

Summer 1998

The Shed

I have always believed that the good things that happen in our lives are meant to be there for us in our heart's memory to serve as a source of strength when the bad times hit. The summer of 1998 was going to be one such time.

I'd had surgery at the end of May and was staring at several weeks of recovery. My job had ended and I had already decided that I would wait until the fall to begin looking for something else. My son was growing up and in a few years, he'd be off to college and out on his own. Even as I lived those summer days in 1998, I was well aware that time was slipping ever so quickly past and that it was a time meant to be cherished. Looking back now, after the tragic event that took place in November of 1998, perhaps it was a gift from God, who already knew what was to take place; one last good time before the worst thing that could happen would spin our lives out of control.

I'm not a very good patient. I had a summer to spend with my son and I wasn't going to spend it lollygagging around in recovery. Largely ignoring the directives of the surgeon, I forged ahead with my own idea of recovery. While his dad worked, Josh and I played.

Josh had recently begun learning to play bass guitar, and I decided we should take guitar lessons together that summer. I'd played guitar for years, but wanted to learn some new techniques and perhaps learn to finally read music. After our lessons, we would return home and practice together and would laugh at the bass guitar instructional video we'd picked up at the music shop. "Play this several tahms" the southern voice drawled at us from the video player.

We went to matinees and saw movies like "Ever After". I remember that the last film we watched in the theater together was "What Dreams May Come". We ate lunch out often, went to browse in book shops, rode our bikes, took Beauregarde for long walks along the beach and spent time out in our backyard pool. It seemed that those times in the pool, once the roughhousing and cannonballs were past, when things settled down into the quiet of contemplative talk, Josh was able to express some of his fears and feelings to me in ways that he might otherwise have kept hidden. I cherished those times while we lived them and cling to them now in the memories of my heart.

As a family we had our last vacation over on the Gulf Coast; taking in a Devil Rays baseball game, going to the beach and playing miniature golf. Josh and I spent a lot of time on the beach, watching early evening storms roll in, mesmerized by the lightning dancing between the clouds. I remember one such evening when I'd said I wished I had my Nikon to capture the sunset

just before it was swamped by the impending storm. Josh, said, "I'll go get it for you, Mom!" and in a flash, he was charging barefoot across the sand over to the apartment we'd rented to retrieve my 35 mm. I was able to only fire off a couple of shots before the lightning came too close for comfort and we were outrunning huge splashes of raindrops.

And, this was soon to be known as The Summer of The Shed.

It was after we'd returned home from our vacation at the Gulf that I got into my head that we should replace the dilapidated sheds that we'd had removed earlier in the year. They had just barely been standing, actually, and I thought why not get one fairly good-sized shed to replace them?

So, it happened that one hot, humid August afternoon, Josh and I found ourselves standing in the shed aisle at Lowe's, deciding on which one we were would tackle as our summer mother/son project. Steve wanted no part of it, but allowed us our little fantasy that we might actually be able to get such a structure erected.

The picture on the box of the 10x14 shed we finally chose, depicted two smiling people standing next to their completed weekend two-man project. It didn't look too formidable to Josh or to me. I mean, those two people in the photograph hadn't even broken a sweat. How difficult could it possibly be?

The ad in the paper had said this shed was \$397. What the ad failed to mention was that you also had to purchase the floor kit. Add \$64. Unless, of course, the sales rep told us, we planned to pour a concrete floor. (Yeah, right; give me a break!) The plywood recommended for the floor ran us another \$129.50. And, another twenty bucks to pay the store to drop the bulk of it at our house. One box alone, the sales rep informed us, weighed well over 300 pounds.

So, before I knew it, we were paying for the shed, all the necessary components and making arrangements for it to be delivered to our yard later in the week. The floor kit and the wood we had cut for it, was transported home in my trusty little Ford Ranger, Foxworthy. Granted, a good deal of it was sticking out of the back, but we managed to get it home without incident.

Upon our arrival home, Josh and I changed into shorts and t-shirts and began the serious prep work; water bottles, boom box, an assortment of cds, and the tie-out chain for Beau so he could be with the folks. Josh managed to find a strategic spot to position Beau's tie out chain so he wouldn't be continually wrapping himself around the live oak tree near our construction site.

After getting the important stuff out of the way, we began the arduous process of unloading the floor kit and lumber that would be the floor. This

proved to be a Herculean undertaking. The wood weighed a freaking ton and it was extremely awkward maneuvering everything out of the back of the pickup and under the carport, where we covered everything with a tarp to wait for Lowe's to deliver the shed.

If Steve had any misgivings about our construction prowess, he at least had the decency to keep them to himself.

On the appointed day, a huge truck rumbled down our little street and somehow backed into our driveway and the three boxes that contained the bulk of our weekend project was dumped unceremoniously onto the lawn. A large man in a t-shirt and incredibly tight jeans swaggered over to me for my signature on the paperwork and in exchange for that, handed me an enormous plastic sack of nuts, bolts and washers announcing, "Here's your stuff."

I gulped and shot a glance of concern Josh's way. "That's a great lot of stuff in that bag," I pointed out.

"I'm going to need some music," I informed Josh as I scraped through the pile of cds and settled on the five-cd boxed set, Time Traveller by the Moody Blues.

Josh grimaced as I put the first cd in the boom box. "Are you going to listen to all five of them?" Josh wanted to know.

He wanted Natalie Imbruglia or the Godzilla soundtrack instead. We compromised. One Moody Blues cd, then one of his choice, back to the Moodies, and then another of Josh's.

After what seemed an eternity, with thunder rumbling in the distance, we managed to finally get the frame for the floor assembled. Steve was just getting home from work as the first raindrops began to fall. He ventured over to survey our accomplishment for the day.

"You've got it together backwards," he pointed out casually.

"Backwards!?" Josh and I chorused in disbelief.

"Yeah, see here and there?" Steve pointed out the errors of our construction. "You've got the rails on the outside and they're supposed to go the other way."

I was in denial.

Josh, however, after scrutinizing the directions once more and looking at what his dad pointed out, came to the same sorry conclusion.

"Dad's right, Mom," he announced calmly.

Steve went into the house, leaving us to the task at hand as the thunder grew closer.

"How in the hell are we going to manage this?" I complained. I was hot. I was tired. And I was peeved that Steve just so casually knew with one quick look that we'd gotten the first stage of our project assembled backwards. "Easy for him to say," I grumbled more to myself than to Josh. "Him standing there fresh as a daisy.... He's not the one who was out here sweating bullets all dang day long, huffing and puffing tons of wood every which way."

"Never mind, Mom," Josh said, sitting down to peruse the directions once more. He took a sip from the water bottle and squinted at the floor frame for a couple of long minutes. He tossed the instructions to the ground and got up. "Let's just pick it up and turn it over. That way the rails will be on the right side."

It was no easy task, managing to get the entire floor frame in an upright position without losing the nuts and bolts holding it tenuously together. And, the lightning was drawing ever nearer. Handling a wet metal frame in a thunderstorm was not particularly conducive to longevity.

We somehow managed to get the frame flipped over without incident, and we called it a day. So much for our two-man weekend project. All we'd managed that first day was to assemble the floor frame. Wrong. But, thanks to Josh, it was salvaged.

The next day, we were out the door early armed with our music and beverages. It took at least forty-five minutes to get ourselves all set up with the tools, instructions and our entertainment. Beau was positioned in his usual tie-out spot where he nearly instantly began to bark at squirrels.

Our weekend project stretched into the first full week. Each day, the mail carrier would see us working on it and Beau would always eagerly greet him when he stopped by to see how we were coming along.

"It's not often I have dogs who love me like this one does," he remarked one day.

"Yeah, no pepper spray needed at this house," I laughed, referring to his little can of mace he carried to ward off menacing dogs on his route.

The mail carrier would always say something encouraging about the shed as well. "Wow, that's looking good!" he would exclaim, or "you guys are doing a really fantastic job!"

Sometimes he would arrive when we were trying to figure out something,

and I would ask him his opinion, but in the end, it was always Josh who saved the day by figuring out how it all fit together.

Many times during the construction of The Shed, I expressed doubt that we'd ever get it completed. What business did two people who never even built anything with an Erector Set have trying to build a 10x14 shed, anyway?

I thought we were in over our heads and said so on several occasions. Whenever I got frustrated, Josh would say, "Mom, hand me the paper." I would give him the instruction book, which, by the way, consisted of 31 pages of illustrations and explanations that made little, if any, sense to me. Josh would sit down on the chair with the book unfolded on his lap, sip on his water bottle, and glance at the pieces in question, all in total silence. Then, suddenly, he would toss the book to the ground and say, "Okay, I know what to do now."

It took us two weeks to assemble the "weekend project" pictured on the side of the box. We began to look forward to the afternoon thunderstorms just so we could call it a day.

I ended up having to buy a second ladder when it was time to erect the roof because neither of us was tall enough to handle the task. Josh manned the cordless screwdriver and it was my task to hand him the various nuts, bolts and washers. He would slip one between his teeth, as he operated the screwdriver.

"Mom, hand me another washer," he would announce without even so much as a backward glance at me, with an outstretched hand waiting.

"I just gave you one," I pointed out.

"I know. I need another one."

"Why?"

"Swallowed it."

"We could break for real food for lunch, if you're that hungry," I informed him.

I don't know how many of those things he ended up accidentally swallowing, and I was beginning to wonder about metal poisoning and things of that nature.

Throughout the construction process, it was Josh who sorted out how to fix what went wrong, and plenty went wrong. We spent nearly as much time moving backwards in the instruction book as we did moving forward. But, even one step forward and two steps back is still some sort of forward

movement.

And, it was actually beginning to look like a building!

It wasn't until we got to the last side of attaching the roof that the dismal discovery was made that the holes were not matching up.

"The floor's not square," Steve pointed out when he was home for lunch near the end of the construction process.

"Well, what does that mean?" I grumbled.

"It means the holes for the roof aren't going to line up with the ones in the side walls," Steve informed us.

"Oh."

Steve went in the house and I stood dejected beside the shed. "Now what are we going to do?" I asked Josh in despair.

The silence was palpable until Beau bayed at an errant squirrel.

Josh sat down to think. "We Can Be Heroes" a cut on the Godzilla soundtrack cd by the Wallflowers blasted from the boom box. The afternoon storm clouds began gathering gloomily in the distance. We were so close, yet so far...

"Okay," he finally declared. "I know what to do about this."

"What?"

"Drill new holes."

Ah ha.

So, that's what he did. Ignoring the ones that would never work, Josh simply drilled through the metal to line up new holes.

That was a heckuva lot more productive than my nightmarish thoughts of having to tear apart the entire structure just so we could re-do that miserable floor frame once again.

Just as the first raindrops began to splash onto the sand, Josh was finishing up with the final holes. He stood back, with the cordless drill hanging at his side.

"It's done, Mom," he said quietly.

"It is," I said in awe as I put my arm around his shoulders.

"You did it," I told him proudly.

"We did it," he corrected.

"No, if it hadn't been for you being able to decipher that mess and understand what needed doing, that stupid thing would still be in the box."

"Well, let's get a picture of it," he said.

I'd been taking a series of photographs each day to record our progress, and now there was the final one with it standing.

"Let's set the timer and get into the very last shot," I said to Josh.

I set the self-timer and Josh quickly grabbed Beau so he could be in the picture, too. "Beau helped," he said, giving credit to his beagle.

I thought to myself, "yeah, he was more help than I was!"

The very last picture on the roll was of just Josh and myself. Josh was sitting on the floor of the shed by the door, and I was just behind him.

"Well, Josh, this has certainly been a learning experience," I told him as we waited for the Nikon's self-timer to snap the shot.

"Wanna know what I learned?" I asked him.

"What?"

"I learned I am never gonna do anything like this ever again as long as I live!"

Josh broke into a huge grin and the self-timer captured the image forever.

As I write these words, it is darn near seven years later and that shed is still standing. It has withstood tropical storms and hurricane force winds. It was built all wrong from the ground up. But, it stands as a testament to what can be accomplished with a little ingenuity and a lot of hard work.

And a lots of love.

Summer 2004

Thoughts of Maddie

On June 17th, 2004, Maddie would have celebrated her 14th birthday, the age Josh was when Maddie was killed. Not a day passes that I don't think of

Maddie and the young woman she would have grown up to be today. Instead, in the shadows of my heart, she remains forever frozen in time at age eight.

In 1990, the year Maddie was born, the 17th of June fell on Sunday - Father's Day. No matter the day, I cannot look at Steve Clifton, who still lives across the street from me, without silent tears, but never more so than on Father's Day. It must be so very wrenching for him. Such joy he no doubt felt upon the birth of his second daughter on that Father's Day only to endure a parent's utmost worst nightmare only a few short years later, when Maddie was killed by my then fourteen-year-old son.

The image of how I found her will remain forever etched in my mind's eye; an image which will haunt me all the days of my life. It was quite horrible enough on its own merit, let alone to know my own son had something to do with how I found Maddie that morning in 1998.

