didn't want to alarm her in case it all turned out to be nothing, but when a doctor tells you there's a three-centimeter mass in your chest, it gets your attention. So as soon as we got home, I dialed her number.

After I explained it all, I could hear the panic and fear in her voice.

"I'll get on a plane first thing tomorrow," she offered. "You don't need to go through this alone."

"I'm *not* alone Mom. Michael's here with me. There's no reason for you to come. We don't even know what's going on yet."

The truth was that her presence might have caused me even more stress, but talking to her and hearing her concern was somewhat comforting. I knew she loved and cared for me in a way that only a mother can, and it helped to hear that in her voice. But I didn't want to open up emotional wounds from childhood in the middle of dealing with a medical crisis. I was grateful that Michael was with me, and for now, that was enough.

The next day my brother and I went to the hospital for two biopsies, which were supposed to be simple procedures conducted while I was awake. As the hospital staff breezily explained, "We'll just poke a little hole through your chest into the mass and collect a sample for testing."

But it didn't turn out to be that simple.

They were able to extract fluid rather than the tissue they needed, so the only option was full-on thoracic surgery--opening up my chest to extract the sample. I wasn't thrilled.

A week later, I met with "Dr. K," as Saeid Khansarinia was nicknamed, a thoracic surgeon born in Iran. He must have sensed how frightened I was, and because of my youthful appearance, I am often mistaken for a teenager. So the first thing he said was, "James, I'm going to treat you just like my son or little brother."

That calmed me down a bit, and I felt like I was in good hands. He told me there was a possibility that I could wake up after the surgery with either a small incision or a huge one, depending on how difficult it would be to access the mass. I didn't care either way. I just wanted to know what was going on inside of me.

Three days after surgery, which left behind a four-inch incision, I returned with Michael to Dr. K's office to get the results, both of us anxious. I felt panicked at the prospect of getting an answer, but also relieved to finally get some clarity. Just to be free from wondering would lift a huge burden from me, unless, of course, it was bad news. So I sat there, my heart racing, part of me wanting to run out of that office and act like none of this had ever happened.

Five minutes later, Dr. K walked into the room with a deadpan look, pulling up a stool in front of me.

"James," he said directly, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but you have [lymphoma] cancer."

No fluff. No sugar coating. He might just as well have said, "You have dandruff."

"Okay," I said. I was just as expressionless as he was. Although I'm an articulate guy, a journalist who's rarely at a loss for words, I sat there and just stared at him. Words seemed pointless. All I could do was try to absorb what he was saying.

He told me I had Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, extremely rare for someone under age 60. It was aggressive, in Stage 2, and had already spread to my lungs. I needed immediate treatment, and without it, my life span could be as short as a year.

Wow.

As he continued talking, telling me that he'd refer me to the best oncologist in Atlanta, his words became a blur as I tuned him out, an act of self-protection. I vaguely remember him picking up the cell phone clipped to his belt and calling another doctor to talk about my case, but I couldn't focus on what he was saying. I thought: *I'm only 25. My life is just starting to fall into place. And now I have a disease that could kill me. It isn't fair. It isn't supposed to happen like this.*

I thought about Michael sitting out there in the waiting room, and sent him a two-word text: "It's cancer."

By the time I saw him, he was calm, but grim. As for me, I was in a state of shock. Totally numb. Without a word, Michael and I drove home in silence. Neither one of us could take in what had just happened, so when we got to the house, we went about our business as if nothing had happened. Denial is very effective protection.

That was typical of our family. We never talked openly about feelings (or anything else), nor did we express emotions in a direct way. Everything was repressed or came out sideways in angry outbursts. From that environment, I went straight into the Marines, where emotions are not only a sign of weakness, but a liability. Our coping mechanism as Marines was to acknowledge tragedy, but quickly move on from it, because you can't be devastated or broken down on a battlefield.

And now, here in a suburban neighborhood in Atlanta, a different battle was unfolding as Michael sat beside me on the couch, both of us staring at a paper towel

commercial on TV. I couldn't tell how the news was affecting him, much less tune into my own feelings.

I just kept thinking about how cancer is something that happens to *other* people, not to a young healthy guy who survived five years in the Marines. In combat, I beat death on a daily basis. But now, here I was, unable to swallow without searing pain, with a large mass of doom growing in my chest. It felt wrong in every way. I was too young to think about the end of life. It was too much to comprehend.

While Michael distracted himself in the kitchen, I was drawn to the telephone, as I'd been the week before, wanting to talk to my mom. As I explained it all to her, I could hear her breathing start to get shallow, followed by a long period of silence.

"I'm coming down there," she insisted, after asking a hundred questions about how I got the cancer, how long I'd had it and how it was going to be treated. "I can be on the next plane."

"No Mom, please. It isn't necessary. At least wait until we have a treatment plan. There's nothing you can do here right now. I promise I'll keep you informed every step of the way."

It wasn't surprising that my mother wanted to take care of me, because her role in life was all about being a caretaker, as both a career and a passion. Her day job was working as a housekeeper in a nursing home, and she'd often volunteer to stay at the home in her free time to keep the folks company.

Thankfully, she agreed to delay coming. I felt that as long as Michael was willing to drive me to medical appointments and hold down the fort at home, I would be OK.

* * * * *

Finding out I had cancer was like a kick in the balls from a surprise assailant. One minute I was going about my daily life, settling in to an adult identity, with a great job and a house; and then, BAM, the worst possible shit just shows up out of the blue. Well, maybe not the worst. The villagers I saw in Iraq, and poor, oppressed people all over the world had it far worse than I did. After all, I was an American guy with a good job, a nice house and a network of friends and family members who would take care of me. How could I possibly complain? But then again, how could this happen to *me?*

The disease itself didn't worry me. I knew I was going to beat it. It was the treatment that made me fearful. And I had every reason to be.

Less than three weeks elapsed between receiving the diagnosis and preparing for my first round of chemo. It all started with a bone marrow biopsy, a truly terrifying experience. A medieval torture device that looked like a corkscrew was drilled through my skin and muscle straight into my pelvic bone. It was the most agonizing pain I'd ever experienced, radiating from my pelvis straight down my legs. What followed it was a blur of waiting rooms, blood screens, meetings with oncologists, tests and more tests. All of it was leading to the projected treatment plan... four months of chemotherapy followed by eight weeks of radiation.

