Wait…

what?



a.k.a. …Route Recalculation for the Soul

by Brenda Wedemeyer

PHOTO: Sign at the ferry ramp on the Isle of Lismore, Outer Islands, Scotland. Village of Achnacroish, Oban Car Ferry. Photo taken by the author, 15 May 2026.

About the Author

Born and raised in Wisconsin, Brenda Lee was named after the popular singer of the 1950's. Having worked an eclectic range of jobs since turning 16, she is approaching her 70th birthday at this writing and wants to mark this moment by not only writing some of her favorite life stories, but she is hoping to share support to you, the reader, through the telling of those events in her life that were so unexpected, but so much the right thing at the right time.

Brenda was raised in a disciplined, but loving home. A place where music, laughter, midnight board games, and genuine wit were abundant and appreciated. A spirit of *at least try to do it before you say you can't* was instilled by an imposing figure of a man, a six-foot tall, pipe smoking Scandinavian man known as Pa, who could be brought down by any one of the youngest of his great-grandchildren's hugs and kisses.

From playing the piano to forklift driving to photojournalist to church secretary to world traveler, if Brenda wanted to try something, she did, and usually with great success, although there were times when she did secretly question her sanity in the moment.

Brenda will always claim to be a Wisconsin girl, but she has lived in Iowa since 1979. Now widowed, she remains active in her church as the parish musician. Several pets have come and gone through the years; however, a newly homed pair of four-month-old sibling farm kittens have moved in. Mostly she loves dogs but has to admit felines are easier to take care of.

She invites you to come along with her through these pages just to share not only here stories, but to see what an inspiration for your own soul's route recalculation might be.

Dedication

To my parents, Bob & Norita, for giving me their very best.

To my grandparents, Grace, Rudy & Gladys, for filling in all the spots my parents couldn't.

To cousins, aunts, uncles, for the laughter and the tears.

To friends. More than I can name. More than I realized.

To all who have kept me in their prayers. Please don't stop because there will be more stories to tell in Heaven…

But mostly to Craig, because without you, so much of this wouldn't have been my life. I love you and I miss you.

You would've made 70 this year, too.

Introduction

Hello dear reader!

Thank you so much for taking some time to sit down with me while I share a few stories from my life that I hope will be helpful to you or to someone you know. I happen to really enjoy drinking coffee, so please feel free to pour yourself a cup before we begin. If coffee isn't your style, then grab whatever it is that relaxes you and let's find a comfortable, peaceful spot to share some stories!

The title I chose for this book, *Wait…what?*, is a common expression used when an unexpected thing happens. Hardly original to me, it's a phrase that fits so well into so many of the stories that I will be relating in the next dozen or so chapters. I will describe a situation, something that I have planned, and what I expected to happen as the outcome. Simple enough. Unless we are totally relying on ourselves to do all of the planning.

Not asking for help is a big thing for me. I'm an only child. If it was to get done, it was up to me. I was the planner. I was the boss. Kinda' got that reputation throughout my life. I admit it. It's the way I am. Or was. Or possibly, still might be…at times.

Simply put, there wasn't anyone to ask help from. Both of my parents worked outside of the home and there weren't any siblings. My big strong Scandinavian great-grandfather Pa had taught us all to figure things out on our own before giving up and proclaiming the words *I can't*, so there you have the foundation for my independence. Of course, I could make something happen and make it happen correctly.

Well, sometimes God has other plans.

And, not just *sometimes*, His plans are better. It is then, quite possibly, that we undergo a route recalculation of the soul. Maybe you haven't experienced this.

Yet.

Come with me now and see what you think.

Any donuts left to go with that coffee…?

Chapter One

It all started when…

I was born on Thanksgiving evening in 1956, however my mother had a condition which required that she be admitted to the hospital a few days before going into labor, so she didn't get to experience the rush to the hospital.

The name of the hospital was St. Mary's, and it was a Catholic hospital in Racine, Wisconsin. Mom told me in later years about how when she checked in to the hospital, the hospital sister asked her what religion she was. Mom proudly answered *Baptist* and Sister boldly printed *Other* on the form. I would be raised Baptist.

I was the first-born grandchild on both sides of the family. Since I wasn't born until 8:02pm, I imagine that the family did get to feast on all the traditional holiday fare before heading to the hospital to sit with my dad while waiting for me to make my arrival.

After I was born and made presentable by the sisters, Grandma Grace, my dad's mom, was quoted as saying, "Look at that girl's hands! She's going to play the piano!"

So, here begins the saga of my faith journey. I had been exposed to the Catholic faith literally from the day of my birth.

I did, in fact, become a piano player.

And much to my mother's chagrin, I did, in fact, become a Catholic.

And to date, I am the parish musician at St. Mary's Parish in Anita, Iowa.

To top that, I was born on November 22. That happens to be the feast day of St. Cecilia, patron saint of music and musicians, honored for her unwavering devotion to faith.

This story of my birth is like anyone else's. Nothing particularly unusual. Nothing prophetic, we thought. Just normal day-to-day life. It only took 50 years to see where that early Catholic influence would lead. *If you're not Catholic, don't let that put you off! This is a life story, not an attempt at your conversion!*

* * *

I love my Catholic faith. I made the decision to convert because of personal searching. It was my own faith journey that led me to make the decision to change directions. I didn't do it to make anyone else happy. I didn't do it to rebel against my childhood upbringing. I did it because I found what I had been looking for!

There are so many influences in our lives that consciously or subconsciously aid in our decision-making processes. That's why we must be so careful about what we expose ourselves to. It's why we must be so vigilant about what our kids are exposed to whether they're our own children or just children in the neighborhood.

When I converted, I didn't give up the basics I had been taught about God's love and care for each one of us or that we needed to have a personal relationship with Him. I remembered the Sunday school songs that taught us real life truths like "The Wise Man Built His House Upon the Rock"; Bible verses that taught us to "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32 NIV); and I saw the witness of the

Dominican sisters that lived next door to our pastor as they were friendly to all of the kids in the neighborhood, not just the Catholic ones.

It may take a lifetime to make changes for the better in our lives. Some changes may come more quickly. Sadly, we sometimes fight changes out of a rebellious heart or because we're just plain afraid of the unknown.

* * *

Take a sip of your coffee now and recall those people and situations that have contributed to decisions you have made in your life. If you can't think of any right now, that's perfectly fine. You can always think later.

If you're still a young person, think about who you look up to for inspiration. Attending church and Bible reading might not be the first things that pop into your mind. That's our cultural influence on you, sadly. But don't be afraid to try. Do you know you can pray to God just as easily as talking to your best friend? You don't have to have anything memorized or fancy words. It's as easy as *Hi God. It's me. Can we talk?* Then just sit quietly. You might be surprised at the peace that comes to you.

Case in point: After five decades of saying *I'll never turn Catholic*, I got the surprise of a lifetime! And it was the best. God knew all along. Your path is known to God. He knew you before you ever came into being. Ask Him to lead you. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah 1:5 (NIV)

* * *

I mentioned the Dominican sisters that lived next door to my then pastor and his family. Let's go there, back to the late 1960's when I was attending a non-denominational church, was best friends with the pastor's daughter, and was quite active musically in the church already. The pastor's daughter also played the piano and we quite often both played for worship services on Sunday mornings, she on the piano and I on the traditional Hammond organ. Wasn't trained for it yet, but I never let a little thing like instructions stop me from trying something new. *Remember what Pa said! Don't tell me you can't!*

In those years of attending this church, several times per week, mind you, I received what I felt was a sound grounding in the Christian faith. Later in life and along my faith journey, God has helped me to see some things that maybe could now be better understood. This is one of those areas.

Sunday School lessons, Sunday sermons, youth group, Sunday night services, and Wednesday night Bible study and prayer meetings all offered opportunities to learn and to share God's Word.

As always, we need to consider local culture, thinking, and writing styles of the period when trying to understand what certain scripture passages might be saying to us. Remember, this was the 1960's and there was plenty of civil unrest in the country, the Viet Nam conflict was going on, Rock 'n Roll music was ruining our teenagers, and so on. As well as these things, I was being taught that the Catholic Church was not the best thing since sliced bread. Quite the opposite. I won't get into any further discussion on this point as I am only wanting to provide context for the rest of my story.

Due to what I was being taught-or led to believe by well-intentioned folks - we, my peer group and I, developed a sense of fear and dread when it came to having any contact with people of the Catholic faith.

And they lived right next door to our pastor…

One summer afternoon we were in the vacant lot behind the pastor's house playing softball. There was also a vacant lot behind the sisters' house on one side and a line of apple tress along the opposite side. At the far end was the parking lot that belonged to the parochial school for kindergarten through sixth grade students in our community.

As we were playing, a great pitch flew across Homeplate only to be swatted directly overhead, veering to the west and…*oh no, not…no*! Right into the nuns' backyard! And if that wasn't bad enough, *gasp*, out of the house at exactly that moment walked one of the nuns! Black and white habit and all! Every one of us headed straight for the line of apple trees in the opposite direction and climbed the first tree we could grab on to. We watched as she never missed a step, her robes – didn't know they were called a *habit* - flowing gracefully with each purpose-filled stride. She walked right up to that ball, picked it up, pitched it back to us, and smiled the entire time! She just kept on walking over to the school and we started to drop down out of the trees like fledgling birds, beaks gaping open at the sight of what we just witnessed.

But in my mind? *In my mind?* "That lady lives her faith every day. I want to be a nun."

Well now, how do I tell my Baptist mother I want to become a nun?

I eventually got married instead.

Through the years that nun's smile never left my mind. I prayed many times that maybe someday I would be able to meet her.

* * *

Four decades later an aunt of mine passed away.

I traveled home to Racine for the funeral but made different arrangements than I normally would have done. My husband wasn't going to be with me, so I wondered about other accommodation. You see, by this time, I had converted and I was aware of the possibility of staying in an abbey and Racine had one. I checked out the Racine Dominican Retreat Center and found they had space available. I made the reservation and headed out on the seven hour drive.

When I arrived, I checked in and – because I am rather talkative after driving alone for several hours – managed to share my entire baseball throwing nun story to the gal at the reception desk. She smiled and showed me to my room.

The next morning, I was greeted by an unexpected knock on my door. I opened the door only to find a rather serious looking nun, what I assumed to be someone of authority, who instructed me to follow her. She was on a scooter and reminded me of Mother Angelica of EWTN fame. I hurried along as best as I could, down the long corridor, around the corner, another hallway, and then arrived at the cafeteria. I could see several ladies having breakfast. "They eat first," she kind of barked.

The retreat center was also a retirement home for sisters, and they were fed before the paying customers. Fair enough. But I'm still kind of pondering in my early morning brain the summons

she had given me… “That one over there,” she said, pointing to a very diminutive white-haired woman who was seated at the end of a table finishing her oatmeal. “When she’s done eating, you can go visit with her. I think she’s your baseball nun.”



Then Mother Scooter took off, just as quickly as she had given me her last order.

I did as she asked and ate a piece of toast with a cup of coffee while I waited. When the moment was right, I went over to the lady and introduced myself and began to tell her my story. She was ever so quiet and unassuming. She smiled – I knew that smile – and said she didn’t quite remember the incident, but that it sounded like something she would’ve done. She remembered very well the pastor and his family, and we shared some other stories about the town that convinced me she was the right person.

Now, in my Baptist upbringing, people would’ve gotten all excited about something like this and shouted and hooted and had some hand-shakin’ and back-slappin’ going on. But no, not Sister. She was quiet.

Well, I was excited about meeting her anyway. And so grateful that I was able to meet her after all those years. God had given me the chance to tell her thank you for being the witness to me of her personal faith and she didn’t even know it.

Three months later, I received a letter in the mail from the retreat center. Sister Agnes had passed away peacefully. The letter said that she had spent her last months telling everyone she knew the story of the baseball and the Baptist kid.

May she rest in peace.

* * *

One thing I didn't get to share with Sister Agnes was that during my class sessions to become a Catholic, I think I must have mentioned my Baptist mother quite often. More often than I realized, apparently. Here's why.

When you convert to Catholicism, the most popular or traditional time to be brought into the Church is during the Easter Vigil Mass which is the night before Easter Sunday and that's what was planned for our class of three in the spring of 2006. The course, then known as RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, is now known as OCIA, the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults. This is the process of education, rites, and sacraments that you go through when you decide to become a Catholic. I had made this choice of my own free will after a lifetime of saying *I'll never be a Catholic!* Well. You know. My soul was heading for a route recalculation.

* * *

The Easter Vigil is a solemn, powerful, and soul-stirring Mass that celebrates all of God's Creation. (To learn more about the Easter Vigil, the OCIA program, the Catholic Church in general, please go to www.USCCB.org)

As we came to the part where the new members would be brought into communion, a storm came up. A typical spring storm at first, but then we could hear it growing more intense. The

stained glass windows glowed as each flash of lightning grew stronger and longer. The thunder grew louder, even to the point of drowning out the sound system. Fr. Greg calmly continued on as if nothing was amiss.

This was a fairly new building, approximately ten years old at the time, made of block, stone, and steel. The original church had been lost to an arsonist in previous years, sadly, so the new building was designed to withstand whatever could be thrown at it.

Except we were beginning to have our concerns as we could actually feel the air pressure increasing inside the building.

We, the candidates, our sponsors, and the RCIA team were seated in the pews as we waited to be called to the front of the church to be anointed with the oil of initiation. The storm increased, the wind howled. The wind blew so hard that somehow, unbelievably, the chandeliers started to sway! I remember looking up at the lights, then feeling like someone was staring at me. I turned to my left and there they were. The entire RCIA team was turned toward me, staring directly into my eyes, mouthing the words, *Where's your mother?*

This was a rhetorical question that insinuated the reason the chandeliers were swaying. *Did she know I was being brought into the Catholic Church at this very moment? Was she storming the gates of Heaven with her prayers for my immortal soul?*

Did she know? No. I hadn't told her.

It's twenty years later now. I'm still Catholic and she's still upset about it.

The church is still standing.

Chapter Two

Back to the music

It was probably 1969 or so and I was just tall enough to reach up and get my fingertips on the keyboard of the baby grand piano in my grandparents' living room. In fact, I remember laying on my back on the floor underneath it during a thunderstorm one evening. Their home had stained glass windows, and the storm included bright flashes of lightning that made those windows glow each time one struck. I don't remember being scared. I suppose I thought that giant piano would protect me if the house fell. The lightning through the windows mesmerized me! *Little did I know then that lightning would also be present at the occasion of my joining the Church!*

Going to the piano would forever be a place of refuge for me, although I wasn't necessarily hiding underneath it!