Writing these very words is wrenching to my heart beyond belief. How much can the human heart withstand? I grieve the loss of Maddie, I grieve for her parents, sister and family members. I grieve for my son, who found himself in such a terrifying and terrible situation at 14. So much grief and hurt... it is unfathomable. It is relentless... always moving just beneath the surface, touching virtually every aspect of my life in some way.

I cannot imagine a loving God causing this to happen. Perhaps it just happened, and He is there to help us through it somehow. Like the Cliftons, I have kept somehow putting one foot in front of the other. Keep moving. I sometimes wonder how we ever made it through to this point, but realize in my heart that it is God carrying us on those days and long, lonely nights when we are unable to walk on our own.

I find myself still looking at young girls who would be Maddie's age now. I have done this ever since I found her. Seeing girls of 8 and 9 years of age in public never failed to reduce me to tears. I wondered how I would ever be able to look at Danny's daughter, Destiny, and not see Maddie behind her eyes staring out at me.

It took me a few years after Josh's arrest to finally find my way to Maddie's grave at Oak Lawn Cemetery. I pass by there often. And never do I pass without thoughts of her there and the tragic circumstances behind it.

September, 2002. Finally, after nearly four years, I made it to Oaklawn Cemetery, where, with my friend Janice, I found Maddie's grave. The sky that day was as blue as the sea, with large white clouds separating the great patches of cerulean blue. I'd risen early to go to the 7 A.M. service at church and when I got back home, I decided to haul my bike out of the shed, pump up the tires and take a ride. After awhile, I found myself in Janice's neighborhood and decided to see if she might be home. She was, and I was

invited in for a cup of coffee. When I told Janice about my aborted attempt to find Maddie's grave, she told me she thought she knew about where to look and offered to drive me over there.

Even then, four years later, I was terrified to be in that place. I seriously doubt that I would have had the emotional strength to go on my own. As I write these words, I can feel exactly what I felt as we walked towards that gravesite. Fear, remorse, sorrow... my heart felt like a cold stone in my chest. I wasn't sure I was even breathing. Would someone see us? What would I say if they did?

A weatherworn teddy bear rested against the flower urn, and someone had left a bouquet of flowers with a card. Janice and I sat down in the grass and talked about that seemingly endless day in November when I made the tragic discovery, with Maddie there in the midst of us. Tears flowed, but they were of the cleansing kind; the kind you shed when you need to turn the page of one chapter over to begin the next, wherever it may lead. It was heart numbing to sit at the gravesite of a little girl who would have been at that time, twelve years old, fully realizing that my son was responsible for her being where she is. In the end as Janice and I got up to leave, I looked wistfully back over my shoulder towards the gravesite and through my tears, whispered, "She shouldn't be there."

She shouldn't be there.

Summer 2005

Visiting Josh

It is dark when I am out the door on the weekends I visit Josh. To be at the prison by nine o'clock, it means I must be on the road by five am at the latest. The day before, I ensure that the little roadster I call Gemmie has a full tank of gas, and that I have the money I'll need for the visiting park, gas, and a motel room. The travel bag is always packed with the basic necessities and a clean change of clothing. I toss in some reading material, and now, a laptop to tap into the motel phone line. It is a lonely time spent alone in the motel room after the first day's visit. Having a laptop computer to access the internet is a way to at least find someone to talk to.

A few years have passed since I've had to spend the night away from home in order to visit Josh. He was moved at the end of October and it now means a long car journey and arrangements with friends to house-and pet-sit for me over the weekend.

This past weekend I was blessed to have nice weather, but it isn't always so. There are many times spent driving through torrential downpours and thunderstorms. Leaving early in the morning sometimes means I must deal

with a heavy ocean mist until the sun burns through the low lying clouds.

Before I got the Miata, I had an aging Ford Ranger that had about 200,000 miles on its original engine. On one drive home, in a downpour, I was in the passing lane on I-10 headed back to Jacksonville when the front driver-side tire shredded. I don't know how it didn't flip over. There was the time the clutch went completely out on the Interstate, leaving me stranded over night, and wondering how I was going to pay for the repairs being done to it. Always, mishaps of any kind occurred on my return trip to Jacksonville, and never on the way to visit Josh, and for that, I am thankful. If I don't arrive at my usual time, Josh goes into panic mode, scared that he'll be taken aside and told his sole parent has died. Josh's father died in an accident when Josh was sixteen years old, and one of his greatest fears now is losing me as well.

So, when I was able to, I bought the Miata, which is a dependable, and fun, ride. I need fun in my life, and this car definitely gives me a great deal of joy. Josh is always eager for me to be happy, and was thrilled with the car I bought. The morning I parked it in the front row where he would be able to see it from the outside area of the visiting park was bittersweet. Josh was thrilled about the car, but the sadness crept behind his eyes at the realization that in all likelihood, he would never know what it is like to ride in it with the top down, or even to take a turn at driving it himself. He never learned how to drive a car, let alone one with a manual transmission.

With my bags slung over my shoulder, I say goodbye to the dogs and tell them their Aunt Bennett is coming to stay with them, and with her, their two canine friends Coach and Candy. They won't miss me much. But I will miss them.

Closing the door behind me, I make a last minute check that I have everything I will need. CDs to listen to in the car when radio stations don't cooperate... money for the toll roads, my prison ID card, directions to prospective motels pulled from the internet... As I fasten my seatbelt and start Gemmie's engine, I send out a prayer asking for travel safety. "Please God, keep me safe, and keep my car healthy on this journey"

Pulling out of the driveway I cast a glance back at Nineveh, the name given to my house after it was blessed by a priest from my church not long after Steve died. I ask angels to stand watch over the house and my beloved pets while I am away. What is left of my family needs to be protected and kept safe.

Typically I stop only once and that is to pick up a large coffee at Dunkin' Donuts just down the road from my house, right before pulling onto I-95S. Occasionally, that large coffee will necessitate a second stop somewhere in the vicinity of Orlando. I hate stopping. I just want to get there. To spend time with Josh.

Traffic is still fairly light when the sky looks like it should still be in the middle of the night. Stars are sprinkled throughout the darkness of space, and I can see the moon shining through a few errant clouds. As I travel south, somewhere south of St. Augustine, near Palm Coast, I am aware of daybreak out over the Atlantic Ocean, not so very far away.

Travelling to see Josh, while carrying its own stressors, is decidedly a better journey than the return one, because I have our visit to look forward to and I am thinking of all of the things I want to talk to him about, and wondering how he'll look; and what's happened to him since I've seen him or spoken to him last.

I know there are a lot of things he doesn't tell me about what happens in prison. Some things I find out much after the fact from someone else. Josh never wants me to worry about him, but I do.

When he was first sent to an adult prison after being sentenced to life without hope of parole at the age of fifteen, my despair hung over me like a shroud. Would he be raped? Or something even worse? I was his mother, yet powerless to protect him from the many dangers that awaited him in prison.

The first prison he was sent to upon his sentencing was in Orlando, a central processing center where Josh would be evaluated. This process could last as long as six weeks, and in that time, he would not be permitted any visits or allowed to place any phone calls to us. We could exchange letters and that was the extent of our contact. I tried to get information from the prison chaplain, but was told only that he was all right. Nothing more. Speaking to the warden of that first prison, I was told, "We're going to get him processed out of here as quickly as we can. I don't want him here. He doesn't belong here." I asked him what he meant, and he replied, "He doesn't belong in prison." After further discussion, the warden told me he feared for Josh's life and didn't want anything to happen to him at his prison.

Josh was placed then at Sumter CI, not far from Orlando. He wasn't there a full week before his life was threatened and he had to be placed in protective custody. The weekend we would have been able to have our first visit since his sentencing hearing in August, was taken away. No one in protective custody was permitted to have visits. Or phone calls.

It was decided he was to be sent to Wakulla CI, south of Tallahassee, which was over a three-hour car journey away. He was placed in an open-bay dorm with sixty adult men, many of whom were incarcerated for sexual crimes against children. At night, as I lay in my own bed, I thought of my son, so very far away from home, in a strange place with all of these men, wondering if this was the night he would be attacked. Visiting in those early days, I saw how wary Josh was of people, even with his dad and me right there. Always looking over his shoulder, uncertainty clouding his eyes. How many times did he have to look over his shoulder when we weren't there?

When he was all on his own...

I think of these things not particularly on my way to our visit, but always on my way home. I think of Josh telling me he had to get in shape so he could protect himself and prayed that he would never have to.

The skies gradually turn from black to misty grey as I make my way down the interstate. A small trace of gold streaks through the grey as the sky shifts continually to shades of blue. I am thankful that it's a good day to make this drive. The first time I drove to Hardee CI, it was through a thick fog. Trying to read road signs was nearly impossible. My plan was to scout for a motel as I got closer to Hardee, but I could barely make out the road just in front of me let alone take in landmarks and buildings. It was not until after I left the prison after the visit that first time that I realized it is situated in a cluster of orange groves and not much else.

By hour three I am anxious for the drive to be over, but still have several miles to cover before I am pulling into the parking area. It is just before hour four that I am finally safely at my destination. It is just before nine o'clock am and already there is a line formed just outside the door where I, along with the other visitors, will be processed in.

One at a time, we are allowed inside where the clear plastic bag holding change and small bills for the vending machines, are searched. I hold out my left hand for the officer to put a stamp on it that is visible only under a special ultraviolet lamp. I am told to pass through the metal detector. Another officer seated at a table with a computer asks me who I am there to visit. "Joshua Phillips. J11775." I give her my name when I am asked for it and then am directed into a small room where I am searched prior to being admitted to the visiting park. My shoes come off, and lately, also my socks, which must be turned inside out. I am told to open my mouth so they can look under my tongue to be sure I am not smuggling anything inside. I put my socks and shoes back on and walk through yet another doorway where I will now punch in my visitation PIN into a machine that I must also place my hand into. On the other side of the glass, in the control room, my information is fed into the computer and a sheet of paper with my image and Josh's prints out. A locked door is unlatched and slides open and I step into yet another room, where I will now receive the paper. And I wait until an officer re-closes that door so the next locked door can be opened and slides open. I walk past the tables already with a lot of people having visits to the officer's station where I hand in my paper. Josh's dorm is then notified that he has a visit. I know that he is waiting for me and anxiously keeping track of the time. He knows that many times it takes me an hour or more to get processed inside, so he doesn't begin actively worrying until about ten o'clock.

He and I both remember one time I was visiting when he was at Lake Butler for dental treatment and I sat for six hours in the visiting park waiting. Josh

was never called for the visit, and although I kept asking the officers to please call him again, we never did have our visit. The officers told me that he was probably out on the compound and couldn't hear the loudspeaker for his call out because there was a plane flying nearby spraying for mosquitoes. I asked if they would send someone to check, but was told that was not possible; that officers have better things to do. I asked if they would send an inmate out then, and was denied that request as well. So, eventually, I left and drove home in tears.

I tried contacting the prison chaplain to at least find out if Josh was all right, and to tell him I'd been there, but no one would try and find him, but was told by the chaplain, of all people, that he was there for the inmates, not the families and that he could not be ferrying messages from the outside to every inmate. I tried to explain that Josh was only sixteen years old, and that he did not have access to his phoning privileges at this camp since he was only there for a short time; that there was no other way for me to contact him. The chaplain, of course, had no idea if Josh was all right or not at the time I spoke with him, and he didn't leave me with very encouraging words, as he was not about to go find him and deliver a message. He said, "Write him a letter." Which, of course, would take at least two days to get to him. Two days of him worrying about me, and possibly four or more with me worrying about him until he might be able to send a return letter.

It was, indeed, four days later, that I finally got a letter back from Josh. He was all right, but told me he'd been sitting in his isolation cell on his bunk, waiting to be called for his visit, and no one ever came for him, nor was any announcement made that he could hear. He did tell me that the chaplain did call for him to come to his office, and Josh feared the worst; that something had happened to me. His father had died in a car accident only months before and he was paranoid that he'd lose me, as well. It was a long walk for him to make to the chaplain, not knowing what to expect, and fearing the worst.

It was while he was in Lake Butler in an isolation cell that an officer stole his am/fm radio. He'd gone to chow and upon his return, found all of his belongings, all of which fit into two pillowcases, scattered all over the cell floor. An officer had performed what they refer to as a "shakedown" and it is always left to the inmate to clean up afterward. As Josh picked everything up, he realized his radio and headset was missing. When he was able to phone me, he was very quiet, and I know from experience that this means he has something he needs to tell me, but doesn't want to tell me. This time, he does tell me about the radio and that the only person who could possibly have taken it is the officer assigned to his cell block. Whenever an officer confiscates an item from an inmate, that officer must fill out a form and present it to the inmate, explaining why the item is being listed as contraband and removed. This did not happen. So, a radio, that anyone could pick up at a pharmacy for ten dollars, but which cost me nearly sixty dollars, was gone and there was not one thing Josh could do about it. The

only thing I could do was replace the radio at a time when I was making only \$8.50 an hour and trying to keep up the mortgage and running expenses of my house. As with everything, however, God somehow provides, and for that, I am most grateful.