Making things worse, two days before I was to start chemo, Michael and I had a big argument about some trivial thing, and he decided to ditch Atlanta and return home to Pennsylvania. During the weeks preceding this, his mood had deteriorated from happy and eager to downright depressed just after he'd announced that instead of pursuing a military career, he'd stay and take care of me.

"No, no, Michael, you don't need to do that," I told him. "You can't put your life on hold for me."

In reality, his decision had nothing to do with me. Knowing his penchant for avoiding reality, I sensed that he was looking for an exit strategy before the real horror began. Also, I think what prompted his sudden desire to leave was his addiction. He'd have more access to drugs among his old friends in Pennsylvania. I was sad to see him leave, and urged him to get to some 12-step meetings and take care of himself. I wasn't sure he would, but I didn't have time to sit around and feel sorry about it.

I was about to start very aggressive cancer treatment, so it was the perfect time for my mother to arrive. Angry that Michael was leaving me, she was insistent on flying south immediately. I quit resisting, knowing she'd come with or without my approval.

Good thing she did.

Sickness from chemotherapy feels like a hangover multiplied by 100, followed by drinking a bottle of bleach. It starts with constant nausea and gets progressively worse, peaking with bouts of violent vomiting, followed by a few minutes of short-lived relief before the cycle starts all over again. Most of the anti-nausea medications didn't work, and

on some days I'd be so sick that I couldn't take any of the 14 pills that were prescribed for me. The only thing that made chemo tolerable was the hope that it would get rid of the cancer

Mom came with me to every chemotherapy session, which was an all-day affair that began on Mondays at 8 am and continued for eight straight hours as the chemicals were administered intravenously. We'd then leave the infusion center and go out to eat, knowing that it was only a matter of time before I became deathly ill. And then, for the next three days, I'd be so sick as my mom did everything for me--giving me what little I could eat, cleaning the house, doing the laundry, collecting the mail, you name it. While she did these things, I could do nothing but lie in bed or puke in the bathroom. By the time Thursday rolled around, I'd recovered from the chemical torture enough to go to work, so I'd go to the office from Thursday to Sunday while Mom flew back for work at the nursing home, returning the following Monday for the entire cycle to begin again.

This went on for four months, and it was the most time I'd spent with my mother in my entire adult life. Our relationship was much closer now, but not from the outside looking in. Just as always, we never embraced. Yet I knew she cared and worried, simply because she had come to Atlanta to be with me. My stepfather was angry with her for "neglecting" him, (what an asshole), but for the first time in years, she put me first.

"I can't believe he expects me to stay with him when my son has cancer," she told me in disbelief. "What kind of person *thinks* like that?"

A total son of a bitch, I thought to myself.

We next crossed an important bridge when she said, "You know, Jimmy, I made a lot of mistakes with you kids, but I'll be damned if I'm going to sit back while you go through chemotherapy. You're still my son."

Those heartfelt words -- and the devotion she exhibited during my treatment -- instantly healed a world of pain for me, because it was the first time I'd witnessed her being truly selfless. What she said wasn't a full admission of guilt, nor did she take total responsibility for what she allowed my stepfather to do, but for the first time, I think she understood the gravity of her actions during my childhood. At that very moment, I forgave my mother. I was done punishing her. It didn't make us instant best friends or create a

magical transformation in our relationship, but I accepted her mistakes and was ready to move on with my life.

* * * * *

It takes a while to realize that you're a cancer patient. At first, feeling completely healthy, you don't see yourself as a member of that club. When I started out (as the youngest patient in the infusion unit), I didn't look sickly, bald, or emaciated like the rest of the patients. But before long, I looked and felt exactly like they did. My hair started falling out, my skin was as white as a sheet, and while I was already thin, I became skeletal, eventually shedding 30 pounds.

And how, I thought, would it all end? Was this cancer a death sentence?

The most I could pry out of my oncologist as the weeks passed was the classic non-answer, "We'll wait and see. You're doing well for now, and you have two major things in your favor. You're young, and we detected the lymphoma early."

Left unsaid... without immediate treatment, I'd be dead within a year.

In the meantime, chemotherapy was hell, and if I had to do it again, I would opt out and choose to live as many healthy days as I could, letting the cancer end it rather than enduring chemo. The nausea was so intense that it was impossible to find a comfortable position, whether sitting, standing or lying down, and the dizziness only exacerbated the problem. Vomiting became the only relief, but that was miserable too, because I could taste the bitter chemo chemicals coming up. The chemicals were so strong that I'd have to flush the toilet twice to avoid exposing my mom to them.

In the midst of it all, food became the enemy. Just the smell or look of it made me sick, and when I tried to eat, the food mixed with the metallic taste in my mouth, and it was absolutely vile. I'd spend hours over the toilet vomiting partially digested Jell-O, which was the only semi-solid food my body would tolerate. One day after treatment, Mom and I went to Chipotle and I ate a few bites of a chicken burrito, which I couldn't hold down. To this day, I can't eat at that chain.

Once I knew what to expect, I assembled my "chemo kit," which included nausea medication, Ensure, hard candies containing ginger, and fruit. Those were the only things I found tolerable. As for the doctor's advice to drink six glasses of water a day, that wasn't happening. I couldn't even manage half a glass. The chemo also led to hot flashes,

constipation (alternating with diarrhea), a bleeding colon, dehydration and erectile dysfunction (the least of my worries at the time, since I had no partner and couldn't even imagine thinking about sex in this condition). All the energy seemed to be sucked out of my body, and even sleeping seemed like too much effort.