By 1963, piano lessons were on the list of things to do. My first piano teacher, Marilyn, was a



lovely woman. I would go to her house on Monday evenings for 30 minutes of instruction each week. It was torture for me and most likely her as well. Not physical torture, of course, but things were just not progressing well at all. I was only seven and in second grade. I believe she *quit me* about the same time that I *quit her,* and I would go on for several years before receiving formal instruction again. I did manage to play in a few recitals along the way and Mom made me this beautiful red velvet dress to wear one year. It doubled as my

Christmas dress. I loved it. In fact, it's still hanging in my closet! I even took a photo of my granddaughter wearing it. *I wonder if she'll wear my wedding dress someday…*

By the time I was in the fourth grade and about ten years old, I sang in the church choir and worked out how to play hymns on the piano at home by myself. Grandma Grace played hymns and read music, so I would watch her as she played and watched the music, putting the two things together and then translating that into my hands. My dad, who couldn't read a note of music, played guitar by ear. Someone who can play "by ear" is a person who can listen to music and then find the notes on the instrument well enough to play along. So, I picked things up from him as well.

One day he parked my backside on the piano bench and said, "If I can do it, there's no reason you can't. I'll put a record on and get my guitar. You follow along on the piano." He did. And I did. I was always an obedient child. And away we went. If Daddy told me I could or should do something, I would do it. No questions asked. I trusted his judgement.

There's a lesson in that about how we should be trusting our Father in Heaven, right? After all, my dad wasn't perfect – just ask my mom.

The years went by, it's now about the early 1970's, and I continued to play for church, sing in the choir, and was active in our church youth group. When I graduated from high school in 1974, my parents promised to send me to college at their expense anywhere I was accepted, but after that it would be up to me. I had been accepted at a Christian college in Honolulu, Hawaii and they kept their promise. On completion of my first year there I received a music scholarship to continue my education there.

I had gone home for the summer when I happened to run into Marilyn, my early childhood piano teacher. I joyfully and excitedly said, "Marilyn! I've got a music scholarship to attend college!" After picking her jaw up off the floor she said, "What do you play?"

* * *

During my college years, I accompanied several vocal groups and toured the islands of Hawaii (aka, the Big Island), Kauai, and Maui in the process. I also sang with the church choir in special performances at the Honolulu International Center (HIC) auditorium. This is where I grab some bragging rights: I performed on the grand piano on the same stage as Olivia Newton-John and Elvis Presley. Not with them, of course, but on the same stage. You just never know what you're going to be able to tell your grandkids later in life.

I have told them, but the names Olivia Newton-John and Elvis didn't ring any major bells in their heads. *Wait…what? You've never heard of Olivia or Elvis?*

The blank stares I got from them knocked the wind out of my sails right there and then. Oh well…it's still a big deal to me. I didn't bother to mention we shared the marquee at the auditorium with Doc Severinsen during one of the events. There were two venues at the HIC, so two events could happen simultaneously. If my grandkids didn't recognize the first two names I dropped, they wouldn't have had a clue about the "Doc." He was a fantastic trumpet man and the bandleader on the Johnny Carson Show, if you're someone who can remember Johnny Carson, that is.

Not only had God provided the means for me to continue my college education, but He had made it so much fun!

* * *

Music has afforded me so many opportunities in the 65 years I've been at it. Whatever your age today, whatever your talent or interest is, what kind of opportunities have come from using that talent? How have you been blessed? Have you discovered a talent or interest you weren't aware of in your younger years? Or have you been afraid to try something for fear of failure or making a fool of yourself in front of others? You know what? You're human. Don't be afraid to pursue something you love! If you're not that great at it, some day you might be. Enjoy the try.

* * *

After I converted to Catholicism in 2006 – I was coming up on my 50th birthday - I had been hoping to one day to be able to sing the Ave Maria in Latin during Mass. Yes, I sing, too, but it took me a long time to work up the nerve to go solo, believe me. Anyway, the opportunity came when I was asked to provide the music for a funeral and would I please sing the Ave?

Yes! Of course! Here was my chance!

I practiced and practiced. Brushed up on my Latin – I had taken three years of it in high school after all, so I was confident in that. I would be accompanying myself and had done that many times, so no problem there either. The moment came. And it went well. Yes! I reminded myself, however, I was not doing this for my glory but for God's and in honor of the deceased's family.

I walked over to the parish hall for the luncheon and saw that the priest was headed my direction with a smile on his face. He reached out to shake my hand. I couldn't help but grin, but I tried so hard to hold my excitement to a minimum. Then he spoke. "I've never heard Latin pronounced that way before." He smiled, then asked if I would like a cup of coffee.

By the way, this was the very same priest, Fr. Greg, who presided over the Easter Vigil the night I came into the Church.

He was known for always starting his homilies with a joke. Maybe he was going to say something else funny about my Latin…

Worth noting here again is that he never flinched at the thunder, the lightning, or the swinging chandeliers and he used to umpire at baseball games. Nerves of steel. He should meet my mother.

I went home after a quick cup of coffee and started researching. No one ever told me. I swear. No one.

I'm rambling here…

Anyway, as they say in detective shows, *here's what happened*:

There is a classical (Roman, hard sounds) way to pronounce Latin, which I was taught in public school. And then there is an Ecclesiastical (Medieval, Italianate) way. In the classical form, for example, the letter V is always pronounced as a W as in win. In the ecclesiastical form, the V is pronounced as it is in English, like it is in vine. Technically correct to my classical training, I had been singing, quite clearly, *Ah-way Mah-ree-ah.*

In my mind I was now thinking in the accent I had heard from both sides of my family growing up – one side was Germanic and Scandinavian and the other was Czech. My brain said, *Oh vell, vat to do now? Vass goot, vasn't it? I tawt it vass goot, vasn't it?*

Just to interject a little personal fact of life here, Craig, upon the initial meeting of his future in-laws, asked me, "Doesn't anyone in your family speak English?"

* * *

Now that I am almost 70, my singing voice is all but gone, so I reminisce a lot about years back when I was more heavily involved with music.

I have a friend named Kathy. (She's one of my SSTs, a member of my Sanity Support Team.) She sang for our wedding. We met each other through the fire department. When I found out she could sing and was very good at it, I asked her to sing a song at our wedding that was extremely popular and extremely over-used at that time, but we all loved. It was the one about the troubadour…



Anyway, Kathy and I would establish ourselves as a musical duo, I played the piano and she sang. We did ladies luncheons, nursing homes, funerals, weddings, and whatever venue requested music for their occasion.

Expanding on the musical theme, I had been used to doing choral music through my church growing up. We would traditionally do Christmas and Easter cantatas each year. I missed that tradition after moving to Iowa, so I put an article in the local paper to see if there was any interest in forming a community choir. I received an enthusiastic number of replies, and the first Christmas performance rehearsals were underway.

It was a success! The community was in full support of the newly formed choir, and we would go on to enjoy another 20 years of performances. We added the Easter performances to

Christmas, then opted to join in the community's summer celebrations, performing a variety of show tunes each year.

The Community Choir experience culminated in a trip to Vienna, Austria to take part in the AdventSing program. AdventSing is an international gathering of choirs from around the world and takes place over the four weekends of Advent every year.

I received an invitation to take part in the event and so shared that with the choir members. I started by saying, "They've heard how good we are!", then cleared my throat and said, "Well, maybe we're on a mailing list." We decided to go and planning began. Thirty-nine of us would make the trip.

I had always dreamt of going to Vienna, even as a child.

God said, "OK, you can go but take these guys with you!"

I can go, but I'm taking 39 other people with me? Well, OK then!

Music has taken me places I never thought I'd go. From the day I was born, when my grandma said *look at those hands! She's going to play the piano*, I have been blessed to have used my God-given talent in a variety of places.

The Adair Community Choir performing in the Vienna City Hall. That's me at the piano, of course….

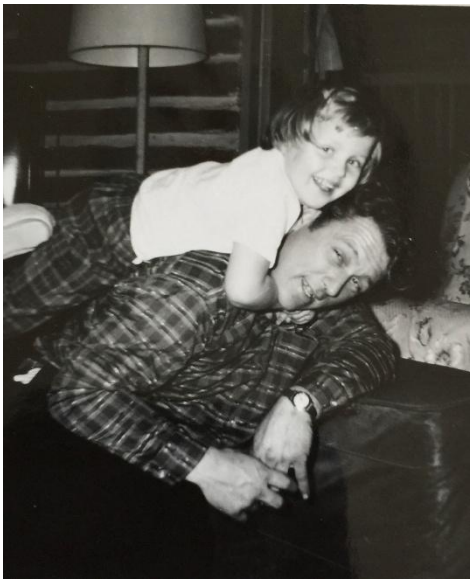


Chapter Three

The Move to Iowa; Meeting Craig

In 1979 I was working in Wisconsin as a forklift operator. There were two of *us*, you know, *women*. Two women in a factory full of men. Carpenters, plumbers, electricians, the lot. We all wore hard hats and had our coffee breaks while sitting on bunks of lumber. We two females were placed on separate shifts. I suppose the men didn't want us to gang up on them.

At any rate, I was quite at home working there. I was always *daddy's girl* and knew how to build things, sweat copper pipes, run electrical lines, pour cement, and operate heavy equipment. If that puts some kind of cartoon in your head, don't forget to add piano playing, crocheting, and motorcycle riding. Just saying…



Dad and I in the midst of a wrestling match. This was famously known in my family as the "keylock". My terminology, not sure where that came from…

Anyway, the housing industry was not doing well at that time due to terribly high interest rates on new home builds and I was laid off. I was, however, offered a job doing the same thing in a new factory the company was opening in southwest Iowa. I have family members that live on the eastern side of the state, so Iowa was not unfamiliar to me. My mother thought it was OK because, in her way of thinking, Iowa was still a pretty wholesome place to live. Folks are homespun, God-fearing,

church-going, all-round good hearted. That's still pretty much the case anywhere, actually, if you look in the right place. However, sadly, Iowa has its not-so-homespun spots just like the rest of the world.

I digress…

I accepted the position and asked my grandparents if they would be willing to make a trip to my future location to check out living arrangements. They agreed and we made a mini vacation out of it.

I loved my grands! The trip was successful, especially considering that we made a stop for antiques along the way back to Wisconsin that pleased my grandmother. She loved her antiques!

Soon it was time for me to head off on my new adventure. I packed my stuff and announced to my family and friends that I would try it out for a year.

My dad helped me move, a labor-intense task that included my cherished piano as well as all of my other household items. I never really knew how Dad felt about my moving away from Wisconsin, but he supported me anyway and was most likely glad that I had a job to go to. The economy wasn't all that great at the time. That was in 1979.

It's now more than twenty-five years into the next century and I'm still here.

I'll try it for a year, I had said.

I'll never be a Catholic, I had said.

* * *

Then I met Craig.

By accident.

As I began my new job in Iowa, I started to get acquainted with the local population. I had coffee with the farmers at the restaurant, started attending church, volunteered with the local fire department, and did as much business locally as possible. In fact, Craig worked as the mechanic at the service station where I bought my gas. You may or may not recall, but gas stations used to be called *service stations* for a reason. Customers were actually *served*. I didn't actually meet Craig until later. I'll get back to our meeting in just a bit…

I had moved on to a different factory job by 1981. Better pay and benefits. It was just me supporting myself, so I needed to do what I could to pay the bills. In this time, I had joined the Adair Volunteer Fire Department and was working second shift at the factory. I would get home around 11:30pm and had made friends with a gal who was the night manager for a local restaurant. Since we were along Interstate 80, it was a convenient place for state and local law enforcement officers to take their midnight coffee break. It was a fun routine that included lots of laughs. Those stories won't be repeated here.

Craig, it turns out, was a night creature. He worked regular day hours but would go home and sleep for a couple of hours, then return to the shop to work some more. It's what he loved. It's what he did every day, six or even seven days a week, from high school through our entire marriage.

One night, a cold, snowy, February night, the local police chief got a call of a drunken driver who had plowed into a snowbank in front of the Catholic Church in town. The car was stuck and the driver needed a citation and a ride home. Craig was called to recover and impound the car. I

had ridden to the scene with the officer, well, just because. No other reason, just because. There's not a lot of entertainment in a small town…on a weeknight…in February…or ever…

That's the night Craig and I met, and it was an immediate match.

Craig was busy snagging the car out of the snowbank while the police chief wrote up the ticket on the driver. He had already done the obligatory *walk in a straight line, touch your nose with your fingertips* drills and had decided the gentleman just needed to go home and sleep it off. In fact, the man wasn't far from home, so the officer just sent him on his way on foot telling him the night air would do him good.

Making sure the gentleman got home OK, the chief walked after him leaving Craig to finish his job. I was in the squad car observing the events not realizing my world was about to change. Craig hopped into the back seat of the squad car claiming the cold air forced him to look for shelter. *I smiled, then wondered why he didn't just get back into the wrecker that was right there, running, and I assume, also would've been warm?*

We were sitting in the squad car waiting for the chief to return. Craig sat in the back and I was riding shotgun. My arm was up on the seat back when Craig reached up and held my hand. I let him. I really hadn't thought about it happening, but it just seemed so right.

It was a sweet moment and will always be a sweet memory.

We absolutely did meet by accident.



PHOTO: The C70. Craig's pride and joy for too many years. It sat in the shop during the last two years of its time with us. Craig couldn't stand the thought of parting with it. He'd been through several trucks in his career, but this one was his "ol' faithful." In fact, Tim was just two years old when he went with his Daddy on his first wrecker call and it was in this very truck. I was working second shift and Craig got called out before I got home one night, so he just piled Tim in the truck with him. I met them at the shop only to see this little blonde head pop up from behind the dashboard. Little man standing on the seat of the truck, red sweatshirt with a wrecker appliqued on the front, blue jeans, a grin, and a big "Hi Mom!" at midnight just made my day.

Chapter Four

Cats and Catholics

It seems as though my getting together with Craig brought on some unexpected connections. Cats. And more Catholics. And in this instance, they were all named Fred.

Fred. His name is Fred. It's always Fred.