Once inside, I find a table for us to sit and talk. Sometimes it takes a while for him to come up, and other times, it's only a few minutes. I know that unlike my pat-down search, Josh must strip completely and submit to a cavity search before and after each visit. When he was fourteen- and fifteen-years-old having to do this each time I visited him is unimaginable to me; the embarrassment and humiliation at having to submit to this in order to see someone from his family, makes my heart cringe. He has told me that periodically all of the men stand naked in a line in front of female officers as well as male officers and that some of the female officers will make some derogatory comment about one of the inmates, such as, "Baby, is that all you got?"

I know also that when Josh was fifteen, he was taken aside and molested by one of the female officers, but he never told me which one because he fears reprisals, even all these years later. Inmate grievances against officers rarely get very far and most times only create more problems. I have learned that I, while on the outside and free, must also choose my battles very carefully, always weighing the possible problems it may create for Josh, who may have to pay dearly for that phone complaint I make.

The door opens and he walks into the room, which is much like a cafeteria. The lighting leaves a lot to be desired, and it is always very noisy and sometimes hard to hear. I've noticed that at all of the prisons in which I've visited Josh, that it always seems to be the same group of inmates having visits. Most of Florida's state prisons have an inmate population of 1,000 or more, and the same 50 or 60 inmates get regular visits.

When legislation passed (finally!) that made it mandatory to house youthful offenders sentenced as adults only with people up to age 18, Josh was already 17 years old. This change came about too late to be of much help to him at all, and of the ten or eleven other juveniles he was housed with, only he and one other received regular visits. Mark Louis Dufault's mother and uncle came just about every week to see their son, but he and Josh were about the only ones who ever saw a parent or other family member. As a mother, I cannot fathom a child in prison not having a mother or father, or both, visit. What message does that send? Not only does the State of Florida throw away that child, but that child then also faces the same rejection from his or her own family!

This day, I see the door open and Josh walks through. I cannot get over how he has grown and try to imagine what it would be like if he were still living here at home with me. Well, most likely, at 21, he would be away at college and probably not living here now. Still, I try to imagine what it would be like

to see him walk through the front door for a visit, and to walk through the house, stop to pat his beagle, Beau, and maybe decide to take a swim.

Instead, he is where he is. Wearing the same clothes every day, day in and day out. Sleeping on a metal cot with a thin, lumpy mattress and an even worse pillow. No privacy at all, ever, any where. Not even in the shower or when he must use the toilet. Always, on display. No private time available to do anything at all anywhere. He sometimes tells me he longs to just sit and soak in a tub, let alone get immersed in a pool or wade in the ocean and feel the sand between his feet. It's been over six years since he last patted his dog. There are things he wants to talk about, but only very briefly, as it's difficult to dwell upon a way of life he no longer has.

From where I am sitting, I see him scanning the faces and when he finds me, his face breaks into a huge smile. I get up and in seconds I feel his arms around me and he's saying to me, "I love you, Mom. I missed you."

In return, I say, "I love you, too, sweetie. I've missed you so much."

Our visits fly by. We sit and talk about what's happening with his case, how his website is doing, what the family and my friends are up to. How is my job going, he wants to know, and was the drive over all right. I always tell him it was fine, even if it was a nightmare due to weather conditions, because I don't want him to worry. I keep things from him that he doesn't need to know, and he does the same for me, to save our sanity.

Sometimes, we will get a deck of cards and play various games. He's excellent with card tricks and although I've seen most of them before, it never ceases to amaze me how good they are. Always, the card tricks attract the attention of children, and he'll have a little group gathered around him to watch. Seeing him interact with them on this level, I am reminded how good he is with children. They seem to naturally gravitate to him, and he knows just how to respond to them. But, I cannot help but think of Maddie and how something went so horribly wrong.

One boy, about ten years of age, asked him after watching the card tricks, "So, what're you in here for anyways?"

Josh gets quiet and I can see that familiar look appear behind his eyes. "Something really bad," I hear him respond.

"Yeah, well what?" the boy insists.

I wait to see what Josh will say.

"I don't want to talk about it."

And the boy's father, an inmate, sitting adjacent to us, gets the gist of what

is going on and calls his son away. "Let them have their visit," he tells the boy. He knows why Josh is where he is. But no one actively discusses it in prison. Don't ask, don't tell is the unwritten code. Yet, a person's record precedes him. News travels fast in prison, and also from prison to prison. Whenever Josh has been moved, the inmates at the receiving prison already know of his impending arrival, even before Josh knows where he is being transferred to.

Transfers happen at any time for any number of reasons. Typically an inmate is moved every five years or so, in order to prevent them from forming friendships and possible gang affiliations with other inmates, and from becoming too close to any of the officers. Some officers are decent individuals, and some are on ego trips of power. They take great joy in beating down the self esteem of an inmate, and in some cases, even encourage other inmates to attack inmates that officer doesn't like for whatever reason. Josh has seen it happen firsthand. He related to me not long ago that an officer set up a fight in the shower between one inmate who had caused trouble for the officer, with two other inmates. It is not an uncommon thing to happen.

Other times, a fight may break out and officers will look the other way rather than risk getting injured themselves. And fights occur for any number of reasons. Many times it's not something major that causes a fight; it could be that someone was caught cheating at a game of cards, or someone didn't care for the way another inmate was looking in his direction. People get shanked (the prison term for stabbed) for minor infractions of the unwritten inmate code. Josh told me he saw another inmate get shanked with a plastic Bic pen that caused serious injury to that inmate. "Mom," he said to me, "you wouldn't believe the blood that he left trailing just from a pen."

I don't want to believe it. I don't want to know this.

In any case, with this visit, as with all the others, we pass the time quickly. Even as the moments are being lived I am consciously aware of how very precious they are. Right here and now, he is in front of me and I can see that he is all right, but once I leave, I fully realize that anything can happen in there.

We get something to eat from the vending machines, but none of it is particularly healthy. Fast food to be cooked in a microwave, but at least it's different from the usual things he eats in the prison cafeteria. When he was a juvenile, by law he was supposed to have been given extra servings of milk and higher calorie meals since he was still growing, but that never happened. Fresh fruit, other than oranges, is rarely served. This visit I'd asked him about bananas and he couldn't remember the last time he'd had one, or even seen one. It is all institutional food and cooked without much seasoning since so many different people have to be accommodated. It is much easier to keep things bland. We noticed in the vending machine this visit that

something new has been added; frozen waffles and syrup. It costs me about \$3.00 for three small waffles, and Josh very nearly says not to buy it because he thinks the price is outrageous, but I get it for him because I want him to have something he doesn't normally have a chance to eat. After he'd heated them in the microwave and was eating them, I asked if they were all right. "They're nowhere near as good as the ones you used to make for us, Mom." Nonetheless, it takes him less time to down them than it did to make them.

Count time hits around 11:30 and the inmates must line up outside to be counted. Count is done several times a day in prison to ensure that everyone is still there; that there have been no escapes. When count clears, the inmates may rejoin their families and loved ones.

There are sometimes other delays, such as routine searching of vehicles for drugs and random drug testing of the visitors. It's basically an infrared test to see if there is any trace of marijuana on your hands before you enter the institution. If any are found, your vehicle is then searched with the assistance of a dog trained to find drugs. The officers stress that the presence of marijuana on your hands in itself is not incriminating against you; because merely handling paper money that was handled previously by someone who had residue on their hands, will show up on your test. It's aggravating because these tests, while random and not often, thank goodness, take a good deal of time out of your visit time.

The list of rules is long. One hug and one kiss are permitted at the beginning of each visit, and also at the end of the visit. Anything more and you are subject to having your visit taken away. Hands above the table in full view. Nothing is to be carried in or carried out, other than perhaps a Polaroid that you pay \$2.00 each for during the visit. Money can be taken in, a pack of unopened cigarettes and a clear lighter. A deck of cards. That's it. No food items, no clothing, no books, no written correspondence, no photos. Photos may be mailed in, but only five per envelope. Books may be sent in only from Amazon.com or directly from the publisher. I am not permitted to share a book I may have purchased for myself. If I want Josh to read it, I must purchase a separate book and have it sent in. He may receive magazine subscriptions, but if there are any suggestive photos in them, they are ripped out, or the entire magazine is rejected. I learned that if I send him a postcard, even if I just tuck it in with a letter a photograph or two, that I must write on that post card, otherwise, the entire lot is sent back to me; rejected as containing contraband. Some of the rules make no sense whatsoever, but you learn to play the game.

Nothing special is done for holidays or birthdays. One day in prison is the same as the rest. Inmates are not permitted any presents for any reason at any time. There is no cable television; only the channels that can be received off the air is what inmates are able to watch. Josh isn't into sports much, so consequently he does not get to watch much television since the majority of the inmates want to see whatever the sport of the season is.

There is no air conditioning in the dorms. Nor are they heated except under extreme weather conditions. Josh, being a law clerk, discovered that there is a statute which states that air conditioning is to be provided, yet the Department of Corrections found that it's cheaper for them to pay fines than it is to cool the dorms. Only areas congregated by officers are kept comfortable.

The visiting park is somewhat air conditioned, but on the hottest days it's even uncomfortable in there due to the amount of people and the added heat from the microwave ovens that are going nearly constantly.

I tell Josh that I keep getting people asking me what his email address is and I have to tell them there is no computer access at all for inmates. That there are not even typewriters as the State decided it was too expensive to replace ribbons on them.

Another misconception is that medical care is free. Inmates must pay \$5.00 for medical treatment; and I believe Josh said that it costs 70 cents for each aspirin he goes to sick call for. He usually does without since it requires filling out a request for medical call out, then waiting in line. And, the medical care at many of the institutions is substandard. He told me about the inmate who had a cavity in an eye tooth and the dentist inadvertently drilled right into the sinus cavity so now the inmate's sinuses drain through his mouth.

An inmate at one institution, while Josh was there, died, after suffering a heart attack. He'd been using a manual push mower to cut grass on the inside grounds of the compound in the intense Florida summer heat. He complained to an officer that his chest hurt. He was told to stop being a baby and cut the grass. Eventually, the officer permitted the inmate to return to his cell; telling him to stop at sick call and get some aspirin first. Some time later, the inmate collapsed in his cell and the cell mate shouted for help. When an officer finally responded, he called for a nurse, who hurried to the inmate with an oxygen tank, only to discover the tank she'd brought was empty. The inmate died as a result.

Medical care (or lack of) aside, I worry about other aspects as well. At Lake Butler, when Josh was there for a short time, was put on display for other youthful offenders by an officer, who brought them around and pointed out Josh saying, "Here's the animal who killed Maddie Clifton."

After my visit on Saturday, I leave and try to find a safe place to sleep for the night that I can afford. There isn't a lot of choices near the prison, which is in the middle of a very rural area. The closest motel Josh warned me to avoid because he'd heard through the grapevine that it was a drug den. I did stay there twice, but the second time I found that on one side of my room was a man shouting that someone had stolen fifty dollars from his wallet. A fight broke out and I wondered if they were going to come through the paper thin wall. Eventually, that resolves itself. Then, on the other side, a man

begins coughing up a lung and can't sleep as a result, so on goes his tv set, which is apparently just behind my headboard. A siren sounds in the distance and draws ever closer, stopping somewhere just outside the motel. I try to sleep, but it's nearly impossible. The loneliness is crushing. I miss the company of my dogs; the feel of them pressed next to me in bed. At one point I get up to go to the bathroom and feel a draught and discover it's coming from an opened window at the rear of the room that had been hidden by a closet. I try to close it only to find that it's broken. The window leads to a dark alley behind the motel and anyone at all could just climb right into my room. Now, I lie awake on the bed with the light on, wondering if I would have enough time to grab the keys to my car and run out the front door if someone entered that window.

At least now, with the laptop, I can log on to the internet and find contact with family and friends. It helps to pass the time and I don't feel quite so alone.

Early Sunday I drive about an hour back to the prison, since the motel I stayed in this last time was located in Lakeland. I felt safer, at least.

The second day visit passes much like the day before, and it is over all too quickly. At least on Saturday, Josh and I know we have one more day together. But on Sunday, when it is close to 3 pm, we know that will be it until the following month. Going any more often than that takes too much of a toll on me emotionally and physically and places additional wear and tear on my car, which is going to have to last me a long time.

I think of all the things we have said, and the things we have left unsaid. All of this, I carry with me at the end of our visit. We embrace one last time and exchange a kiss. Josh tells me he loves me and to drive safely home. I tell him I love him as well, and to stay out of trouble. I know he won't look for any, but in there, trouble can all too easily find him. I don't want to let go of his hand.

He walks back to be processed out, and I wait for the first of three locked doors to slide open. Passing through the first, I have to place my hand under the infrared light to show the stamp. It shows, so I'm off to the next phase, where I re-enter my PIN into the machine and place my hand inside of it. I am "verified" and the officer in the control room checks my id. The next door is unlocked and slides open. I pass through the metal detector once more and out the last door. I don't look back. Josh will be held inside until I leave the parking area, so there's no point in looking back at the layers of barbed wire and the officers who patrol the perimeter with high power rifles.

