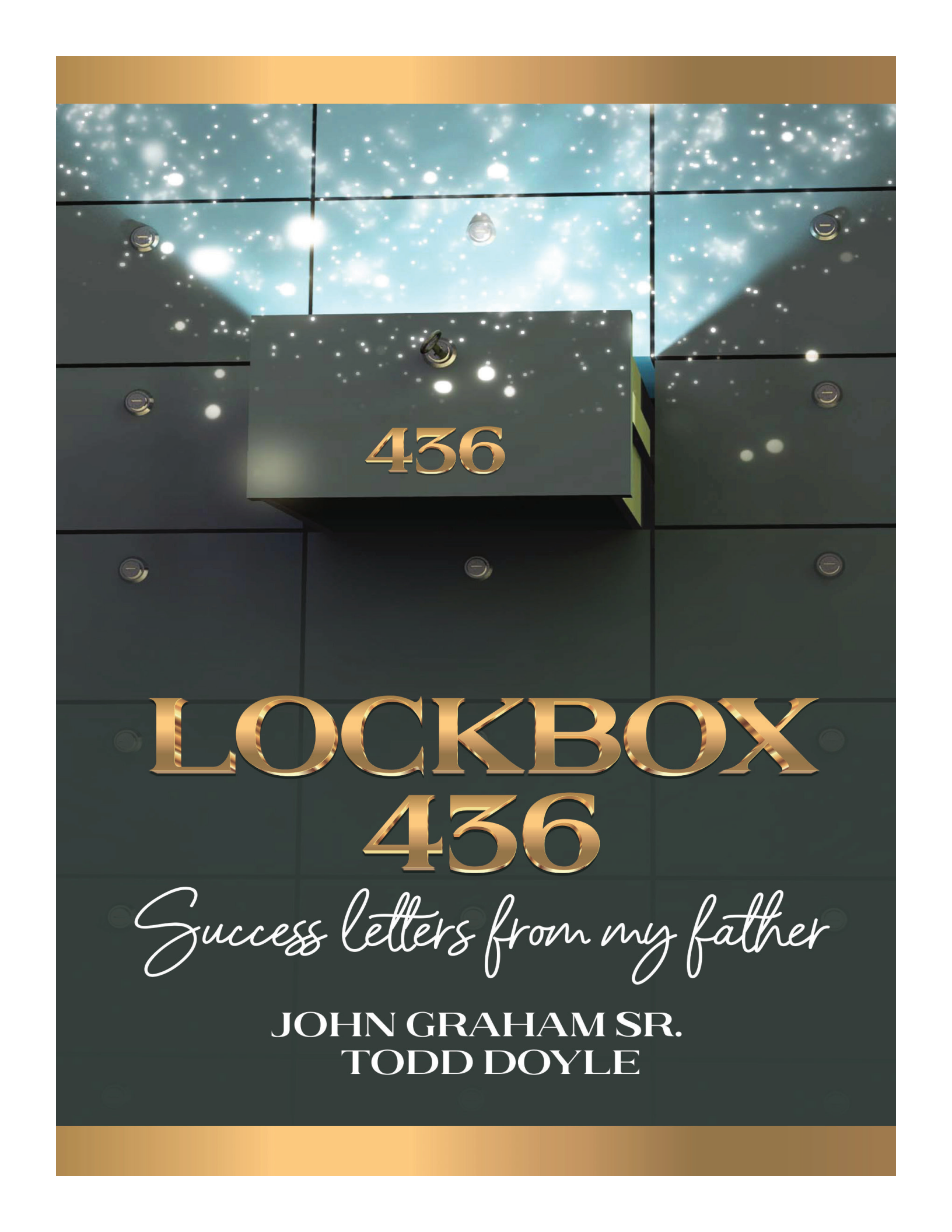




436

LOCKBOX 436

Success letters from my father

JOHN GRAHAM SR.
TODD DOYLE

Lockbox436: Success Letters from my Father

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Rudy's Perspective

Prologue

The cool air seemed to seep into his bones, chilling him, as Rudy followed the attendant into the depths of the bank vault.

In each of these drawers lays a treasure, he thought. A treasure that is probably worthless to anyone else. Then again, there must be some treasures that any thief would die to gain.

The attendant led him around a corner to a wall of hand-sized drawers. He stopped and produced a slip of paper. “436 Sir, is that correct?”

Rudy withdrew the small lockbox key from his pocket, the one that his half-brother, Steve, had given him yesterday. The numbers read 436.

Rudy nodded, “Yes, that’s right.”

“That’s good,” the attendant leaned down, and with a pointing finger, indicated drawer 436.

Rudy knelt down, feeling his stomach tightening in anticipation. The air seemed to get even colder. He inserted the key into the lock; it turned. The attendant inserted his key as well. It moved without resistance, and the drawer came loose from its restraints.

“Let me get it for you.”

The attendant pulled the drawer out and carried it into an adjoining room where Rudy could examine its contents in private. He placed the drawer on a small table and withdrew from the room, closing the door behind him.

Rudy stood there for a moment, staring at the drawer, wondering about its contents.

What did he leave me?

His thoughts turned back to the previous day.

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He had been working on his car in the garage, changing the oil, when he heard a car door slam, drawing his attention away from the steady stream of oil pouring from the belly of the vehicle. He slid out from under the car and saw a young man with dark hair and a lanky frame walking toward him.

“Steve?” Rudy said, “Long time no see-bro?”

Steve, stopped, and started doing a motion like he's fly-fishing. "Those fish are going to be huge by the time we get back out there, Bro."

Rudy stood up and reached into the ice chest he had nearby, handing Steve a beer.

"Thanks," said Steve.

"No problem, it has been a while since we went fishing. Is that what you're here for?"

"No," Steve's face darkened, "It's about Dad."

"What happened," asked Rudy.

"He passed away last night," Steve said quietly.

Rudy was shocked. He felt tears come to his eyes and blinked them away. "How did it happen?"

"He's been sick awhile. Had brain cancer. He thought he had a few months left, but then he started having seizures. An aneurism took him last night."

The blood drained from his face, and Rudy said, "I didn't know."

"He didn't tell anybody in the family. As far as I know, you are the only one he wrote letters for. Then, bang, he's gone."

Rudy sat down.

"He wanted me to give you this," said Steve, holding out a key.

"What is it?"

"He wrote you something and had me put them in a lockbox at First National Bank downtown."

"What are they?"

"Letters from him."

Rudy accepted the key and pocketed it.

"I can't believe he's gone," he said.

"Me neither," said Steve.

David Irving had always been a part of Rudy's life. Sure, the early divorce had separated him from his father, but Daniel had always strived to reach out to Rudy. When he was old enough to see it for himself, Rudy saw the relationship between his mom and dad was toxic. So he understood why he never came around, but he did make time for Rudy when he was grown, for fishing trips with his brother. Rudy cherished those times.

Now they were gone.

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Rudy's thoughts brought him back to the present as he gingerly reached out, lifting the lid of the drawer.

Inside, lay what looked like documents.

What's in those letters?.

He took the documents in hand, realizing that they were all in envelopes, ten total.

He opened the first, and unfolding it, and saw that it was numbered with a one.

Rudy,

Rudy felt his eyes tear up, and he sat down. He decided to read the first one here. He took a deep breath and read on.

Letter 1- Live an extraordinary life

Rudy,

I want to give you a roadmap to what I'm saying in these letters. They will lead you to be an extraordinary person. This starts with who you choose to be. Everything begins with a choice.

These letters will direct you to being the best version of yourself, helping you become an extraordinary man. What is that? A person who makes choices that leads to good results and positive outcomes. Everyone starts out in the world as ordinary. But what makes a man extraordinary? It is when ordinary people find their purpose, find something that you love to do and become excellent at it. Once you find why you are here, why you are alive, it becomes how you perform and navigate the world.

I would say that extraordinary human beings are few and far between, because of most people's actions and choices are selfish. Whereas extraordinary people focus on how to take their talent to as many people as they can, in a positive way they can. so their influence can spread out as far as it possibly can. Think of a searchlight in the dark of night, reaching out to the masses.

When you make your decision to go from ordinary to extraordinary, you will experience a feeling of owning your life and living life as it should be lived. You will live a life of freedom through caring and service. The extraordinary ones find a way to serve and give of themselves, in a way that brings happiness and joy to others.

The Old Man would frequently talk about work. "Don't work a day in your life, Davy. If you do what you love to do, you'll never work. You'll have a sense of true success."

Your loving father,

David Irving

§

Rudy placed the first letter back in the manilla envelope where the other letters were. He wiped a tear away, thinking to himself, I wish I had known him better. Maybe this will be the way I get to.

He stood up from the small table and left the room, exiting the bank. Driving home, he kept glancing at the manila envelope, wondering what knowledge it held about his father. Truth was, he was eager to read the letters.

He arrived at his house, and his girlfriend, Mary Ann, met him at the kitchen door.

"Well?" she asked, "What is it?"

Rudy held up the envelope, "It's letters. From Dad to me."

"What kind of letters?" she asked.

"I don't know exactly. But I think they are on his views on life."

"Wow," she said, "That's quite a thing to get from a father you barely knew. I hope you like them."

"We'll see," Rudy said as he went to the living room and sank into his Lazyboy chair. He peered into the manila envelope and pulled out the envelope titled Letter 2.

Letter 2- You are what you choose to be

Rudy,

I hope that this letter finds you well. Know that I always wanted to do more with you, be in your life more, than I was. From my reckoning, I think you've turned into a fine young man, despite my minimal influence.

I want to take this time to talk to you about someone that influenced me greatly while growing up. My years were tough when young. I had an abusive father and cold mother. But I had someone who loved me through those tough times. He was my grandfather, Augustus Irving. Augustus was the best welder on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. People would come from all over for his welding work in Gulfport.

"Best do a thing right the first time," he would say to me, "that way you don't apologize with your hat in your hand the next day."

I don't want to leave out my Grandmother, Alice Irving, who had a strong influence on me as well. She had her own wisdom, but this is a story about a father passing down to his grandson ways of doing things that made sense. Just as I'm passing down to you, what he taught me.

He owned the land and surrounding acreage for his shop. He leased part of the building to a man named Shorty, an auto mechanic. Fernwood Motors was the name of the auto shop. I learned many lessons from both of them in that shop.

The Old Man, as we called him, had it in his head that his children would never go without. He had bought enough land for five or six houses behind the shop. Four of those houses would be leased out to people from Keesler Air Force Base. People called it the Irving Compound. My mother had three brothers, Mike, Ralph, and Justin.

The picture I'm trying to paint here is not a grim one, but it's real. I grew up distinctly Southern, in a difficult time. My home wasn't a great place. But something saved me. It was the love of the Old Man. He loved me as much as he could. His love saved me from my mother and uncles and cousins.

"Davy," he would call me, "What do you know about people?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I was only five, and we were in his fishing boat with cane poles, fishing for brim. "I dunno, Grandpa. People are people I guess."

"Well," he stretched his legs as he adjusted his grip on his pole, one eye not leaving the motionless cork

resting on the water's greenish-brown surface, "There's right, Davy, and there's not right. You see, boy, there are three kinds of people in this world. I want you to understand this!"

He held up three fingers to emphasize his point, "Three kinds! One kind is bigger than the other two. You can find this one everywhere. You can even find them under rocks and bridges. This kind of person I call a Hornet."

"A Hornet?" I asked, not really understanding what he was saying.

"Yep! Hornets!" he said, "They sting you, Davy. Sometimes, they do it more than once."

"How do they do that?" I asked.

"The Hornet type of people live off of your misfortune, Davy. They thrive and grow in the midst of your pain. If you are miserable, they are happy. They live for another person to be down and unsuccessful."

"They are a mean and spiteful people."

"They dislike good things. They want replace it with misery. That's a hell of a thing."

"What's Hell?" I asked.

The Old Man stopped, and considered his words carefully, before he said, "It's a place where there is no Love or Hope. And it lasts forever."

I hoped that I would never go to this place called Hell. I wondered if my Mom and Dad had ever been there.

"Grandpa? What about the other two kinds of people?"

"Well," he said, taking another gulp, "I'm going to save the best for last, so I'll tell you about the Mosquitoes."

"Mosquitoes?"

"Aye, Mosquitoes. You see Davy, these are people who don't think about anyone else but themselves. Everything they do, is about them. They live in a world where their wants and needs come first because they are the only people that exist. Everything they do is about them. They suck the blood right out of you, just like the insect."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Let's say that you know someone at school named Johnny. Whenever you talk about something good that you did, like hit a homerun in baseball, Johnny would talk about how he hit a homerun. A Mosquito will always one-up you. He takes what you did, and does it better than you. The way Johnny sees it, his life is better than yours, and he will talk down to you. They try to suck out your enthusiasm or your triumphs. In Johnny's mind, he's the only one who matters. He's crazy with greed and selfishness. He wants to be in the spotlight."