I am a dog lover. It was my husband who brought cats into my world. He grew up with cats on the farm. Cats, dogs, hogs, cows, and an occasional horse or two.

I grew up in the city. I grew up with a dog. The same dog from my fourth birthday through my third year at college. Bootsie was his name because he had four white paws, i.e., boots. He also had a white collar, but he wasn't a Collie, so that didn't figure into the naming process.

I'm not sure what names the animals were given on my husband's family's farm with the exception of a donkey who was named *Lightning*.

I had won Lightning in a raffle the second year my husband and I were married. It was one of those fund raising raffles where you didn't have to be present to win…however, there was a catch to that in the fine print and I hadn't read it.

"Need not be present to win. If your ticket is drawn and you do not wish to accept the prize offered, you may make a further donation and offer the prize up to another drawing."

Clearly printed. Plain English. Didn't read the list of prizes. Wasn't present.

My phone rang. This was back in the day when you had to run through the house to grab the receiver off the wall to answer a call. Out of breath, I answered, "Hello?" The voice on the other

end asked, “Is this Brenda?” I said yes it was and they said that I had won one of the prizes at the raffle and that I should come to the city park to pick it up and that I needed to get there pretty soon as the prize would need to be fed and watered in the near future.

Silence on my end of the line.

“Brenda? Are you there? Hello?”

“Yes, I’m here…what prize did I win?”

I began to hear laughter in the background. “You won Lightning, the parade donkey!” More laughter.

Lightning was a retired parade donkey. Yes, retired. He was a pensioner looking for a forever home.

Well now, how do I break this news to my husband?

“Honey…? We need to go to the park. And your dad needs to drive his pickup truck in with the stock rack on…” I said to him rather sheepishly.

After I explained that I had, for the very first time in my life, actually won a raffle, and that the prize was a donkey, and that we were still newlyweds, and I was still cute, well, he had no choice but to go along with the plan of going up to the park to bring the donkey back to our house. We live in town, by the way, and therefore had no place to keep a donkey, just in case you were wondering.

But the story takes a great turn. It was just a few days before my father-in-law's birthday and, believe it or not, my husband had actually said, "Dad always wanted a donkey." Solution to the problem found! Happy birthday Dad! My father-in-law was, indeed, fond of me, so that helped.

An hour or so later found my husband and my father-in-law trying very hard to persuade this animal into the back end of the pickup truck with no luck.

It's true.

Donkeys can be stubborn. The guys wound up walking the donkey about a mile out of town to a relative's farm where there was a loading chute. I drove the pickup truck, slowly following them,



Lightning versus Craig and his dad. After some improper donkey language from all parties involved, the task was completed.

flashers on, and backed up to the chute where they eventually coaxed the donkey on board. Dad

and donkey headed out to their farm, and we went back to our house smiling like we'd pulled the greatest job since the locally historical and infamous Jesse James "first moving train robbery west of the Mississippi River", our town's historical claim to fame. No kidding. Google it.

Later that fall, while visiting the farm for an evening meal, a brown flash went past the window. Everyone kept talking. Moments later, there it was again! I thought I was seeing things. Then the third time it happened I had to say something. "What is that?" I blurted out. "Oh, that's just Donk (formerly known as Lightning). He's chasing the dog around the house," answered one of the family. "He does that all the time."

Apparently donkeys can be trained to keep other animals in line by nipping at their backs. The dog, a very sweet collie, was not behaving the way Donk wanted her to, so the nipping began. I stepped outside to witness the goings on only to see Donk run past me with a mouth full of collie fur. I just shook my head and went back in the house.

So, what's all this to do with Fred?

It's an example of the nonchalant way my husband and his family named their animals. *Lightning* the donkey simply became *Donk*.

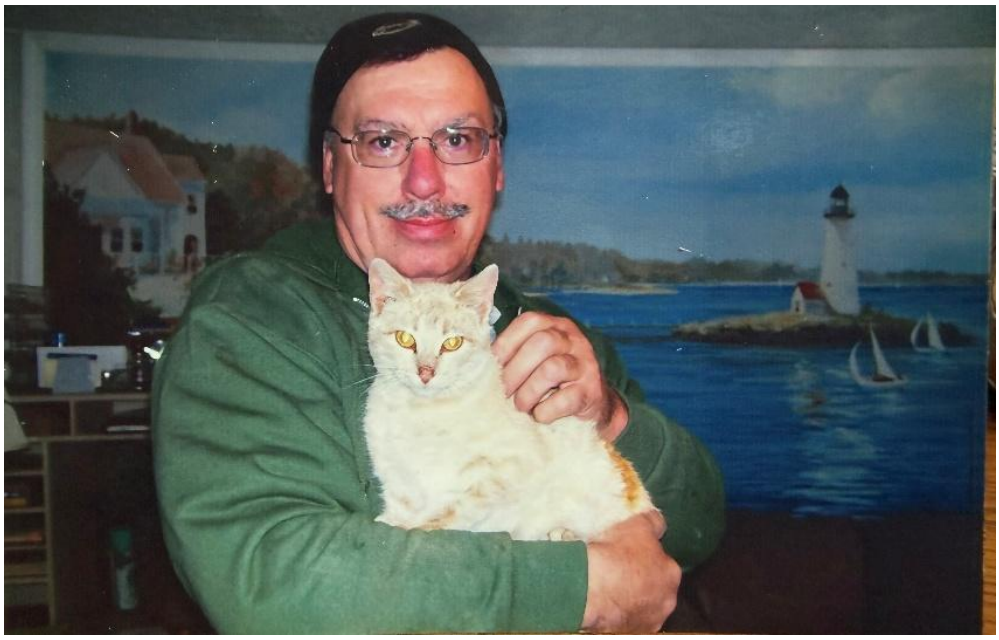
There were cats, not just at the farm, but at the shop where my husband worked as well. They were named Fred. All of them. Males. Females. Didn't matter. Just Fred.

One day I was outside calling for "Fred" to come inside when a gentleman across the alley came around the corner of the building and said, "Can I help you?" I had met this man before but wasn't really well acquainted with him yet. He was the deacon from the Catholic church across

the alley from our shop. I was not yet Catholic and so I wasn't quite sure what his sense of humor was like. After all, being raised Baptist…you know…I just wasn't sure.

Anyway, I apologized for bothering him and explained that I was just calling for the cat. He smiled quite pleasantly and went on his way. A few months went by and just like clockwork, "Fred" had become a mother. Now we had a batch of little Freds running around the shop.

"We can't keep calling these cats Fred," I told my husband. I suggested "Fritz" because that was the German nickname for Friedrich, which is Fred, basically, so the next time I saw Deacon Fred, I told him that I had solved the problem. He laughed. I laughed. He laughed more. I stopped laughing. He said, "That's my nickname!" I must interject here that it was Deacon Fred who was the one who tipped the scales in my conversion experience. We had gotten to know each other better through the local ministerial association's Lenten scheduling meetings, I drank coffee, he enjoyed the perfect cup of tea. We shared many theological discussions throughout the RCIA



Craig's Freds were his best form of stress relief. If stroking the fur off the back of one of the cats didn't work, he'd resort to a flavored cigar. When things got exceptionally tough, it wouldn't be out of the question for me to puff on one myself. A cigar, not a cat, just to be clear.

process, and I will be forever thankful that God sent Deacon Fred, or Deacon Fritz, or whatever, my way!

OK, I give up. However, this did lead us to back to just using Fred for the older cat there, but then a new name sprung up. Fritzen. Fritz instead of Fred. And -en taken from the end of kitten. Fritzen. And thus began the legacy of the Fritzens.

But the Fred thread lingers on…Our son and his family gave my husband a rescue cat, a Russian Blue, by the name of "Ford", for his birthday two years prior to his passing. Immediately "Ford" was changed to "Fred" and that was that.

Now, two years later, two kittens have taken up the empty space left by a different Fred, who unfortunately went missing. They're farm cats, a brother and sister combo. A short haired male and a long haired female. Sitting at my dining room table, I pondered the many names that might be appropriate for the new silver-colored pair, when all at once, the male pounced on my neck.

"Fred!" I yelled, "Get down!"

Yep. That was that.

His sibling? Now she wound up with an original name.

Sissy.

I love dogs.

(P.S.) So why did I get more cats? Because I like to travel and I must admit, Freds are easier to leave behind with extra food, water, and litter. A dog? Not so much.

Chapter Five

This is where it gets real

I lost my husband to cancer on July 12, 2024. We didn't expect to have to deal with something this serious just as we began our retirement. It was a tumor, guaranteed to be benign, that turned into a whirlwind of nightmares.

Craig, my husband of 42 years, started to act confused and was having small difficulties with everyday life when we took him to the doctor. He hated anything to do with a doctor's office or a hospital visit. In fact, his blood pressure would go so high during the visits that the nurses were quite alarmed. Even when the doctor checked his levels, she was alarmed, and rightly so, because just as she was assuring Craig that he was alright, the man passed out on my shoulder! "Call the ambulance," was the direction given to the attending nurse while we got him on the exam table and tried to bring him around.

The ambulance crew arrived and they loaded Craig, now semi-conscious, onto the gurney and took him outside to the ambulance. My heart was in my throat.

* * *

I had trained to be an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) early in our married life, so I understood how serious this situation had just gotten. However, I had never felt this emotion of watching my own husband keel over right there and I was experiencing a total loss of control, having no clue what to do. Thankfully it all happened in the clinic. Had we been elsewhere, the story might have been much different.



Emergency Medical Technician graduating class for the Adair Volunteer Fire Department circa 1983. Front left: myself, Cindy. Back: Skip and Bill. Sadly, both Skip and Bill have passed, Bill being the husband of my friend Connie.

* * *

A memory came to mind of the time before I became an EMT but was already a member of the local volunteer fire department. We were still newlyweds. Craig was at work and saw me

standing on the backstep of the fire truck, hanging on with one hand, trying to pull on my turnout coat (aka, bunker coat) as we roared down the street in front of his place of employment. I recall my adrenaline level being extremely elevated, feeling with all my heart how I was going out to save the world from destruction!

Later that evening, at home with my husband, when all was quiet and I had helped to "save the day", all Craig said to me was, "If I EVER see you hanging off the back of that truck again, I'll…". He didn't finish the thought, but I understood that I wouldn't be performing that stunt again.

* * *

Back to the ambulance trip to the hospital, Craig told me the paramedics reassured him that I was following them close behind and that I would be there at the hospital with him. I was right there, at his side, waiting for our son, Tim, and daughter-in-law, Amanda, to arrive, which they did a short time later. None of us knew what to expect. Was this going to be a false alarm? Was it going to be serious? Could we take Dad home and just go on like nothing ever happened?

As we stood there waiting for test results, Craig was able to talk with us, but he wasn't making a lot of sense. He told us he was on a ship and that he needed to fix it and did we have his tools? Tim had the wisdom to go along with the boat story to keep his dad's confusion to a minimum. He even told him yes, in fact, he did bring the tools with him. That calmed Craig for a little while and I quit trying to convince him that he was not on a boat.

But then, looking at Tim, he came out with, "Take care of Mom." The tears came.

* * *

My thoughts went to before Tim was born. (Anything and everything starts to go through your mind in a crisis. At least it did for me.)

I had an uneventful pregnancy other than morning sickness that never stopped. There were two food issues during that time: I couldn't get enough pimento stuffed green olives, and I couldn't stand the smell of fried hamburger, Craig's favorite supper.

One evening I was feeling confident about making hamburgers for our evening meal. I was about eight months along. I stood at the stove watching the meat brown to perfection. I plated the burgers for both of us. I picked up the two plates, turned 45 degrees to serve them, but found myself turning another 45 degrees to face the kitchen sink, vomiting, then turn back to the counter, plates still in hand. The plates were intact and received none of what I had left in the sink, so I set the plates down in front of Craig.

"I don't think so," was all he could say.

When Tim finally was born, 13 days overdue by the doctor's calculations (but only five by mine – after all, I was there when it happened), he became the center of my attention and the most wonderful thing I could ever have imagined. His daddy was a little jealous that he wouldn't be getting my full attention any longer.

Now this little boy was being charged with the task of making sure I would be OK. Dad's jealousy turned into trust that Tim would be able to hold our family together in his absence.

* * *

Craig was admitted to the hospital for more tests and observation. Serious conversations were taking place in the moments of not knowing what was happening to him. My brother-in-law (AJ, ten years Craig's junior) came to the hospital to check in on big brother's status. We stood in the hall outside of the room, hugging and sharing some tears.

It's times like this that you realize how helplessness feels. That's a feeling, thankfully, that I had only known one other time in my life. It was when my parents divorced. I was crushed and there was nothing I could do. I am not going to include that story in this writing other than to say it was a devastating influence that left a huge scar on my heart. I was 16 at the time.

Chapter Six

Reality hits

Following several weeks in the hospital, we came to the sad conclusion that my sweetheart of 43 years was not going to be coming home ever again. The proclaimed *benign* tumor turned out to be malignant.

"In the 41 years I've removed this type of tumor, I have never experienced what I just found in your husband's brain." Those were the words spoken by the neurosurgeon who operated on Craig. It was to be a simple operation: go in through the nose (I apologize for mentioning that if you are squeamish) and remove the tumor that had attached itself to the pituitary gland. The pituitary gland controls everything in your body and having a tumor appear on it is, in fact, quite a common thing, the neurosurgeon had explained prior to the surgery.

Following the surgery, he announced, as though he was telling me the sun was shining, "It's malignant." No big deal, just the word. My heart was in my throat, again.

"I went in there and found the tumor. Started to scrape it away, like always…but then I hit something hard or tough," he said. "I've never experienced that," he continued.

He managed to cut out as much as he could without doing more damage and sent the sample for testing. But he knew. He knew the moment he saw it that the prognosis changed instantly and dramatically.

I sent text messages to the family because I couldn't speak. They had taken Craig to the Critical Care Unit where I would be able to sit with him after he came out of the anesthesia.

“How are you feeling honey?” I managed to get that out before I choked. I tried to stay upbeat for his sake, but the doctor had already told him what he found. Roughest day of our lives.

A little while later, Fr. Ray (a wonderful friend and beloved priest) and AJ were able to get to the hospital to meet with me. Seeing them gave me comfort and helped calm my emotions. I explained what the neurosurgeon found and that we really didn’t know what was going to happen next.

This moment would mark the beginning of a support network that I never dreamed I had or would even need. I will be forever grateful for these two men and for the ones I will be mentioning later.