I unlock my car and since this is a good day, I put the top down. It's now a long, lonely four-hour drive back home. I can sometimes make it to the prison in less than four hours, but going home, through heavy Orlando traffic, it takes me the full four hours. On days when I have thunderstorms to

drive through, it takes even longer. And I am exhausted before I even shift the car into reverse to pull out of my parking spot. I wonder how I am ever going to make it back home feeling this way. I miss Josh before I am out of the driveway. Indeed, I am missing him as we're embracing that last time before I walk out the door to continue serving my life sentence, for as surely as Josh was given one, so was I.

I just want to be home. I want to escape this long drive. If I can't be with Josh then I want to be free of all of this time I have to think about everything and be home, where I will have the distractions of the daily life I have had to rebuild for myself. I was once somebody's daughter. Somebody's wife. Somebody's mother. Now, I am just somebody. I ask God to help me through another day. To make His presence known to Josh, and to give him the peace that passes all understanding. I have learned that is the most valuable thing to ask for, whether it be for myself, or for Josh. And then I give it all up to God, for once Josh is out of my sight, I have no control over anything that happens to him.

In a month, I will do this all again, and will continue until the day he is released. I do not know how, or when, but I believe in my heart that one day he will walk out of that place. And that is the faith that keeps us both going.

8/17/2005

Redefining Home

Nearly seven years ago the world I knew fell away from my feet. All I knew about home lay shattered and broken about me. What was home without Josh in it? One morning, he walked out the front door to go to school and never returned. Instead, he spent the first night of many, away from home. Away from me. I thought my heart would stop. Indeed, I prayed it would so very many times. The pain in my chest was crushing. Paralyzing.

But my heart, broken as it was, continued to sustain my existence. Truly, the only thing that kept me going was the knowledge that my son needed me. More so, he wanted me!

The guilt I have carried deep within my soul torments me still. Some days are worse than others. I feared that Josh would hate me because it was I who was responsible for his arrest. I found poor sweet Maddie that awful morning and it was I who walked out the front door of my house to bring in the police. That single act destroyed the hope of so many people. Even as I walked out my front door, I was conscious of looking over at the Clifton house and thinking, "My God. Right now, they still have hope. And in a few minutes, they will know." And, I knew, that Josh would be arrested. What sort of mother turns in her own son? And what of the son? What would he do? What would he think?

How I wanted to protect my son! But doing so would leave another family in the continual heartache of not knowing whatever became of their sweet little girl. I had no choice... no choice in my own mind. In the end, I sacrificed my own son to bring some degree of closure to Maddie's family.

I say some degree of closure... there is no thing as complete closure unless one allows the heart to become so hardened and the soul so bittered so as to be able to completely close off what once was and can no longer be.

You can never go home again. Not really.

The things that made my house a home no longer exist for me. I made it as liveable as I possibly could, but in the end, I came to realize it was time to let it go. Friends were instrumental in helping me realize this to the point that I made the call to a friend at church who is a real estate agent.

I put the house on the market, and the day someone I knew from England was due to arrive, it sold.

While he was here, and we were sitting out on my deck by the pool pondering my next move, Ray, the guy who handled all of the repair work for me over the past few years, walked through the back garden gate and I told him the house had been sold. He asked where I was going and I said I had no earthly idea.

"How about a brick three bedroom, two bath house?" he asked.

How about it?

So, without even seeing the house, and stepping out solely in faith, I said, "I'll take it."

Tonight, the 17th of August 2005, I said goodbye to Nineveh, the house that was once home to me and my family. Ray and I stood in the empty house and he said, "Say goodbye now, Mel. It's time."

And, so I did. The tears fell instantly. Ray held me while I cried, all the while understanding why. Even though Ray has never met Josh, he knows me and that is enough for him to be a champion for Josh and me.

I took one final look around. The last room I said goodbye to was Josh's bedroom. At one time I never imagined I could even set foot in there ever again, but in time, it became my favorite room to spend time in.

With tears still in my eyes, I closed the door one final time. Don't look back, I thought to myself. Don't look back...

So, I am now fully in my new home. It is all my own. I have never had a

place of my own before. Of course, I share it in heart and soul with Josh.

Friday morning at 9 AM EST, at the closing, I will officially turn over my keys and receive in their place, a check. I'll pay off Gemmie and some bills so I can live comfortably in my new home and pay money towards Josh's legal fees.

It is a continual redefining of home. It may sound like a trite greeting card but home is truly where the heart is, and right now mine is in several places. It is with Josh in prison four hours away. It is with Danny, hundreds of miles north of me. And it is with all of you here, only a mouseclick away...

8/21/2005

New Beginnings

My new neighbor in the back, where our yards adjoin, but are separated by chain link, is a slightly built man of middling years named Mark. He was getting his backyard grill going and a massive black dog my own two had made friends with the first day they were here by rubbing noses through the fence, bounded over to me, his bushy tail waving over his back. Charles, I learned was his name, from Mark, who immediately came to the fence when he saw me approaching him to introduce myself.

It is so strange to be a regular person in this new neighborhood. The new kid on the block, but an unknown kid, although some have said they thought they knew me from somewhere (uh, perhaps the hundreds of times I've been shown on tv or been in the paper???)

All the while I am shaking Mark's hand I am thinking to myself, what would he be thinking if he knew who I was? What will he think when he does find out, which he most certainly will when the hearings get underway?

We talked of dogs and also of birds, when I told him I also had two cockatiels and a parrotlet. He told me he'd spent four years in Australia as a missionary and had been most impressed with the number of wild cockatiels he saw there. My thoughts turned to the number of friends here on Josh's Forum who hail from Aussie or New Zealand. I told Mark I had several friends from that area and that we all chat on an internet forum regularly. He commented on how tricky that must be given the massive time difference.

Turns out we have another thing in common; we both lived in Oregon. He lived in Springfield and Eugene, while I lived in Portland and Medford, but it gave us another piece of common ground to stand upon.

Someone told me weeks ago that when I arrived in my new home that it would be, for a time, anyway, a clean slate. Nobody would know me here or have preconceived notions of who I am or what kind of person I am. I would

have time for them to come to know me as I am, not as who I am the mother of. He's right, of course, but still, when I talk to my new neighbors, I am always holding back just a bit, as if I am feeling guilty even before being convicted of anything.

Still, I am very glad to have this time of respite; this time of their not knowing who the new kid on the block is related to. Right now, I feel safe, something I haven't felt in a long time.

This house that closes its unseen arms around me has accepted me and is committed to giving me safe harbor. How much of my old house's energy have I carried with me? How much of it remains in the furniture and other things that were at the old place? To be sure, I made a lot of changes to that house since 1998, and certainly since the summer of 2000 when Steve died. Still, if any of that old energy traveled with us, there is a newer, stronger one in place here right now.

I thought I would miss the old house more than I do. Truth be told, I don't miss it at all. I had to make a clean start and this is the right time. I was so hesitant at making the change. After all, there is an odd comfort in knowing the proven, however uncomfortable or unhappy it may be.

I was speaking to attorney Richard Rosenbaum and his associate Cheryl Zickler, who are located in Fort Lauderdale, several weeks ago on the phone. He was telling me that seven years, for a juvenile in prison, is in his experience, the breaking point of most kids; that seven years is all they can stand, because it takes at least that long for a child to realize the magnitude of what life in prison without parole really means. And Richard is absolutely correct, because Josh started feeling those pangs as early as last spring, right around the time the 48 Hours "Caged Kids" documentary aired.

And, I was beginning to feel those same pangs from another perspective, in 2002. The beginning of my life changing had its start with a trip to England; paid for by friends. It took me two years to adjust to being without Steve and to know I could, indeed, carry on under my own steam.

In 2003 came a pilgrimage to Ireland, and the purchase of my little Miata, Gemmie. I needed some unadulterated joy in my life. I'd had a taste of it with my trips to England, Wales & Ireland and I wanted more. Needed more. This little car was more car than I have a right to have, given my income and the legal fees I know I need to find for Josh in the weeks and months ahead. Yet, when I am in that car, I am... dare I say it?...happy. I take what I can get these days.

So, the change began for me a couple of years ago. A new car. A new job. Along the way, more sorrow, the most difficult being the loss of my father in April of 2004. He was my biggest fan and supporter. And, he loved Josh. Unconditionally. I miss him so very much and am in tears even now as I

write these words. Whenever something happens, I have my phone in hand and am dialing his number before I realize what I am doing. It rings and then the disconnect message screams into my ear, reminding me that he is no longer at the other end of that phone.

I have come to realize that happiness is fleeting. It is not a constant state of being, and must be continually cultivated and permitted to blossom. Tenderly pruned, watered, sunned and tended.

And, so now I've moved ahead one more step on the path.

This is such a fragile life. Handle with care.

8/22/2005

Ready to Go Home

I need to write about my Dad tonight. He is always in my heart, but he's been also on my mind a lot lately. I think, losing JoAnn in July has caused me to revisit this place in my heart that I rarely talk to anyone about in much depth.

Josh is the only grandchild for my parents and oh, how they loved him!

My mother, who passed away December 21, 2000, had really never been able to come to grips with Josh's arrest. It was through a mutual friend of mine and my sister's that I learned that after my sister had the horrible task of telling our parents what happened to Josh, that my mother could no longer even look at any pictures of Josh. The next time my sister went out to the house, not one photo was in sight. You would never know there was a grandchild who ever existed. She didn't hate Josh, she just couldn't handle the heartbreak of what happened. While everybody else in our family, including Ben and Danny, Josh's half-brothers, and all of our friends, found out on CNN and other national televised newscasts, as well as seeing it in print in every major national newspaper, what happened to Josh, my sister and my parents were saved that. Only just barely.

When Steve asked if we should phone my parents, my heart died a thousand deaths, thinking of how this news would crush them. If he had to tell anyone, let it be my older sister. Poor Judy. She had no sooner hung up the phone from Steve when it rang again. It was my father. "Judy! I just saw something on CNN! They found out who killed the little girl across the street from Missy!"

Judy, who lived only a couple of miles from our parents, immediately instructed him to turn the tv off and leave it off; that she was coming straight away to the house. My parents had just missed seeing their grandson's mug shot splayed across the CNN news screen by mere seconds.

I'll never know the exact content of the conversation they had that morning. My sister has never told me, and I don't think I'd have the endurance of spirit to hear it replayed in any case.

When I flew to PA that December to say goodbye to my mother, her face lit up when I walked into the hospital room. The first question she posed to me was how long was I staying, and the second was, "How's Josh?" My heart leapt with joy that she did still love him, after all, but my eyes filled with tears nevertheless.

Three days later, my mother crossed over, and my sister looked to me to comfort our grieving father, because she figured that after all I'd been through that I must have some magic words to make the hurt disappear from his heart. I didn't. All I could do, in the end, was hold him while he sobbed, my own heart just breaking for hearing him in such despair.

My father was the kindest, gentlest man I have ever known. He loved his family passionately, and that extended to Josh. Josh's hero was his Granddad and the two of them were inseparable when we visited.

After Josh's arrest, it was my father who listened to me cry over the phone when I tried so hard not to. He always knew. And I could hear his own tears in his voice when it was time to hang up the phone.

If anybody ever wonders what it's like to have a child, or a grandchild, arrested for the first-degree murder of another child, just know this... it is unrelenting agony. Seeing and hearing the pain in my father's eyes and voice were my undoing many times. Thinking about how my mother felt about Josh was another torment altogether. I feared she no longer loved him. And was too afraid to ask lest it be true.

After my mother passed away, my father, at 83 years of age, bought a plane ticket, with the help of my sister and brother-in-law, and flew alone from PA to FL to stay with me a couple of weeks. On his list of things he wanted most to do - VISIT JOSH.

I thought perhaps the long car journey would prove too much for him, but my father was insistent that he visit Josh each and every chance he could. He wanted to be there when the visiting park opened, and stay until it closed. And, so we did. I will never forget the look in Josh's eyes when he walked through those doors and he saw his Granddad for the first time in nearly three years. Truth be told, I wasn't sure who to watch first or most! I could see the tears in my father's eyes as he embraced his grandson. His lower lip was trembling as he tried so hard not to cry, and I could hear his voice breaking with emotion.

If the greeting was that intense, I can't even begin to describe to you what it was like when it was time for us to leave.

My father had the chance to fly down yet once more before his illness left him completely bedridden and I am so very grateful for those precious times we had together.

When my sister phoned me at the end of March, 2004, only days before the 48 Hours documentary "Caged Kids" aired, to tell me that the doctor said it was time for us to make a decision about our father, I was on a plane that same morning. My boss knew that my father was gravely ill and when I walked into her office and said, "Pam, that was my sister on the phone..." She knew exactly what it meant. "You need to go."

"Yes, I do. Right now."

And so I did.

My plane got in quite late, but the hospital had granted us the opportunity to come see my father that very night, even though it was well past midnight when we finally walked into his room.

The trach tube left him unable to speak, but when he saw me, his eyes spoke volumes to me.

He was then ready to go home.

My sister and I had been told by the doctor that we could make the decision to slowly begin weaning our father off the ventilator that was doing all of his breathing for him.. or they would continue treating him as they already were.