"Oh. Like cousin D.J.?"

"Yeah, like cousin D.J." The Old Man wet his lips and pulled out a small piece of paper, ran the paper across his mouth, then pulled out his tobacco pouch, and hand-rolled a cigarette in a ritualistic way. Then he picked up

his fishing pole again.

He held up one finger, then two, then three. "Do you want to know about the third kind of person?"

"What about the third kind of person?" I asked.

"I was gettin' to em. Your third person can be found like the mosquito, it's a firefly."

The image of a bug with a glowing thorax came to mind.

"A firefly is a person full of Hope and Love. They bring light into the darkness, and show the whole wide world a better way to be! To live and love!"

Just the thought of a Firefly warmed me in such a way, that the thoughts of the Mosquitoes and Hornets disappeared. "Which am I?" I asked.

The Old Man looked at me, put down his beer, and leaned over, pulling his cigarette from his mouth. He stared at me with a face full of concern. It seemed like forever but was only for a few seconds. "What I'm about to say needs some thought."

I nodded, breathlessly awaiting his next words.

"You are who you choose to be."

He repeated himself in a deep baritone voice, "You are who you choose to be."

I thought about that the rest of the day and into the night. I've thought about it nearly every day since then. I'll continue thinking about it until my last breath.

My question to you is: Who do you choose to be? A Hornet? A Mosquito? A Firefly?

Think about that as you read each of these letters. Who do I choose to be?

Everything begins with a choice.

Everything.

Your loving father,

David Irving

Letter 3- Live a life of integrity

Rudy,

The Old Man would constantly talk to me about all kinds of life lessons. One of his favorites was integrity. What it was; what it wasn't. He would find examples of it and point out to me where he saw it in other people. Here is one of those examples of him walking the talk.

There was a space on the compound, where he kept five to six cars for sale. I remember the lot well, as I spent a lot of time playing hide-and-seek amongst the cars. I was around eight years old with my constant companion, Barker, my dog. My mother always knew where I was because of Barker always being close to me wherever I was. She would look for him to find me. I might be hiding but he would be there, pointing me out like a bird dog.

The lot had crushed oyster shells, with grass growing in sparse places. It reminded me of a bald-headed man with sparse hair on top. There was a smell of rusty metal and oil around the cars. Just north in the corner of the lot was a two-hundred-year-old mossy pecan tree. Once in a while, you'd see a rat running across the lot with pecans in their mouths. The old tomcats would attempt to chase him down. That was quite a sight. Most of the time the rats would escape. It was always fun watching the cats go over and under the cars, like a game of hide-and-go-seek. Then the cats would stalk it and catch them sometimes. That wasn't a pretty sight.

The cars were a mixture of Studebakers with their pointed noses, red and yellow Chevy trucks, and Buick Specials. Grandpa had Uncle CB, who was a body repairman, to repaint the car to fetch a better price. If the cars had something wrong with them, he would place a sign on each car, stating what was wrong with it. I remember one sign saying the axel was cracked, and I wondered why Grandpa put the signs on the cars. You see, Grandpa would sell the cars as is, with the owner knowing about the problems with the car.

One Saturday morning, an airman from Keesler Air Force Base, came looking at the cars. He was a young airman, barely in his twenties, from what Grandpa told to me. I remember he had sharp green eyes, a pointed nose, and strong jawline. He had a crisp military walk to him. He had a clean look to him. In contrast, Grandpa had a slight limp, with a dirty old oil-stained coveralls, hands black from working on the engines, hair disheveled, and sun-leathered face.

"Looks like we got a customer, Davy, looking for a car."

I could see anticipation and nervousness in the airman's eyes.

Sometimes, my uncles would come out to the lot and try to help him sell a car. Uncle Henry was out there today. He was in his thirties. He had a muscular build because he oystered, like most men in Gulfport. He was known in Harrison county for his gift of the gab. All the women would be cautious not to be caught in his web of lies. One of his famous stories, was that he was a Korean fighter pilot from Keesler Air Force Base, but he was really an oyster-man. He greeted the airman with a smile and big hand gesture, "How y'all doing this fine Saturday mornin' Sir?"

The Airman replied, "I'm Airman Baily." Then he walked slowly toward the cars.

I watched from the garage as the airman walked around and around the like he was stag at the prom looking over girls for the first dance. He kept returning to one car in particular. He checked under the hood and the interior of the driver's side. "What's this sign about?"

"Oh that," said Uncle Henry, "that's just to tell you a little about the car."

Uncle Henry began talking animatedly about the car, how it had high miles but the tires were real good. "I bet you won't find an old car with a good paint job on it. There's hardly any rust on her anywhere. Heck, I think I could talk myself into buying that car. It'll be a great deal for anyone."

Nevermind that it had a sign on it telling the airman what needed fixing. Finally, he walked up to the garage, introduced himself, and asked the Old Man about the sign on the Studebaker.

"I just want my customers to know what they are getting," he said, "That one burns oil. I think it may be the rings, I'm not sure," said my Grandfather. "Try it out," he handed the airman the keys to the car.

"Fine, Sir. Thank you," he replied.

The airman got in the car and turned the key. Black smoke billowed out the back of the car. There was a ticking from the engine. He got out of the car after turning it off, and Grandpa said, "See what I mean, there's an oil leak. It probably needs rings."

The airman stated, "You're right, but the car has great bones. I sure like how she looks. I could see us having a great relationship. Boy, she's fine."

He continued, "I know a little about cars, but my Senior Master Chief knows more than I do. How much for it?" he asked.

"Five hundred," said Grandfather.

"I'll give you a hundred dollars to hold the car."

"I'll hold the car for you. No need to pay me."

"You'll do that for me?"

"Ayeah, I will. They aren't jumping off the lot," Grandpa said with a smirk on his face.

"I'll see you later," with that, the airman left.

Uncle Henry went back to the house, while Grandpa motioned me over. "Your Uncle Henry was a little too much on the car."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He brought up the good things about it, without talking about its blemishes. In my judgment that's a lack of integrity. You can choose to tell the facts, or not. You need to tell him the truth or not."

"Was he lying?"

"No, I don't think so. But I can't run a business like that. You have to run your business on integrity, Davy. Not make promises that will never show. There's personal and professional integrity. Henry has situational integrity. People saying what they say to get what they want, but not lying totally. If you don't give all the facts, then you might as well be lying. Henry sees integrity as a gray area, whereas I see it as black and white. Even if it means that I don't make a sale."

Monday afternoon, the airman was back. He had a senior enlisted officer with him. He was a Senior Master Chief, dressed in full uniform, his service ribbons filling his chest with accomplishments. The Senior Master Chief walked into my grandfather's garage and called on him. He had a look and feel of authority to him. Grandpa was working on a car, and straightened up, put some goop on his hands and cleaned them with a rag. Then he gave him his full attention, "What can I do for you, Master Chief?"

"Airman Baily advised me that he came here Saturday, to buy a car from you. I understand that you have signs on your cars that tell you what's wrong with them," he said bluntly.

"Yes Sir, some of the vehicles I sell have a posterboard with what's wrong with it."

"Well, that's a first. I've never heard such a thing."

Grandpa replied, "Yep, that's what I do."

"Thank you for your honesty. Airman Baily told me about this, and I had to come here for myself to see. I told him that if there was anybody out there selling cars that was doing what you were doing, I told him I would fix the car. It's my hobby, fixing cars. I'm a mechanic."

He turned around and addressed the airman, "Baily, you just took this Master Chief to school, or should I say, this gentleman did. And I thank you for the lesson, Sir."

Grandpa smiled and held out his hand. The Master Chief shook it, wrapping his hands around Grandpa's, saying, "You are a refreshing man of integrity."

I looked at Grandpa and saw him lift up his shoulders and his chest puffed out and seemed to be strengthened by it, they both were feeding off each other's presence.

They walked to Grandpa's desk, where he had a bronze dog paperweight on a stack of papers. Grandpa pulled a fresh bill of sale out of the stack and filled it out in his flawless handwriting. The Airman pulled out five crisp one-hundred dollar bills and laid them on the desk. Grandpa picked them up and put them in his coverall pocket and buttoned it up.

Moments later, Grandpa watched as the Master Chief and airman drove off in a smoking cloud of oil. He turned to me and said, "There's different types of integrity, Davy. What you experienced was three men in an encounter, where the truth and integrity was tested numerous times, because personal agendas could have changed the outcome, whether they had integrity or not. What you saw, Davy, was how I live my life."

A week later, the Master Chief showed up with another airman looking for a car. That's when I learned that Grandpa's integrity had really paid off. He had established a trust that rewarded him.

Rudy, Don't sell your soul for anything. Hold onto that integrity that Grandpa passed on to me, and that I'm passing onto you. Integrity is a precious thing. Guard it jealously.

Your loving father,

David Irving

Letter 4- Look at the consequences of your actions

Rudy,

When I was 11, fishing trips with Grandpa were a sacred time for me. We would go fishing nearly every Saturday. One trip stuck out in particular, because we witnessed a hawk diving for fish. It would circle in the sky, looking down. And then, suddenly, it would dive toward the lake, into the water, grabbing a fish in its talons. It was quite a sight to see.

Grandpa said, "Ain't that somethin', Davy."

"It sure is, Grandpa," I said.

"It reminds me of something about people. You can see it in that hawk. What made the hawk dive down?"

"It saw the fish?"

"Ayeah, it saw the fish, but something more. It acted on instinct. It reacted to the presence of the fish. It's a hunter. That's what Nature made it. People are not too different from the animals, they react to circumstances."

"How does that work, Grandpa?"

"Well, people have beliefs about the world that shape their attitudes and personalities. Sometimes, those beliefs are shaped by their attitudes, and sometimes they are shaped by their emotions. Sometimes their beliefs are shaped by attitudes and emotions. All three things affect each other."

"The trick to controlling your actions, comes from within. Considering the consequences of your actions before you even say anything. I have a friend of mine, who is a former Marine. He got married, and then later divorced. His ex-wife was dating a man whom I would consider a Horner. Everyone knew he was mean dude."

"Well, one day, my friend, Mark, ran across his ex-wife and her new beau at the grocery store. My friend was grocery shopping and didn't want any trouble. He is a kind and respectful man. Her new boyfriend wanted to cause trouble. When her boyfriend, Bill, approached him, he could tell he was brewin for trouble. He started talking loudly about my friend in the middle of the store. Mark was smart enough to realize this Horner was pulling for a fight. Let me tell ya, my friend was an excellent boxer. He had been boxing and fighting his whole life. He was a Golden Gloves Champion and Marine Corp Regimental Champion. He was a real fighter. He could have beat him up. He told me that the Horner didn't want any respect, he wanted trouble. He started talking bad about my friend, as loud as he could in the middle of the store. My friend was smart enough to realize, that this

Hornet was pulling for a fight.”

“Let me tell ya, my friend could have whupped anyone that day. He was a fighter. But he kept his mouth shut.”

“Why?” I asked.

“He told me that he knew what the consequences would have been. He would have put the hurt on the fella, put him in the hospital even, and then my friend would’ve gone to jail. He didn’t want that, so he kept his mouth shut and went on his way.”

“I don’t know if I could do that, Grandpa.”

“Let me tell you something about emotions, Davy. They are temporary at best. But when they control you and cause you to do things that will affect the rest of your life, they are permanent. Sometimes, a man will let his emotions sell him a choice before he can think about it. He will allow his emotions to dictate to his thoughts what he should do. Imagine if everyone in the whole world made decisions based on their emotions. It would be chaos.”

“How do you stop that from happening, Grandpa?”

“Well, you do have some resources, Davy. You have your mind, your will, and your reason. These things will keep your emotions in check and not let them control you. You have to learn to keep your emotions in check. Not let them run away from you. The best way to do that is to check yourself and your feelings. Have your mind be constantly asking yourself, ‘How am I feeling right now?’ or ‘How does this circumstance affect me?’”

“That’s what my Marine friend was doing in the supermarket. He was considering the consequences. Which is your next tool in your toolkit. Consequences. If only more people considered the consequences of their actions, we would be living in a better world. It takes just a blink of an eye to ask yourself, ‘What will my actions produce?’”

“This brings me to the next tool you have. Your will. Your ability to act or not. You always have that choice in front of you, Davy. Remember what I said about choice. Your life is choices you make.”

“Think about the mind, the will, and emotions. Like I said earlier, sometimes the emotions will direct the actions, leaving out the mind and reasonable thought. Think of it this way: emotions, good or bad, strong or weak. They are temporary. Make your life choices on reasoning, goals, and consequences of actions. This will help you to live a more productive and happy life.”