Amazingly, through all of it, I never missed a day of work. I could have taken a medical leave, but I was still new on the job and didn't want to jeopardize my career. I also didn't want to sit at home strapped with the identity of "cancer patient." So I dragged my ass into work on Thursday nights and did a full shift through Sunday. Crazy as it seemed -- and as bad as I looked—working helped me maintain a sense of normalcy, and it also seemed to build up my strength. I felt like I was in combat again, remembering the standard line of my commander in Iraq, General James Mattis: *There's no room for pussies.*

One night at work, toward the beginning of treatment, I touched my hair and a clump of it just fell into my hand. The next day, there was hair all over my pillow. So that afternoon I had my barber shave it all off. Now I was just some bald guy, and it actually felt like a relief, like boot camp all over again. And in an awesome display of support, one of my co-workers shaved his head too! It really touched me, and it connected us as best buds in a way we never would have been otherwise.

One day early in my chemo adventure, my friend Liz Mack, who'd been my friend since high school and had moved to Atlanta six months earlier, asked me, "Do you feel like this is end?"

At that moment I knew intuitively that this was absolutely NOT the end. I had a sure intuition that I would beat this, even though so many people with the same diagnosis eventually died from it, including Arlen Specter, Ed Bradley, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Wendy Wasserstein, and countless others, famous or not. If they all died from it, why would *I* live? Granted, most of them were all at least twice my age, so hopefully the doctor was right about my youth being in my favor.

I found myself connecting with a whole range of emotions that I'd ignored for years. Sympathy, sadness, empathy and fear were among the feelings that I had largely suppressed most of my life. But now, with the support of friends like Liz, my co-workers, and my mother, I started to realize that I never really knew what emotions were until I got sick.

I was raised in a household where the only acceptable feeling was anger. So as a child, under the reign of a raging stepfather, I'd learned to shut down in order to protect myself. Later, as a Marine, I saw a lot of death, trauma, and grief. Again, emotional responses were not allowed. I'd become an emotional iceberg, not knowing that "breaking down" is actually cathartic and healing. I was just too afraid to find that out, and believed that feeling nothing at all had served me well. At least I hadn't fallen apart.

But cancer changed all that. With all the love I received from family, friends, and colleagues, I realized that people actually *care* about one another. Oddly enough, that was a revelation. There was a time when I was so shut down, so numb, that I *had* no emotions. I felt almost nothing--at home or at war. Compartmentalizing feelings was the only way to cope.

So people were constantly telling me that they loved and cared about me; things I wasn't accustomed to hearing in conversation. While my mom never actually expressed that out loud, she said it without words by helping me through chemo, by putting her hand on my back, and by comforting me day-after-day just with her presence. I *felt* her love.

Did it take cancer to bring me to this awareness, to feeling all the emotions that allowed me to finally be human? I guess it did. Suddenly, I was more physically demonstrative. I was mirroring what I saw and felt in cancer wards, where I was surrounded by displays of affection. There's always someone holding your hand or touching your arm or shoulder, gestures that reassure you that you're not alone, that you're going to be OK. There's no embarrassment about tears or fears, or about holding on to one another.

The same thing transferred over to work. My co-workers would now hug me and tell me how much I mattered to them. I guess when people think you might die, they get pretty brave about revealing their feelings. I saw that in order to maintain real human relationships, you have to *feel.* I no longer worried about keeping up a front. I cried more than ever. I opened up to friends about how much they meant to me, saying things out loud that would have embarrassed me before.

And in the infusion ward, with my fellow patients, there was always someone holding my hand or touching my arm or shoulder, gestures that reassured me that I wasn't alone, that I was going to be OK. There was no embarrassment about tears or fears--or about holding on to one another. As I sat there, I heard a lot about my fellow patient's everyday

lives; their weddings and travel adventures, their kids and pets -- you name it -- and how badly they wanted to get home and return to normal. Sometimes they talked openly about their fears of dying and facing the unknown ahead. Such profoundly personal conversations would normally have made me run and hide. But I found myself becoming comfortable with their vulnerability --and my own --seven though it was as foreign as the chemicals being pumped through my veins.

I also saw a change in my relationship with Liz. For years we just hung out and joked around, but now we were having meaningful talks. I'd hear myself say brutally honest things like, "Why would you even give a shit about me?"

I had been such an independent guy – with classic Marine mentality -- but cancer knocked me on my ass not only physically *and* emotionally. It was the first time I realized that we aren't meant to struggle alone. We need other people.

* * * * *

Finally, after four months of agony, the chemo was over, but the respite didn't last long. In the next phase, radiation treatment, I was deployed to another tour of duty in medical hell. This time it didn't make me nauseated, but it was physically tortuous, because the radiation literally burned my skin and some of my internal organs, including my heart and lungs, while also damaging my throat. It was as if I'd put my entire body in a microwave oven and cooked it. My skin was toasted to a crisp, with symptoms identical to a severe sunburn. And for the next eight weeks my esophagus was so sore that I couldn't eat any solid food, except for Jell-O, which immediately came up again.

Although many friends wanted to visit me during the radiation phase, I didn't want them to see me as a decrepit old man, which is exactly what I looked like. The radiation does that to you. I was reduced from a healthy former Marine to a powdery white, emaciated, bald, bag of bones with no muscle tone. Weak as I was, I couldn't even walk up a flight of stairs without being completely out of breath. That's what radiation did to my heart and lungs. It also completely destroyed my thyroid, and because of that damage, I'll be taking thyroid medication for the rest of my life.

But it all paid off. After seven months of cancer treatment, on July 22, 2011, my 26th birthday, my oncologist told me that I was in full remission, as he handed me a piece of paper with the test results.

I treated that printed report with reverence, and saved it as if it was a sacred object, like a trophy or a diploma. Better than any birthday card or present, this was a passport to a brand new life.

My hair started growing back, and I soon began to look almost normal person again. But while the physical ordeal was over, the emotional roller coaster ride was just beginning. True, I was no longer focused on my physical pain, but all the feelings that had been brewing inside me were now right on the surface. In some ways, the psychological stress of being a cancer patient had only now fully set in.

Every month I needed a battery of tests to determine whether the cancer had come back and whether the treatment caused any residual side effects. It was a seven-day process of waiting that caused extreme mental anguish. The week began with blood tests and scans. Then I had to wait seven days for the doctor to tell me whether I was still in remission. The uncertainty of it drove me almost insane. Every time the phone rang, my heart would sink, as I thought it might be bad news. And then, of course, each time I get a clean bill of health, I let out my breath, hugely relieved. I've now collected dozens of those written reports, each one of them a reprieve. And I always tell myself that the follow-up testing process, which continues for five years, is a small price to pay for staying alive.