Looking at my father, emaciated, unable to stand, let alone walk, unable to eat or talk, I just couldn't imagine him going on that way indefinitely. The doctor had told us that even so, we were looking at days, perhaps a couple of weeks, before the emphysema and asbestosis claimed him. Still, my sister and I agonized and went home eventually to discuss what we should, and ought to do.

Early in the morning, the doctor phoned us to say our father had made the decision for us and he wanted us both there straight away.

We arrived and Daddy waved us both to his bedside. My sister sat on one side and I on the other, each holding one of his hands. I wondered if we'd be able to get through this, but knowing that it was his decision, and that he made it to save us the agony of it ourselves, was the supreme sacrifice in my eyes.

I could do no less than to sit by his bedside and tell him it was all right to go home; that Judy and I would be all right. We told him we loved him; that he was the best Daddy in the world to us. Any man can be a father, I told him,

but it takes a special man to be called Daddy by his grown daughters.

My father wrote in a light scrawl that he wanted me to read him aloud all of the letters I'd written to him since his hospitalization. There was a huge stack of them on his nightstand. I did as he asked. He always did love my writing and it was my gift to him to read those letters aloud to him.

When I'd finished, the nurse came in to say we were very near the end of the road, but that he could still hear us, so we should keep talking to him, so we did. Mostly, it was me, but in the midst of it all, another nurse hurried in, brandishing an envelope.

"Here! This just came in! I brought it right away!" she exclaimed.

My sister, sitting closer to the door, accepted the envelope and in a whispered voice she looked at me through tears and said, "It's from Josh."

I thought I'd disappear in my grief. With trembling hands, I opened the envelope and began reading to my Daddy the words written from the heart by his grandson. In that letter, Josh expressed how much he loved his Granddad; how much he valued the visits when he was in prison, and all of those jaunts to the park when he was little. I can see them still, in my mind's eye, walking down the sidewalk in front of the house where I grew up, hand in hand, Josh chattering away, my father patiently listening.

Minutes after I finished reading the letter, my father crossed over to join my mother in the greatest mystery of all. I know he's all right. I know they are both all right.

My father, though he loved us with all his heart, was ready to go home.

I love you,
Rissa Ria

8/26/2005

New Horizons

I can't say how many times songs composed by Justin Hayward seem to have been created from his having looked at my personal diary. I was first introduced to his music when I was 15. I was terribly depressed... to the point of thinking of ending it all. In the midst of all those terrible feelings of overwhelming sadness, for which I could never find a cause, I was given an unusual album by the Moody Blues. One evening in quiet despair, I put it on the turntable and in the darkness, as I was given to just sitting in candlelight, I put on Side Two of a concept album by the Moody Blues and got as my first taste of their music, a song called "Gypsy", which was

composed by Justin Hayward. It begins, "the gypsy of a strange and distant time, travailing in panic, all direction blind..." It piqued my attention instantly, because it seemed as though this guy really knew me, or at least had walked where I was now walking at one time in his own life.

Since that musical awakening, I have listened to virtually every song Justin has ever composed and find that so very many of them describe my feelings so intuitively. I find in so many of Justin's compositions, a great amount of spirituality and shared insight.

I have been fortunate enough to have met and talked with Justin personally a few times over the years, and am friends with someone very close to him as well. He knows of Josh's case, and in fact, watched both of the "48 Hours" programs. The first one, he was so angry about Josh's treatment that he punched a hole in a wall in his frustration! Whenever I have seen him perform in concert, he acknowledges me and knows how deep the hurting is in my heart, not only for Josh's sake, but for Maddie's as well.

Now that I have moved along one more step on the path, I am beginning to truly experience my own New Horizons

9/9/2005

Difficult Decisions

In the coming days/weeks/months, I will be faced with many difficult decisions to make in regard to Josh's case. I don't mind telling you that this responsibility weighs very heavily on my mind and most especially, my heart. There is perhaps, no closer bond, than that of a mother and a child in this world, and as far as that goes with Josh and me, it is maybe even closer than ever. When two people who are already so very closely linked suffer through a tragedy the magnitude of ours, it serves either to bring them even closer together, or force them apart.

Josh, as an intelligent young man, and as a law clerk, has an excellent understanding of the legalities surrounding his case that he did not have when he was 14 years old. While his emotional growth has been somewhat stunted due to his circumstances, he has nonetheless, got a good grasp on the gravity of his situation. A fragile balance exists in his world that no one, not even I, as close as I am to him, can possibly imagine.

I, too, have such a fragility in my own life. There are days when I hover between hope and despair, and at times, I will admit to you, I have hovered between life and death, when things have become so daunting and overwhelming that I didn't think I could possibly stand one more day of this life. The pain is that great in my heart. There is none like it that I have ever experienced. I have suffered the deaths of both my parents. The death of Josh's father. Of close friends and relatives. Cherished pets. But nothing

hurts the heart so much as this wrenching experience of finding Maddie 's body and all that followed. It has forever altered so very many lives. You can never go back, and at times, it seems you are hard pressed to know there is even a way out. A way through, with faith, has been my guide thus far, but even so, I wonder, if there ever is a true way out. Are Josh and I forever destined to wander through this wicked maze; is it a never-ending spiral? Or, is there, somehow, a way out? The way is sometimes so, very, very dark. Yet, we keep moving ahead, thanks to Danny and all of you, here, who hold out lanterns of love to illuminate our path. The glow of so many lamplights, I hope, also serve to help you on your own journeys.

To be sure, not a one of us in this world is without pain and grief of some kind that we carry. Pain is pain and cannot, and I don't believe, should not, be held as a yardstick against another's pain. If you are hurting for whatever reason, there is no pain like it in the world. The best balm is hanging on to the knowledge and the hope that there is someone who can just hold you, let you cry when you need to, and then help you dry those tears and gather up the courage to keep moving on.

As we are now moving closer to hearings and a possible second trial, I find that I am having a more difficult time finding that balance in my life. My job has been extremely stressful of late, and that has compounded the internal emotional strife that is beginning to deepen in regard to what lies ahead in the legal system for Josh and for me.

I don't like to borrow worries, but there are times, God help me, when I cannot help but think what will become of us if the second trial never happens, if Josh's sentence of life without parole, stays forever. Right now, the hope that he WILL get out one day is sometimes I think, the only thing that keeps him going.

When I am with Josh, and when I speak with him on the phone, I am a pillar of strength and hope; a voice of calm in his ocean of worries and thoughts. When I walk out the visiting park door... when I am in my car alone... that is when my defenses fall. When I hang up the phone, and am here on my own, only then do I permit myself to cry.

There are endless nights, even still, that I am in danger of drowning in my despair. Thank my God, they have been, of late, far and few between.

I don't want you to think my life is all doom and gloom. Far from it. I have a lot of joy in my life, and I love to laugh.

I have had such a good time when Catherine has been here with me. There is no age difference between us; that all melts away and I am always a bit taken aback when people say "you and your daughter..." (!)

In November, I am very much looking forward to having Debbie, from

Australia, here with me over Thanksgiving!

Then, at the end of December, I am flying to UK for a couple of weeks.

These visits from Cathy and Debbie, and my upcoming visit to England, each serve as an oasis that I so very much need in my life. My one hope and desire is that they find something of value in spending time with me; because I truly feel like I am always receiving and not ever giving back, and I so much want to make a positive difference in their lives as well.

Well, let me give you all a blanket apology for any moments of dark despair that I may, from time to time, in the coming weeks, dump upon you here. I work through a lot of my emotional turmoil in my writing and hope you'll all forgive me for the times I am so unlovable.

There are a lot of very difficult decisions I must make, and the weight of them is so very heavy upon my soul and my heart. I fear making the wrong choices and that Josh will ultimately pay the price for my mis-steps.

Please, keep us in your thoughts and prayers, most especially in the coming months.

Love is the only reason why.

Gentle Peace, Love, Light & Blessings,
Missy

9/27/2005

Rain

There's nothing quite like a gentle rain shower following a lengthy period of sunshine. Just before the first drops fall, the smell of impending rain appears on the breeze. I'm not sure what it is that we actually smell, but it's one of the most identifiable scents I can think of.

Watching the water weave lazy trails down the windowpane, I think about the magic of it all. The green of nature shimmers emerald under the rain and on the occasion when the sun manages to peek through a break in the clouds, we are treated to a beautiful rainbow. I try to imagine what God was feeling when He put this package together. How utterly glorious it must seem from His perspective.

It's been said "into every life some rain must fall". I ponder this phrase and the simple beauty of a rainstorm after a dry spell. My favorite songwriter, Justin Hayward, co-wrote a song with Ray Thomas titled "Never Blame the Rainbows for the Rain." A rainbow does not create the rain, it merely is a reminder that the sunlight still exists even in the midst of rain. If our world

were constant sunshine with no darkness or rain, nothing would grow as it should. We all, along with our earth home, need periods of rest from the sun in order to grow. A delicate balance of just enough hours of light and warmth, interspersed with just the right amount of rain and darkness is the circle of life God created. We cannot have life without death, light without darkness, or sunshine without rain, for one cannot exist without the other.

It is human nature, I suppose, to feel better on bright, sunny days. We all want life to move in a positive direction with as few bumps in the road as possible. When it rains, we must alter our path and change plans. Yet, there is a feeling of soulful contemplation that takes place in the midst of a grey, rainy sort of day that we rarely take the time to investigate on bright, sunny days. Perhaps God invented rainy days to force us to analyze the inner workings of our soul.

I've been reading a book about night seasons; times in our lives when nothing but pain seems to exist. The author of the book stresses that the greatest strides in spiritual growth occur during these night seasons; that we are made stronger through times of trials and tribulations. Indeed, there have been times in my life that I felt the sun would never appear again.

Everything was dark and rainy; day after day. But, then sometimes when I least expected to find it, a rainbow would appear, which meant the sun was shining somewhere. God's promise of a better time was reflected in that spectrum of light created by the ray of light passing through droplets of water. Have faith, the sun is shining, always, somewhere, is what God seemed to be saying. When half our world is plunged in the dark of night, the other half is basking in the light. A rainbow is proof that while the rain falls in one place, the sun still exists, even if we cannot directly feel its warmth. God doesn't send the rain without the promise of the sun's return, and that's a great comfort, just knowing that in time, the rain will end and leave us spiritually refreshed as the earth is also rejuvenated.

Immediately following a shower, breathe in the smell of dampened earth and realize how vital the rainfall is for the balance of nature. Periods of stormy weather are also vital for our spiritual growth.

I've spent a great deal of time wondering why this is so. Why do we not learn as much spiritually when things are going well? Is it because we begin to take the good things in life for granted? These are all queries that we, as human beings, ask ourselves continually. Why are things as they are? The truth of the matter is, we will never know in this life. God has the entire picture in front of Him and we are but small pieces in this puzzle of life. When we are a part of the picture, we cannot stand back far enough to get the view in its entirety. One day not too long ago I saw a full rainbow and ran to grab my camera. Even standing miles and miles away from this magic of light and rain with a wide-angle lens, I could not capture the entire thing, yet God always has a perfect view.

When I lie in bed at night and hear the rain pattering down upon the roof, it lulls me to sleep, knowing that I am safe, warm and dry. So it is when periods of sadness befall me; God is ever-present in the midst of grief and pain, giving me safe shelter. There are times when storms do great damage to our world, and there are equally times when it's not merely rain that comes into our lives, but seemingly relentless, damaging storms. Sometimes it seems they will never end, but God promises that they will, and they do. We come out the other side, stronger for our faith.

As our bodies need exercise to become healthy and strong, so too, apparently, must our faith need to be stretched and exercised to remain healthy and strong. "Use it or lose it" is a phrase that comes to mind here.

Looking back at days of rain, it sometimes seems that it has ruined the plans we had for those times. Perhaps it was merely meant as a reminder to ponder our strength of spirit. How we move through times of strife and sorrow can enhance the days of joy, realizing just how precious such times are. Oh, that I could remember to greet the times of sorrow as I view the gentle shower outside my window as I write these words! So easily I am able to see the need for rain upon the earth; not so easily can I see the value of a rainfall upon my soul!

Rain is a necessary part of life and it makes all the difference in the world when we choose to view it as a needed resting place for our souls to contemplate the glory of God's presence in our lives. While life sometimes hurts us terribly, it is of great comfort to know that this time of sadness will most assuredly pass. Just as the earth around us is made beautiful and renewed from the rain, so too are our spirits. God promised it with a rainbow.

Deep Peace,
Missy

9/30/2005

Change of Seasons

The air outside has gradually changed until now it is quite apparent I won't be doing any more swimming at the motel until the warmer breezes return. Pinecones are pelting my house and yard like bullets from the two giant evergreen trees in my front yard. I kid the mail carrier that it's a hard hat zone as he dodges a barrage of pinecones to deliver my mail. As I sit and write, another one hits the roof of the house and rolls down the backside where it will inevitably take a flying leap to the yard below. The dogs are frisky in a way that I haven't seen since last spring. And, the house is quiet with the air conditioner coming on less and less frequently.