Your loving father,

David Irving

§

It was a Thursday night, and Rudy was arriving at a bar to meet his friends Billy and Tommy. As soon as he walked in, Billy called to him. Billy was an overweight guy who was always on a diet. No matter what he did,

he couldn't keep off the weight, but to know him, he was as slender as a swimsuit model with the way he acted. Tommy was a shit-stirrer around Rudy. As was Billy. They could both get his goat, and Rudy knew it. Still, they were friends since elementary school, and that counted for something. They were knocking back a few beers when Rudy noticed that Mary Ann, arrived with her new boyfriend.

Rudy had just been broken up with her for a month, and she had already found someone else. Rudy didn't have any have any hard feelings against Mary Ann. He found himself still attracted to her. Her dark tanned complexion and brassy blonde hair was like honey to his appetites. She was smart too, an office manager of a small office in town. He felt something in his chest, a longing for her, but he knew it wouldn't work. She had wanted too much, too quick for him. He wanted to take it slow, and she wanted to speed things up. They parted as friends.

Now she had somebody else on her arm. Rudy didn't know him.

"Hey!" said Dan, "Isn't that Mary Ann, Rudy?"

"Yeah," Rudy replied.

"Who's that with her?" asked Tommy.

"I think it's her new boyfriend," Rudy said.

"I thought so," said Tommy. Then after a moment, he said, "You oughta whip that fella's ass!"

"Why?" asked Rudy.

"I heard that he's a real asshole to her," said Tommy.

"Yeah," chimed in Dan, "I think I saw her being mistreated by him at the grocery the other day."

"Really?" asked Rudy. He felt something protective stir in him.

"Yeah," continued Dan, "He was talking down to her, and making her feel like shit from the expression on her face."

"Huh," said Rudy.

"Here," Dan handed him a fresh beer, "drink some more."

Rudy did.

"In fact," said Tommy, "I think I've heard about this guy around town. He's a real ball buster. Rude to everyone. Thinks he's hot shit."

"All the more reason for you to kick his ass, Rudy," said Dan.

"You really think so?" asked Rudy.

"Yeah!" said Tommy, "We know how tough you are! You could whip him in no time! Put him down like a dog!"

Rudy glanced at Mary Ann, who hadn't noticed him. They had both settled up to the bar. Then she looked around and saw him. Rudy ducked his head down, but he saw her said something to her boyfriend. He looked in Rudy's direction once. A look of recognition crossed his face.

"He's rearin to come over here!" said Dan.

Maybe I should take him down a notch, thought Rudy.

The boyfriend leaned over to Mary Ann, said something to her, and she looked back at Rudy, a look of concern on her face. She looked back at her boyfriend and put a hand on his arm to stop him. But he pulled away from her and started walking across the bar floor toward Rudy and his friends.

"Now's your chance to sucker punch him!" whispered Tommy.

Rudy thought he just might have to do that. He backed away from the table, stood up, and walked toward the boyfriend.

They met in the middle of the floor, and before Rudy could do anything, the man stuck out his hand in a handshake.

"Hi, name's Mark. Mary Ann's guy."

Rudy glanced back at his buddies who had anticipation written on their faces. Then he stopped.

What am I doing? I don't want to hurt this guy. Let's hear him out.

Rudy grasped his hand in a return handshake.

"Hi," he said.

"Rudy, right?"

Rudy nodded.

"I just want you to know that I have honorable intentions with Mary Ann. Just want to clear the air and make that understood. She's a fine woman."

Rudy glanced at her. She was biting her bottom lip anxiously.

He looked back at Mark, releasing his hand.

"Yes, she is."

"I'm sorry it didn't work out between the two of you," Mark said. "But I'm sure you're a standup guy."

"Thank you," said Rudy, remembering what his father said about choices. He could have put this guy in the hospital. Then he would have been sued and in jail. What am I? Entertainment for Billy and Tommy? No. I don't think so. I would have gone off, half-cocked without knowing what the truth was. This guy isn't a bad guy.

"I hope you take care of her," said Rudy.

“I promise you, I will,” said Mark.

Rudy turned back to his friends and walked back to the table.

“You assholes!”

Billy and Tommy grinned sheepishly.

“Let me guess,” said Rudy, “When I wasn’t looking, Tommy gave you a look, like ‘Let’s eff with him,’ and you Billy, winked back at him, like you always do. Am I getting close?”

Tommy threw up his hands as if to defend himself and admit it at the same time.

“Yeah,” he admitted.

Billy just continued grinning.

Rudy said, “I would have taken off that guy’s head without any knowledge that he was a stand-up guy. You just wanted me to fight. Like I’m some kind of entertainment for you two. You guys are the ball-busters, not him.”

“I could’ve gone to jail for beating him up,” he continued, “all to satisfy your egos! Screw you guys!”

“But you fight so pretty,” said Tommy.

“Screw you! I’m not your monkey!” replied Rudy.

I would’ve made a bad decision based off of no information. That’s not what my Dad talked about in his letter. Same consequences as great grandpa would’ve faced. I could’ve fallen into the same trap as he did.

Letter 5- Patience and Persistence for success

Rudy,

I come to this next lesson in a bit of quandary. I want to talk to you about the value of time as it is seen in patience and persistence. But I have little time left myself. I wonder, with each letter that I write, if I'm not counting down my last days. How long I have left, the doctors don't know. All they tell me is that the cancer has metastasized and is spreading quickly.

So it is with haste that I write to you today about patience and persistence. The lesson that the Old Man taught me about was another strong memory that made a strong impression on me. I was twelve at the time.

It was my first road trip with Grandpa. Early one summer Friday morning, Grandpa roused me outta bed, told me to fetch my best clothes, which consisted of a white button-down long sleeve dress shirt, tan pants, Sunday School loafers, and a clip- on black tie. I started to pack these things in my satchel, but Grandpa told me to wear them instead. He had me pack my regular clothes in the satchel.

"Where we goin'?" I asked.

"N'awleans!" he answered with a gleam in his eye.

"What's there?" I asked.

"I've got some materials I gotta pick up in Slidell. I figure that we make an overnight trip outta it, and I'll show you something you've never even seen before!" The Old Man winked at me, and I felt electric with excitement.

The trip down to Slidell in his red Ford pickup was uneventful. I gazed out the truck with the window down and the wind on my face. I watched the cows and horses and farms zip by, wondering what life would be like if I were working on a farm. In my lap was a black writing tablet that the Old Man had given me. I had begun to discover the power and beauty of words, and Grandpa recognized this. He started coaching me to write, and I would write at least once a day. What I wrote, it didn't matter but I had to do it at least once a day. He would read it at dinnertime. Grandpa was always positive and non-judgmental, and that made me feel free with my thoughts. He made me feel really good about myself.

After seeing so many farms and animals, my attention turned inward, and I sat there, pencil in hand, waiting for the words to come. Sure enough, I was learning, if I waited for it, the words would come. Grandpa leaned back in his seat, smoked a Saturday night cigar, and watched me out of the corner of his eye.

I was so absorbed in my thoughts that the time flew past, and before I knew it, Grandpa pulled up at the shop in Slidell where he needed to get his materials. He told me to stay in the truck, which I would've done anyway, because I was so lost in my head. I barely gave the place any notice. It seemed like only a few moments had passed before Grandpa was opening his door and situating himself back into his seat. I glanced out the back window and saw that the bed of the truck was laden with welding materials, covered up with a green canvas tarp.

"Well! That's what I came for. Now we go to N'awleans!" he announced, and I could feel the excitement on him.

"Is there any special place that we're goin'?" I asked.

"Ayep!" He grinned as he turned the ignition and the red Ford rumbled to life. "I'm takin' ya to the French Quarter!"

The French Quarter.

I remember writing the words "French Quarter" down in my tablet. It had such a mysterious and alluring sound to it.

I wrote it again.

The French Quarter.

And again.

Each time I wrote it, it caused me to examine the words in different ways and phrasings.

What was it about a place like that, which held my Grandpa's attention and excitement?

The trip into the city of New Orleans proper was a short one. Grandpa navigated through the streets though, like he had lived there all his life. The buildings were taller than I had ever seen—ten, twelve, even fifteen stories. The houses in the Garden District were beautiful and as grand as the massive oak trees that overhung the streets with their limbs. The trolley cars were packed on this busy Friday, people bustling from one place to another. In fact, I realized that this was the most people I had ever seen in one place, ever. This was my first trip to any big city, and my eyes drank it all in like I was dying of thirst.

All the while, Grandpa watched my response.

Eventually, he found a parking place and announced that we had arrived.

I started to leave my tablet and pencil on the truck seat, but he told me to hold onto it. "Don't want to regret not having it when the muse sings her song," he said.

"What's a muse?" I asked.

"Well," he explained as we started walking up the broad street of Canal, "Davy, a muse is something that the

universe gives to people. She shows up once a man finds his purpose."

"It's a she?"

"Or it can be a he. Depends really on the person."

I nodded my head, starting to understand. "So what am I? An artist?"

Grandpa stopped, looked me in the eye, and said, "I think that's what your soul is turning into. I see the way you take words and make them into something that makes me want to cry. Or sing. Or dance. Or shout. You give d'em words emotions the way you put them together."

I was stunned. I never thought that I could have that impact on people, especially the Old Man.

"That's why we are here today, Davy. This is where you will learn about yourself."

"How?" I asked, thoroughly confused.

"Follow me," he said, and I did.

We turned down a street and passed various shops of all sorts. I wanted to stop in each one, but Grandpa kept us moving. Finally, we reached a block where there appeared to be a small park in the middle of the Quarter. At the center of the park was a statue of a very noble-looking man. Directly behind the park was a grand Cathedral of a church. The noon bells rang out as mass concluded.

"Davy, this is Jackson Square."

On three sides of the square stood shops that sold art, hats, costumes, and jewelry. On the south side of the Square was a row of horses and carriages, where a tourist could purchase a tour of the Quarter. But it was the people themselves that captured my attention. All along the black fence enclosing the park, were paintings, sketches, and art hangings, each with their individual authors' sitting patiently in their chairs. I watched closely as a man with his wife and son sat for one artist, who was painting their portrait right then and there. I noticed that the painter was focusing very deliberately on a detail over the man's eyebrows.

I turned my attention to the other artists, and Grandpa let me wander a bit, not getting too far behind, but close enough to let me know that he was there. One woman, a gray-haired elderly lady with piercing eyes, was sitting in front of some charcoal sketches. When she saw me looking at them, she smiled.

"Hello, young man. Would you like your picture sketched? It'll only take five minutes and five dollars."

"Yes Ma'am, if I could ask you some questions," I replied.

With a puzzled look on her face, her smile was gracious and she nodded her head, "Sure, sweetie."

"How long did it take you to learn how to draw or sketch a picture this good in five minutes?"

"Oh, my!" she drew back, a semi-serious look on her face, "Such a tough question from such a young man!"

It took a very long time.”

I looked at one picture of a gentleman with his daughter. He was happy and content. Another picture of a different man showed his worry and frustration. “To get this good at capturing emotion?” I asked.

She said, “I paint how they feel at the moment. I freeze their emotions in time through the portrait.”

“Oh Gosh!,” I said, “That is very good! No wonder it took a long time! I can see the happiness and the frustration.”

Grandpa was now standing just a few paces behind me. She noticed him, and said, “Tell you what, sweetie, let me draw you and your Grandpa, and I’ll tell you the secret to my talent!”

“Really?” I replied excitedly.

“Done and done!” declared Grandpa.

Grandpa sat in the chair and I stood next to him with my arm around his shoulders, while the woman, who introduced herself as Sharon, sketched our portraits.

“Sharon,” said Grandpa, “Would you be so kind as to explain to my grandson, Davy, if you had a muse to help you along your journey?”

“I’d be glad to,” she replied with a twinkle in her eye. “You see, Davy, yes, I had a muse. He showed up when I was about your age, actually.”

“Really?” I said.

“Yes, when I was your age, I was always fascinated with colors, tints, and lines, different greens and blues and reds. There was a neighbor, a high school chemistry teacher, named Mr Wells. He was a very talented painter. He liked to paint watercolors in his front yard. He would paint beautiful sunrises and sunsets and flower bushes. One day, I walked over and watched him work. I was fascinated by what he was doing. I wondered as to why he painted in early morning and late in the day. He explained to me that the sun hit the canvas in a particular way. The temperature of the air would affect how the paint acted on the canvas. He used a particular type of paint for his watercolors. All of these factors were in the mix that created the beautiful pictures he made. He taught me the chemistry that goes into the painting, how the water mixes with the paint and how to get the colors you want out of the blue, green, yellow, and red. He educated me about everything that happens before I even made the first brush stroke. I had no idea that chemistry and mathematics went into art so precisely. I was eagerly waiting to paint. But he wouldn’t let me until I could explain to him the minutia that goes into the piece. Until I could describe the canvas that I needed, the brush that would work the best, and the temperature of the water needed, he wouldn’t let me paint. At one time, I got frustrated with him. But he would tell me that I needed a strong foundation for

my passion to grow and my talent to grow to its potential and for me to grow. He told me that I had to put in the prep work, because there was no shortcut to excellence. You must put in the time. You must know what is in the painting before the painting is created. It was then, that I realized he was my muse. I learned that in the prep was the mastery. So when I painted my first piece, it was a magical experience.”