Craig was moved into a private room where he stayed for several weeks. New symptoms were presenting themselves almost daily. He could carry on a decent conversation most of the time, but then he’d say something that was totally off the wall. He wasn’t making sense. He saw things out of the hospital window that weren’t there. He insisted that what he was seeing was there and couldn’t be convinced otherwise.

He couldn’t get warm enough. He was losing mobility. He was starting to lose his sight. I can still hear him say, “I don’t want to die.” We cried and I said, “I don’t want you to die either.” We sat for quite a while holding hands in silence.

I tried to bring up stories about Tim growing up, our trips to Door County, what was happening back in Adair, and yes, Tim is taking good care of the business while you’re away.

I brought up the story about the time we travelled by bus to Toronto, Canada to watch the taping of the final episode of The Red Green Show. Our friends Harold and Marlene accompanied us on

the trip which was sponsored by the local PBS station in Des Moines. We left Des Moines on a Friday afternoon and returned in the wee hours of the following Monday morning. As I recall, this was over a Labor Day weekend.

Wanting to make the most of this adventure, I noticed that there would be about five hours of free time on Sunday. What better time than to rent a car and drive own to see Niagra Falls from the Canadian side? I had been to Niagra with my mom when I was a teenager, but neither Craig nor Harold or Marlene had ever been there.

See an opportunity? Go for it! That was always my response. I still like that idea, but my response time has slowed down quite a bit with age and experience.

We got up at 5am and hit the road running, as they say. I drove because I always acted like I knew what I was doing, which instilled confidence in my groupies that we were in for a nice day. And we DID have a nice day! We toured the Skylon Tower, took a ride on the Maid of the Mist, visited a beautiful garden, and ate something along the way



Standing on the Canadian side of Niagra Falls after taking a ride on the Maid of the Mist. Beautiful adventure!

before returning to Toronto in time to catch the bus back to Iowa.

* * *

Then there was the time that Craig scooped the entire professional press corps folks at the Des Moines airport. “Remember that, Honey?” He smiled.

I was working as a photojournalist for a six-day newspaper in southwest Iowa at the time. I covered all the average stories like school functions, art contests, chamber of commerce events, and the like, but something *big* was in my sights. President George Herbert Walker Bush was going to be visiting Iowa in less than a week, and I wanted to be there! It wasn’t necessarily a political thing, but just the chance to see a sitting US president with my own eyes was exciting. I was younger then.

I asked my editor if I could cover the story or at least be there when the president’s plane landed in Des Moines. Our paper didn’t actually cover central Iowa, he explained, but said, “I guess if you want to, go ahead, but I’m not paying you mileage. You’re on your own!” Fine. I didn’t care. I wanted to see the president!

There wasn’t much time to get the security clearance paperwork done, but I managed to get the proper credentials processed in plenty of time. I was sharing the news with Craig and he said, “I wanna’ go, too,” and looked at me with those big puppy dog eyes. Well, um, OK, but how was I going to get his security clearance done so quickly? I mean I had to go through a lot of paperwork and answer questions that seemed really pointless ad infinitum. But I’d try.

Well, what do you know? Two days. That's all it took and Craig's security pass came through. It was the day of the event, but we didn't have to be there until that evening, so there wouldn't be a time crunch.

Before I left the newspaper office I made sure my camera bag was restocked with several rolls of 35mm black & white film (yes, I'm *that* old), fresh batteries for the flash attachment, and a few odds and ends. I had been on a local farm that morning gathering information and shooting photos for a feature story on hog confinements in the area and sometimes I just threw things back in the bag without much finesse. I shut down my Macintosh Classic computer and headed out the door. I was home in thirty minutes, took my shower; my husband got home and we were ready to go. We made it to the airport in plenty of time to go through the security checks with time to spare.

I had nothing to be nervous about, but just the thought of going through a *Secret Service Security Check* made me a little bit queasy.

We got in line with our paperwork in hand. The agent looked at Craig and his pass and sent him through. Just like that. No questions. No squinty-eyed suspicious sideways glance. Just a wave of the hand.

Well, that was simple, I thought to myself.

"Open your bag," the agent said, rather gruffly. *Yes sir.* I don't remember if I said it out loud or just thought it, but I opened my camera bag, and the man literally gutted every slot and pocket. He didn't hurt anything, but he was definitely thorough. I didn't mind. I understood he needed to

do his job. I wasn't offended, that is until he picked up my telephoto lens and held it up to look through. "It's filthy," he barked.

"I WAS IN A HOG LOT!" I blurted out. I know I said that out loud. "Go on through," were the last words out of his mouth. So, I stuffed everything back into the bag and headed onto the tarmac with the rest of the reporters.

There were tv crews, photographers, law enforcement personnel, and my husband.

It would be about ten more minutes before Air Force One would be landing. Flatbed semi-trailers had been brought in and positioned for film crews to better view the landing and the president as he deplaned. The place was buzzing with sound tests and makeup and clothing adjustments. In the meantime, Craig was just wandering around taking in all the sights and sounds.

We were all positioned with our lenses facing west. Craig walked up behind me and asked, "What color is the plane?" *Well now, that's a weird question, I thought.* "It's kind of teal colored, why?" I answered. "Because it just landed over there," he said, pointing to the east, in the exact opposite direction of our entourage of press people.

You could almost feel the breeze as every single person within earshot swung around to confirm that, yes, in fact, Air Force One had already, without anyone but Craig noticing, touched down and was taxying over to our location.

Craig just grinned but didn't say a word.

Soon the plane came to a stop, the stairway was wheeled up to the door and the president stepped out, waving to the crowd gathered there before him. We're all clicking and flashing and rolling film when my husband said to me, "That's not him." "What?" I asked. "That's not really him.

That's a double," he said. "They always send out a double first just in case someone tries to shoot at him or something."

How in the world did my husband know that?

Of all the murder mysteries and crime thrillers and spy stories I've seen and read…now I can say I have actually seen a real doppelganger!

I don't know how he knew what he knew. But he knew a lot about life.

* * *

"Yeah, that was fun," Craig said, then fell asleep. I left for home. There were daily chores that still needed to be taken care of there and I needed some sleep as well.

The next few days found Craig completely losing his eyesight.

It was all happening so fast. That was hard for him. His mind was starting to get more confused as well, so accepting the fact that he couldn't see was a difficult concept for him. I think partly because he was seeing things that his mind was conjuring up and he couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't. He mentioned to me one day that his dad had been there to see him. This was a flashing red light for me that the end was probably getting near. His dad passed away in 1989. This was 2024.

They say that if or when you see family members who have already passed, that they are with you to help guide you home to heaven. I think that's a real possibility.

There's an absolute connection between this life and the next. I firmly believe that. It's not a statement of "I believe in ghosts", not at all. But I know there's more to life than what we see with our own eyes.

Case in point: My dad had a habit of wearing white t-shirts under his regular shirts (as well as white socks with every style of shoe he owned, including the polished black dress shoes he wore with his best suit) and there was strict adherence as to how the sleeves were folded up. Note that I said folded, not rolled, as was the style in the 1950's when guys rolled up a pack of cigarettes into their short-sleeved t-shirts. Nope, rolled wouldn't do for my dad. The proper order for putting on his shirts was 1) t-shirt goes on, 2) t-shirt gets tucked into his pants, 3) t-shirt sleeves folded twice, neatly – no wrinkles allowed, 4) put on the regular shirt, 5) button said shirt, 6) tuck that shirt into his pants and 7) fold shirt sleeves up being sure to be short enough to not bug him by rubbing too low on his arm, but not too short so as to allow the t-shirt sleeve to be visible. He could do all of this himself, but he felt it was a much easier thing to have done by my mother or myself. He would raise his arm, placing his hand on mom's or my shoulder, always giving instructions on how to fold the sleeves the right way. Every. Single. Time.

Well, years later, Dad was diagnosed with cancer. They found it too late and he passed in less than a year. We did get to say our goodbyes a month or so before he passed. When I received the call that he was gone, I finished my day at work and headed home to start packing for the trip up to Wisconsin for the funeral.

We went to bed, ready to leave first thing in the morning. It was about 2am when I woke up to see that Dad was standing at the end of our bed. I wasn't scared. Dad looked like he did when I was growing up. He was smiling and said that he wanted me to help him because it was time for

him to go. He walked over to my side of the bed and reached out his arm to put his hand on my shoulder so I could fold up his sleeves.

It all seemed so natural.

I reached out to him, but he was gone. I really miss you, Dad.

To this day, every now and then, I will get a whiff of cigarette smoke just like when Dad smoked. No one in our house smoked, ever.

Chapter Seven

This is it

After weeks of traveling to the city to sit with Craig as he lay in the hospital, the doctors broke the news that there was nothing else that could be done for my husband. He would need to be moved into a care facility that was staffed and equipped to handle Alzheimer's patients. Craig didn't have that diagnosis; however, the symptoms of the tumor made him act like he had the disease. He began not recognizing people, especially since he'd lost his sight. He could no longer feed himself and was bound to a wheelchair.

He was admitted to a specialty care center on a Saturday. He passed away the following Friday.

My prayers had been that he wouldn't have to live in that condition for long. There was no hope for recovery of any kind.

I spent the day with him Thursday. He was unresponsive, but I held his hand. Holding hands was something we didn't often do, but in the month or so before he got sick, he would sit in the chair next to mine to watch television. The regular evening lineup included *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Gomer Pyle, USMC*, and *Hogan's Heroes* to name a few. He held out his hand to take mine and then, of all things unexpected, he would sing to me. Was that a show tune coming from my husband's mouth? I didn't know he could sing!

This was so out of character! But I loved it. As I recall, it was a slow, romantic ballad by Barry Manilow, you probably know it - the one about not being able to exist without each other. Little did we know what was coming in the very near future.

Something else remarkable, at least to me, was that while he still had his faculties intact in the hospital, he said, “You were right.”

I asked, “About what?” “Everything. Just everything.” This covered a multitude of topics including faith, family, business, and life in general. We never argued in our marriage. Not that we didn’t have our disagreements, but neither of us liked confrontation. We always worked things out. It may have taken more than one day at times, but we got there in the end.

* * *

Thursday evening was coming and I needed to go. I had been sitting with my husband for most of the day. I think I just couldn’t see him in that condition much longer. I didn’t want to go, but I didn’t want to stay either. I couldn’t face what was coming. I had called Fr. Ray, and he came in the afternoon to give Craig Last Rites. He had only just started going to Mass with me the previous Fall. It was so nice to finally have him join me after all the years of attending alone. Craig had even decided to convert, but time ran out before that was accomplished. The intent of the heart was there, and I believe I will see him again in heaven. That is comforting.



I leaned over his head and whispered in his ear that I loved him very much and always had. I told him that AJ was on his way to sit with him and would be there soon. Tim couldn't get there until Friday because he was away in the truck. "Tim will be here just as soon as he can be," I whispered. "Wait for him, Honey. I love you."

Tim did get there to spend some time with his dad - he needed that time alone to say goodbye. Within the hour after Tim's visit, Craig was gone.

When I called Tim to let him know his dad had passed, he had news for me as well. Just a few hours before Craig passed, Sherry, the wife of a long-time family friend, Daryl, also died. She had been diagnosed with Huntington's Disease several years ago and had suffered with it. A recent fall had put her into the hospital where she passed away.

Just how many gut wrenching moments can a heart take at one time?

I haven't been able to watch *Andy Griffith* since.

* * *

This is a small town (population 750). We all know each other, at least those of us in our age range. It was crazy to hear that she had passed. Their two deaths occurred only a few months following the death of another friend, Bill, in town. Bill and I had been EMT partners with the local volunteer fire and rescue folks. His wife, Connie and I used to *do coffee* every morning way back before I even had met Craig.



Life takes you to different places at different times.

Connie attended Craig's memorial service. We had watched Bill's service from home online as Craig was sick at the time.

I hadn't seen her for ages as we had gone our separate ways, only due to raising families and other life stages. I was surprised and very pleased to see her there. She came up to me, gave me a hug, and said, "We need to get together for coffee again." That renewed a friendship that had long been set aside. We did get back together shortly after things settled down. I thank God so much for this reunion!

Kathy, our wedding singer, and I also rekindled our friendship. Again, there were no problems between us, we just grew apart taking care of our own families and working outside our homes.

God is good and knows what each of us needs and when we need it, and who will be there to help if we let Him work.

Chapter Eight

Alone and Away

The family dynamic has changed drastically. We're a small group to begin with, but now that Craig is gone, the conversations seem forced. Do we keep talking over the same old *back in the day* stories? Do we talk about Dad? Do we ignore the fact that he's not with us? How do we do this?

I had no clue.

My mother had come to stay with us when Craig got sick. The idea was to have her here to help me with things, whatever things needed to be done that I couldn't get to. After Craig passed, it seems my mindset picked up on taking care of her. Mom could drive herself around. She was pretty much self-sufficient, but I still felt like I needed to be her caretaker. That's the platform I had been operating from.

As time progressed, her health did start to suffer. Arthritis and scoliosis of the spine started to make her more dependent on me. That's ok, she's my mother, it's my duty. But I hadn't counted on how needy she would become. It took its toll on me physically and emotionally. I had grown up being *Daddy's girl* and Mom and I were butting heads increasingly frequently.

Things were coming to a head as her body was wearing down. Craig and I had started equipping our home to handle my own future with arthritis. We had already installed a stairlift, higher stools in the bathrooms, and grab bars wherever we thought they were needed. These things all helped Mom navigate around the house until she got to the point of needing to be in a

wheelchair. My house couldn't accommodate a wheelchair bound resident, so we moved her into a skilled care facility.

She wasn't pleased, but it had to be done. She has since adjusted to the idea and has come to understand that she does need to be in a facility where she can receive 24/7 care. We're getting along much better now. I had worn myself out without realizing why.

* * *

Prior to her moving into the care facility, I had been online *talking* with a person who I was led to believe was someone who honestly cared about me. My friends warned me about scammers on Facebook, so I was wary. However, I couldn't help but get attached – really attached – to this person who was so sympathetic to my feelings. I bared my soul, spewing out all the feelings of loneliness, sadness, and unknowing about what the future would hold for me now.

Turns out, the person was indeed a scammer, and it was a real kick in my already fractured emotions. It was yet another loss on top of losing Craig. The good thing was that I never gave up any financial information, nor did I buy into the scam.