This time of year used to be my favorite, especially when I was growing up and it was still permissible to burn leaves. My father had a lawn sweeper that he used to let me ride in as he made the circuit around our yard, pulling up leaves from the numerous maples that shaded our home. And we all chipped in to rake giant piles of them, just ripe for jumping into. I loved the mornings when I could see my breath when I opened my mouth to speak; the crispness of the air as the seasonal change was well underway. When my son was little, we could no longer burn leaves and have that wonderful scent upon the air, but we still raked them into great piles so Josh could jump in them and roll just as I once did.

Then, nearly seven years ago, when tragedy struck our family, autumn was no longer a season I looked forward to seeing. Instead it became a season of renewed grief, to be gotten through, rather than enjoyed as the anniversary date rolled around once more. Since November of 1998, change has been my watchword. Everything in my life and about my life changed dramatically one crisp fall morning, and once in motion, snowballed onward. When my mother died six months after my husband was killed in a car accident, I firmly reminded God that this was definitely my limit of sorrow and change. Yet, there was more to come. The deaths of friends. The hurt of my father's illness and death. Another bout of cancer for my sister. Throughout it all, my faith kept pulling me out the other side. People have approached me on occasion to say how strong they believe I am. Maybe it's not strength so much as my innate stubbornness to not cave in completely when the going gets tough.

As my faith was stretched to new comfort zones and my friends drew closer around me, my heart began the lengthy healing process. If anyone could examine it as it feels to me, they would see a heart that still sustains life, but shows the scars of its brokenness as if it were a Rand McNally roadmap. Indeed, perhaps that is exactly what it is; a roadmap of my heart's journey through this life. When metal is welded together, it's strongest point is at the point of the weld. I am hoping this is true of the places where my heart is welded together as well.

When I walk into the sanctuary of the church I attend, it seems that the church itself is alive. It is full of memories of joy and sorrow, of weddings and funerals, of baptisms and the echoes of last rites. The changes in so many lives intertwine with the presence of the Holy Spirit so that at times I think I can almost feel the movement of the church as it breathes.

Some changes in our lives are noticeably rhythmic, such as the changing of the seasons, the revolving of the earth around the sun, the ebb and flow of rushing waves. Other changes seem to blindsides us, sometimes, when we are least able to emotionally deal with them. We don't have control over these changes, whether expected or unexpected, but we can control how we react

to them. Sometimes a good cleansing cry is necessary to empty out some of the hurt to allow room for the positive effects of change.

Each of our hearts bears the wounds of our journey through life. We are as a sanctuary to one another. Together we can face the road ahead and know that somehow, all will be well. As I drove home from a friend's house early one evening, the sky was overcast; in fact, I had just driven through a rain shower. In the midst of all the grey, there was one bright spot shining through the clouds; God's reminder that no matter how cloudy the world gets at times, there is always a bright light shining its way through. It may not be particularly large, yet it is there nonetheless. Our job is to focus on the light to see our way through the clouded mist. God promises that the Light for each of us to follow is there. He knows. He made it.

Deep Peace,
Missy

10/2/2005

Thin Spaces

A couple of years ago when I first began studying Celtic Christianity through a series of books with one of my priests, and my good friend, Mother Travis, and another friend, Dr. Marnie Jones, it seemed a distant dream that the trip would become reality for the 18 pilgrims signed up to travel to Celtic Ireland, yet it did come about. All of us were eager to experience the thin spaces we'd read and heard about firsthand in perhaps the very place that invented them. Ireland is connected with magic through movies, folklore and written word, and we would soon be in the midst of that magic. Indeed, the time moved quickly, and in August of 2003, our pilgrimage began.

At Travis' request, I took my Martin backpacker guitar and played our Celtic chants as each evening we held our Candle Prayer. Those places we traveled to were thin spaces where we added our own unique voices, prayers and lives for others to experience after us. Travis told me that any place people consistently gather together in the name of Christ, or to celebrate God, is made holy. Some nights we had our evening prayer in the inn where we were staying, but many times it was out in an ancient abbey or church ruin...thin spaces-God places. At the ruins of Kilfenora we celebrated Eucharist at the base of a High Cross, joined by the surrounding sheep and cattle. At Clonfert, Travis and Father Wayne Carney celebrated Eucharist with us all, including our coach driver, Colman Roche, in the medieval cathedral founded by St. Brendan about 559. It was simply amazing to be a part of that experience, knowing how many others have prayed in that place before us and all who will continue to do so after us.

The climb up Croagh Patrick was profound, although I only made it perhaps a third of the way up myself. A babbling brook cascaded down the steep,

rocky, mountain, but at one simple turn, the water disappeared and all became absolutely silent. I stopped in my tracks, amazed at the complete and utter silence. In that instant, I realized I was, at that very moment, experiencing what is known as the Holy Hush. I felt my creator's presence all about me, and it was so absurdly quiet, that for a moment I thought I had lost the hearing in my only hearing ear (I have been completely deaf in my right ear since childhood). I actually had to start talking out loud to be sure my left ear still worked!

My own climb on the 2,500' Croagh Patrick held both disappointment and magic. The evening before, after I'd purchased supplies for the hike in a small grocery store in Clifden, my wallet containing my money, passport, driver's license, phone card and bank card, turned up missing. With a borrowed phone card, I was able to phone my bank in the US to cancel my bank card, but it was still somewhat clouded how I was going to get back home without my passport. In the coach on the way to Croagh Patrick, I silently negotiated with God, and St. Patrick, with whom I feel a link because Josh was born on St. Patrick's Day, saying if I made it to the top, might I have my passport magically returned to me so I could go home with my friends instead of staying on an extra day or two in Dublin. Imagine my disappointment in my failure to reach the top. I labored my way back down, and passing the statue of St. Patrick at the base, I said aloud, "I'm sorry, Patrick, but I just couldn't do it. Does this mean I don't get my passport back?"

After reuniting with the shoppers rejoined, we made our way back to our bed and breakfast in Clifden. Walking through the door, the owner of the establishment, Mrs. King, was waving a brown wallet wildly over her head. It was my wallet, sans money, but with my passport and other cards intact! That morning as our coach headed for Croagh Patrick, Mrs. King had gone to the supermarket to do some shopping and spoke with the woman at the cash register about my plight. Later in the afternoon, when her shift was over, the cashier started walking back home, eating an apple. Two streets away, in a busy pedestrian area, finished with her snack, she made to toss away the core. Two very full trash cans greeted her and she wondered why the garbage had not been collected the evening before as it always is. She chose one can over the other. A brown wallet lying on the very top of the bin made her stop. Remembering the story of the American who had lost a wallet, she picked it up and upon seeing the passport, realized that it must belong to the person staying at Kingstown House. She hurried it back down and handed it to Mrs. King a scant three minutes before our coach pulled in from the trip to Croagh Patrick. It was a miracle of events that led to my reunion with my wallet. I have to say that when the others in our group learned of my loss, I had people handing me Euros and keeping me fed and well-Guinness-ed. It was an incredible outpouring of love and kindness and I was humbled and deeply grateful to have these people as my friends.

So many things had to come about at just the right time for my eventual

reunion with my passport. What if Mrs. King had not shared my story with the clerk at the shop? What if the clerk had not decided to eat an apple on the way home? What if the garbage had been collected as was normal? What if she had thrown the apple core away in the opposite trash can? All these tiny, seeming minor events, all linking together for one wondrous miracle for me.

I had my answer to my prayer in the coach, but not the way I anticipated it. It was the grace of God that returned my passport and papers to me, not my ability to climb to the top of Croagh Patrick. God's grace, and not my works (or failure of in this case). It was, indeed, a most profound thin space in my life and one that my spirit will hold forever.

Deep Peace, Missy

10/8/2005

I think about the people who have entered my life in the past few years, which include all of you here on Josh's Forum. If our Creator puts certain people in our life's path, then he certainly knew I needed a lot of help, so he put into motion a series of events that would eventually lead me to this particular place in my life. Because of free will, such things must be pretty tricky because I most certainly could have missed the key to my connection here, but, I didn't miss that key point on the path. Something, no doubt, stirred from deep within me; a re-awakening of a sorely injured spirit that could find some measure of healing here in Josh's Forum.

Life's pathways are strewn with emotional and spiritual speed bumps. We'll be tooling along, just picking up speed, and then WHOMP! A speed bump pops up and slows us down and possibly even changes our direction entirely. A speed bump can be the loss of a job, the finding of a job, the loss of a spirit, the finding of a spirit... Sometimes, perhaps, it is just meant to cause us to slow down so we are able to notice something crucial to our spiritual development.

Even the physical speed bumps we encounter in parking lots remind me to slow down as I drive about. I know they are there because I can see them. Spiritual speed bumps are not readily seen; they just pop up suddenly, it seems. I know they're out there somewhere and they will appear, usually when I feel it is most inconvenient to slow down. But God knows where we need them and our free will dictates how we handle ourselves when we encounter them. We do have a choice before us; do we view this event as an ending or as a beginning? Fully thinking it through, I've come to the conclusion that there is no ending, only new beginnings from chapters of our life's book that never ends, not even when we step across the threshold between the worlds, for I believe that spiritual life is eternal.

We all have choices before us when grief and hard times overwhelm us emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. We can become bitter, hard and angry, or we can trust in our faith to keep putting one foot in front of the other, even when it seems our common sense is telling us otherwise. I know that for myself, it has taken over a few years to gain any sense of a comfort zone back; to feel as though I am not merely existing, but really living. As I began to find my way through the misty shroud that was obscuring my future vision, I slowly let go of some emotional baggage. The hand of my Creator was extended to me, and I chose to take it. It has made a profound difference in the way I live today as compared to seven years ago. That is not to say my heart is healed without scars. If it was possible to actually see the heart of my soul rather than the heart of my body, I am certain it would appear as a virtual roadmap of wounded cracks.

I have lived in the place where I could never go home again. I have lived in Camelot. I have been Lost in a Lost World. I have dwelled in The Land of Make Believe. I have seen Visions of Paradise, then was Lost and Found. I was Question. I have heard The Voice. On occasion I have been in the Promised Land. And, I have lived Strange Times, and Haunted. Sometimes I am never far from any one of these places. They are as rooms in a mansion that I move freely through. Some places I dwell longer than others, some I wish not to revisit, but do through memories.

Sometimes, I find that my memories color my present and hope of future. I linger there for a time and at some point, allow faith to renew hope.

Always, there is love. When I visited my son in prison a couple of weeks ago, it was apparent to me that as Josh grows older, he becomes more acutely aware of the ramifications of all that has transpired. It was during this visit that he and I both cried quietly in a corner of the visiting park. He said that he had feared losing our love and that he could barely believe it was possible that we would ever love him again. And, he looked at me with wet eyes and said his heart could hardly handle the fact that he was, and still is, loved.

It is the strongest emotion I know of. It holds together faith, which in turn, holds fast to hope. It is the link between all three and without it, the others would fall.

I have no idea what the future holds. Everything I have struggled for and worked for in the past several years to rebuild my life could crumble away tomorrow. It happened before, it could happen again. I am well aware of that, but I just keep conversing with God and keeping the lines open. I have stopped praying for specific things for myself. The best prayer I have found for myself is to simply ask for the peace that passes all understanding.

My daily purpose is to greet each day with positive outlook and do something passionate that day. Greeting the day with positive enthusiasm is an end in itself. Likewise, at the end of each day, I take out my gratitude journal and

jot down five things I am grateful for that day. The five blessings. Some nights, I have to really think about what they might be, but I write something down, even if it's "the dogs felt good snuggled up next to me on the couch as we watched tv together", or "traffic was light on the way to work today". Some nights, the entries are much more profound, but the main thing is to just enter something that is positive. It really does help me maintain a sense of hope and renewal as I explore my passions on a daily basis.

On days when I would like to do nothing more than pull a cover over my head and hide away, I make the choice to get up, and to seek out passionate people to hang with. Endorphins are released and absorbed, and before I know it, it is I who am passionate once again and there is a sweet peace in being told that I have made a positive difference in somebody's life, if only by sharing my passion.

We, each of us, have a choice to make in how our present will be our past. Each moment we live, we are creating our past. It is amazing what we are able to tolerate when we have faith in the future; that there is an end in sight to suffering. Regardless of what has happened to me, or to you, we are not the sum of our circumstance of pain and suffering. We have choices to be what we are meant to be in this world. It is never too late to be what we MIGHT have been; we just need to make the choice to DO it now! If we wait for a time for everything to be right or perfect, we will wait forever. Disturbances in our path will, due to our human nature, cause us to think thoughts of woe, but perhaps they are brought to us to remind us we have always have a choice before us to make. I believe a certain amount of wallowing is healthy, but there comes a point when I get sick of how that makes me feel, and I become angry with myself, and make the choice to do something positive and worthwhile. So many times I have discovered that the very disturbances that shadowed me are gateways to positive changes in my life.

Albert Einstein wrote "There are only two ways to live your life – as though nothing is a miracle, or everything is a miracle."