I was memorized by what she was saying.

She said, “After that first painting, it would take practice, practice, practice to get good. The more I learned about painting, the more it would open up to me. A muse educates the artist and piques the curiosity through the process.”

I looked up at Grandpa, and he winked at me.

Sharon kept sketching as she talked, “Yes, it took lots of practice to get where I am today.

“And patience...” added Grandpa.

Miss Sharon nodded, “Yes, patience for sure... and a lot of paper!” As she laughed it sounded like birds twittering.

“Davy,” she paused and leaned forward, “do you want to know a secret?”

I nodded, hungry for her knowledge and what it could reveal about myself.

“You must never, ever, ever give up your passion! If you do, then you will be lost...forever... wondering what life could have given you. You see, the universe only gives to those willing to make real what is in their mind and hearts. That takes time, Davy — time, patience, and persistence. Now I could be a famous artist and travel the world with my skill, Davy. But I prefer where I am.” She held up her hands and indicated the surrounding buildings with her gestures, “This is my world. It’s all I ever wanted. I’m happy here. Find where you’re happy, Davy, and don’t ever leave.”

She finished the sketch, and turned it around to show us. The sternness and strength in my Grandpa’s face was apparent, as was my wide-eyed wonderment and innocence. Grandpa handed her a twenty-dollar bill.

“This is for the invaluable lesson you taught my boy, Miss Sharon. God bless you.”

“God bless you, too,” she replied.

We stood up, with charcoal sketch rolled up in-hand, and started down the Square. Suddenly, I heard an awful noise to my left and saw what I considered to be the most ridiculous sight I’d ever seen. It was a man who had a drum on his back, cymbals tied between his knees, a harmonica brace around his neck, a tambourine hanging off his belt, and a guitar in his hands. As he walked, he clanged, strummed, and thudded. Grandpa stopped me, and we both stood there, watching the man.

Anytime a passerby would even look at the man, he would blow his harmonica, or strum the guitar, as if by doing that, he could entice them to pay further attention to him. He tried to strike up a song several times, but the passerby would just lose interest, as he or she took in this spectacle of a musician, and found him wanting, and moved on about their business. The musician would call out to people he knew, and even those people would just give him a passing nod.

After about five minutes of watching this, Grandpa leaned down and whispered in my ear, "What do you see, Davy?"

"A skinny man who can't get a break."

"Why? Why won't anyone give him the time of day, Davy?"

"Because he's ridiculous," I declared.

"Why, Davy?"

The pressing question stumped me. I couldn't answer. Grandpa let me watch the man a few more moments, as if I would stumble across the answer before he said, "Let's go, Davy. There's someone I want you to see."

We walked just a couple of blocks toward Canal Street, when suddenly, we heard a popping sound coming from an alleyway. Out of the alleyway stumbled a man gripping his stomach, his hands bright red. Grandpa placed a hand on my chest, warding me away from the man. He was dressed in ripped jeans and a dirty white t-shirt. He fell against the side of the building and slid down to the ground, his face in torment. He gasped for air.

"What happened to him?" I asked.

The man heard me, and looked our way. He raised a hand, covered in blood, toward us, as if to beckon to us, "Please," he gasped, "please help me."

Just then, we heard a whistle behind us, and turned to see a police officer running down the street. He reached us, and we heard him call in an ambulance. Then he drew his gun and walked into the alleyway. Grandpa and I stood there, watching.

The officer returned a moment later, calling out some numbers on his radio. He looked at us, and motioned for us to step back. We did.

The man's eyes opened for a moment, and he looked at me.

"Don't do what I did," he said between gasps. "It isn't worth it. Threw my whole life away chasin' that horse."

Other people had started to come out of their establishments to watch, and the police officer backed them up too.

"Come on, Davy," Grandpa said, "I know another way."

We turned around, but I kept looking at the bloody man, his thin, unshaven face a fixture in my mind. Then other people crowded my view of him, and I looked away. Grandpa held onto my hand and we went another route toward Canal Street.

"What's going to happen to him?" I asked.

"I don't know, Davy. He might make it. He might not."

"What did he do to get shot?"

"It was probably a bad drug deal, I reckon."

"Drug deal?" I asked.

"He's a junkie, Davy. Threw his life away on drugs."

"What did he mean about the horse?"

"It's a name for a drug. Just remember what he said. Threw his life away."

We turned a corner, and kept walking.

"Why would he do that?" I asked.

"There are some people that live for the stuff they put in their bodies, Davy. They're addicted. They have no reason for doin' it other than it makes them feel good."

"He didn't look like he felt good."

"No, he didn't. Remember that."

We walked several blocks, retracing our steps back to Canal Street. Turning right, we walked several blocks until we reached a theater hall. On the billboard and poster was the picture of a young man, looking to be no older than twenty. He held a violin in his hands.

"Alexander Strauss, a prodigy of the violin," announced Grandpa.

I leaned close to the poster, examining the young man's face. He didn't look like he was from the South.

"Where is he from?"

"He's from Europe," answered Grandpa.

"What's he doing here?"

"He's doing what I want you to understand clearly, Davy. He's letting his light shine."

At that, Grandpa checked his pocket watch, walked to the ticket counter, and purchased two tickets for the evening's performance. He held the tickets up for me to see, "This, Davy, is why we came down here. I wanted you to see this young man."

I was stunned, "You mean you planned this for me?"

He grinned widely, "Ayep. I did indeed. Now let's go back to Jackson Square, I want you to experience Café Du Monde."

We walked with a purpose back to Jackson Square, and Grandpa introduced me to an open-air café where they served hot beignets covered in powdered sugar. While I feasted on this fine delicacy, the white powder dusted my face and black tie; Grandpa lit a cigarette, having run out of cigars, and watched the front of the café. His attention was on a trumpet player who belted out jazz songs with a belly full of fire. Passersby and café customers would drop a few coins into his black felt hat that lay at his feet. I listened intently to the music, wondering if he had spent long hours at his craft the way Miss Sharon had at hers.

Finally, Grandpa focused his eyes on me, and leaned over, saying, "Davy, what do you think is the difference between this trumpet player and the fella we saw earlier?"

I thought the answer was obvious, "This man has one instrument. He's good at one thing. He doesn't look like a fool."

That was a question I couldn't answer.

"But!" interrupted Grandpa, "He's missing something...What is it?" Grandpa leaned back in his chair, lit another cigarette, and said, "You think about it. Wait until the concert tonight. I'm sure you'll figure it out."

I nodded in agreement.

I'm sure I would figure it out.

Finally, the time came for the concert to begin, so we paid our waiter and left the Café Du Monde, making quick time toward the theater. We stopped at the truck for a moment, and Grandpa surprised me by pulling from a duffel bag a red tie and white dress shirt that he had neatly folded inside. He quickly pulled off his grimy grease-stained shirt and put on the dress shirt and tie, within the space of two minutes. After he straightened his tie using the driver's side mirror, he looked me once over, brushed the powdered sugar from my face and tie, and locked the truck.

We arrived at the theater in good time, found our seats with little trouble. Grandpa seemed to almost be at home in this place. I just noticed all the rich-looking people who were dressed in tuxedos and elegant dresses. Several times, Grandpa told me to shut my mouth, flies were getting out. No one seemed to notice us or single us out by laughter, and for that, I was grateful.

The time came when the lights dimmed, and a hush fell over the audience. The stage lights came up, and the thick red curtains drew back. Onto the stage walked a tall, thin young man, the one in the poster on the outside of the theater, carrying a single instrument. At his appearance, the crowd broke into applause. Alexander Strauss

walked to the center of the stage, bowed once to the audience, and then walked to a single microphone stand. He raised the violin to his cheek, and placed his bow upon the strings.

What happened next, I'm not quite sure. There was a sound...no...that wasn't quite right...it was an...emotion, that poured forth from this instrument that filled the entire hall. It was a long mournful sound that seized on every sad moment that I could ever remember and pulled it up and out of me, like my breath was being stolen. This...emotion stretched into an ocean of sounds, washing and overwhelming me, threatening to pull me under, like the riptide. I couldn't escape this mournfulness and tragedy that swept me up and carried my heart and mind out into places I had never been before. The music changed, and as it did, so did my feelings, first sadness, then remorse, then regret, then everlasting sorrow.

On and on, the music poured out of this instrument...no...that's not right...out of this man... this young man. I heard from him a passion that eclipsed the trumpet player's efforts. I saw, on the faces of the people around me, passion that he pulled out of them. All around me, I saw it over and over.

Passion.

Passion.

Passion.

And then, I understood.

I looked at Grandpa, and saw in his damp eyes, the same passion that I felt. I gripped his hand, and he looked at me. Winking, he whispered, "So you understand?"

I nodded.

Grandpa ruffled my hair and grinned.

After the concert, Grandpa surprised me again by leading me to the stage where Strauss stood, bowing and accepting praise. When the young violinist saw me, he stopped what he was doing and bent over.

"Well, young man!" he said in a rich accent that I could only assume was European, "What can I do for you?"

"He wants to know your secret," said Grandpa.

"Ahh!" said Alexander, straightening, "Such a bold thing to ask of me. But without asking, you would never know, now would you?" Alexander displayed his hands in front of me.

"What do you see?" he asked.

I studied his long manicured fingers. I saw calluses on the fingertips. I saw strength in those hands. "I see... strength and calluses."

Alexander laughed loudly, "My young man, what you cannot see, is that these hands have practiced eight to

ten hours a day for the past fifteen years. Everyday! Without fail!"

I couldn't believe it.

"Everyday?"

"Every. Single. Day!"

"Why?" I asked, already knowing what the answer was.

Alexander Strauss shrugged, as if this were the easiest question in the world, "Passion, young man, passion!"

What I want you to understand, Rudy, is that I discovered that Alexander Strauss's passion led him to have a vision to share his light, his talent, with as many people as possible. But I'm sure that this vision could only come about by means of what Miss Sharon said, "Practice...practice...practice..." The trumpet player had passion, he had talent, but his vision was limited to a few coins from a passerby. The ridiculous musician was too concerned about what people thought about him, so he used gimmicks, instead of relying on one thing.

There is something that I need you to understand about the mind, Rudy. Each one of those artists, had talent, some great, some small. Each of them also had desire, some to be great, some to be mediocre. That desire was fed and nurtured by what they told themselves about who they were. Your self-talk, Rudy, is crucial to your success. Miss Sharon told herself what kind of artist she wanted to be, and she became the person she visualized. The ridiculous musician did the same thing. As, did Alexander Strauss. He visualized himself traveling the world as a famous violinist. This is what he became. Why? Because of self-talk. And successful self-talk, Rudy, is patience and persistence. It is an everyday action. An everyday nurturing of who you are.

Something else...Miss Sharon chose what kind of life she wanted. She knew she could have had more. But she was comfortable with what she had. So many people in life will just settle for what they can get. Their vision goes no further than their front door. Alexander Strauss had a vision to be the best and let the world know he was the best. He had a vision to let his light shine before men, and to light up the world with his passion. In the reverse, the alley man chose a life that led nowhere but his own demise. Each person made a choice and lived out that choice to the fullest of their vision. That is what I want you to have, Rudy.

Don't settle.

Set the world on fire with your light. Shine, Rudy, shine.

Your loving father,

David Irving

Letter 6- Face your challenges to be a hero

Rudy,

There is one lesson that the Old Man taught me that is painful to recall, even now, because I witnessed it firsthand. You see, Daniel, it was a different world back then, in the fifties, than it is today. Back then, in the deep Delta, hatred and bigotry ran deep and wide throughout the land. Back then, there were two classes of society. Coloreds and Whitefolk. I was very conscious of this from an early age. I naturally thought what I was taught to think about Coloreds. I was a product of my upbringing. Until the day that I met Colored Joe.

I was no more than nine, sitting in the Old Man's welding shop, watching him work. He had deemed it safe enough for me to sit in the shop with him and begin learning his trade. It was a Friday afternoon, late as I remember, and the air was sticky that day.

I heard a car horn blare out two short bursts behind me, and turned to see a long Ford Fairlane pull into the drive. Sitting in the driver's seat was a black man. His skin was coal dark. When he looked at me, he grinned from ear-to-ear, and I could see that he was missing two top teeth on the left side. His cheek bulged from what I naturally assumed was a plug of chewing tobacco. When he smiled, I could see his teeth were stained yellow, most likely from the tobacco. I turned back toward Grandpa, and he hadn't heard the car horn, his helmet still down, blue fire reflecting off the visor. The black man opened his car door and walked to the trunk and opened it. I walked over to Grandpa and tapped him on the shoulder.