In between those monthly exams, I spend a lot of time analyzing the 'what if' scenarios... *What if it comes back? What if I get another kind of cancer*? *What if the chemotherapy or radiation causes some contagious disease or genetic mutation that forces me to live forever in a bubble, like in a hospital isolation unit?*

Right after the treatments ended, I was afraid of it all. And I'd run every scenario through my head so that I'd be prepared for whatever was in store for me. To this day, every time I get a headache or notice any change in my body, I contact Dr. K. (I bet he regrets ever giving me his cell number and private e-mail address.) Cancer can turn you into a semi-hypochondriac, mistaking every little physical ailment for a dreaded disease.

I realize now how lucky I've been to survive. And one role model that's inspired me is Kevin Hart, the ESPN anchor who fought cancer for 20 years, leaving behind, at the time of his death, a message I truly believe in: "When you die, it does not mean that you lose to cancer; you beat cancer by how you live, why you live, and the manner in which you live."

And now I know what it means to live *better.*

Cancer didn't kill me, but it killed off some aspects of my psyche that needed to die. Before I got sick, I was anything but empathetic. I would quickly jump to judgment and look for the flaws in people. Understanding human frailty wasn't exactly my strong suit. But cancer showed me that there is good in the world. All I needed to do was remember all the people who gave me love, and their amazing courage. I realized that people actually *care* about one another. And oddly enough, that was a revelation. There was a time when I was so shut down, so numb, that I felt almost nothing, at home or at war.

My old way of living was now obliterated. I now see that the only way to conquer adversity is to reach out to others and allow them to reach back to me, like paying it forward [and backward]. Living in a bubble of emotional isolation is fruitless. That I'd certainly proved. Now, when people tell me "what a shame" it is that I contracted cancer, I always correct them by saying, "No, it was actually a gift. Maybe it was meant to happen this way, in order to wake me up and re-order my priorities."

So what's important now? First off, it's life itself (that would have sounded trite to me before). Waking up in the morning and being able to walk, to run, to drive to work, read a book, get on a plane, go on a date or celebrate the holidays with friends laughing over a beer... all of that is *big stuff*, but it's viewed as trivial by most people. You never appreciate what you have until you lose it. I guess taking things for granted is human nature, but I can't do it anymore. Having almost died three times -- twice in Iraq and once from cancer -- I know the slippery slope of arrogance. So every morning when I wake up, I remind myself of how lucky I am.

Cancer also helped me *forgive*. Beyond the abuse I experienced as a kid, I now understood that my mom had been tormented by step-father as well, placed in the impossible position of trying to placate him while keeping peace in the family. I could see that she did the best she could, and I could release all the blame I'd been placing on her for years.

I also let go of the rage I'd been harboring toward my stepfather, because that anger no longer served any purpose. I once heard a fellow cancer survivor say that holding a resentment only gives you a headache and a sore jaw from clenching your teeth; whereas forgiveness gives you back laughter and a sense of lightness. I learned that forgiveness is supposed to benefit the person who *forgives*, not the one who perpetrated the wrongdoing.

Without the weight of constant anger, I now felt more at ease with myself and my family. My lifelong angst and emotional isolation was washed away. It was as if forgiveness cleaned out my system, just as powerfully as chemotherapy and radiation had eradicated cancer.

Finally, cancer made me a man. It gave me focus, perspective and strength. I'd come home from Iraq a seasoned soldier, but I was still a boy, immature and naïve about how to live. Now, while still only 25, I was more like 60 inside, much more grown-up and aware of life's value.

I now know that the reason I got cancer at such a young age was because it was there to save my life. After all, if you go through something like cancer and defeat it but don't learn anything from it, then what was the point?

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CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Following the format of the sample chapter, "A Reason To Live: The Gift Of Cancer," all chapters in ***A MAN BEFORE HIS TIME*** *feature dramatic narratives that capture the themes of the multifaceted storyline. These include flashbacks to episodes of childhood abuse, the author's keen observations about war, descriptions of his adventures in the world of TV network news, and a moment-to-moment accounting of his battle against cancer.*

As these events unfold, life lessons are crystallized as we witness Curry's maturation--from a naïve angry teenager, to a toughened Marine Sergeant, to a disoriented homeless veteran, an up-and-coming TV producer, and a cancer patient facing possible death.

The book will include an Introduction that defines the major themes and promises of the book. Each successive chapter examines, often in flashback using re-created dialogue taken from notes and journals, the author's nner struggles and exploits as he moves almost continuously across countries and continents.

Curry delivers a powerful message--that we have in our power the ability to heal the wounds of the past and prevail over any adversity, even the continual threat of death, creating an invincible spirit that can fuel a life of purpose and contribution.

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CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter One: "What The Hell Have I Gotten Myself *Into*?"

Looking much younger than his age and weighing 98 pounds, 17-year-old Curry arrives at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot on Parris Island in 2003, anxious and fearful, second-guessing his impulsive decision to enlist. He's never been away from home, even to summer camp; now he faces the stark shock of Marine culture and its warfare mentality. "Everything will be done with speed and intensity," he's lectured moments after having his head shaved. He's soon witness to the hazing, hitting, screaming, cursing, and embarrassment "not tolerated but practiced nonetheless." We follow his sometimes-humorous reaction to harsh military life as he acclimates to it. His drill instructors beat him down psychologically, but pile on extra food to fatten him up. Above all, the value of loyalty is pounded into the naïve teenager. He spends days on the rifle range—quickly mastering his weapon, a metaphor, he says, for "proving yourself as a man." Confident and toughened by the end of boot camp, he thinks: *If only my stepfather could see me now*.