Heartache – especially when it's fraudulent – is a painful teacher.

Be warned, please, if you ever find yourself talking to who knows who is online and they want you to invest or purchase anything, don't do it!

Even though it was false, it did give me a place to go, a place to share my feelings, share things that you can't relate to unless you're going through it yourself.

The day after Mom moved into the care center, I fell apart. I spent the entire day in tears, realizing just how much I missed my husband. I realized that I had transferred taking care of Craig to taking care of her and I never got the time or took the time to honestly grieve for my husband. It was time to start living again.

The trip to Scotland that I had hoped for so many years just might be the answer to recovering my emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being.

Chapter Nine

Getting There

I have been so blessed by being able to travel through 34 of our 50 states as I was growing up, but to also have been to Canada, Mexico, Austria, Ireland, and with airport layovers long enough to claim London, Zurich, and Amsterdam. But there was still one place left on my bucket list. One place that I had wanted to go for more than 25 years and that was Scotland.

Let me make a confession here about another aspect of why I *always* wanted to go to Scotland.

Way back in my youth, when I first discovered Sean Connery in the Disney movie *Darby O'Gill and the Little People*, (which scared me half to death at a few points), it brought Ireland into my world. I was probably six or seven at the time, and my parents took me to the local drive-in movie theater to watch it. I was able to travel to Ireland in 2001, but that would be a story for another book.

My interest in Scotland expanded via James Bond 007 movies. I thought Sean Connery (oh yeah, I remember seeing him when I was a little kid!) was handsome. And he looked good in a formal kilt.

Then from 2000-2005 a Scottish television series called *Monarch of the Glen* became popular. I enjoyed seeing the beautiful Scottish countryside and *Archie MacDonald* (played by Alistair MacKenzie), who looked good in a formal kilt.

There's a pattern developing here.

Moving ahead to 2014, another Scottish series came along entitled *Outlander*. A story written by Diana Gabaldon about time travel between the end of World War II England and 18th century Scotland. The leading characters are *Jamie* and *Claire*. *Jamie* was played by Scottish actor Sam Heughan, who looks great in a formal kilt. Mr. Heughan is also an author, entrepreneur, and philanthropist, as well as a very talented actor.

So that's three Scotsmen who *looked great in kilts*, none of whom know me or ever will. But a girl can dream, can't she?

There you have it. The pattern that made me finally plan and execute the trip! I won't go into the story lines of any of these programs, suffice it to say these three gentlemen were only icing on the cake of my imagination as they say, but not actual reasons for making the trip.

All that silliness being confessed, I certainly didn't make this trip JUST because of how these gentlemen appeared in native costume. *Possibly…maybe just a little bit…*

* * *

Now seemed to be the right time. I needed to commit to this trip, not just because it was on my bucket list, but because I *needed to*. I needed to get away from all the emotions, the fears, the worries, and the not knowing what this new title of *widow* would bring. I really didn't like that word. I didn't want to be known as a *widow*. It just wasn't what I felt like. I didn't want to be put in the category and stuck away on a shelf where it felt like people would give me *that look* the rest of my life that said, "So sorry for your loss," when they had nothing else to say. It's what we all say to someone who has lost a loved one. There's not much else we can say. We can't fix it.

We can't joke about it, necessarily, that would be in poor taste (however, I could see in some instances where it might be funny, depending on the circumstances).

Case in point, my great aunt Peggy. She pretty much raised my dad because my grandmother had her hands full with the five younger children in the home. Aunt Peggy had a witty sense of humor and often told us of a particularly unique request she was making with regard to her inevitable funeral arrangements. "Before I go," she'd start her story, "I'm going to make a tape recording of myself." "Oh, really Aunt Peggy? Why?" "Well, I want to have it rigged up so that when people come up to give me their last good-byes, they'll step on a button under the rug next to my casket that will trigger the recording. That way, before they can get a word out – which they'd probably be lying anyway – I'll say something like: 'Don't I look like I'm sleeping?' or 'Don't I look natural?' Most of the time those folks only want to come and make sure you're actually dead anyway!"

Yes, Aunt Peggy was a real corker! Turns out I didn't get to attend her funeral service so I can't attest whether or not this actually happened. I'll leave that up to you to decide.

In my own experience as a musician, people often ask me, after they've attended a funeral that I have provided the music for, "Will you play for my funeral?" I never knew how to answer that tactfully. After all, who knows? I could go first. So, depending on the scenario, I've learned to inquire as to the songs they'd prefer, and do they have a date in mind? That usually ends the conversation.

Maybe some of Aunt Peggy rubbed off on me.

I digress…

Back to my trip planning.

I wanted to go on a retreat, not hit the tourist spots. A place where I could see the beautiful landscape, meet new people, learn about a new culture, listen to the Scots Gaelic accent that I had become familiar with from watching British television for so many years, and to able to sit quietly to read, to pray, to draw, and to do just nothing.

This trip wasn't planned to be just a vacation. It was meant to be a *route recalculation*, if you will. I needed time to process the fact that I was now – even if I didn't like the term – *a widow*.

You might think, as I did, that you're an independent person even while you're married, but you find our quite the opposite when your spouse is no longer there. Sure, I knew how to take care of the household duties, how to pay the bills, take care of the car (with the help of my son), and general everyday life. But it's in the evening when you're watching television and you don't haggle over what channel to watch, or when you go to bed and there's no one there to snuggle up against. It's that feeling of security when you're used to hearing the breathing of the other person that has now gone away that it hits you. *That's when you know you're alone.*

It hadn't been quite a full year after losing my husband that I began to think more seriously about what I was going to do with my life now that I was alone. There had been so many things to take care of at his passing. The paperwork alone seemed to go on forever.

Then there were the frustrating, unexpected things. First, the water heater started leaking. My son replaced that. Then the dishwasher quit. Again, Tim and his wife Amanda came to the rescue. Then, yes, another thing, the microwave went bad. And yet again, Tim and Amanda helped to rectify that issue. In all the 40 plus years we have lived in this house, there has never been a time

when so many things went wrong in such a short period of time. (Update: as I'm writing this, the air conditioning unit went down and just a week ago I had to have the battery replaced in my John Deere Gator.)

I haven't even mentioned the leaks under the kitchen sink and both outside garden hose hookups.

My son and his wife have been a Godsend during these two years. In addition to these rescues, they took on the family business and the care of my elderly mother, who had been living with us since before Craig passed. The pressures of losing my husband, the malfunctions, the care of my aging mother, the unknown future, all took its toll on me. The trip had to happen. It had to happen for my sanity.

I started making serious plans for a two-week retreat-style vacation in Scotland. Never having been there before, I had no idea what to expect. I connected with several groups through social media sites to research how, where, and what to expect on my journey. Would it be safe to travel alone, especially at my age? Where should I stay? What about car rental? I wasn't concerned about driving on the "wrong" side of the road as I had already done that in Ireland. And I have watched tons of British television shows through the years, so my eyes and brain were already used to driving opposite of what we do here in the US.

These are the things I wanted to accomplish while in Scotland. Quiet time in a peaceful setting. Church attendance. Take part in a ceilidh (a traditional Scottish dance party). Do some writing, some sketching, some crocheting, some reading, and mostly get to know local folks and learn about their culture.

First thing, I chose the dates I wanted to travel. May 1-15. Springtime. Flowers are beginning to bloom. No midgies, the vicious little beasties that can plague the average person by swarming around you and getting into every nook and crevice possible. It's still a little too cool for them in the spring. With the dates decided, I booked the flights.

Next, where to stay. I browsed several sites looking for just the right place. I had planned on going alone but found a place with a second bedroom just in case I did wind up with a travel partner. It was a cute little cottage in Oban (that was the address given), which is the seafood capital of Scotland, according to the guidebook I had purchased through my favorite online source. It sounded perfect and the price was quite reasonable. I clicked to confirm and that detail was now done.

I mentioned that Oban was the address given. Well, yes, but when I looked at the online maps, I couldn't find the place. I found Oban alright, but not the place I was going to be staying. I looked at the email I had just received confirming my stay and there, in fine print, were the words, *Be aware that a ferry will be needed to access your accommodation.*

A ferry? Nothing was mentioned (that I noticed) in the process of making the reservations about taking a ferry? I'm staying on an island? Um, well, OK then. I had clicked the confirm button fully understanding that this was a firm commitment and only the dates could be rearranged if need be. The ferry sailed from the Port of Oban.

After catching my breath and accepting what I had signed up for, I made the arrangements for hiring a car to drive while there. A bit of practical advice: be sure to understand the exchange rate of the local currency with the US dollar. At the time of my trip, it took $1.37 to buy one Scottish pound. (As an example, upon arriving in Oban, I found a Bank of Scotland ATM that I could use

to get some Scottish currency. I asked for fifty pounds and was charged $75 and change to make the transaction. The exchange rate plus a small fee.) It is recommended and much easier to use a credit card than to do the exchange. There still might be fees, but they will be smaller. Best advice: check it out before you go!

All said and done, my plans were in place to make the trip a full seven months ahead of time. It was excruciating to wait all that time! I couldn't help but think that something would happen to stop me going. *Oh, ye of little faith!*

* * *

I had been praying about making the trip. If it was God's will that I go, then please help me make it happen. To those of us who don't ask God – or who might think it's a silly notion – let me assure you, life goes much better asking Him for help rather than trying to accomplish life on your own! We aren't meant to have to live life every day all by ourselves. That also doesn't mean we'll never have problems. Quite the opposite. But at least we have Someone to go to when the problems arise.

To help pass the time between making the arrangements and making the trip, I resorted to a proven family method of using the days, weeks, and months constructively. I picked up my collection of crochet hooks, bought a pattern, ordered the cotton thread, and embarked on what I thought would make a nice *little* wall hanging of the Last Supper. I emphasized *little* because I was under the impression that the finished piece would be maybe three feet wide by two feet tall, at best. I was using all of the correct materials. If you're not familiar with crochet, the instructions provide the size hook to use, the weight of the thread or yarn, and the scale or size of

your stitches if you are using the correct hand tension. I did and I was to all of the above. Where things went askew, I don't know, but the finished *little* wall hanging had to be mounted on a six foot long by four foot sheet of lauan plywood before being fixed to the only wall large enough in my house to accommodate it. It's magnificent, not because I'm taking a pat on my own back, but because of the size and grandeur of the pattern. The person who sold the pattern online said she'd copied it from an original work her grandmother had done many years ago. God love her!



The crochet project of my lifetime. Da Vinci's Last Supper. Approximately a quarter of a million minute stitches in this project took six months to complete. Shown in the blocking stage prior to being mounted for hanging.

A quarter of a million stitches later…I never thought I'd do a project that big, but God gave me the patience and the skills to complete it in six of the seven months that I had to wait before it would be time to leave for Scotland. *That's enough of those tiny little stitches for me!*

Oh look! A pattern for a Scottish teacloth…

I still had some time to spare before my trip, as well as more cotton thread and this really pretty pattern to make a tablecloth. The motif uses the thistle, a noxious weed here in the US, but in Scotland, it's the official flower. You can google the story here: The thistle – Scotland's national flower https://www.nts.org.uk

When it was completed, I showed it to a few relatives and friends here in Iowa. Two of the guys who were farmers commented on how much they despised the prickly weeds in their fields, besides the fact that they are outlawed here. "You're *not* seriously going to use that here," one commented, sporting a sinister grin.

Well, now what. Then my mother piped up. "Take it to Scotland with you and give it to Sam!" she suggested. Raucous laughter filled the room.

Go ahead and laugh, you guys…just keep on laughing…



I didn't say another word. But the teacloth did wind up going to Scotland with me all the way to Sam's Distillery where I left it as a gift. I hope he liked it.

So, here's a shout out to the Galloway Distillery in Newton Stewart!

Slàinte Mhath!

To your good health!



It's something I picked up from my Gma Grace as well, this making something to give people that I think a lot of.

I made Fr. Ray an afghan (crocheted blanket) for Christmas a few years ago. It's nice to think about the person and even pray for them while you're making it.

But the time finally arrived to leave for Scotland. The night before I left was crazy. I checked and rechecked my luggage, my passport, my meds, and all the necessities I could imagine I would need for the next two weeks.

* * *

Amanda arrived at my house at 7:30 the next morning and we headed to the Des Moines International airport. The flight was delayed. Of course it was. Just a little rattle on my patience cage.

The trip so far included the initial hour drive from home to Des Moines, 90 minutes from Des Moines to Detroit, seven hours from Detroit to Amsterdam, another hour from Amsterdam to Glasgow, and now it would be almost a three-hour drive to Oban. I kept telling myself as the

traffic started to lessen and the roads were reduced from four lanes to two, *you're almost there*. The scenery was nice, but I had to pay more attention to the driving. I could sight-see more later. Soon I entered the Trossachs National Park where I found myself driving a narrowing highway along the lengths of Loch Lomond. Yes, that Loch Lomond. You know, *You take the high road, and I'll take the low road…* Beautiful drive! This was Scotland's very first National Park and it is absolutely worth visiting!

When I say *narrowing* please understand that the vehicles there aren't the gigantic things we're used to driving here in the US. They are quite a bit smaller and need to be so to navigate the roads. You often drive with the mountains on one side while the water is on the other side. No shoulders, no waysides to speak of, just occasional *lay by's* where you can pull to the side to let someone pass you if need be. I didn't see any *scenic lookouts* to stop for photo opportunities either. Maybe a very occasional spot you might try to pull over, that is, if you weren't amid a long line of traffic from both directions like I seemed to be constantly.

Something else to check before you go: the UK has things called *bank holidays*, three-day weekends where everyone and their dog (literally, as you can take your dog into any restaurant or place of business with you) travels to their favorite spots in the country to get away and have fun. I was headed to Oban on a Friday afternoon on a bank holiday. Oban, I found out, is a holidaymaker's paradise. They were all headed to Oban for the weekend.

* * *

I never said so many prayers to St. Christopher – you know, the plastic statue so many people used to have stuck to their dashboards back in the day, the patron saint of travelers, drivers, and

transportation – in my life! There were also several *Our Fathers* and a few well-placed *Hail Mary's* along the way.

All said and done, I arrived in Oban, unscathed and ready to ferry over to the island of Lismore. Lismore is a small island situated at the foot of the Highlands, a part of the country referred to as the Highlands and Islands, not quite as well known as the more touristy islands like Skye, or Lewis, or Iona. Lismore's population is around 150-160 full time residents. There is one café combined with a visitor's center and museum, a church, the post office and grocery store with one coffee machine, a community center, sheep, several farms, artisans, and lots of hard-working, welcoming citizens.