The Old Man stopped his work and lifted his visor, "Yeah Davy? What?"

I pointed silently to the black man who now was carrying what looked to be a load of white sheets and a laundry basket. The man's grin hadn't changed a bit.

"Joe!" exclaimed the Old Man, "How are ya this fine afternoon?"

Before Joe could answer, Grandma appeared, "Joe! You got ma sheets for me?"

Joe's head bobbed toward Grandma, "Yessum, Ah's got yo sheets right here! The Missus an' I done a fine job wit' dem! Dey's fresh and clean, Ma'am!"

Grandma took the laundry from Joe and examined it. "Well, Joe, looks like you've done another fine job!" she praised.

Joe's head bobbed again, "Ah, thankya Ma'am!"

"Margaret!" snapped Grandpa, "Joe's always done fine work by us! I expect no less from that war hero!"

Joe's grin broadened, somehow, "Thankya Boss! But I ain't no..."

"Nonesense!" interrupted Grandpa, "You did what I couldn't! Don't you ever let anyone take that away from you, Joe!"

Joe's head nodded gently, "Yessir Boss."

Grandma lifted the laundry basket and turned toward Grandpa, "I 'spose ya'll goin' fishing?"

I looked from her to him, and saw a light in Grandpa's eyes, "Well, woman! I reckon' we can go down to the creek for a spell! Whatya say, Joe? I got the cane poles right over there!"

Joe's expression was of pure delight, "Well, Boss, seein' as how ah ain't got no more deliveries on this Friday, ah think ah got plenty o' time for catchin' a fish or two!"

"That's what I want ta hear!" laughed the Old Man.

Then his eye fell on me, "Davy!"

I jumped up from where I had been sitting. "Yes Sir?"

"You're comin' with us today! I want you to meet Joe!"

I turned toward the black man named Joe, and looking up at him, saw he was taller than Grandpa. I nodded to him, "Nice to meet ya...Joe."

Joe leaned down and stuck out his hand for me to grasp, "Nice to meet you, Boss!"

I looked to Grandpa, and he had a look on his face that told me to shake the man's hand. I did. It was a huge hand that swallowed mine. I noticed that his palms were a light tan, almost beige white. His eyes, up close were dark, but the whites of his eyes were streaked with thin lines of brown. His breath smelled of tobacco, and after he shook my hand, he turned his head, and spit through the missing teeth into the dust. He straightened and looked at Grandpa.

"Davy!" Grandpa barked, pulling me out of my reverie, "Grab three cane poles from the corner over there!"

I jumped to it.

Minutes later, the three of us were walking down the dirt road toward the Creek. I tried to keep stride with Grandpa and Joe, but their long legs carried them ahead of me. Still, I kept up with just a couple of paces behind.

For a while, all the sounds I heard were the crunch of our steps on the dusty road. Well, it was barely a road, but it had smooth gravel that kept the thick mud at bay during the heavy rains. In the summertime, each step brought with it a plume of dust trailing behind you.

After about five minutes of silence, however, Grandpa spoke up, "Hey Joe!"

Joe cast a glance at the Old Man, "Yeah Boss?"

"Davy here don't know nuthin' about the war. Do you Davy?"

War? What war? "What war?" I replied.

"See what I mean?" answered the Old Man, "Why don't you, being a war hero and all, educate my Grandson about your bravery at Normandy?"

Joe turned his head and spit a wad of juice through his teeth, wiped his mouth, and glanced back at Grandpa, "Boss..." he paused, "I can't do that."

"What!" exclaimed Grandpa, "Why not!? Davy here needs an education!"

Joe nodded in agreement, "I reckon' he do, Boss, but I'm not no teacher."

"Joe..." said Grandpa slyly, "you are the best dadgum teacher about what a hero is! I don't want my boy learnin' about anything from a book that he can't get from a bonafide hero! That's what you are, Joe! BONAFIDE!"

"Ayeah," agreed Joe, "I reckon you might be right, Boss, but them's times is hard on a man."

"Why is that?" I asked.

Joe glanced back at me, and I saw something in his eyes that spoke clearer than anything that could come out of any man's mouth, "Boss, you don't wanna know the pain I've been through. It's hard on the heart."

"What happened?" I asked, genuinely curious, but at the same time, not wanting to offend Joe.

"Tell you what Joe!" said Grandpa, "If you consent to educate young Davy here about your exploits of bravery, there's a Saturday night cigar in it for ya!"

Joe's head swiveled back to the front, and he spit again, "Well, Boss, seein' as how I likes yo Saturday night cigars, I'd sez we has a deal!" He looked back at Grandpa and grinned from ear-to-ear, his yellow- stained tobacco teeth standing out from his bright pink gums.

"Done and done!" declared Grandpa as he fished into his shirt pocket and pulled out one of his prized cigars, handing it to Joe, who took it like it was pure gold. His face shone with delight.

By that time, we had reached the creek, and we walked down the embankment to the water's edge. Grandpa produced a large fishing knife and used it to dig up some fresh worms for the bait. Within minutes, the three of us were standing on the creek shore, eyeing our corks and bobbers closely.

Grandpa and Joe were about ten paces from each other, and I stood between them.

After a few moments of silence, the Old Man nudged Joe to begin his story. Joe spit out of the side of his mouth and glanced at me.

I smiled back, hoping that my smile would encourage him to tell his story.

Joe returned the smile and said, "Well, Boss, the story I gots to tell is not a pretty one. No indeed. It twernt pretty at all. I was in a Negro company, that stormed the beach at Normandy, over the pond, as they says it."

"Where was Normandy?" I asked.

"France!" barked the Old Man, "Now hush up and let Joe tell his story!"

"Yes sir," I replied quickly.

"Youse gots ta understand, Boss, that over there, you can die like a mosquito gettin' swatted! The landing door opened on our boat, and the fella next ta me, Forest, his name was, fell over dead with a bullet in his head! He didn't get his helmet on his head in time. We spilled outta that boat like guts outta a fat trout sliced up proper! The water was colder than a witch's tit in the winter and it made my jimmies draw up into my guts! Hooah that was some cold water!"

"Why did you do it?" I asked.

"Cause!" interrupted Grandpa, "Joe is a hero! He's Bon-a-fide! BON-A-FIDE!"

Joe almost seemed to blush at that declaration, "I did it because..."

"Hey! Joe! What's you doin' out there?" a harsh voice interrupted.

We turned to see three men standing over the embankment at the edge of the dirt road. Two younger men, perhaps in their early twenties, and an older man, who seemed familiar to me somehow, looked down at Joe, with a frightening cast to his eye.

"Nothing, Boss!" replied Joe, "We's jus..."

"We? WE!? What in Tarnation you mean WE, Joe?" blurted the older man. He glanced at Grandpa and me. "Don't tell me you're fishin' with a Colored, Augustus Irving? Are you fishin' with a Colored?"

"Now Samuel Townsend!" barked Grandpa,

"It's none of your fool business where I fish or who I choose to fish with!"

The now-identified Mr. Townsend, who was chewing his own plug of tobacco, spit to the side and eyed Grandpa with a threatening gaze. "I 'spose you don't mind being a Colored-lover, now do ya, Augustus? I might have ta take my weldin' business somewheres else if I find you're a Colored-lover!"

Grandpa put down his cane pole and drew himself up, "Well, if you're gonna be so inclined to do so, then by all means, it's a free country last I checked!"

Townsend smirked, "This is the South, Augustus, you know we do things different round here!"

"That may be," answered Grandpa, "but I don't cotton to no one insultin' friends of mine and then threatenin' my livelihood!"

"Then why don't you come up here," beckoned Townsend, "so we can discuss this proper like?"

"Townsend..." Grandpa started up the embankment, "you are cruisin' for a bruise!" He clenched his large gnarled fists, and I heard the joints popping.

I felt ice water in my belly; the fear made my lips tremble.

I lost my voice.

I lost my strength.

I watched, helpless, as my Grandpa reached the top of the embankment and Townsend swung down on him. There was a meaty thud, and I saw Grandpa take the first blow on the cheek. But he stood his ground. His ham-sized fists pummeled into Townsend's face and stomach. As Townsend bent over, Grandpa reared back to deliver another punishing blow. Suddenly, the two younger men tackled him from behind.

The three men fell into a heap after some scrambling; one of them grabbed Grandpa from behind, pulled his arms back and had him pinned. The other young man was landing blow after blow into Grandpa's belly. A moment later, Townsend was there, smiling between busted lips. The younger man stopped, and Grandpa was hunched over, gasping for breath.

Townsend smiled a wicked smile, one that I will never forget to this day, and said, "You're gonna pay for that, Colored-lover. Then your family is gonna pay too — I'll settle for you first."

Townsend drew back his fist, and I could already hear the crunch of bones in my head. I tried to look away, but I couldn't. They were gonna kill my Grandpa, here and now.

And there was nothing I could do.

Townsend launched his fist at my Grandpa's head.

And then, without warning or preamble, a huge black hand caught the white man's fist in mid-punch. A second black hand, in the shape of a massive hammer of a fist, slammed into the side of Townsend's face. The white man went flying several feet, landing in a pile of dust.

I suddenly found my feet again and scrambled up the embankment.

Townsend's face was cut and bleeding, his hand covering his jaw. The expression on his face was one of both outrage and repulsion. I looked to Joe, and saw him unleash his anger on the one young man who was standing to the side. I saw something I hadn't ever seen before in a man's face.

Pure rage.

The young man tried to block Joe's punches, but Joe was too quick. His massive fist thudded into man's torso and jaw, and I heard several loud crunches that I took for broken bones. It was just a handful of swings, and the

man went down, cradling his face and ribs.

Joe spun around and glared at the last man standing, who had released Grandpa, now on his knees, looking up at Joe. There was an expression on Grandpa's face that I'll never forget. It was part awe...part gratefulness...part worship. Of that, I'm certain.

The man standing charged Joe, trying to tackle him.

Joe had none of it.

He stepped to the side and brought his elbow squarely down on the man's neck and head. He followed it with a huge smashing punch to the middle of the man's back, sending him sprawling, facedown, in the dirt. Joe didn't stop there. He turned his gaze back toward Townsend, who was on his haunches, hand to his smashed cheek, blood soaking his white shirt. As Joe started toward him, Townsend's eyes grew to the size of half-dollars.

I looked to Joe, and saw that each step was filled with an earth-shaking rage. His fists quivered and his cheek twitched. His nostrils flared, like an enraged Spanish bull.

It would be just a few steps to reach Townsend... And then...

"Joe!" cried out Grandpa.

Joe stopped.

"Joe!" Grandpa cried again.

Joe turned to look at him.

"Help me up, Joe," said Grandpa, on his knees now.

I looked back at Joe, and saw something in his face change.

It softened. In the blink of an eye, the rage was gone. In its place was the face and expression of the grinning man that I had met only an hour or so before.

Joe was back.

Joe helped my Grandpa to his feet, and the Old Man looked at me with concern in his eye.

"You okay, Davy?"

I nodded, not really knowing what to say. "Fetch our cane poles, willya? I think it's time we headed back to the house."

"Ayeah," agreed Joe, "I thinks that's a grand idea, Boss."

I scrambled back down the embankment and gathered up the cane poles. The two old friends waited for me, and the three of us walked slowly back to the house. The sun was setting, and the shadows grew long over the gravel road.

No one said anything for a long time.

Finally, I could no longer hold my peace.

"Joe," I said, looking up at this hero, "I think I know why you did it."

"Ya do?" he asked.

"Yeah, Joe. I think so."

"Well do tell, Davy," ordered Grandpa.

"As terrible as it was over there," I started, staring at the road, "you did it to protect us over here."

I looked up at Joe.

"Didn't you?"

Joe grinned widely, "Ayeah, I reckon so. I reckon so.

"THAT, Davy," declared the Old Man, "is why Joe is a hero. You can't judge a man by his skin. You can't judge a man by his speech. You can only judge a man by what is in his heart. The heart, Davy, is what directs the hand. Consequently, what a man does reveals his heart. Do you understand boy?"

"Yes sir."

"Good...good..." the Old Man tousled my hair, and I felt in those gnarled fingers, pride and love.

Rudy, I want you to know that some fifteen years later, Joe died of a heart attack. I went to his funeral given at the VFW building. They talked about Joe's exploits, the bronze and silver medals and the purple-heart medal that he had been awarded, and the lives he saved. Several of the townsfolk showed up for Joe's funeral, including Grandpa, of course. But I also noticed, at the back of the room, for the briefest of moments, one Samuel Townsend flanked by who I later learned were his two boys. The man had a look on his face that showed me that something had changed.

Maybe the world is getting better.