Chapter Two: "Tell Your Faggot Son…"

In graphic detail, we are immersed in the toxic family relationships that motivate Curry to quit school and join the military, leaving behind his hometown of Lansford, Pa. His abusive stepfather, Charlie, has emotionally and physically assaulted the boy and his mother, Margaret, for years. Though outwardly stoic and unemotional, Curry seethes inside as Charlie continually attacks his masculinity. One night, in a pivotal scene that changes his future, the 17-year-old is washing and folding his own laundry when his stepfather derisively shouts the word "faggot" at him, disgusted by what he views as feminine behavior. The teen explodes and smashes his fist through a window, expressing the rage that had built up for years. By coincidence, a Marine recruiter shows up at his high school the next morning, and within days, James abandons his plan to study journalism at Temple University. Instead, he persuades his mother, whom he blames for the abuse, to sign the necessary papers for him to join the Marines. His stepfather is contemptuous of this decision, and doubts James can possibly hack it as a Marine.

Chapter Three: "The Very Men Who Want Me Dead"

After three months of "pure hell," Curry graduates from boot camp, the proudest moment of his young life. He derives immense satisfaction from the revenge of proving his stepfather wrong—that he isn't weak, effeminate, or powerless. Instead, he's gained 25 pounds of muscle, new skills as a crack rifleman, and impressive endurance. "I showed my stepfather that I could make something of myself—and that all of the insults he had issued while I was growing up meant nothing. I was on my own now. I didn't need him or anyone else." Filled with rage and resentment, he'll direct all of it into his job. In spring, 2004, he's given orders to Iraq, to serve as a combat replacement for a Marine who was killed in action. Once on the ground, at Camp Fallujah, he quickly learns that Marines are apparently regarded as expendable, in that the Humvees are not adequately armored to protect Marines from explosive device attacks. In battle, for the first time, "I made eye contact with the very men who wanted me dead. I worried that I would freeze and lose my cool. But to my surprise all the training kicked in." Here is a gripping account of Curry's first missions, his reactions to gore and death, and to the odd requests

of his commanders, who are intent on making the Iraqi people like and accept invading Americans. For example, he and his comrades are forbidden to wear sunglasses (meant to protect their eyes from shrapnel) “because it makes you look like robots to the Iraqis.” He huddles at night in a cramped, stifling hot six-man trailer (with broken air-conditioning and no plumbing), the threat of death ever-present.

Chapter Four: Me & "Ma"

In his tent, Curry is dreaming about the morning of his graduation from boot camp. He awakens and has the impulse to proudly call his beloved grandmother to tell her the good news, before remembering that she’d died a few years before, when he was 15. Sadness returns. In this chapter, we learn about the woman who was “the single most influential person” in his life, his maternal grandmother, whom he nicknamed "Ma." Beginning at age five, he spends every weekend with her, having “adult conversations” as she instills in him a fascination for current events by reading Lansford’s *Times News* or *Reader’s Digest* to him and watching TV news. Most importantly, she provides a safety net of acceptance and affection for him not available at home. “My grandmother made me feel like I was somebody, like I mattered. No one else ever made me feel that way.” Over games of poker and gin rummy, he listens to her stories of the Great Depression and is impressed by her resilience. She also teaches him practical life lessons--the art of ironing, how to wash clothes in the bathtub, how to sew, cook and make a bed, military style. A chain smoker, "Ma" is periodically ill, then diagnosed with lung cancer. James prays that his grandmother won’t die. As she deteriorates, he reads the newspaper to *her*. The chapter ends with her death, at age 77, and the 15-year-old’s deep grief at losing the one person he adored. We segue back into the “harsh reality of war.”

Chapter Five: “No Trouble Identifying My Body”

The scene begins with Private Curry hosing down the inside of a Humvee, scrubbing away the blood of his wounded and dead comrades, a heinous job assigned to him as the lowest man on the totem pole. Here’s we’re immersed in the bloodiest city in Iraq, Fallujah , where Curry bonds with his Engineer Unit, each Marine assigned his own *battle buddy*: “We trusted each other with our lives and knew we’d die for one another if

the situation called for it." Whether in a convoy or a helicopter, Curry faces death daily. We witness his account of a nightmare helicopter fight in which Curry and his squad are nearly killed: "Suddenly, the chopper veered sharply yet smoothly to the right. Centrifugal force threw me against the side of the cockpit, as my stomach dropped. Chills raced through my body and my heart was pounding furiously. I can remember reaching for my dog tags to ensure they were still around my neck. I didn't want there to be any trouble identifying my body if we wound up as wreckage scattered across the ground." Curry, a "helpless passenger," now feels betrayed by his Marine training—which doesn't prepare him for a recurring sense of "powerlessness" under conditions he can't control. What follows is an insider account of defective equipment and military policies that are inadequate in protecting him and his comrades.

Chapter Six: "Jimmy, You Know I Love You, Right?"

Calling home from Iraq, Curry avoids talk of mortar attacks and death as he connects with his mother, whom he doesn't want to worry. The conversation is awkward and ends quickly. Later, in flashback, he reflects further about his family history and its dysfunction, including the heroin addiction of his biological father, Alexander, which leads to his death from a drug overdose at age 36. Afterward, his mother marries her husband's brother, Charlie, and "all the hugs and kisses disappear" for six-year-old James. He recounts his first view of his abhorrent stepfather. "One morning, I woke up and was about to leave my bedroom when I stopped dead in my tracks. Some drunken, naked guy was stumbling from the kitchen to my mom's room. And he never left." Domestic violence ensues. His stepfather often slaps, drags, and punches his mother as he and his three siblings, Michael, Alexandria, and Linda, watch in horror, screaming and crying, begging him to stop before calling the police. During one such assault, James grabs a sewing machine and hurls it at Charlie, knocking him down as his sister holds a knife to his throat. "If you ever put another hand on my mom again, I'll fucking kill you," she tells him. James is constantly worried that Charlie will kill his mother. But he grows angrier at his mother too and resents her for staying with Charlie and not protecting his siblings as the verbal abuse continues. The hardships of childhood lead to a total emotional shutdown, an asset in Iraq.

Chapter Seven: "What Are We Dying For?"