Lismore would be my home, my basecamp for the next fourteen days.





Chapter Ten

The Island

I arrived at my cottage on the evening of Friday May 1. I had no real clue as to the time of day. I was physically exhausted from the trip. It had been drizzling rain off and on. I couldn't really see anything *spectacular* as far as local scenery because of the clouds. Honestly, I was a bit depressed. I was expecting, I thought, so much excitement about finally being in Scotland. I needed to sleep. As I dropped onto the soft bed, my thoughts went to, *well, at least I am away from everything and now I can unwind…* I passed out, as they say, when you're just at the point of total exhaustion.

I can't say for sure how long I slept, but I woke up several hours later, unsure of the time or even what day it was. I eventually figured out it was still Friday and I hadn't taken my meds since, well, not sure when, but I knew I must be due to swallow something. (I take medications three times a day to space out the blood pressure stuff from the cholesterol from the thyroid, etc.) I checked my bag for the pills and decided as to what was due and got a glass of water to wash them down.

Travel notes: the tap water in Scotland is wonderful and perfectly safe to drink anywhere you go.

In an unexpected meeting with a local gal on the ferry over to Lismore, I was invited to attend a ceilidh the next evening. It was unusual, she told me, that they'd have their own ceilidh, but on

this special occasion (in honor of Beltane, the first day of spring), there was one planned at the community center just a short walk from my cottage.

I mentioned earlier that I had wanted to go to a ceilidh and was wondering how to get that done, especially now that I was staying on a very small island. And what do you know? There it was! The party I wanted to attend was just a few minutes away from where I was staying! God is good! Even at getting me to a party!

It was a blast! The band was made up of locals as well as folks from the mainland. They were excellent and played traditional music for hours. The band even baked and brought there own goodies to share with the crowd.



There were two couples who attended who were volunteers that taught folks how to do the traditional dances. I was invited to join in the fun, but my knees aren't up to it. This may be taken out of context, but "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak!" (Matthew 26:40 NIV)

I thanked them for including me but remained on the sidelines to watch a wonderful evening of entertainment. I wish we had this kind of tradition here…

Following the ceilidh, my second night of sleep was welcomed, and I began to adjust to the time difference. I caught the ferry back to the mainland and drove to the local Catholic parish.

St. Columba's sits along the seashore in Oban. It's a massive cathedral built in 1878, according to their website.

Something I love about my Catholic faith is that you can attend Mass anywhere in the world and it will be just like your home parish. The Scripture passages, the music, the communion rites, all exactly alike, except for the priest's homily, making you feel right at home. Everything was in English there and the hymns were familiar. It was just like that there at St. Columba's. *FYI, they don't necessarily heat historical sites, so dress for the weather!*



St. Columba's at low tide

I was beginning to unwind. My shoulders were relaxing.

Following the church service, I did a little bit of exploring around Oban, a city known as the seafood capital of Scotland. I didn't go out for lunch but rather went to the local grocery store – a large chain

in the UK by the name of Tesco – to purchase my food supplies to take back to the cottage. Eating every meal at a restaurant also is not something I enjoy much anymore. Too much food, too expensive, and a table for one gets boring. I don't mind being alone, but you get all these pitiful smiles from well-meaning folks that say "Oh, I'm sorry you're here by yourself…"

Time to head back to the island. I had only been there since Friday afternoon, but I already was running into a few people I had met at the party Saturday night. I pulled up into the proper queue to drive aboard the ferry when I spotted a lady that I had met the night before during the ceilidh. The population of Lismore is 160 locals and then whatever visitors make it there to hike or bike on the weekends, so it doesn't take very long to get to know people.

It was beginning to be reminiscent of the Sunday afternoons I had spent with Craig hundreds of times in our 43 years together. Going into the city, that is, Des Moines, for groceries and business supplies was basically our day out, our *weekly date*, if you will. It worked for us. Two workaholics who found a little bit of time together in all of the craziness of making a living. Looking back, we might have done some things differently. But that's the thing. Don't look back. You can't change anything. It is time gone by that cannot be recaptured. That's even more reason why we need to ask for God's direction each and every day. If we don't, the stress we end up putting ourselves through can be debilitating.

Back in my cozy little cottage, groceries all tucked away in the cupboards, I got a phone call from the same lady that had invited me to the ceilidh. She and her husband ran the local hosting and taxi business on Lismore. Check out *Explore Lismore*

"Hiya," Iris said when I answered my phone. "Hiya! What's up?" I asked. She explained that the next weekend, if I was interested, there was another unusual event scheduled for the island and

that I was welcome to attend that as well. It was a gathering of archaeologists who had done a dig on the island around the site of an ancient abbey there. Several lecturers from Scottish universities and other organizations would be taking part and we could go to the site and put hands on to many of the artifacts they uncovered.

"Yes!" was my reply. I thanked her for including me in the local activities and then took the time to thank God once again for giving me a chance to do something that He knew I would enjoy but hadn't even thought to ask for. The ceilidh? I asked for that. He got me there. The dig? Didn't ask, but He knew. *He knew* I'd like that, too.

I love history and archaeology. In fact, when I was in junior high school, I had to write a paper on what I wanted to be when I grew up. I chose archaeologist.

I am always watching documentaries on history, archaeology, forensic exploration, and so on. Even when my husband was still alive, I'd be watching some documentary on mummy forensics, and he'd desperately ask me to change the channel. He never understood what I liked about those programs. Somehow, eating supper while viewing mummy forensics wasn't as appealing to him as it was to me.

Time to get ready for bed. Jammies on, lights off in the cottage, I stepped outside. So many stars. *So. Many. Stars.*

I spent Monday taking in the fresh air and the peace. I discovered that mince and onion pie is wonderful, especially followed by something chocolate. Chocolate is readily available, just in case you're wondering.

Note: Never travel to a country where you can't get chocolate. It's just kind of a rule of life.

The time lag in my brain was settling down, and I managed to get to bed at a proper time in anticipation of the next event I had planned.

Tuesday morning, I headed back to Oban by ferry to set out on a planned trip to Newton Stewart, a small city in the south of Scotland. You might ask, "Why there?" Think back to those three gentlemen I mentioned earlier, Sean, Alistair, and Sam. Yes, Sam. That's the one. He is part-owner in a fairly common and popular business venture in Scotland. A whisky distillery. And yes, it's spelled correctly when referring to Scottish whisky.

I wanted to do a little bit of sightseeing around the country, and it only made logical sense to have a point of interest in mind, a particular destination. So why not head to Sam's distillery? Who knows? Maybe I'd get to meet him? *It'd be my chance to drop off the teacloth that I had tucked away in my luggage...*

Apparently God didn't agree with me on this point.

It was very beautiful countryside, but totally different to what I saw from my cottage on Lismore. I could look out at the Highlands each day from my cottage where I was able to see Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in the Highland range, along with several other peaks and glens.

Along the way, I drove through many quaint little villages. My mind's eye would picture what the cottages might be like inside. *The peat fires burning on the hearth, mums stirring up a batch of porridge, collie pups chasing little ginger-haired children in the gardens.* Oops! Crud! Just missed my turn!

I eventually arrived in Newton Stewart and checked into the hotel. The building was old, older than what we're used to here in the States, but it was well-kept and had everything I needed for

the two-night stay. There was a restaurant on the lower level and a fish and chip shop next door if I'd prefer. The food was spectacular and prices equated to ours for mid-range dining.

I had taken the advice of someone on a British cooking show and tried a slice of Sticky Toffee Pudding. Let me just say this: Yes, you need to try it. Your life will be forever changed.

I settled in for the night with a book that I was trying to finish. I had made a promise to myself that I would finish reading it, cover to cover, if it was the last thing I would ever do. Dostoyevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov". All 800 pages of it. It was a Lenten project suggested on a popular Catholic devotional app that I use. I hadn't managed to complete it by the end of Lent, but I did get it done before my trip was over. *I left the book in the cottage on Lismore.*

Wednesday morning found me in the restaurant enjoying a *full Scottish breakfast* except for not ordering haggis or black pudding. I was scheduled to do a tour of the distillery that afternoon and was looking forward to it. After all, you-know-who just might be there…

The Galloway distillery sits at the top of a hill overlooking a beautiful area. I remember sending a text to one of my cousins to share with her that I had learned to make whisky, vodka, and gin all in the same day and would those be considered useful life skills should I ever need them? She replied to my text with a googly-eyed emoji.

All said and done, a very nice time was had by one and all. Except for Sam. He missed it. He missed meeting *me.*

One more evening and overnight at The Crown Hotel and then my adventure there was done.

* * *

Driving back to Oban I discovered some other interesting facts about driving in Scotland. When you come across a sign that says *Traffic Diverted* you need to understand it's not like in the United States. We see *Detour* signage that includes how soon to expect the detour, which way to go, and whether the road is still passable for *local traffic only*.

No. Not here. You see the traffic diverted sign with no other instructions. Then another, and another, until there you are, stopped with no further instructions except that you cannot go any further. Apparently you are just supposed to know where to turn before you get to that point.

So, I turned around and went back the way I came. That's when I started getting that insistent message from the car's Satnav (satellite navigation, better known to me as GPS, Global Positioning Satellite) "Turn around at the next available site…route recalculating…route recalculating…" which only served to tighten the hold I had on the steering wheel even more.

I have to think that our US Department of Transportation folks are a little more sympathetic toward drivers than their Scottish counterparts.

More prayers went up to heaven to help me find my way.

Thinking of the working title I gave this project, *Wait…What?*, this *route recalculation* thing, this changing directions in mid-journey and not knowing where you're supposed to go, that's the situation we all face when things do not go as planned in our lives.

I didn't plan on becoming a widow just as we were retiring.

I didn't plan on many things that I experienced from childhood to adulthood.

But here I am, still able to enjoy my life. I can still recall my adventures, good or otherwise, and they all have contributed to who and what I am today. I have held on to this verse from the Old

Testament, found in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 29, verse 11. "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" (NIV)

God's plans for our lives are not for bad things to happen, but they do. They happen because of poor decisions, ignoring warnings, bad judgement, either on our part or on the part of someone else. Not everything bad in our lives comes from our own choices. We are all part of the world community, and one person's decision can (and often does) influence one or more people around them.

This is why it is important to think through life choices before just blindly going along with the crowd mentality, the *everybody's doing it* excuse.

We cannot make choices without considering the cost. There's a responsibility that goes along with every single decision or choice we make. And not just the monumental options like which college to attend, who to marry, what career to choose, is it OK to be a stay-at-home mom, and so on.

Consider some of your own choices. Who had influence on what you decided? Or did you decide completely out of a rebellious heart? Have you opted to do things the opposite of what your parents suggested just because they're old and out of touch? It's true, your parents are not always right, none of us is always right. Political parties are not always right. Church leaders are not always right. School teachers and college professors are not always right. You get the idea, I'm sure.

Did you think of asking God for guidance? If you don't have that kind of faith, just acknowledge the fact that there will be consequences to your actions and you are the only one totally responsible for the outcome. Consider others who have experienced the same issues you are facing and ask them how or why they made the choices they made. Do they have any regrets? Some things cannot be undone.

Will we make incorrect choices? Absolutely! But it's easier to accept an incorrect choice if you know that you did everything you could prior to making that decision to do what you thought was right.

Arrogance never results in good choices. Whether you believe in God or not, your mind is never more capable than His. I believe He's there for us and He is very real. I won't try to convince you this is true, because if you don't believe He's there, it's up to you to prove me wrong. If I am wrong, nothing's going to happen. If I am right, you're going to have a lot of explaining to do in the end.

* * *

Did I mention that there are very few places to stop along the way to use the restroom? No further information is needed here, except to say, yes, sadly, I did have to stop along the way in a secluded area before I could drive another inch. *That was the first time in my life that I ever needed to do that, so of course, it's worth noting here in my memoir.*

All that backtracking was beginning to get on my nerves. I started the day with plenty of time to make the trip back to Oban to catch the last ferry of the day to Lismore. With each diversion of

traffic, the clock kept ticking and my grip on the wheel got tighter. And that lack of rest stops… that made it even worse! But I did eventually arrive back in Oban with 45 minutes to spare! When I drove my car onto the ferry, I shut the motor off and put my head back on the headrest. My thoughts were that I was headed *home* to Lismore.

A day of rest and relaxation was in order, and I spent the day making notes, looking at my photos from the trip south, reading a bit, and just looking at the beautiful Highlands through the glass doors. I did some laundry and watched a funny little bird on my patio as he scavenged for snails in the garden. Once captured, he'd smack them down against the concrete pad until the shell broke open, revealing the juicy treat inside.

There's always something to see in God's Creation!



This rainbow, God's promise, showed up just as I received a text from Lisa and I was sharing some things with her, about my trip. Well, admitting some things, would be a better choice of

Soon it was the weekend, the second of my trip, and it was time to gather with the group of archaeologists and other enthusiasts for the day's special event.

The site of the dig was around a cathedral built in the 7th century by St. Moluag. There are only a church building and its two cemeteries left, but it was quite interesting to me. You can find out a lot of information in cemeteries if you're into genealogy.

I walked through the newer cemetery first which is still in use today. There I met a man who happened to be there to place flowers at his wife's grave. It was the 8th anniversary of her passing. Turns out that the woman had the same surname as two of my cousins back in Iowa. Yes, it's a very small world. We spoke for some time, and I learned quite a lot from him about Lismore. I will be doing more research on that side of my family later…



I enjoy history, archaeology, and genealogy. You can often discover some interesting things about family history just by reading headstones in a cemetery than you can find otherwise sometimes. The gentleman I met who was visiting his wife's grave turned out to be related to the MacDougall clan, the same as my cousins.

Why is that remarkable? I'll tell you.

I don't have any Scottish bloodlines, according to my DNA profile. I'm of Scandinavian and Northern and Eastern European descent. As interested in Scotland as I was, I just couldn't claim a clan tartan of my own. That is, until I found that Nova Scotia has its own tartan! My mother's father was born in Nova Scotia. There it was – I could claim some Scottish connection, thin though it was. I had even joined a unit of the Scottish American Society here in Iowa so I could take part in some Scottish traditions prior to making the trip there.