I told you this story to show you what true courage is, Rudy. My Grandpa showed true courage simply by breaking with society's rules and befriending a man that society saw as inferior. Grandpa showed true courage by calling Joe by his name, not Colored Joe. He called him by his name because he respected him. Why? Because Rudy, he had principles.

I leave you with this: Be courageous. Live by your principles. Take a whuppin' if you have to, but take it like a man on his feet. Never back down on your principles, son.

Rudy, you need to understand that in life there are three dimensions to the challenges we all face. There is the Material and Physical dimension; the Emotional dimension; and the Spiritual dimension. Each of these

dimensions can be seen in nearly every challenge that you face.

Remember that your great-grandfather walked into three challenges that day. Physically, he faced a beatin' with his head held high and his fists swingin'. Emotionally, he chose to stand up for a friend. Spiritually, he chose to stand against the wickedness of hatred and bigotry.

He did it because of his principles. He did it because it was the right thing to do. Be someone's hero, Rudy.

Your loving father,

David Irving

Letter 7- Humility is a price

Rudy,

I was eighteen when I learned the next valuable lesson from the Old Man. I have to admit to you, son, that I am embarrassed as I tell you this. You see, Daniel, I don't want you to see me as something that I'm not. I've made mistakes in my life. I've screwed up more ways than I can remember. I've got faults, just like the next guy. Listen to the lesson I have for you.

I was seventeen years old when I entered a short story into the Mississippi Southern Regional Writing Contest. This was a contest that was held every year among high schools throughout Southern Mississippi.

I remember the day that Grandpa knocked on the door to my bedroom. I was at the small wooden desk that sat in the corner, typing away on typewriter that he had bought for me. I was so caught up in the story in my head that I barely registered the knock on the door.

"Come in!" I called out, turning to see Grandpa walk in with a single white envelope in his gnarled fingers. He had a look in his eye that I instantly recognized as excitement. He held it firmly in his hand.

"It's from Ole Miss," he said.

"Ole Miss?" I was confused. "I didn't send anything to Ole Miss."

Grandpa pulled out from his back pocket, a second envelope, this one already opened. "I'm sorry I opened your mail. This is from the Regional Contest."

With a smile that lit up the room, he exclaimed, "Your story won first place!"

My mouth dropped open.

"First place?"

Grandpa nodded and pulled out the letter, and there it was in bold letters:

We are pleased to inform you that your submission was awarded first place in the Mississippi Southern Regional Writing Contest.

But it didn't end there.

We are also pleased to award you with the Faulkner Writer's Scholarship to attend University of Mississippi upon completion of your high school diploma.

As I grabbed my face with both hands and whispered to myself, "I don't believe it, I don't believe it." I took

the envelope from Ole Miss and tore it open. Inside was an acceptance letter to the university and congratulations from the President of the University.

Ole Miss!

The Grove!

The Rebels!

Faulkner!

Hell yeah!

This all seemed too good to be true. I looked up at Grandpa.

He reached out with his thick fingers and pinched me on the arm. "You're not dreamin'. It's real, Davy."

"Grandpa, I really never thought that this would happen to somebody like me."

"What? That you would do this good? You're my boy! Remember Alexander Strauss! He was barely twenty, and he was touring the world! You have a duty to let your talent shine before men! Let your light shine brightly, Davy!"

"Yes sir," I nodded.

Grandpa spread his arms wide and embraced me in a bear hug.

That last year in high school passed like a dream. I barely remember it. I no longer thought of who dated whom or were we going to win the regional football championship. I didn't care. I was going to Ole Miss.

Grandpa says there is something about success that changes a man.

I didn't know it.

I didn't see it.

But it happened.

Pride goes before the Fall.

I got through that last year in high school on a perpetual pink cloud. I have to tell you, by the end of that year, I was so good, I smelled like roses. Everything I touched, wrote, or thought of, turned to gold, it seemed.

That next fall, I unloaded my bags from Grandpa's red Ford pickup and walked onto the Ole Miss campus ten feet tall. I was there to conquer. I was there to show them who was best. I was there to be the best.

Looking back now, I wonder if my arrogance was so very apparent to everyone around me.

I suppose that it was.

My professors picked up on it right away. They made things very hard for me. Suddenly, nothing I wrote made sense. Nothing I wrote was good enough. Nothing I wrote was gold.

It was crap, one professor told me.

Do you think that this made me humble?

Nope.

Instead, I became sullen and angry. Who does this professor think he is?

Then, one day, after midterms, I was called in the Dean of Liberal Arts' office. I sat down in one of the two chairs positioned in front of the Dean's desk. The Dean, Dr Foster, was studying some papers on his desk. He said nothing at first. Dr Foster was a balding man with thin-wire glasses on his nose that were in danger of falling off as he read the papers. I noticed on his coat stand was a Harley Davidson jacket and a helmet hanging next to it.

There was a knock on the door, and Professor Wright, one of the ball-busters that I had for English Lit, entered and took the chair next to me. Professor Wright was a round fellow, he looked like a tick ready to pop. He had black beady eyes and crooked yellow teeth. I could smell the Camel cigarettes on his breath. I wrinkled my nose unconsciously, then caught myself.

Dean Foster looked up from his papers with a stern and serious look. "Mr. Irving," he began with a deep voice, "I understand that you are here on a Faulkner Scholarship, is that right?"

I felt my throat tighten, "Yes Sir, I am."

"Well...Mr. Irving, I'm not one to beat around the bush about things. Here at Ole Miss, we take pride in the integrity of our work. We value originality and keenness of thought. We strive to encourage excellence in our students' academic lives."

He paused for a second, and took a deep breath, "Do you understand?"

I swallowed, "Yes Sir, I do."

"So, can you explain to me Mr. Irving, how you could see fit that it is somehow acceptable to take another person's work and pass it off as your own?"

"Sir?"

"Professor Wright has identified four separate places in your midterm paper that were not identified as proof text."

I felt my insides turn to ice water.

"What?" I said.

"He's talking about plagiarism!" declared Professor Wright, "I have found not one, but four instances where you have not cited sources! You did not use quotations!"

"S..Surely this is some kind of mistake..." I stuttered.

"No, I don't think so," said the Dean.

I felt sick to my stomach.

"No Mr. Irving, this is not acceptable. This is what I clearly consider plagiarism. As a consequence, your scholarship is being revoked. You are placed on academic suspension. It will be noted in your academic record what has occurred here." The Dean pushed up his glasses on his nose and glared at me for a response.

"So what does that mean?" I asked.

"Go home," replied Dean Foster, "Go back to Gulfport. You can forget about your future here at the University."

"I can't come back?"

"Oh you could," answered Professor Wright, "but do you really want to under these circumstances? All eyes will be on you from now on."

I couldn't find the words. In my mind, I reflected back to New Orleans. Had I been abandoned by my muse? She was nowhere to be found. I left that office feeling something I had never experienced before.

Defeat.

I also felt anger at myself.

My arrogance had led me down this path.

I was broken.

The next two days, I withdrew from the University, boarded a Greyhound bound for home, and said goodbye to my dreams. I called Grandpa and told him I was coming home. He asked why, and I said, "It's not good."

I had plenty of time to think about what I had done. Deep down, I realized that I thought that I could bend the rules. I realized that the pressure of the classes was greater than I had ever imagined. I realized that I had reacted out of fear, when I copied off the other authors' work. Worst of all, I simply thought that I could get away with it.

When the bus reached Gulfport, I stepped off it to find Grandpa's red Ford pickup parked. He sat in the driver's seat, smoking a cigarette.

Head down, I walked to the pickup, and he said in a gentle voice, "Get in boy."

I threw my bags in the bed of the truck and settled into the passenger's seat. I kept my eyes on the floorboard, not wanting to look at him.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" he said.

"They caught me copying someone's work in one of my papers. I'm on academic suspension."

Grandpa nodded his head, put the truck in drive, and drove away. He left me in my thoughts, not knowing how

to feel.

"This is your home, boy. You can't ever leave your home behind. Everyone should be able to come home at some time in their life. Especially when they've had a whuppin'."

"I took one alright," I agreed.

"Ayeah, I'm sure you did. Hurts doesn't it?"

"What?"

He finished his cigarette and tossed it out the window, "Your pride, boy. I've watched you over the past year and a half. You've been so full of yourself that I thought you were going to bust. Now you have a good look about you."

"What is that?"

"Davy, it really looks like you're hurting right now. Pride does a number on us all."

"I believe you, Grandpa," I replied.

"Now it's time to learn about humility. That's the only thing that is going to take away that sting. It's a lesson everyone has to learn."

"Your Grandma has prepared you a big dinner with your favorite pie. It's time you man up! Accept that you done wrong. Own it. Learn from it. Tomorrow is another day. We'll figure out what you're gonna do with your life tomorrow. Today, you're coming home and gonna be loved."

Rudy, this is what I want you to learn from me. Beware your ego. You cannot let it lead your thoughts and actions. If anything, it is kindness and integrity guide you in your decision making.

What is humility?

Well, there are several definitions. But, I think the best one that applies here is it is not putting you ahead of others. That's what I did. I thought I was better than everyone else. But the universe doesn't like that kind of attitude, son. It has a way of puttin' you in your place. Reminding you that you have to be a servant leader, if you want to lead.

Every human being is full of potential. Our job on Earth is to find that potential, those special gifts our Heavenly Father bestowed on us, and give them away with integrity and kindness. In these actions, the universe unfolds with reward for what we did for other people. Son, I'm not talking about money. Money and fame comes and goes. What stays in a person's life is a feeling of being one with your gifts, being one with the universe, and being one with the people that your gifts lead you to. They are expressions of your gifts from above.

Your loving Father,
David Irving

Letter 8- Mastermind your success plan
(A get-together)

Rudy,

I woke up the next morning and I sat at the breakfast table, eating eggs and sausage, thankful for the large breakfast my mother cooked for me. I gazed into my glass of milk, wondering if the answers to the questions about what I was going to do with my life were there. After I drained the glass, I felt no wiser. I returned to my room, planted myself at my typewriter, and placed a clean sheet in it.

I typed out the following questions: What do I do now? Where do I go with my life? How do I keep my spirits up? How do I recover from this terrible mistake?

I thought that if I typed out these questions, my mind would work out the answers — that they might magically appear on the paper.

I was thankful when Grandpa came into the room, stopped, took in what I had typed, and took the paper from the machine. He looked at it in silence. Then he said, “Get your shoes on, we’re going somewhere.”

I did, and he watched me, my every movement, like he was measuring something. I didn’t know what it was, but I felt the weight of his eyes on me. I felt like I was eight years old again, and mentally prepared myself for a long lecture. But he said nothing to me, just motioned me to follow him out of the house to his pickup truck. We climbed in and tore off down the road. We soon found ourselves in Gulfport, pulling into the parking lot of Shag’s Barbershop. It was Saturday morning.

“Grandpa, I don’t need a haircut,” I said.

“You do today,” he answered.

We entered the barbershop at which Grandpa would sometimes spend hours at. Bart, the owner, was an older man with a short, clipped haircut, high and tight. The tiny bell rang as we entered and he looked up to see us.

“Welcome, Augustus!” he greeted.

“Howdy do, Bart. How are you?”

“Doing good. Well bless me! Davy! Haven’t seen you in a long while. Heard you were off to school.”

I grinned at Bart and raised a hand in greeting.

Bart folded the paper he had in his hand and spun the seat around, inviting me to sit.

"Go on, Davy," Grandpa urged, and I did.

Grandpa took a seat in the row of chairs at the big pane window with five other men, who seemed to be waiting for a haircut as well. I had seen them around, and I knew they were Grandpa's friends.

"Davy," Grandpa said, "Let me introduce you. This is Mr. Henry, Mr. Cottle, Mr. Shakes, Mr. Dale, and Mr. King."

I looked at them in the reflection of the mirror while Bart clipped my hair, "Hello," I said.

"Davy, I brought you here today to experience a get-together."

"This," gesturing the men next to him, Mr. Cottle, a thin-faced man with wire-rimmed glasses, said, "is the Gulf Coast Get-together Group! Some people would call it a mastermind group. We just call it a get-together. Davy, what brings you here today to the get-together?"

I said, "Well, I made a huge error in judgment at college at Ole Miss."

"Well, Davy, all of us sittin at this barbershop made mistakes in life."

"Hell," said Mr. King, "I killed someone once in a bar fight!"

Mr. King glanced at Mr. Shakes, "Hell, Davy, Mr. Shakes has been married five times. And I can guarantee you all those divorces weren't the women's fault. He's gotta take the responsibility for the blame somewhere."

Mr. Shakes said, "I'm not very good at marriage, but I love a honeymoon."

Mr. Cottle said, "Not a man in this barbershop that hasn't made a passel of mistakes during their life. It's what you do about it that counts."

All of the men nodded their heads, "Ayeah, that's right."