Curry's Unit, Bravo Company, is under heavy fire daily, and one comrade after another is killed beside him. He's obsessed with death and dying, and his confidence in the mission is compromised by his growing skepticism about the purpose of American involvement in Iraq. *Why* are he and his comrades there in the first place? What are they accomplishing and dying *for*? He paints a picture of the unique enemy in Iraq and the Marine response to it, carrying out missions while doubting their purpose. Curry explains the impotent U.S. strategy of "winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people," hoping their support will weed out insurgents. Meanwhile, death is a pedestrian experience in Camp Fallujah's ER: "Two female doctors are carrying a black body bag out of the back of Bravo Surgical to a nearby freezer in the sand. They handle the body as if it was nothing, just thrown onto the pile like stacking firewood." Adding to his grief, Curry details the politics of war, and believes his superiors make questionable decisions that actually endanger the lives of servicemen. He also reveals the Marines' abuse of prisoners in the Camp Fallujah detainee center: "Men were kept in dog cages, relieving themselves there, not allowed to use bathrooms. At mealtime, they were marched to a huge hole in the sand to eat a meal. My gut told me this was totally wrong, a violation of the Geneva Conventions." In the midst of this, Curry is nearly killed a second time while facing down the enemy on the ground in a Humvee without sufficient armor to protect him. Again, he notes: "The government didn't seem to care about troop safety as most of the military vehicles were 'soft,' i.e. not reinforced for combat in any way. We felt like sitting ducks."

Chapter 8—"Michael's Going To Jail Again!"

While still in Iraq, James is disturbed by the news that his 15-year-old brother, Michael, has been arrested, yet again, for cocaine and marijuana use. He's spent the majority of his teenage years in juvenile detention facilities for infractions that include running away, vandalism, underage drinking, and building a bomb in his high school. Curry is intensely frustrated by his brother's behavior and by his mother--who enables her younger son by continually bailing him out and making excuses for him. With no positive male role

model to rein him in, James worries that his brother will follow in the footsteps of their father, and could wind up dead or in prison. On a home leave, James witnesses Michael using drugs and angrily books a flight back to Camp Pendleton, unable to tolerate his brother's defiance or his mother's permissive attitude: "I stayed mad for a long time after that. It did, however, make leaving for war easier. I needed to get away. For the reminder of my time in Iraq, I didn't speak to my mom, or anyone else in my family. I spent the last two months solely focused on the war. What was going on at home bothered me, but I distanced myself from it as best as I could. The on-going war effort was enough to distract me."

Chapter 9—The Absence Of Enemy Fire

After seven months of active combat, James arrives back in the U.S. relieved to be home but grief-stricken that so many of his brothers didn't make it. We learn more about the distinct personalities of his comrades and the deep connections made in Iraq. Those who did survive are now housed at the West Coast base of the Marines at Camp Pendleton, in a building Marines jokingly referred to as a "crack house"—World War II barracks previously condemned. Trash bags cover broken windows. Hot water is a rarity. Curry gets the news that the personal belongings held in storage while he was in Iraq were lost in a fire at Camp Pendleton. His nights are filled with violent dreams, haunting memories of Iraq, while daytime hours are tortured as well. Suffering from post-traumatic stress, Curry is on high alert, anxious and paranoid despite the absence of enemy fire. "While driving on the highway, I feared IED's; if a car followed too closely, I pulled over, thinking that a driver might detonate hidden explosives. In restaurants, I sat in the back, suspicious of everything." This readjustment period in the U.S. is painful as Curry grapples with survivor guilt and sorrow.

Chapter 10—"Do People's Heads Really Explode?"

That's the insensitive question Curry's older sister, Alexandria, asks him upon his return visit to Pennsylvania after combat deployment ends. "Are you kidding me?" he exclaims. "No," she says casually, "my friend in the National Guard said that when people get shot, their heads blow up." Curry thinks back to the dead Marines at Bravo Surgical, the

coffins lined up on the back of the plane, the blood-stained Humvees that he scrubbed clean—all those images juxtaposed against the ghoulishness of his sister's inquiry. Angry, as always, Curry continues to stonewall intimacy with his family or anyone else. Meanwhile, his mother greets him with no embrace, as usual. He retreats to his childhood bedroom and sleeps. Nobody in the family talks about anything meaningful to him. His closest friends and family treat him like damaged goods, giving rise to "weird and forced conversations," and awkward moments, such as the interchange with his sister. "It was as if the proverbial 800-pound gorilla was in every room that I entered. The problems of my high school friends now seemed absolutely miniscule. I felt superior, more mature, more competent." At get-togethers with old friends, Curry is irked and conflicted when asked to be a pundit on the politics of war, the rights and wrongs of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Feeling alienated amongst those who never served, "home" is no longer home, and Curry leaves quickly. He never returns to live there again.

Chapter 11: Life In A Bulletproof Guardhouse

Back at Camp Pendleton, Corporal Curry learns that one of his comrades killed himself while on leave at home in Kansas, one of thousands of U.S. veterans who commit suicide each year. He's shocked to learn that twenty-two veterans take their lives daily--a suicide every 65 minutes. "I saw that combat, even off the battlefield, became the gift that kept on giving. Most of us went through an expedited grieving process. We learned of tragedy, then filed it away somewhere in our brains. The Marine motto: 'Suck it up and move on,' is an act of self-preservation." But some good news surfaces: Curry is chosen for Marine Embassy Guard School, an elite assignment requiring top-secret clearance and a rigorous 8-week regimen, including CIA espionage training. Once he's stationed at an embassy, he'll spend most of his time in a bulletproof guardhouse. His primary mission will be to protect classified material and U.S. personnel and government property. Though stellar in the academics of the training program, Curry is cursed at and demeaned by his staff sergeant as inept, then almost removed from the program for his "alarming lack of maturity." Yet, he prevails and on the morning of graduation, Curry awakens from a dream in which he eagerly tells his grandmother the good news. The chapter ends with Curry's sense of loss and gratitude for his new assignment, a posting in New Delhi, India.