And, of course, I just had to have a kilt to attend the annual Robert "Rabbie" Burns Night Dinner Gala three months before my trip.

Yes, I have a kilt. A complete formal kilt made with the tartan of Nova Scotia. And even I look good in a formal kilt! Well, not like Sir Sean (may he rest in peace) or Alistair or Sam, but it is a striking suit. And, well, I'm a girl, so, you know…

Here's where it gets interesting – to me, at least. The grandfather that my cousins and I share was born in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Their other grandfather's surname was MacDougall. Bingo! A connection to Lismore!

I purchased a few books about Lismore while I was there. As I have been reading them, I came across this little fact: The MacDougall clan of Lismore eventually emigrated to (drumroll) Cape Breton, Nova Scotia! (I'm hearing the theme from "The Twilight Zone" in my head now!) The very same Cape Breton where my grandfather was born.

I explained to my new friends on Lismore that, no, I didn't have Scottish blood, but I did give birth to a Scot. The variety of facial expressions to that statement was comical. The women understood right away.

If I have to explain, my husband contributed the Scottish bloodline to the family. Craig had English, Welsh, Irish, and Scottish markers in his DNA and therefore our son does as well. I gave birth to a Scot without being one myself.

You may call it grasping at straws for me to claim the heritage, but it works for me.

I look back at that moment, and it makes me realize how strongly I needed to feel a connection to a *clan*, if you will. I'm obviously enamored with Scotland's beauty, her people, and the culture, but my grief was manifesting itself in the need to belong. I needed to feel like I was part of something that was my new *happy place*. I had no worries, no burdens, no care while I was there. There was nothing around me to remind me of what was happening in my real life back home.

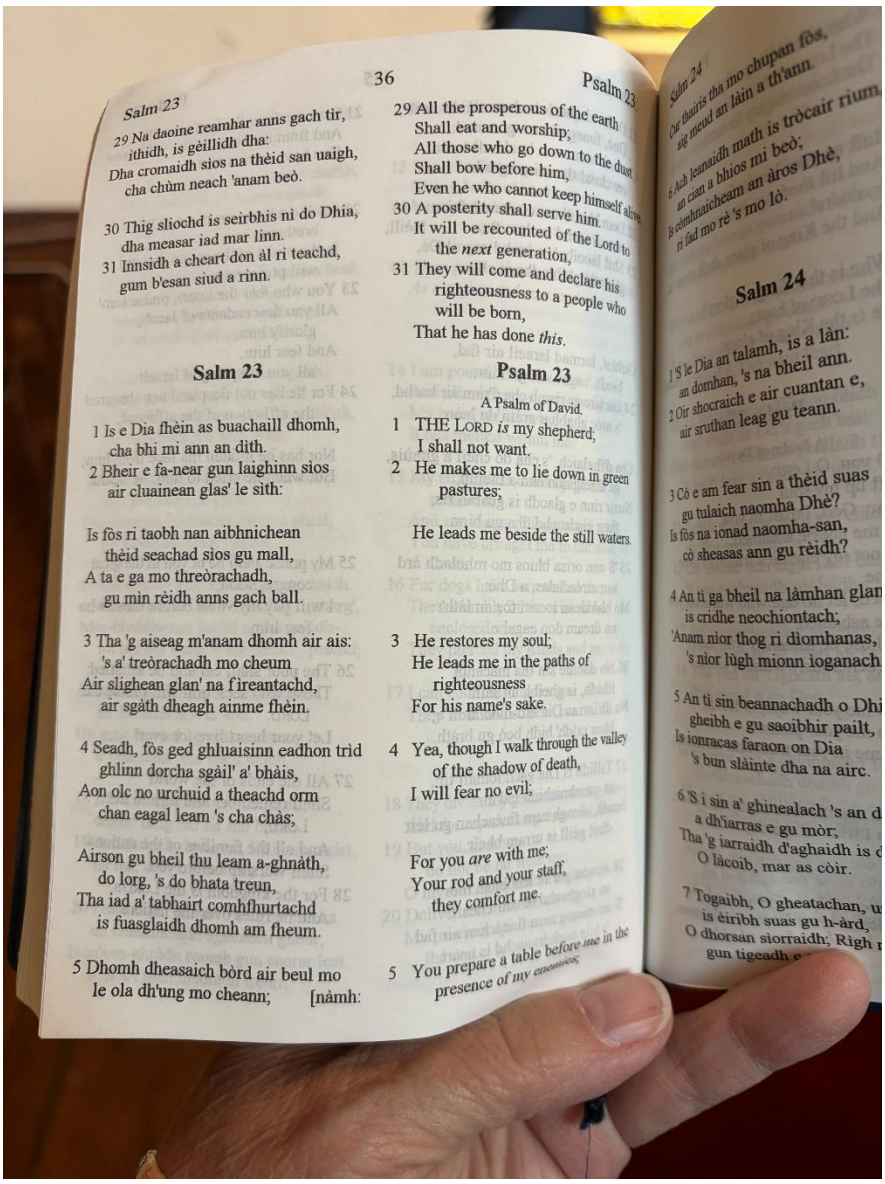
God was with me back home. I knew that, but there in that cottage, driving along a beautiful loch, watching new lambs chasing after their mums in the fields, feeling the ferry being rocked by the sea, took all of the pain away and I knew God was there, too.

The day spent at the dig site, hearing the history of the island, and seeing the artifacts, I could only be amazed and in awe at how these early people not only survived here, but thrived. I cannot even imagine their way of life. But they made it. God had a plan for them, too. I was so pleased that I had found even the slightest connection to the Scots in my family line just to be able to make some claim on this resiliency they seem to have as a natural attribute. I didn't need to, because like you, I am God's child. Attributes that come from that line are much more to be desired, of course, but after all, I am still thinking with my human mind.

A leisurely Sunday morning was next on the docket. I planned to attend the local Church of Scotland, *Eaglais na h-Alba*, service on the island which would be in the historical church

building there.





Scripture readings are done in Gaelic during Sunday worship services in the cathedral. The island schools incorporate Gaelic on a regular basis in an attempt to keep their language alive after almost losing it altogether, having been banned by the British after the Batlle of Culloden in 1746. Interestingly, Christmas was also banned by the British government in Scotland from 1640 to 1958 in an attempt to suppress the Highlander way of life.

Worship didn't start until 12:30pm as there wasn't a resident minister and they had to wait for one to come over on the ferry from the mainland.

The minister, Rev. Dugald Cameron, presided over a large gathering in the ancient building. Being a parish musician myself, I tend to pay extra attention to the music and how the congregation sings.

Aye, they were grand!

The music and sermon were in English, but the Scripture passages were read in Gaelic, that being the first language of those native to the Outer Islands. Minister Cameron's sermon was well done, and he spoke about many of the same things that we hear about here in the States. The same lack of attendance, although

this service seemed well-populated to my eye, the lessening of people who claim to have any faith at all, and so on.

Later that afternoon I reflected on the ties I had made with not only the people on Lismore and my faux Scottish DNA, but with how the problems of the people around the world are the same. God's still there, but we've moved so far away from Him. People are hurting and lonely everywhere. Even though I was experiencing grief, I had come to realize how beyond blessed I really was and am. I had four days left to spend on Lismore before I would be heading back to the real world. I had to admit I was starting to feel some measure of homesickness but still wasn't ready to leave. I would be going back to Iowa a different person.



Minister Cameron and I after the service. Yes, that's "my" Nova Scotia tartan I'm wearing.

Chapter Eleven

Coming Home Different

On April 30, 2026, I was a mass of caffeinated excitement, ready to take on an adventure of a lifetime. The experienced traveler, toughened by a few of life's hard knocks, ready to get on a series of planes that would take me the more than four thousand miles from home into a world I had only been able to fantasize about in my mind for a quarter of a century.

The flights went well. No glitches, no real delays. But I was starting to get tired. *It's just the time zones*; I told myself more than once. Des Moines to Detroit. Detroit to Amsterdam. Amsterdam to Glasgow. Then a three-hour drive from Glasgow to Oban. Then a one-hour ferry ride to Lismore…It had been 25 years since I had been on a trip this far from home.

This is going to be so fantastic!

And then, finally, I arrived at the cottage. It was rainy. Gloomy. I had no clue what time of day it really was. I had no appetite. I didn't know if I should try to stay awake or go to sleep.

What had I done?

I made a cup of coffee. That's always my first step in my personal problem solving process. OK. This is what I know. It's quiet. I wanted quiet. Check. It's Scotland. I wanted to be in Scotland. Check. There's a good supply of coffee. Check.

I need to sleep. Check.

This chapter is going to have a lot of "I did this" and "I did that" in it but stay with me – that's not ego talking.

After some much-needed rest, I got up feeling better about my situation. The rain had stopped and I could start to see some of the beautiful mountains and glens I had been dreaming about for more than two decades. Another cuppa. (United Kingdom speak for cup of coffee) I'm starting to perk up. No pun intended, especially since it was only instant coffee anyway.

I unpacked my luggage and put my clothes away in the dresser drawers or on hangers in the closet. The Brothers Karamazov went to the coffee table along with my yarn and crochet hook. The weatherproof folding map and the big spiral-bound book version map of Scotland landed on the kitchen table. All set to start my adventures in the morning.

Curiosity made me turn the television on only to find American programming. Ugh. Why? I surfed the channels until I found local programming, even finding one or two that were being broadcast totally in Gaelic. I watched the news for a while, but no one – if you can believe it – not one news person had announced the fact that I had arrived in Scotland that very day.

The world, oddly enough, doesn't give a fig about an individual's comings and goings, that is, unless you're someone famous. You, me, the family next door? Not so much. But you *do* know Who cares, don't you? God knew how badly I wanted to make this trip. And He knew that I would get it done because I like to be in charge. I'm an only child. If something is going to get done, by golly, it's got to be done by me and that's just the way it is. So, He let me put this trip together. In spite of my fumbling around. In spite of my fondness of kilts and a few folks who wear them.

He lets us be silly. He lets us have fun. He lets us make mistakes. Because He knows and loves us and He knows He can fix us.

What *I* experienced on this trip was how much *I* needed to let it be *He* then *me*.
This wasn't a new concept in my life. But how deeply I believed it, how deeply I obeyed it, *that* was what I needed to learn. That independence of an only child, the kid who had left home at 16 because the family split up, the kid who went to college three thousand miles away from home not knowing anybody there, the kid who moved to another state after college to start a new life, that kid needed to back off the independence and replace it by admitting she needed help. *That just made me cry, by the way. I've never said that before…*

I came home different. I didn't come home perfected. But I did come home different.

By May 16, 2026, *I was different*.

I had finally come to the realization – although I had thought this many times before – that I didn't want all the stress in my life that I had been carrying. The excess weight on my shoulders. You know the feeling, I know you do. How often are we hit with ads for stress relief through television or social media?

I've struggled with physical weight issues all of my adult life as well. And you know what? I finally figured out that my physical weight issues didn't *become* issues until the stress piled on. And where did all that stress come from?

Well, for me, the problem solver of the world…it came from within my own self. Within my own soul, if you will. I could not give up the feeling that I *needed to be responsible* for fixing everything that was wrong in the world and for making sure that everything went to plan and that

everyone around me was taken care of and…and…and…And so, the more responsibilities I took on, the less effective I could be. God had to override my plans, my drive, and my ambitions, and stick me on a tiny little island on a gloomy day all by myself in order to get my attention.

"Can you hear Me now?" goes a popular ad catch phrase.

Yes, indeed, I can.

All of my good intentions finally set aside, my soul has had a route recalculation. I don't have to know where to go next, I only need to trust that God will show me the next turn. I can go to sleep at night with a prayer of thanksgiving as I lay my head down on the pillow. I can wake up the next morning, if that's His plan, and begin a new day with praise for His goodness.

He already knows what's in store for my day – and yours.

It's certainly okay to make plans in general. For example, it's best to use a shopping list to get groceries. It's okay to think about a family vacation next summer in order to budget for it. Those are common sense things. But while doing these things, it is also a good practice to make sure that at the close of each day, that day's business is as complete as possible. That is, especially if you still have family members living with you, be sure to tell them you love them at the end of each day. Start the day the same. Pray together. If not everyone is in that state of spirituality, then pray for them. But more than anything, don't ever forget to tell God how much you love Him and need His guidance.

Will these things guarantee you a perfectly happy day? Experience says probably not. But it will guarantee that you will be able to greet each trial with a strength you *didn't* know you had and without the stress you thought you *would* have.

Chapter Twelve

A real "wait…what?" as I write

As it happens, I needed to make another trip out of state just two weeks after my return from Scotland. Sadly, one of my two remaining uncles, Uncle "Unc" Lud, passed away unexpectedly.

Well, that is, not expected by us, but he knew six months before his demise and refused to let anyone – including his wife of 60+ years – know that his doctor had given him the terrible news that he was stricken with terminal lung cancer. We, the family, were not told of his diagnosis until a short eight days before he passed.

This was big. How could he have shared with us, seemingly out of the blue, that the doctor had just given him two weeks to live? And then, in eight days, it was all over! How on earth did that happen?

Here is what we found out less than 24 hours after his death. This is where we found out what kind of man he really was, as if we didn't already have a pretty good idea.

As my mother's only sibling and being four years younger and a male, it's entirely understandable that she and her little brother, Ludwig, didn't always see eye to eye. In fact, it was rare that any of their childhood memories ever matched. Mom, being a devout Christian woman, had continual concerns about her brother's spiritual well-being. We heard the answer to that dilemma during his Celebration of Life eulogy given by a lifelong family friend.

Russ shared with us this story and more.

Lud's wife, my Aunt Suzanne, received a diagnosis of Stage Four Pancreatic cancer the previous year. The prognosis wasn't good and Unc dug in and started researching the best options to keep her with us for as long as possible. He felt, rightly so, that his family was given to him to take care of, to make sure they were all provided for, educated, stable, hard-working, well-loved people. And, by golly, they were going to have a blast doing it!

The chemotherapy started with the usual side effects of feeling horrible, hair loss, and general malaise. That was not good enough for Unc. Research brought him to discover the drug regimen based on Ivermectin. (Please note here: I am not making a medicinal recommendation but only relating the story.)