I did not choose the cruelty I've had to bear, the violence in my life I've suffered, or the many tragic losses I've experienced. Those things have caused, at times, nearly unbearable heartache. I was unable to control some of the things that happened to me, but I do have the power to control what happens inside of me as a result of those things. I am learning, albeit slowly, that I cannot change anyone else's thoughts and choices. Only my own. I can't change my own life by trying to change the people who have hurt me, or whom I believe have control over me. I am learning that I cannot find my own happiness by looking to outside sources. It must come from within. It begins with me! Not with what happens to me, but how I choose to move through the circumstances before me.

The other evening I was driving home from work and was stuck in traffic. The weather was poor as a result of Tropical Storm Tammy. I could sit in traffic and fume about the gloomy day. But what I chose to do instead, was notice a huge rainbow that appeared in the sky directly in front of me. The colors, the sheer size of it, was amazing! It was a miracle placed in front of me that I might have missed had I been concentrating solely on the earlier storm that darkened the sky and snarled up the traffic.

When I find myself concentrating on sorrowful thoughts, I am, in reality, pushing myself farther into quiet desperation. Learning that things like a summer storm or events of tragic proportion do not have to control or destroy me, allows these experiences to deepen wisdom to my spirit. It brings me to a place of empathy and compassion for others, and that my responsibility to them is to put out my best possible efforts, keeping in mind that I am not responsible for how others receive it. I am not happy or sad without my own consent and it is the same for each of us. To renew my life is to take it one step at a time, and to begin right now. My past is being shaped at this very moment.

To help me through, I concentrate on surrounding myself with people and things I love. I recently bought a couple of bottles of fairly expensive perfume. The old me would save them to wear for special occasions. The new me sprays it on every day, because it makes me feel special. Why not feel special each day? Why wait? I want to surround myself with comfort; good and reliable friends, good books, great food, lots of laughter, my pets, music that I love. I try to plan something special to look forward to each month, but on a daily basis, I indulge in simple pleasures like my candlelight nights with a good book and soothing music, a soak in the hot tub, or an early morning stroll at the beach. I use my best china to drink my coffee and tea out of. Why wait for the right time to feel good about anything? The right time is this very moment if I choose it to be.

Of course, there will continue to be moments of despair and I will take my time to wallow around in that emotion for awhile. It is then my choice to climb out of that cloud and make my own path. Sometimes it is a huge pain in the rear to be human with all of the frailties that come with it, but bless the days I am feeling strong and know that even in moments of periodic darkness, that the sun still shines just on the other side of it and in time, it will shine for me again as well.

Thanks be to God, I do have a blessed life. Thank you all for being in it.

Deep Peace,
Missy

5/10/06

Children Are Not Mini Adults

As I was going through a myriad of papers weeks/months, I will be faced with many difficult decisions to make in regard to Josh's case. I don't mind telling you that this responsibility weighs very heavily on my mind and most especially, my heart. There is perhaps, no closer bond, than that of a mother and a child in this world, and as far as that goes with Josh and me, it is maybe even closer than ever. When two people who are already so very closely linked suffer through a tragedy the magnitude of ours, it serves either to bring them even closer together, or force them apart.

Josh, as an intelligent young man, and as a law clerk, has an excellent understanding of the legalities surrounding his case that he did not have when he was 14 years old. While his emotional growth has been somewhat stunted due to his circumstances, he has nonetheless, got a good grasp on the gravity of his situation. A fragile balance exists in his world that no one, not even I, as close as I am to him, can possibly imagine.

I, too, have such a fragility in my own life. There are days when I hover between hope and despair, and at times, I will admit to you, I have hovered between life and death, when things have become so daunting and overwhelming that I didn't think I could possibly stand one more day of this life. The pain is that great in my heart. There is none like it that I have ever experienced. I have suffered the deaths of both my parents. The death of Josh's father. Of close friends and relatives. Cherished pets. But nothing hurts the heart so much as this wrenching experience of finding Maddie 's body and all that followed. It has forever altered so very many lives. You can never go back, and at times, it seems you are hard pressed to know there is even a way out. A way through, with faith, has been my guide thus far, but even so, I wonder, if there ever is a true way out. Are Josh and I forever destined to wander through this wicked maze; is it a never-ending spiral? Or, is there, somehow, a way out? The way is sometimes so, very, very dark. Yet, we keep moving ahead, thanks to Danny, and all of you, here, who hold out lanterns of love to illuminate our path. The glow of so many lamplights, I hope, also serve to help you on your own journeys.

To be sure, not a one of us in this world is without pain and grief of some kind that we carry. Pain is pain and cannot, and I don't believe, should not, be held as a yardstick against another's pain. If you are hurting for whatever reason, there is no pain like it in the world. The best balm is hanging on to the knowledge and the hope that there is someone who can just hold you, let you cry when you need to, and then help you dry those tears and gather up the courage to keep moving on.

As we are now moving closer to hearings and a possible second trial, I find that I am having a more difficult time finding that balance in my life. My job

has been extremely stressful of late, and that has compounded the internal emotional strife that is beginning to deepen in regard to what lies ahead in the legal system for Josh and for me.

I don't like to borrow worries, but there are times, God help me, when I cannot help but think what will become of us if the second trial never happens, if Josh's sentence of life without parole, stays forever. Right now, the hope that he WILL get out one day is sometimes I think, the only thing that keeps him going.

When I am with Josh, and when I speak with him on the phone, I am a pillar of strength and hope; a voice of calm in his ocean of worries and thoughts. When I walk out the visiting park door... when I am in my car alone... that is when my defenses fall. When I hang up the phone, and am here on my own, only then do I permit myself to cry.

There are endless nights, even still, that I am in danger of drowning in my despair. Thank my God, they have been, of late, far and few between.

I don't want you to think my life is all doom and gloom. Far from it. I have a lot of joy in my life, and I love to laugh.

And, I have had such a good time when Catherine (spoonphed) has been here with me. There is no age difference between us; that all melts away and I am always a bit taken aback when people say "you and your daughter..." (!)

In November, I am very much looking forward to having Debbie (pebbles) here with me over Thanksgiving!

Then, at the end of December, I am flying to UK to for a couple of weeks.

These visits from Cathy and Debbie, and my trip to England coming up, each serve as an oasis that I so very much need in my life. My one hope and desire is that they find something of value in spending time with me; because I truly feel like I am always receiving and not ever giving back, and I so much want to make a positive difference in their lives as well.

Well, let me give you all a blanket apology for any moments of dark despair that I may, from time to time, in the coming weeks, dump upon you here. I work through a lot of my emotional turmoil in my writing and hope you'll all forgive me for the times I am so unlovable.

There are a lot of very difficult decisions I must make, and the weight of them is so very heavy upon my soul and my heart. I fear making the wrong choices and that Josh will ultimately pay the price for my mis-steps.

Please, keep us in your thoughts and prayers, most especially in the coming

months.

Love is the only reason why.

Gentle Peace, Love, Light & Blessings,
Missy

12/17/2005

Love Actually (is)

It's been awhile since I wrote an article for this section and this day is as good as any to rectify that. I've been "under the weather" for about two weeks or so and finally gave in to see a physician today. Rest is what I need, Dr. Doogie Howser tells me. Seriously, this man (boy!) barely looked old enough to operate a motor vehicle, let alone have graduated from medical school! As I was sitting there, listening to his rhetoric, I wondered if he'd had to have someone drive him to work...

Anyroad, I'm home now and we're having a wintry day here in northeast Florida. A thunderstorm and rainy ocean winds blowing past. I long to drive out to the beach rather than be here in the house, because there is such a fascination with watching storms come in off the sea. But, I'll take Doogie's advice and stay home and rest, as much as I am able to, that is!

Just now, I've taken some time to play some Celtic chants on my guitar. This is soothing balm for my soul and does put me in a restful state. Music does give much solace in times of renewed grief. It seems I am in continual grief over Josh and Maddie, yet still must deal with the usual sorts of grief life hands us. On the 21st, it is five years since my mother crossed over. So, it is she who is on my mind and heart this day, as this anniversary date approaches. I know, through my faith, that she is all right; that she is home, and that one day we will be reunited in a different plane. Some may call this place heaven, others may have other terms for this place. For me, it is the blue world that operates parallel to our world of human existence here. The Other World as I have come to know it. It is eternal and it is paradise beyond human description. I have seen glimpses of this place, and have never felt the power of love so strongly, nor could I begin to find an accurate way to describe it. I only know that it IS.

And, now I will attempt to describe how I am feeling at this very moment... Closing my eyes, and listening to the soothing repetitive Celtic chants help return to me the sometimes fragile sense of balance and provides a calming center through which to listen to my creator speak.

For years, I thought prayer was always something I was supposed to say to God. It has been a relatively recent revelation that I realized God spoke back if I were still enough to listen. When communing with my creator, I use

contemplative prayer in conjunction with my guitar, to sit and be still; to renew my sense of center and balance. It seems so much of the time, I live such a hurried, busy life that I seldom take the time to slow down until I am utterly spent, stressed and irritable. How much better I feel when I set aside that quiet time to just be still and allow God to flow through me.

While I am a Christian, I offer my thoughts to you as purely my own, and there is no hidden agenda at play to attempt to convert anyone or to even say that what I believe is right for everyone. It is merely right for me, and if you find value in it, then that is a good thing. I would rather have my doors and windows wide open to a full range of possibilities, and to allow for many alternate routes to the Other World to co-exist in harmony. It has taken me a lifetime to become comfortable in my own spiritual skin, but this is what seems to work best for me. This is hardly conventional Christianity here, but I am not a conventional person on any level. I have always marched to that "other" drummer, although I have had to keep my innermost thoughts to myself for a great deal of time.

Christ started calling to me in 1991. I felt stirrings of something very significant and profound about to happen. At the time I did not know it was my creator calling to me. I called this undercurrent flowing through my soul "it." "It" was going to happen soon and I felt at the time I would impact the world and not just myself. Years later when I went to a psychologist to try and learn what was happening to me, he said it was my "kundalini energy" being awakened. Perhaps "kundalini" is another term for my creator's attempt to communicate with me. It was only a bit past a year beyond this that my world was torn asunder.

From that point, it was Christ reaching out to catch me as I fell from the edge of my world. I prayed to die instead; the pain was that great. But Jesus had other plans, and gave me a new way – He first gave me two shooting stars in a jet black sky when I most needed some kind of physical affirmation that my prayers had been heard, and then he guided me to begin my spiritual rebirth. It has not been a seamless journey thus far, but one surrounded by hope, love and comfort through so many good people, including all of you here now reading these words. Through all of you, I am able to feel the tangible arms of God embracing me.

I recall the words of Celtic spiritualist J. Philip Newel, who told me, "God flows through all things and we are part of that deep mystery. At the moments we are broken open we are invited to see in new ways... in the weak moments the tears of our eyes wash away our old way of seeing... Where are the turbulent times of our lives? This is where God is trying to bring us to something new, and that the storms we face lead to new birth. In times of difficulty, what is God trying to give birth to in us?"

Indeed, I had not thought of this particular aspect in regard to my own family tragedy. I felt some stirrings along these lines, but until I heard the

way Philip put it to me, I did not fully grasp it. He spoke of the death of Lazarus and how Jesus brought him back to life. I'd always thought of that Bible story in a very literal sense, but perhaps it was meant to demonstrate how we can be the walking dead and that through some degree of turbulence in our lives, we are brought to full life through Christ; we are awakened.

This month, we celebrate the birth of Christ; a new beginning for the entire world, past, present and future. Do we sit still and mediate upon this miracle only once a year? Or is it something we might celebrate every single day? Imagine a rebirth celebration with each morning we awaken!

There is growing turmoil in our country. Indeed, throughout the world! My heart hurts with the ignorance of so many people in this country, especially; that things like the death penalty and LWOP sentences for children are an okay way of life. That drugs that could CURE cancer and AIDS remain out of the reach of those who desperately need these cures, because it would mean that a giant source of revenue would be lost if pharmaceutical companies no longer had to pump out drugs at exorbitant costs to the end consumer. Not long ago, I saw a documentary that proved hurricanes could be generated by man and not solely by nature. For a long time, I, along with others, have believed that what happened to this country in September of 2001 was not what we have been told to believe. I believe it to be highly orchestrated from the most unbelievable source imaginable. And it is all to do with power and money and greed for both. I believe that many things are kept from the public and it is not a safety net to say that what we don't know can't harm us. It can hurt us, and it WILL hurt us.

Now, more than ever in my life, I count on my Creator, to help see me through whatever is ahead. I think that all of these years have been a preparation for the most difficult part of this journey. I am grateful to be open to new ways to see and to be, and that there is room for all faith walks to unite in the common thread, which, of course, is love.

Let those whom you love know it. Do not be afraid to give it, nor be afraid to accept it. It is the greatest gift of all. Pray for love for all of mankind; it can change the course of a world, and there has never been a time when it was more needed than now.

Deep Peace, and Love,
Missy

1/17/2006

Perseverance

Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending.

Each day I am blessed to wake up and begin living anew, I try to put into active practice the above statement. I have lived, from time to time, in the Going Nowhere worlds of "if only", or "I should have", or "why didn't I?" None of those places is conducive to living any kind of quality lifestyle.