Chapter 12: "Devil Dawg Kickin' Ass"

After a 30-hour flight, the newly minted embassy guard disembarks from a commercial flight, observing that the stench in India, like burning garbage, is eerily similar to the odor of pollution in Kuwait. As the convoy proceeds, he notices that the streets of New Delhi are littered with debris, urine, and feces. This is in stark contrast to Embassy Row, in the affluent Chanakyapuri neighborhood, a pristine diplomatic enclave where Corporal Curry will now be living like a king, with his own bedroom and bath, plus access to a gym, bar, pool table, and swimming pool. Although relieved to be safe in India rather than under daily siege in Iraq, Curry is disoriented and unable to speak the language as he adjusts to a new culture. He becomes violently ill after eating at a Pizza Hut, which forces him to be hospitalized. Afterward, he finds a mentor in a 25-year-old sergeant, who takes the underweight corporal under his wing, adding muscle and tough love. Curry recounts disturbing, and often humorous, stories about coping with lunatic "walk-ins" to the embassy. He also has to deal with the ambassador's clueless wife, who asks if Curry generally flies "private or commercial." "Ma'am," he answers, "I'm lucky if the Corps doesn't stick me in the cargo hold." The chapter includes a face-to-face meeting with President George W. Bush and the First Lady: "Hi guys," says the First Lady with a big smile, shaking Curry's hand. Then the President to Curry: "Devil Dawg, I just want you to know, we're kickin' ass over there." "Yes, sir," he answers. After one year in India, the assignment ends.

Chapter 13: "India Was Poor, But Nothing Like Togo"

Reassigned as a guard at the embassy of the West African nation of Togo, Curry is appalled by the poverty of the tiny country. Even in the capital, Lomé, daily life is bleak; nearly-naked children beg for money, their parents struggle to feed them, and hygiene and health care are both non-existent. "India was poor, but nothing like Togo." The grim statistics reveal that only one in eight children will ever reach their fifth birthday. In contrast is the privileged lifestyle within the embassy compound, "which was like a slice of America," complete with a two-story mansion, marble floors, gold faucets, a pool, domestic staff, bountiful food, and clean water. Surrounded by the hardship and despair

of Togo's native population, Curry feels guilty accessing such amenities. Now, as a seasoned embassy guard and combat Marine, he's more confident than before and takes a leadership position in what turns out to be the smallest post in the U.S. State Department, with only five Marines and a Commander stationed there. Curry uses his experience to lead the detachment, while influencing the dismissal of an abusive gunnery sergeant, after which he steps into an informal unofficial leadership position. He is soon reassigned, at last, to a Western nation.

Chapter 14—"Fire In The Belly All But Gone"

Having begged to be deployed to a Western culture ("to preserve my sanity") Curry is next sent to Ottawa, Canada, the last assignment of his Marine career. It's a welcome respite from duty in third-world nations. But life in Ottawa isn't what he expects: "Many of the locals hate us because we're Americans—despised because of President Bush." Also, embassy life is no longer "cushy" as it was in India or Africa, as amenities are in short supply due to their cost. The Marine house is "a dump," with a leaky roof and inadequate heat. In contrast to the African heat, Curry is freezing. Meanwhile, his six-man team operates on "auto-pilot," routinely and effectively protecting the embassy and welcoming VIP's such as President Bush and California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. We learn that despite the incentive of a reenlistment bonus, Curry's motivation for military service weakens as he finishes an undergraduate degree in political science: "The Marine Corps no longer interested me. The fire in my belly was gone. My focus shifted to the next chapter in my life and how I was going to write it." Curry envisions another college degree, a career as a journalist, and living on his own, putting his needs first for a change. "I was willing to go anywhere that wasn't cold!"

Chapter 15: One Suitcase And A Volvo

Feeling liberated once out of the military, Curry transitions to civilian life. He refuses to return to Pennsylvania and live at home, despite his mother's desire for him to do so. Instead, with one suitcase and a used Volvo, he strikes out on his own and searches for a small city that might be receptive to a fledgling broadcast journalist, a teenage ambition he now pursues. El Paso is the place, he believes, as the market is so small. But civilian

life turns out to be a disaster for him. No longer under the protection of Uncle Sam, without the camaraderie of fellow Marines, and with no savings or a job, the broke veteran is unable to afford an apartment of his own. Instead, he starts living in his car, in the parking lot of a motel, where he finds a job as an $6 dollar per hour rent-a-cop. He's now homeless: "I started to think that this was the biggest mistake of my life. Why did I get out of the Marine Corps? I should have stayed in. It didn't take long before I found myself in tears." Refusing to give up and move home, he eats leftovers from the motel buffet, saving money and eventually getting a cheap apartment of his own. He fights against depression by obsessively calling every TV station in town, applying for an entry-level job as a producer. Everybody turns him down: "My mannerisms, language, cockiness and Marine demeanor, the very things I was proud that the Marine Corps gave me, seemed to bother people." But the news director at KTSM-TV takes a chance on Curry and hires him, part-time, for $8 per hour. It's his big break, and he writes scripts, operates the teleprompter, and assists the newscast producer.

Chapter 16: "Most Of Them Just Laughed At Me"

After just five months on the job in El Paso, Curry finds a better position at a local station in San Diego, a Marine /Navy town where his background will be well utilized in covering military stories. Glad to back in California, the 23-year-old is quickly intimidated by the station's highly experienced staff. But he's determined to master his new job, and his no-nonsense demeanor impresses his boss. He's soon producing two hours of morning news daily. Unlike many of his colleagues, he has access to insider information from Marine contacts, and gets exclusives for the station, some of the stories even going national. All raw ambition, Curry lacks people skills. He throws a mammoth temper tantrum when an anchor ignores him, and learns that he needs to soften his style in order to hold onto his job. After a year in San Diego covering car crashes, gang shootings, and military plane crashes, he's bored. His goal? "I told everyone I was going to be a network producer before I was 25. Most of them just laughed at me!" But that's exactly what happens shortly after CNN International hires him.

Chapter 17: The NFL Of Journalism

Within five months of working as an entry-level "media coordinator" (i.e. gopher, collecting video clips from around the world), Curry is promoted, making him the youngest producer ever hired by CNN. "I was in awe. CNN was the NFL of journalism and I was ecstatic to be part of it." Working 14-hour days in the giant block-long Atlanta newsroom, Curry thrives covering international events— everything from the 2010 earthquake in Haiti to the killing of Osama Bin Laden. As he gets to know the anchors around him, he's secretly intrigued by their eccentricities. One international reporter is poised on-air, foul-mouthed off-camera; another favors shoe lifts, self-conscious about his height. Amusing anecdotes abound. As for his own appearance, Curry looks barely beyond his teens, so his boldness is all the more disarming. One day, a Senior VP of CNN International opens the door of his office, remote control in hand, takes one long look at Curry, and exclaims: "James, you must have some really big balls." Only slightly intimidated by the network's icon anchors like Anderson Cooper, Candy Crowley, Christiane Amanpour, and Wolf Blitzer, he holds his own, ebullient during long work hours, fully immersed in the culture of CNN. But the honeymoon is short-lived.