Mr. King said, "We are a group of men that made a whole bunch of mistakes in our lives, just trying to do the best that we can. We get together so we can keep each other straight. I guess that's why we call it a get-together, because we try to help each other out."

"Davy, here," said Grandpa, "needs our direction."

"Didn't you go off to Ole Miss?" asked Mr. Cottle.

I nodded my head.

"Why are you back here?" asked Mr. Shakes.

I hesitated, the shame welling up inside me.

"Go on, Davy, tell em about it," said Grandpa.

I looked at Grandpa with hesitation in my expression.

"Go on Davy, tell em. They want to help," Grandpa said.

"I'm on academic suspension," I said, "I copied someone's work."

"I see," said Mr. Cottle.

"Can you go back?" asked Mr. Dale, taking a plug of tobacco out of a pouch.

"I could," I said, "but I'm too embarrassed."

"It'll be tougher for him," said Mr. Henry, a red-faced man with golden rimmed glasses. His voice was deep and resonated loudly. "They'll be watching him extra close."

"So what do you want to do, son?" asked Mr. Cottle.

"I don't know," I said.

"First thing, you gotta do," said Mr. Dale, "is know your soil."

"My soil?" I said.

"Ayeah, your soil. It can be a company, a market, or even your relationships. All of life can be someone's soil. You can't grow anything until you know your soil. It can be full of weeds and thorns, or full of rocks. You have to know the environment that you have to work with before you can prosper."

"Okay," I said, wondering what that had to do with me copying someone's paper.

Mr. Dale continued, "You must cultivate your soil, make it fertile to what you want to grow. Apparently, you wanted your cotton to grow in two days, instead of the normal cycle. You got impatient."

Mr. Cottle said, "You might want to grow cotton one year, and switch to another crop the next. You've got to prepare your soil."

"Why?" I asked.

"Variety!" said Mr. Dale, "Variety is the spice of life. If the soil is constantly used up for the same thing, and you don't take time to replenish the nutrients in it...If you don't take care of the people in your company, for example, then your soil sours on you, and your crop goes bad."

Mr. King spoke up, "I have to keep my cars lookin' sharp, running tight, for someone to buy one. I must pay attention to the small details to keep my business open. Details, Davy. That's what Dale is talking about. Details."

"Ayeah," said Mr. Dale, "You have to tend to the crops themselves, make sure that the weather doesn't burn 'em up or wash 'em out. You have to care for your crops as much as you care for your soil, because it's your crops that put food on the table. It's your crops you sell at market."

"He's talkin' about your product, Davy," explained Grandpa, "What you produce is what people are gonna buy. So, you have to make sure that it's a crop that people want. It's a product that people need. It's a product that they can't live without. If you have a bad product...let's face it...you go hungry. You have to tend to your crop."

Make sure that no one steals it from you. Make sure that no one messes with it. Make sure that it is the best quality crop that you have been able to produce. Is this sinkin' in?"

I nodded my head.

Mr. Dale chimed in, "Davy, if you don't know what to do with your life...then you haven't taken stock of what you can do. Too many farmers think they can grow turnips when their soil is ready for soybeans. What happens? They don't know themselves. They don't plan and organize their work to match what they are capable of doing. Too many people, these days, don't plan their lives because they don't have any knowledge of what they can and can't do! They don't know their capabilities! They don't know their strengths and weaknesses! They just think that just because they have a piece of land, that they can grow whatever they darn well please! The land...the soil... Davy...now understand this... the soil is set by God! He determines what is gonna grow and what isn't! Each one of us has a God- given soil that allows for certain crops! Some people can only grow turnips! Some people can only grow corn! Some people can grow soybeans, cotton, and corn! Everybody has got a different soil, a different capability, and it's up to each individual to cultivate his land and make it produce. Do you see?"

"So..." said Mr. Cottle, "Are you going back?"

Bart had finished cutting my hair and he spun me around to face the mastermind group. "I don't know what else I'm going to do. I'm a writer."

"You bet you're goin' back!" said Grandpa.

"Then we've achieved our aims here," said Mr. Shakes. "Young Davy is going back to school."

"Yeah," I agreed, "I am."

Rudy, I realized then that I had to take stock of my soil. Use my talents to grow the best crop possible. I had no time to feel sorry for myself.

So I went back to Ole Miss, and I accepted their scrutiny because I was the one to make the mistake. I had to live with it, but it was worth it, because I had the lesson to learn. I took every class as a field that I needed to plant my crop in. I worked hard. It was a hard four years. But it was fruitful. I learned so much about myself and the world.

I learned something about my Grandpa and the men he had with him in that mastermind group. There was a congruency of personality. They talked alike, thought alike. They said what they meant and meant what they said. They were the same, so they trusted each other.

It was a group built on integrity. They were honest folk that lived honest lives. There were no hidden agendas. They all worked as a group toward a common goal. No one stole the limelight. They cooperated and achieved

something they couldn't have done independently. When they help me, they helped each other.

Find your group of masterminds, Rudy.

Find men and women who believe in you and your vision.

Find them and hold them close, for as you bless them, they will bless you.

Your loving Father,

David Irving

Rudy,

It wasn't too soon after I returned to Ole Miss that semester, that I learned another important lesson from Grandpa. It was Christmas day, and me, my mother, and my three uncles sat down with Grandpa for some card games around the dining table. This was a tradition that we had going back to my early childhood days, as far back as I could remember.

Grandpa was playing the House, while the five of us played seven card stud. We used pretzel sticks for playing chips. Grandpa chewed on a cigar, sputtering as he dealt the cards like a professional dealer, quick with deft hands.

After a few hands, he said, "Davy, why don't you pull your chair over to my side of the table? I have something I want to teach you."

I obeyed and moved my chair.

"Now," he said, "this is a lesson in how to play poker and win."

"Okay," I said.

He dealt the first hand and said in a low voice, "Look at the players."

I did. Mom was all concentration. Uncle Ralph kept looking at his cards, and then the face-up cards of the other players. Uncle Bill kept a straight face, but he wasn't looking at the cards, he was looking at the players. Uncle Henry was scratching his chin and looked like he was about to say something.

Grandpa dealt the next card, and Uncle Henry asked, "So what kinda books you read at school, Davy?"

Grandpa leaned over to me and said, "Henry is an Influencer."

"What do you mean?" I asked, about to answer him.

"He plays the game for the social aspect. He tries to get chummy with the other players, so they don't think about their hands. An Influencer is a very social personality. He's creative in ways that other people don't think about."

"Well?" asked Henry.

"We read a lot of literature books," I answered.

"Literature books," repeated Uncle Henry.

I nodded.

"Now look at your mother, she's got a dominant posture and look on her face," Grandpa said. I did, and

mother did look like she was all business about the game.

Grandpa dealt another card.

"Ralph, there, is studying the cards. That's because he's a numbers guy. He wants to know what the facts are. Who's got what. He's running numbers in his head. What cards could come next to whom."

Grandpa dealt another card.

"Bill is taking it all in, the cards and the expressions on their faces. He's in the game for the game. He's on track with who's got what, but he's also enjoying the game. If we were playing bridge, he'd be just as comfortable on a team, because he's a team player. Whereas Henry will talk your ear off, Bill will sit and listen to him and play the game."

"These are four different personalities that you are going to meet in the world," he explained, "The key is that you've got to meet them where they are."

"Ayeah. Take your mother, for example. She's a results-oriented person. She wants to know about getting the job done. In this case, it's about winning the hand. Just this hand. She doesn't worry about the next hand, or fret about last hand. Just this one. So you have to meet her dominant personality in that vein."

"Uncle Henry?"

"Ah yes, the life of the party. If there's going to be a joke told, it's Henry that's going to do it. He's spontaneous and friendly. He plays the game for the social aspect of it. He's emotional and thinks and speaks from his heart. So you want to let him get his ideas out there and don't ignore them."

"Uncle Bill?"

"He's the steady sort. He's the backbone of the game. He's here to play and enjoy the game, and he's your typical card player. In business, he would be the employee that always shows up to work on time, every day, without complaint. He prizes order and keeping everything on time. He's loyal. Don't be overly aggressive with him, cause he'll shut down. Show interest in him as a person and you'll have a loyal friend."

"Uncle Ralph?"

"Numbers. Facts. That's what gets Ralph out of bed in the morning. He's analytical and accurate. He's not very spontaneous. But he's a great planner. If I want something done, I go to Ralph to plan it out and get it done. With Ralph, you have to be very specific and precise. You need to be patient with him and give him all the facts so he can do his best job."

"I see," I said.

"You just made my next point,"

"I did?"

He dealt another card.

"Ayeah. There are three types of listeners. You're a visual learner. You learn with your eyes, and you say you see. If you were an auditory learner, then you would listen closely and say something like, sounds good."

"Okay," I said.

"But, if you aren't either of those, then you are an emotive learner. So you feel like you've learned something. You speak with your feelings. Understand?"

"I think I do."

After Mom raised the pot, and Uncle Ralph called her, turned out he had a straight, which beat her two pair and everyone else's cards. Uncle Ralph pulled in the pot toward himself.

"See there?" said Grandpa, "Ralph knew his numbers. He played his hand, knowing it would beat everyone else. A numbers guy."

"How do I meet them where they are at?" I asked.

"You have to speak their language. Like Ralph, he would understand facts and numbers. No stories. Your Mom wants results and action. Bill, a steady balance of concern and business. Henry, would be an emotive type, so he would want to gab before getting down to business."

"You see, Davy, everyone has their own language, even you. But if you want to influence people, you've got to suss out that language. Speak it like it's your own."

"Do I have my own language?" I asked.

"Of course you do!" he said, "You're a storyteller. So, paint pictures with your words."

Rudy, I hope that you see the valuable lesson here that the Old Man taught me. Communication and how you do it is everything in a relationship. Of course, there are more personalities out in the world than these four, but this is enough to get you started.

How you learn is important as why you learn. So always listen first to the other person. Find out what is important to them. Don't worry, they'll tell you if you listen long enough.

Your loving father,

David Irving

We've reached the end of the letters. Now this final one will put some questions to you.

What are you going to do with these letters?

I want you to live an extraordinary life. To love without reserve, to give without remorse, to understand that everything on earth is interconnected, independent yet dependent on each to survive. To live an extraordinary life you have to do what you love, love what you do, and every day then becomes a gift of giving. Remember the fishing boat and the three types of people that Grandpa told me about. A Hornet? A Mosquito? Or a Firefly? Know that each one of us has a Hornet, Mosquito, and Firefly part that shapes their life. The one that you nurture to is the one that grows. The choices that you make shape the life you live.

Guard your integrity. It is one of your most precious assets. It all starts with an emotion that creates the thought, that creates the external action that will be interpreted by the world. Have an awareness of your emotions through the day, correct and mold them to be positive, reinforcing, and nurturing, and these my son, must be about you. You cannot show the world positive things about you if your internal dialogue is negative. Guard your mind's door. as if behind it is a fortune in gold and your success. For this is where your happiness lies.

Don't forget my trip to New Orleans. Did you learn about the power of persistence? Does your light shine like Strauss?

I hope my letter on courage emboldened you to do the right thing. It is my hope that it encourages you to do the right thing even when your closest friends and allies sway you other ways.

When you are successful, and you will be, keep a handle on your pride. Do not let your ego run your thinking. Allow kindness and integrity to be your guide.

Find a Mastermind group. Informal or formal, it doesn't matter. Find people with like-minded goals thoughts and aspirations. Key on each other's energy to excel. No one has ever achieved greatness by their self. If you want to become a master of anything, become a master of asking questions. Let precise honest questions guide your success.

As in the letter, we know that communication is key to one's success. If you look at a dog and how it communicates, you will notice something. When his tail is wagging, he's happy. When his tail is tucked under him, he's scared. When it is straight back, he's ready to bite you. These are natural postures that the dog makes on instinct. Even when it barks, it has different tones to its bark to signify what kind of mood it is in. These are all relating to body posture and verbal cues. What Nature instilled in animals, it also instilled in us. Become a student

of body language and verbal cues and communication will be easier for you.

I have made my peace with my Lord, Jesus. Don't forsake your relationship with Him. The Bible says that all things work together for good for those that love the Lord. He is your only path to the Father who knew you in the womb from the beginning.

If you could see me now, you would see the tears in my eyes as I write this. I love you, Rudy, more than you could know. Although I tried my best to give you what I think will make you a success. Keep these letters close to you. Share them with your children. Carry your great-grandfather's legacy forward.

§

Rudy put down the letter and sat back in his chair. Every year since he had first received the letters, he performed an annual reading of them, freshly imprinting them on his mind and heart.