The morning I discovered Maddie's body, I wanted to die. Instantly. I prayed for it. "God, get me out of this!" It was just too horrific; too tragic. My heart felt literally crushed. I could not breathe. I did not WANT to breathe. It was wrenchingly terrifying. And, then, there was Josh. What happened here? What did he witness? What terror and panic must he have endured? What would happen to him? How could I turn back the hands of time to ensure this terrible, tragic event did not happen? Due to shock, I did not want to admit to myself that what I was seeing was the body of missing eight-year-old Maddie Clifton; the little girl I knew who lived across the street, yet intellectually, I knew it must be her. This was surreal! It was impossible – far too much to fully comprehend!

What of her distraught family? Right at that moment, they still held onto the slim hope that she would be found and brought back home to them. In a few moments, they would know the awful truth. All hope would be dashed to the ground in a million pieces. And I was the one who would be ultimately responsible for their knowledge that their little girl was never coming home again. "Please, God! I cannot do this!"

It was the beginning of the longest nightmare I could ever have imagined. I did not die, but I was not living, either. I was merely existing. Drawing breath until I didn't any more. Each day, each hour... indeed, each MOMENT, I was still here was one too long. Looking back, I realize how selfish these thoughts and emotions were. I loved Josh, of course, and wanted to support him and help him however I could. The pain was just so crushing around my heart that I just wanted it to stop. Josh is the reason I made it through that time. Josh and my faith in God. That no matter what happened; God would somehow see us through what lay ahead.

But, oh, how I wished for that day of November 3, 1998, to be re-lived. To be forever altered. That Maddie would still be alive. That Josh would still be home. God only, knows, what course our lives would have taken had events unfolded differently. Friends with whom I have entrusted with a lot of the personal parts of my home life, and have discussed what may have been possible scenarios, none of which were leading to anything positive. Still,

such a high price tag there was... a little girl who is now buried in Oak Lawn Cemetery who should not be there.

I rented the movie Time Machine and was so taken by it that I ended up buying a dvd of it for myself. The fact was that no matter what this guy did to change the events of one single day; to save the life of his beloved; it did not alter the course of what was, apparently, destined, to happen. It lends credence to something my mother always believed; that when one's time is up, it matters not where you are or what you are doing. When it's your time, you go. I still ponder this from time to time, because if pre-destination is the name of the game, then how does free will affect it? Nonetheless, the point here is that this guy tried a myriad of ways to keep his love safe. And none of it worked. So, as much as I wished time travel was an option, it might turn out much like Time Machine. In the end, it would not have made any difference if I was able to turn back those clock hands.

So, where does that leave me? There are always choices in this life. I could choose to end my life and stop the pain in my chest that is always resting there, just beneath the surface. I am, at any given moment, only a heartbeat away from despair. Sometimes, I do give in to it and live in those moments of quiet desperation, when I lock myself away from the world for a time. Other times, I am able to vent and that's where all of you come in... you put up with me and my occasional bouts of tearful revelations. At times, all can be going well, and then something shifts ever so slightly in my psyche. Sometimes it can be a particular scent, or a sound, or some fleeting glimpse of a trigger point in my mind's eye...

My other choice is the one Josh would have me choose; the one that leads to the path of a life well lived. When I look at Josh, I look beyond his eyes to the eyes of his Creator; and of what He would have me do with the gift of my life, for life is indeed, from God's point of view, a most precious gift. What honor would it be to throw that gift back into God's face and say, "No thanks! Take it back, I don't want this from you!" And, I think of my parents, and how they loved me and how they wanted only the best for me. I remember how heartbroken they were over this tragedy with Josh and Maddie. It was hardly the Hallmark life they hoped I would live when they gave birth to me and bestowed upon me all of their hopes, wishes, and dreams for a wonderful life. Much like I felt when I gave birth to Josh! How heartbroken I am over what happened to him, however it occurred. It seems, sometimes, that his life is wasted in there. But, then I look at all of the positive things he has accomplished under such dire circumstances. When it would have been easy, and understandable for him to give up, just as the State of Florida did, he steadfastly refused. I cannot begin to imagine my world without Josh in it. My heart flinches when I think of Steve and Sheila and what they must feel. I cannot put myself in their place. It would crush me entirely to lose Josh on top of all that I have already endured.

I have told Josh many times, we all must bloom where we are planted, and

right now, he is planted in prison. He throws that back to me every once in a while and it always makes me smile. I tell him, we cannot change what was, we have only this day, this hour, this moment, right in front of us, to do what we can with it to move onwards and upwards. To affect our lives and those lives whom we touch, in a positive, nurturing and loving way. We are all here for each other and we are here to hold lanterns of love and hope on the paths for those who find the way dark and difficult.

Thank you all for keeping my pathway lit.

1/17/2006

Choices

When something worthwhile ends due to no personal choice, there is a terrible bruising of the heart that takes place. There comes in every person's life, a time of humbling, when we are reminded just how small we truly are in this vast world. All that free will out there, bumping up one against another, forever altering each course. When life changes occur, is it God's will that we somehow listen to the angel whispers in our ear, urging us to turn left rather than right? Does it happen, then, that when we turn against their gentle urgings, that the proverbial other foot falls?

I don't believe that God "causes" the bad things in this life to happen any more than God causes the "good" things to happen. It just may be that once this world and all contained in it was created, the perfect-ness of it all was set once and for all into a motion all its own. We, being the finite beings that we are, are incapable of seeing much farther beyond our own piece of creativity in this vast canvas. God, the creator of it all, already knows the ending, for before him, is the finished artwork.

If you happen to cross-stitch, or know someone who does, take a good look at the exquisite finished product. Take in the colors, and the design, and how it all meshes together in a lovingly crafted piece of art. Now, turn it over, and what do you see but a mass of colored chaos? Looking at the other side of the material, you'd never imagine how beautiful the other side truly is. But it took chaos to get there; the tiny pieces of threads weaving in and out of the material, which I liken to be the threads of our lives, crossing paths at just the right time, to help us create the perfect picture that is beyond our line of vision. One thin piece of material keeps us from the full view.

And, that is how I view our lives here; that the separation between our lives here and the life that is to come when we leave this place, is nothing but a thin veil. If not for our physical bodies, our spirits could most surely reach out and touch this place, and see the other side so easily.

Before I landed the job I now hold, for however brief a time now, I worked for a Thomas Kinkade Art Gallery. Thomas Kinkade, the most collected living

artist in America is known as the Painter of Light. He uses his gift to create inspirational messages of hope to help light the paths of others. I learned a great deal in the short time I worked at the gallery; I learned that all that we do see is but a fraction of what it took to get to the finished piece. I learned that Tom, the Painter of Light, does not begin with the bright parts of the painting. Rather, as he sits in front of the blank canvas, he begins with the darkest areas, and adds what we see as the "light" last. Staring at one of his paintings in the perfect spotlights of the gallery, it seems impossible that he begins each and every piece with the blacks and greys. The vision in his mind is far from what he sees in the mornings when he walks into his art studio to add the next brush strokes. Until the end.

I've had a full week to digest the fact that my job will end on the first of March. Already I am feeling the angst of forced separation. No job is perfect, and I have done my fair share of grumbling about various aspects of it, to be certain. But, it has been, without a doubt, a very rewarding job, and I have done much growing in strength and spirit while working there. My comfort zones were stretched far beyond my self-imposed borders, much as my personal life has been over these past seven and a half years.

Most of the time I am doing all right emotionally about this. But, whenever someone I have worked with over the past three and a half years comes to me and says how much they are going to miss me, I can feel the tears building behind my eyes. I'll be working at my computer and then in wafts out of the blue a single sentence of email from someone in the office... "I am going to miss you". It's on one hand, gratifying to know that people I work with have found some bit of good in having known me, but also hard on the heart to have to leave people who have become a family of sorts to me. Everyone in that office knows about my life. They all know about Josh, and many of them ask about him often. Thinking of starting all over again somewhere else is daunting if I allow myself to go there over long. Over the years I have held a plethora of jobs. Only one ended without my consent; the typesetting job I held the year of Josh's trial. That one, I was summarily fired from. I was hauled into the office one day and informed that they could no longer "tolerate" my situation. But, aside from that below-the-belt punch, I have always voluntarily left all of my other positions. Losing a job against one's will is akin to a divorce one didn't see coming... the note left on the pillow informing you that you aren't wanted any more.

Sometimes, I think things like this happen when I've somehow missed other signposts along the way. Angels, holding up little signs, saying "Turn right, Missy!" ... And then I blindly go left. That's what happens when I try to control my human path when my spiritual path is clearly marked going in another direction. I go against the grain of what is supposed to be, and create some other reality that can reach out and slap me in the face. God, knowing the path I should be on, watches as I find my way back to it. It is my faith in God that keeps me searching. Perhaps it is some promise made to each other even before my conception, for I firmly believe that dying

means going home to my place of creation; where I originated before committing to this life here on Earth.

I am meant to be brought to something new in my life. Some other means of making a living. Hopefully, a GRACEFUL living, it will be. I desperately hope my next address does not include a shopping cart or a bridge. I am a little frightened, but also very much excited, about what is ahead. Last night I was going over my finances {shudder} and realize that on unemployment, I'll have to live on \$1,000 less a month than I am now enjoying. I've got ten pounds of bills to shove in a five pound sack, as a result. But, I've been through worse in my life. I can do this. And I will. Most of the time I will be confident and self-assured, but sometimes, I know I'll feel weak and and uncertain.

"Everything is possible, and every day is a brand new start. Sometimes, it's a fire burning out of control, sometimes it's a candle burning long and low. There's something not gotten over; always missing what I can't forget. It's an empty space where something used to be. I want to prop up this fragile place, but I can't do it all by myself." Mary Chapin Carpenter

As always, thanks for listening, guys! {Have I told you lately how much I love you all?}

Missy
xxx

Perseverance - by Thomas Kinkade - "Thunder crashes, waves toss the fragile boat. The clouds are about to break. The sea will calm; the sailor's perseverance will soon be rewarded by a return to God's safe heaven."

5/10/2006

As I was going through a myriad of papers in regard to Josh's legal case, I came across an article first published in the Miami Herald on the 19th of March, 2004, written by Erika Bolstad, in which Governor Bush addressed a proposed Senate Bill presented by Senator Steve Geller, a Hallandale Beach Democrat. The bill, had it passed, would have allowed children younger than 16 a chance at parole after they served a specific period of time of a life sentence, and would have applied only to children with no previous criminal record, who were convicted as adults of murder or other crimes that carry a life sentence.

Governor Bush stated: "I'm concerned about the specifics of the bill, but I think the concept is worth looking at. I've never been a big fan of a 12-year-old being sentenced to life without parole, or sentenced to an extraordinarily long sentence without having some review process."

Richard Rosenbaum, who once represented Lionel Tate said, "The bill is definitely a move in the right direction." He also said he would like to see more statewide standards for prosecutors to ensure children aren't being charged as adults based on different standards in different jurisdictions.

Ken Padowitz, the initial prosecutor on Tate's case said he thinks judges also need some discretion when children who are charged as adults receive life sentences. "It would be a good first step in changing the criminal justice system in dealing more appropriately with juveniles who commit crimes."

It has long been my opinion that the juvenile justice system needs serious revamping to incorporate the more serious crimes juveniles are convicted of. I do not believe a sentence which allows for a juvenile to be released at age 21 is always appropriate for every child convicted of a serious crime. The wide disparity of how juvenile cases are presently handled in the United States is also mind-boggling. Even cases involving children from the same state of Florida, demonstrate extremes in various cases. The King brothers were ages 12 and 14 when they killed their father and set fire to their house. They were given sentences shorter in duration than the time Josh has already served. Lionel Tate, was initially given the same sentence of Life Without Parole that Josh receive; yet he was given a second chance at a trial and was consequently released. True enough, he sabotaged his own freedom and will be sent back to prison, but the bottom line is, Lionel was given that second chance. Nathaniel Brazill was 14 years old when he was convicted as an adult of second-degree murder in the shooting death of his teacher in 2000, and sentenced to 28 years without the possibility of parole. Nathaniel was 13 at the time of the killing. The jury in Nathaniel's case did not believe the killing to be pre-meditated, first-degree. My question is this: If a jury could not find pre-meditation in Nathaniel's case, how could they possibly find it to exist in Josh's? The more recent case of New Mexico teenager Cody Posey, allows for his release when he is still a young man, despite the fact three people lost their lives at his hand. There is such wide disparity in the handling of cases, which means, at least, with these more recent cases, there are some positive steps being made that children should be treated as children, and not, as Governor Bush says, as "miniature adults." We somehow need to use these other examples to help Josh receive a more appropriate sentence.

I can not, and will not, try to say that these other children should be out in five, eight, or even ten year's time, given the gravity of their convictions, because there are still lives that were lost. However, what I will say is that there should be a tighter gap in sentencing guidelines available to prosecutors, judges, and juries, alike, when dealing with juvenile and youthful offenders.

To give a light of hope to some, and not all, particularly for those who had no prior criminal records, is not only wrong, it is immoral for a civilized society

such as ours.

Thanks for listening to me ramble...

Missy