Chapter 18: A Reason To Live: The Gift Of Cancer

In this, one of the book's climactic chapters, Curry is thriving at CNN when disaster strikes. One night while eating dinner, he's unable to swallow his food without severe pain. For four days, he suffers, unable to even swallow water, until his brother Michael, now sober and visiting him in Atlanta, insists that he see a doctor. We follow Curry's initial avoidance and denial, then panic and fear as he learns the sorrowful news: He has a large tumor growing in his chest and is in Stage 2 of Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, extremely rare for someone under age 60. The resulting ordeal includes a terrifying bone marrow biopsy and weeks of painful chemotherapy and radiation—which damage his skin, heart and lungs. "Chemotherapy," he writes, "feels like a hangover multiplied by 100, followed by drinking a bottle of bleach. It starts with constant nausea and gets progressively worse, peaking with bouts of violent vomiting, followed by a few minutes of short-lived relief before the cycle starts all over again." He subsists on nausea medication, Ensure, hard candies containing ginger, fruit, and Jell-O. Although skeletal,

bald, and taking 14 pills a day, Curry never misses a day of work. Through it all, in a startling reversal, Curry grows close to his mother, who flies back and forth each week from Pennsylvania to take care of him. Fighting his cancer is the bridge that ever so slowly brings them together again.

Chapter 19: A Radical Epiphany

Curry grows close to his fellow cancer patients and suffers extreme side-effects from the chemotherapy and radiation: hot flashes, constipation, bloody stool, bleeding colon, erectile dysfunction, nausea, vomiting, trouble swallowing, shortness of breath, loss of taste, weight loss, mood swings, not being able to urinate, spots on his fingernails, and severe exhaustion. But out of that suffering comes triumphant news: his cancer, "caught early," is in remission, all evidence of the tumor gone. Curry's spiritual transformation is a radical one. Previously, his emotions ranged from angry to angrier--and he was often critical and intolerant of others. He was estranged from his family, holding onto decades-old resentments. But now, in the cancer ward, he finds redemption—a new way of behaving and seeing things. Transformed by the threat of death, and inspired by the courage of fellow cancer patients, he lets down his guard and openly expresses his grief and fear. Tears flow. Friendships deepen. Connections are reignited. He's physically demonstrative, receptive to the caring of friends and colleagues. He's also touched by the devotion of his mother and finally forgives her. He begins to see cancer as a gift, not a curse or a tragedy. "Cancer didn't kill me, but it killed off some aspects of my psyche that needed to die," he writes, including his sole focus on career at the expense of his humanity. No longer so direct or aloof, Curry taps into his more tender, compassionate side, allowing people to penetrate the bubble of his defenses. "My old way of living was now obliterated." He appreciates life. Instead of actively hating his stepfather, Charlie, he detaches entirely from him, inwardly relinquishing the rage that has consumed him. "Although I never spoke to him about the past, forgiveness was about *me* letting go of resentment and anger, not about him being my friend." He's becoming a man in the fullest sense, while recognizing his cancer as the catalyst toward a brand-new life.

Chapter 20: "Strange When You're Around"

After more than four years at CNN, having survived cancer and grown ever closer to colleagues at work, Curry begins thinking about leaving the network. His learning curve has slowed, he's increasingly ssbored, and the possibility for advancement shrinks. "When you do the same thing over and over, the glamour wears off. The news changes, but the job doesn't. CNN is a factory. Each person is locked into their niche--and there's little room to break out of the comfort zone." As new management begins a series of layoffs, Curry is openly critical of the network's new worldwide President, Jeff Zucker, formerly President and CEO of NBC Universal. At a CNN town hall meeting held in May 2014, Curry offers an impertinent critique of Zucker during a Q&A with Anderson Cooper: "How do we stop managers from being afraid of you? It seems everyone is on pins and needles whenever you give guidance . . . The bottom line is managers act very strangely when you're around." Page Six of the New York Post runs a story on it: *CNN boss Zucker shocked by staffer's fearful question*." After careful consideration, Curry resigns from CNN four months after this incident, anxious to move to the New York City market and produce programs for larger audiences. Curry soon snares a job at Fox Business, producing *The Independents,* a libertarian show focusing on current events.

Chapter 21: "I've Trained My Brain"

Curry's TV career thrives as he rubs elbows with such Fox anchors as Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Geraldo Rivera. Unlike the management at CNN, which was focused on news content and great journalism, Curry quickly sees that Fox is consumed with ratings and numbers. And within months of taking the job, he makes the decision to return to his journalistic home at CNN. He remains committed to his job, but is no longer a workaholic who spends countless hours at the studio at the expense of his personal life or health. His priorities shift from professional to personal. Although he admits that he'll never have an ideal relationship with his family, he cultivates a more positive one, having forgiven those who hurt him. He mentors his siblings. He's more emotional and affectionate with friends and colleagues. He's open and friendly to complete strangers: "I'm the guy you don't want to sit next to on a plane or a park bench. I want to talk and connect because I'm genuinely interested what people are thinking and feeling." I've

trained my brain to think differently about people and the importance of feelings and emotions." While Curry's lymphoma is four years in remission, he lives with the threat of it returning, while he's also more vulnerable to other kinds of cancer. At age 29, he's mature beyond his years, his character seasoned by the struggles of his youth, the traumatic months in Iraq, the obsessive struggle to succeed as a producer, and the transformative power of fighting cancer. Having battled emotional deprivation and death time and again, a sanguine Curry looks ahead to a healthier, happier life, confident that he's capable of facing whatever comes his way. In this final chapter, he details the lessons he's learned and how he puts them into practice.

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