He got married and had three children. He would read the letters to them with the intent that what his great-grandfather and his father said would make an impression on them. He was now in his seventies, and he could see the fruit of those reading sessions. His two boys, Zachariah and Philip, and his daughter, Kim, had all made choices in their lives that served them well. Zachariah had Rudy's talent with cars and became a BMW mechanic. Philip inherited David Irving's passion for literature and became a published author. Kim became a teacher and counselor. Rudy had impressed on them, at an early age, the importance of an extraordinary life.

Rudy, himself, became a writer after reading his father's letters. He had a skill with cars, and that wouldn't change. But what did change was his own perception about himself and his heritage. After selling a couple of short stories to a magazine, he tried his hand at writing a novel. It was tough at first, but then he acquired a book coach, and remembered his father's lesson about the mastermind group. From that point, he began to accumulate people around him who would make his writing better. He felt great success at selling his book.

At the final stage of his life, he had decided to publish the letters with his own influence and how they affected his life.

Dear Reader,

As I reflect back on these letters, these thoughts come to mind. The greatest difficulty in discovering your purpose in life is the gap between knowing and doing. It is a strange consequence that the more creative, the more productive, the more plentiful the purpose, the greater the challenge Life presents. You must engage and continue the path of self-discovery which notably exposes us to our fears. Look closely at your mental, emotional, and physical roadblocks and you will find your true self. The roadblocks will reveal who you are. Remember, the hotter the iron, the sharper the sword.

Reflecting on my life, I see how my father's letters influenced me in my decisions and the way I looked at the world. Families have influenced and spread culture. The bonds that they create are strong. They educate and give examples of life's journey.

For example, my father taught me how to ride a bike. When I fell off, he told me to get back on. Anything worth doing you're going to do badly at first, but you have to have enough want to get over the disappointments to get to your goal. Gotta keep trying and make adjustments. Hop back on that bike.

"Do you really want to learn how to ride this bike?"

"Yes, I do." I replied enthusiastically. "I want to ride my bike with my friends."

It was amazing to me when my father would use a simple lesson to teach me about life. Reflecting back, he would do that even when I was directed to set the table. The fork goes here; the spoon goes there; pay attention to the distance of the fork from the plate. I thought he was being obnoxious and mean, but now I see he was trying to teach me to pay attention to detail and make my decisions precisely. When I raked the yard, my father made it into a lesson about organizational skills. The devil is in the details because they create the picture, he said.

When I fell off my bike the first time, he asked me, "What did you do?"

I answered, "I stopped pedaling and fell over."

"Why did you stop pedaling?"

"I got scared."

"What were you scared of?"

"I started going fast."

"Is that a bad thing to go fast?"

"No."

My dad said to me, "You weren't ready for that amount of speed. You needed to slow down. Get the feel of the bike, the feel of the road, what's going on in your mind, and discover what is making you scared. Then you look at that fear to overcome it. Fear is False Evidence Appearing Real. You must act deliberately and purposely and with action to reach your goal."

The second time I fell, I jerked handlebars too hard.

"Why did you fall?" he asked.

"I jerked the handlebars too fast."

"Could you have done differently?"

"Yes, but I don't know how."

"You could turn a little less and lean into it. But more importantly, is why you turn. Turning is okay, just make sure you want to turn down that way. Make sure it takes you to your destination and not away from it."

When I braked too hard, I almost flew over the handlebars and made the tires skid. My father said, "When you make decisions too quickly, like braking, you can fall on your face. You have to make decisions smoothly and deliberately to make sure that is the action to take."

Through trial and error, changing my actions and results, and his coaching, I learned persistence and patience that day. That lesson showed me what I did wrong, let me figure out what to do right, and adjust. I saw through my father's coaching, patience, and persistence, that he cared for me more than I ever knew.

I fondly remember our fishing and hunting trips, where, for hours, I experienced patience while sitting in a tree stand waiting for a deer to show or sitting in a boat waiting for a bobber to sink from a fish bite. For forty-five minutes or an hour, I would be silent as my father didn't want me to talk and scare the fish. We would quietly sit there, enjoying each other's company without talking. Although he didn't say a word, his body language would say it all. He would stiffen or cut his eyes to the bobber when it moved. What a lesson in nonverbal communication.

These events create emotional bonds, like laughter and caring, that strengthened and sharpened the message or lesson. I can clearly see how Grandpa's connection and commitment to my father was packed into these activities. My father's love for my grandfather was shown in his careful and detailed retelling of what happened. It was like it happened yesterday. Those experiences were formative for my father and created the man I grew to admire and emulate.

I recall my father's anticipation of seeing New Orleans for the first time. As I read the letter, I could almost feel the excitement building in the cab of the truck. Not knowing what to expect when they arrived. Now that I've been to New Orleans a few times, I understand. What a mystical and mysterious city it is.

There is a theme, like a river flowing down the Mississippi, through these stories, and its name is Choice. Choices give you twists and turns, right or left. Choice is like the Mississippi with sandbars and inlets, things that confound our choices and things that cause us to linger on them. From our earliest days to our dying breath, we have choices to make.

Your gift is your burden and joy.

You should never just seek a job or spend your time making money for money's sake. Rather, seek a way of life that expands your inner world and answers the question of I am. I am an expansion of the universe. Speaking in and through you for the betterment of mankind. This is your gift, your task, your joyful burden, your choice.

Greatness is not what you do, but how you do it.

Reading the letters from my father made me open my mind up to questioning myself; What are my passions? What are my strengths and weaknesses? How did these develop? How did my family's choices affect me? It is a sum of all totals that can't be separated from each other. Looking back at my grandparents and parents' choices and seeing the outcomes created the lives that they had. It's a complex flow that affects my choices today.

Being extraordinary isn't a job, or a title, or even something that you can acquire with hard work. It's a state of being. A mindset. A way of pursuing the sum of what you are meant to be, both to yourself and to others. Is it just happiness? That's a part of it. Is it contentment? That's a side effect. Can anyone become extraordinary if they apply themselves? Are their talents and skills the reason for extraordinary? It comes down to choice. Choosing the selfless over the selfish. The you over the me and putting others first.

Jesus said that the two important commandments are to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself. I saw these commandments all through the letters. They are a staple of making the right choices. I think loving God and my neighbor is the basis for meeting God's Law. Loving your neighbor may be defending them in the public square, as Grandpa did for Mr. Joe. My grandfather standing up for Joe instead of ignoring the abuse or letting Joe defend himself wasn't a hard choice. It was a right choice. It was a choice where my grandfather stood up for was right in a time when most white people thought it would not be right or prudent to stand up for a black man. But my grandfather made the choice to do the right thing. (It's never a wrong time to do the right thing.)

As for loving myself, well, we all struggle with that. There's a little child inside us, dressed in pajamas and holding a security blanket, wanting that safety and security that only a parent can give. Can we parent ourselves? That is the question.

How do we nurture Love? -Love is humble, deep, and simple, like a mother's love for her newborn, or the

gleam in a father's eye for his son when that child starts to speak and says, "Daddy!" You can see it in a smile between friends, or a hug given to someone at a homeless shelter. Grandpa gave my father a valuable gift: his time. My father gave me one too: his stories. What kind of stories and time can you give to others to increase their value?

Reading these letters, you can know my father through these stories. Our choices determine how our stories go. Each of us is a single strand of a collection of choices and stories, that makes up a tapestry of history that collectively we weave. What will your stories be?

Be careful of your choices, to harm another is harming oneself.

We are all connected with an invisible thread that runs through humanity. This celestial thread has different colors depending on our emotional states. Each one of us weave a part of the blanket that covers the heavens. What colors are you weaving into this celestial blanket?

Love, respect, honor, commitment and positive emotions are bright and vivid colors.

What colors are you weaving into this magnificent but changing blanket of humanity?

We are continuously weaving a colorful blanket through our emotional lives.

§

2:30 a.m., the next morning...

Rudy was fast asleep until the temperature of the room dropped twenty degrees. He opened his eyes and saw a flickering light in the corner of the room, positioned on the ceiling at the foot of his bed.

Am I dreaming? Or still asleep?

Gentle thoughts came to him, like a whisper in the ear.

Rudy, all the lessons that were given to you have one secret ingredient. Live an extraordinary life. This balances out to "What have I done with my life? What makes it extraordinary?" What makes it extraordinary is your connection to other human beings and connection to God. In this connection, positivity and love must flourish in order for anything to be extraordinary, because in evil and negativity, there is destruction. How you do that is to love deeply with a great amount of emotion with love toward your fellow man, and, in particularly Rudy, love yourself.

You are what you choose to be. Life is a series of choices, a series of yes's and no's, a series of maybes and should-have-beens. You choose your thoughts; your thoughts don't choose you. Your actions are evidence of your internal world. Make your choice, Rudy, that is a lasting and loving effect on your fellow man. Choose to be someone who would ask to be your best friend. Choose to be the father that you wanted to have. It's about choice

and the choice must be love your neighbor as yourself.

Live a life of integrity. As you go through your life, as with choices, you'll have a choice to use integrity, honesty, and transparency. If the choice is not rooted in positivity and love, it will lack integrity. Discord, dislike, rumor-grabbing, rumor-spreading, and other negativities erode your integrity. Keep your integrity by keeping yourself in a frame of mind and thought processes of a loving, caring man on a path on sharing yourself with others.

Look at the consequences of your actions. Our ego, putting our bodies first, the lust of the flesh, drinking, overeating, and lustful thoughts are all rooted in the weakness of the flesh. Choose to grow spiritually, in a way that increases your spiritual growth and positivity, and decreases your need to live in the flesh and worship your body. Don't put your worship of body before worship of God. Remember, the body is temporary in this world, but your soul is forever.

Patience and persistence for success. These are the ingredients to being successful in an endeavor. But if we only endeavor for material goods, titles, and influence peddling, our endeavors for success is fleeting. We must plant our success deep in the soil of reality, not fleeting vanities, and nurture it with love, respect and honor for our neighbor.

Face your challenges to be a hero. When we think of a hero, we think of a marine, an army soldier, a navy pilot, a law enforcement officer, a firefighter. These are obvious heroes. But a hero is also someone who puts others first. Whose actions, thoughts, and emotions lift up other people in a way that they grow and become the best that they can be. This person is a true hero. The invisible emotion behind the action is a pebble dropped into a pond, creating a ripple effect through the world. A single action is just as important as the major decisions you make in your life.

Humility is a price. It's very easy to allow your ego to get out of check. You have to constantly stay in a flux of giving and frame of mind that what you're doing and what your actions are, is not who you are, but you are the spirit behind those actions. Humility puts that first. Your own wants, needs, and your body are superficial and only satisfied for the moment. Build a treasure that lasts longer than your own life. Build a legacy of positivity, love, and commitment to humanity.

Mastermind your success plan. The mastermind is an amazing way to be successful because everybody views something different. Two minds are four times greater than one. Four minds are eight times greater than two. We must make sure that each person in the group is putting their reasons for the group before their agendas. One person out of sync will cause the mastermind to fail. You don't see it at first, but you will see it as time moves on.

A selfish person, a rotten apple, will poison the rest of the group. Why? Because negativity and hurtfulness will spread quickly like a cancer. Be mindful of the attitude of everyone in your mastermind group, that they stay on the path of self-sacrifice and place the work at hand before their own egos. Do this in a way that brings glory to your heavenly Father.

Learn to communicate effectively. Talking is not communicating. Listening with an open heart, listening with open arms, asking questions, being present for the person in front of you, all of these are true communication. It is a one-way street from them to you, not a two-way street. We think that when we talk, that is communication. But we only communicate when we listen and respond in a way that tells a person that we truly heard the message behind the words. Communicate in an open and honest receiving way, and your life will be blessed beyond comprehension because every day you will be giving of yourself and receiving love and commitment from people you connect with.

A job well done, my Grandson. Live the letters and let them live in you.

As the light faded in the corner, the warmth came back into the room, Rudy felt a warming in his heart and soul, and knew that everything was going to be okay. That the legacy of his great- grandfather and father would be something that he could be proud of.

Author Bio

John Graham Sr is a retired police lieutenant with over fifty years in the martial arts as both a practitioner and teacher. He holds 10th, 9th, and 8th degrees in several martial arts systems, with one of them being appointed by the Chinese government. He has been a lifelong student of leadership skills and methodologies and information. He is a member of John Maxwell's leadership organization and spoken about leadership at conferences around the world, including China and the Philippines. He is a speaker and writer and incorporates leadership into every lesson in the martial arts that he teaches. He holds Master's degree in public administration. He lives in Mobile, Alabama.

Todd Doyle is a writer and longtime student of John Graham. He has studied leadership under Graham's tutelage and incorporates those teachings into his own martial arts classes. He has worked at a hospital in Mississippi helping addicts with their addictions. He has owned his own counseling business where he incorporated leadership skills into helping his clients lead better lives. Currently, he helps senior citizens in his classes retain their mobility and vitality in qigong classes. He holds a Masters degree in Counseling Psychology. He lives in Memphis, Tennessee..