Time went by, Aunt Suzanne was holding her own, and Unc was on the road to another state that allowed the sale and use of the substance. Long story shortened, they dropped the chemo, put her on the new regimen, and lo and behold, the tumor has stopped growing and she started feeling much better! While all this was going on, Unc was getting sicker, but then we all knew he'd been having health issues for quite some time. Not cancer, per se, but COPD, gut issues, etc., all things that come along with the progression of age.

Then came the day that he told us he had been given two weeks to live, a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer being the life destroyer.

After he passed, the family happened across an email from his doctor on his computer. (They were taking care of all those things you do when someone has passed.) Six months before he told us it was coming to an end, he already knew it. He refused to tell anyone because he didn't want the family to focus on him. He was prioritizing his wife's health over his. He'd lived his life, was content with what he'd accomplished, and was ready to go.

Ready to go, that's what describes a person who has a solid faith in God. This was what we needed to hear. He had strong faith, and he shared it in his own way. He prayed with a buddy on a regular basis, whether that was at the end of a day of golf, on a boat ride, or snowmobiling, anywhere, any time that he felt it needed to be part of the conversation. We all knew Unc was *in charge*, but ultimately, Unc understood Who was really in charge.



Unc at the 19th hole.

The final anecdote about my uncle. There was a huge tree at the corner of their house. The top of this Evergreen had been destroyed by a lightning strike a year or so before and it sat very close to the house. In fact, it was just six inches away from the eves. This tree situation had been bothering Unc for quite some time. He continually feared that it would come down and remove the kitchen from the

house if it fell the wrong way.

Arrangements had been made for Unc to be at home when he passed, so a multitude of friends and family were at his side one afternoon. He asked his buddy if he would pray with him one last time, to which he replied, “Of course!” What did he want to pray about? One might assume he’d pray for the family, a peaceful passing, his wife’s health, etc., but no. He wanted to ask God to take that tree down.

It didn’t take long before the evening hours came on bringing along a storm. The usual thunder, lightning, rain, and wind were wreaking havoc outside when they heard a loud crash. Running to the windows to see what happened, the chuckling and smiles began to spread through the group. “Hey Lud, guess what? The tree went down!”

The tree. Some 50 feet tall and almost 24” in diameter, fell. Away from the house. Away from the neighbor’s house. Away from every single vehicle that was parked in the yard. It could only have fallen in one place that was safe. And it did just that.

Unc didn’t speak, he just smiled, moving his lips in a “thank you” up to heaven. He died in peace a few hours later.

I’ve always known that God is there for us. Good times, bad times, sad times, all the time. I didn’t need any proof, but hearing this story told at the funeral gave me goosebumps!

Chapter Thirteen

Sunday Dinner

It was Aunt Erna's (a great-aunt, sister to my maternal grandmother) turn to host the family Easter dinner at her house. The family had been dutifully trained to show respect to Aunt Erna for the usual reasons of respecting your elders, "don't make her nervous (to the children of the family) because she's never had kids of her own", and the underlying reason that was whispered in our ears: "be nice to Aunt Erna, she has money!"

That last reason was, at least, an honest remark from my grandmother who held to the idea that someone was going to inherit from her younger sister, so why not her own grandchildren? I don't hold that kind of sentiment, but it was my grandmother's. I believe we should love and respect each other without having an expectation of what we might gain by cultivating a relationship.

Back to the dinner table.

It was a beautiful Wisconsin Sunday, bright sunshine, just a little bit of chill in the air, and spring was in full bloom. The entire family (at that time, much smaller than it is today) gathered in the small town of Dane where my aunt worked as Postmaster and had for several years. As the final preparations for the noon meal were being accomplished, we gathered in her sunroom where the tables had been pushed together end-to-end to make room for everyone. There was no need at this time for a "children's table" as I was the only child present besides a baby, so there I was, seated alongside the adults and minding my manners.

We said a blessing over the meal, or maybe we didn't…can't really remember, honestly. The tables were well-laden with the typical veggies, Jello salads, red cabbage, dumplings, rolls, and so forth. Then the big moment! The main course was placed on the table. A giant platter of … well, not a turkey, but some kind of bird. Someone asked politely, "What's that Aunt Erna?" She smiled and said, "Goose! I wanted something different than the usual turkey or ham." "Where did you get it?" another asked. "From a local farmer," she said. "He raises them and does the butchering." General comments of "that's nice" came from varying points around the room.

Bowls of vegetables, sides, and the gravy boat were being passed around while the man closest to the goose was carving slices off for everyone as they made their choice of white or dark, small or large portions, or "just a taste, please."

Then it happened. A second platter of meat was being carried into the room and placed on the table at the other end from the goose. Small talk, chattering, the sounds of cutlery on dishware, and then the new plate of meat was starting to make its rounds in the parade of food whirling past my face. I took some. Everyone took some.

No one asked what this meat was.

I heard that little whisper in my brain to be nice to Aunt Erna…but I was really wondering what kind of meat we were adding to the already overloaded table in front of us. *Will someone please ask what this is?* I kept thinking. I took a bite. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't anything I recognized. I was growing up eating Czech food and it wasn't unusual that it was different from the traditional American food that my friends at school talked about eating at their homes.

While all the chattering is still going on, someone raised the nerve to finally ask: “Aunt Erna, what kind of meat is this?” There was an immediate hush in the room. Some had forks in hand, nearing their mouths. Some were sitting staring at Auntie. Another was taking a sip of coffee.

“Raccoon,” she replied, with a big smile.

I’m thinking OK, well, this is Wisconsin and my dad and uncles all hunt, and I’ve heard that unless you’ve lived through the Depression, you don’t know how hungry you can get… I could rationalize the fact that there was raccoon on our plates.

Apparently, some of the others were thinking along those same lines and began to say things like, “If you know how to cook it, it can be pretty good,” and “You must make sure you get all the fat trimmed off. Raccoons have a lot of fat.” Everything was getting back to normal conversations.

Until.

Yes, until.

A lull in the conversation allowed for that question, that thing we were all wondering.

“Where did you get the raccoon?” “Did that same farmer raise raccoons, too?”

Aunt Erna proudly replied, “Oh. It’s nice and fresh! I saw it get hit in the road in front of my house this morning!”

The room fell silent for what seemed like hours.



Eating and chatting eventually resumed.

There was no further discussion about the raccoon.

From the left: Mom, Aunt Erna, Gma Gladys

Chapter Fourteen

The Sanity Support Team

I'd like to talk to you last, but not least, about my Sanity Support Team, a.k.a., my *SSTs.* They appear individually in a few spots throughout this book and either individually or altogether in real life for coffee, a meal, or some other shenanigans as I might request. I need to provide some more information about these people because, besides God and various priests, they have been there for me through all my ups, my downs, my craziness, and whatever else I threw at them.

First there's Connie. I've known her the longest. Her husband Bill and I trained together to become Emergency Medical Technicians in the early 1980's. We were CPR partners. I worked the 3-11pm shift back then, so Connie and I hit the local coffee shop every morning. I mean every. Single. Morning. We shared an interest in gardening, food co-ops, and Rodale organic living books. We can tell stories about each other from our younger days but only smile at each other when those memories emerge nowadays. We don't go into the details. No need. We just keep them as things that belong to the past. Bill was also a professional photographer and took our wedding photos. Connie was always on hand to help him and in fact, was there to make sure my bridal gown and veil were laying beautifully posed for the photos.

Connie and Bill owned and operated the local newspaper. They were the third generation of a family dynasty. I worked as a photojournalist for two other newspapers. It seems that someone is always upset with you about something in that business. Bless her heart, Connie and Bill kept it going as the population kept dropping in our small town and cyber space began taking over.

Sadly, Bill passed away March 2, 2024, just four months before I lost Craig. The paper was sold shortly after Bill's passing.

Next there's Kathy. I met Kathy, also through the fire department, but probably a year or so after I met Connie. I wrote that she sang at our wedding and that was the start of us doing music gigs around the area for various occasions. But then I started getting ideas…

"Kath? I'd like to…" is how I would start many conversations with her through the years. These conversations would include her joining the community choir that I started, then later what did she think of the music I had chosen for the next performance and so on. Then it was, "What about starting an after-school program for the kids?" Of course, there were also the times when I "advised" her and her husband Rick as to how to raise their children. (I didn't have Tim yet, but I knew all the answers.) Believe me, I have asked her forgiveness more than once for being so opinionated. But through it all, she has stood there and said, "What can I do to help?"

The third member of the group is Lisa. Lisa is a newcomer. We've been acquainted around ten years but have only gotten really close in the last two. Lisa and I are both Wisconsin gals. I grew up in Racine, and she was born and raised in Sturgeon Bay. We both moved to Iowa for jobs and then fell in love with the men who would become our husbands. Mark, like Craig, was Iowa born and bred.

Lisa and I share not only Wisconsin roots, but also our Catholic faith. We met through our parish several years ago. She and Mark are almost ten years younger than I am and so their lifestyle was different than ours at the time. But after I lost Craig, things started to click for Lisa and me.

We decided to make a pilgrimage trip to Wisconsin. A pilgrimage is a journey of faith and geography. You travel to holy places and spend time in prayer and meditation. It's a renewal of your spiritual life.

We made the decision to visit three shrines: Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse, the National Shrine of Our Lady of Champion in Champion, and Holy Hill Basilica and National Shrine of Mary Help of Christians in Hubertus. Lisa reserved the hotels. I made a trip itinerary that included Mass times, travel times, and especially, times for confession. Lisa laughed out loud when she saw the confession times listed. "Do you think we'll need that many opportunities for confession?" she asked. I answered, "We have never travelled together, ever. We will be in the same vehicle for the entire week. We will be sharing hotel rooms all week. We will be visiting the same places and eating at the same restaurants all week.

What do you think?"



Lisa, King Gambrinus, & me.

The trip went very well indeed and there was never a time when the confessional was needed for other than personal reasons. We got along like we'd been friends for our entire lives.

The first night of our religious pilgrimage to Wisconsin found Lisa and I posed in front of a statue of the king of beer and brewing in La Crosse, Wisconsin. I quizzed her as to whether he was real or a legend, since she spent her college years in La Crosse. I mistakenly kept referring to King Gambrinus as the patron saint of beer and lively conversation ensued. Upon performing some online research, I found that there are no less than five patron saints of beer, according to catholicgentleman.com, St. Gambrinus (not King) mentioned as one of them. However, the article does state that he isn't really a saint, but just "a man who could down epic amounts of beer." The others listed include St. Arnulf of Metz, St. Augustine, St. Luke the Evangelist, and St. Wenceslaus.

Quite the start to our pilgrimage I'd say!

And, just to ease your inquiring minds, no, neither one of us had a drop that night, nor any other night of the trip. Well, not beer, but maybe a little wine at some point with my pizza. I really don't like beer. Beer battered fish or onion rings, yes, but not just beer.

Just sayin'.

All in all, these three ladies are prime examples of what it really means to be a friend. A true friend. You don't have to spend every moment of life with one another. You can be apart for many years and still be able to pick up right where you left off. There's no jealousy because you're spending more time with one than one of the others.

There are many others in my life who have been and still are my friends, of course. I couldn't begin to name each one nor write stories to go along with them. But they're there. I can only hope that I have been the kind of friend to Connie, Kathy, and Lisa as they have been for me.

EPILOGUE

Those two weeks in Scotland would prove to be everything I was wanting to accomplish and more. The *more* is what God wanted to accomplish.

The purpose of this book isn't to be a travel log. It's a record of the things that can happen in life that are expected and unexpected. I met people I never dreamed I would meet. I lived in Scotland – the country I had been longing to see for so long – for two weeks that I thought might never happen. I was given opportunities to do the things that I wanted to do for the first time or to get back to doing them again now that I had the time.

The experience is life. Each of us is given a life. It may be long or short. We don't know. But every moment of it is precious. Not every moment is good. Not every moment is exciting. Some moments hurt. Some moments are funny. Sometimes we find ourselves grieving over things that cannot be changed. But every moment contributes to what and who we are.

The *wait…what* moments come. The moments of *how did that happen? Why did that happen? Please, don't let that happen!*

Life is about how we accept these moments.

God gives us the ability to make our own life choices. Sometimes things happen to us that we have no control over. Sometimes things happen to us because someone else made a choice that affected us with no input of our own. Sometimes we make choices that seem fine only to influence someone else. We don't know.

That's why the choices we make are so important. We don't know how far reaching our choices can be.

It's not the simple choice of what to have for breakfast or what time to go to bed, although those things do have a place of importance in our lives. For example, if I don't eat breakfast one day and I go to work hungry, I might get cranky as the day wears on. I might snap at a co-worker and cause them some level of discomfort. They might go on to have a bad day, then drive home after work, being upset about what I said to them. They dwell on it and drive accordingly. Road rage they call it. Maybe an accident happens. Maybe someone is hurt. And so on. All because I didn't eat my breakfast.

That example might sound extreme. Hopefully it is. But I wanted to make the point that every single decision we make in life has a ripple effect on those around us. We don't always know or understand why things happen in our lives that make us sad or disappoint us. But there's a reason.

We are all connected. We are all God's kids. We all make mistakes.

Life is personal. Life depends on a personal relationship with our Lord. Life depends on love. Love is personal and only possible when it comes through and from God.

My prayers go along with you, the reader. Prayers that you find that personal relationship with God if you haven't already. If you have, then my prayer for you is to keep increasing that love by sharing it with people around you.

I've been a church musician for decades now and one of my favorite sayings is "All God's children got baggage" which is a takeoff on the old spiritual hymn "All God's Children Got Shoes". We all have challenges in life. Never think that someone else has it better than you. You don't know what their life is like at home.



I hope that you have your own band of angels – like my SSTs – that you can go to any time and that *you* are that kind of person as well. But, if you're feeling totally alone, please know that God *is* that perfect Friend. He is ALWAYS there for you, even if you can't be there all the time for Him. His love is constant, always available, always true.

If this is all new to you, if you're feeling alone in the world, drop me a line and I will do my best to put you in touch with people who can help. I won't try to convert you into any religion, but I will encourage you to seek God's love and kindness. He will do the rest. As Father Mike Schmitz says at the close of his videos, "Please pray for me. I am praying for you!"

I still don’t know what lies ahead on this road of my

life, but I know Who it is that leads me there.



PHOTO: This is the highway, leading from the cottage I was staying in on Lismore, down to the ferry at Achnacroish. The *highway* was one lane and the only one on the one mile wide by ten mile long island. FYI, sheep and the Royal Mail van have the right-of-way. Photo taken by the author 15 May 2026.