

A Face of Courage

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The Tommy Watson Story
How Did He Survive?

by Tommy Watson

Cover design by Kamel Matoruga

A Face of Courage—The Tommy Watson Story is a story about courage and perseverance—something we will all need as we go through our daily existence in life. And if you have not yet encountered moments when you have needed these two things, you just keep on living and that day will come. This is a story that deals with many important societal issues—education, self-esteem, male/female relationships, parent/child relationships, race relations, generational gaps, depression, suicide, spirituality, economics, politics, and athletics just to name a few. It is my hope that my story will inspire all readers to discover the best in themselves—and to inspire them to encourage others to do the same. Thanks, and enjoy.

The events and experiences detailed in this book are all true and have been faithfully rendered according to my recollection. I have changed many of the names in order to protect the integrity and anonymity of individuals involved in these episodes of my life, who have a right to tell their own stories if they choose to do so.

Chapter I

Standing Here Alone—Part One

I struggled to wake. The cool morning breeze softly soothed my face. Curtains blowing over the partially opened window flashed episodes of sunlight here and there throughout the room, and the smell of fresh bacon sent me a delightful wake-up call with every waving motion of the breeze.

I finally wrestled my eyes open to find I was in terribly unfamiliar territory. I stared at the white walls and high vaulted ceilings; the spring-fresh smell of the blanket clenched in my hands only added more confusion. And there was my little brother Martin lying beside me, still fast asleep. The more I looked around, the more frightened I became.

“Mommy! Daddy!” Surely they would come and rescue me, surely they would.

Seconds later, the hard, wood door of the room burst open. In the doorway stood Grandma Louise in a long, brown robe, her head full of pink rollers. Grandma Louise was my dad’s mother.

“It’s okay, baby, Grandma’s here. Everything going to be all right.” She came over to comfort me and wrapped me in her arms. “Don’t worry. Grandma’s here now, honey.”

By this time, Martin, too, had awakened in a panic and needed to be comforted as he wiped the sleep and tears from his eyes. Grandma gathered him in toward us.

“Where’s Mommy and Daddy?” I asked.

“They gone away for a little while. You and Martin gonna be staying with me till they get back,” she said. “Grandma done cooked y’all some bacon, eggs, grits, and pancakes. Come on and get some of this good eating.”

And that was the end of all conversation about Mom and Dad.

Grandma Louise had migrated to Denver, Colorado, in the early sixties from Little Rock, Arkansas, with her children—my dad and his two younger brothers and younger sister. Grandma was from the South. She had worked as a maid for Little Rock families, and then for an affluent Jewish family in South Denver—and that meant she really knew how to “throw down” in the kitchen, much to my little stomach’s delight.

The other thing Grandma Louise brought with her from the South was her deep religion. The walls of her apartment were plastered with everything from religious phrases and the Ten Commandments to a picture of a white Jesus and his white disciples. I always found that picture a bit strange; it didn’t fit the physical description of Jesus and his disciples in the Bible that was read to us in our Sunday school class.

Martin and I didn’t know it at the time, but this was not our first time living with Grandma Louise. The first time had been when Martin and I were even younger. We had been joined in our stay by my two older sisters and older brother, who each had different fathers than Martin and I. After a short stay in a foster home and crisis center, we had all been placed in the custody of Grandma Louise. In the midst of all of the transition in our early lives, somehow my older brother was separated from the four of us and was adopted by another family; because Martin and I were so young, memories of him were left only with my sisters, Melony and Sherl, who were now in foster care somewhere else in the city.

The other thing Martin and I didn't know at the time of our second stay with Grandma Louise was that this was our parents' second time in prison, or "the joint" as some called it. They were there because of their illegal profession as shoplifters, and their chronic use of heroin.

Revealing this type of information was taboo for Grandma Louise, who had grown up in a generation that lived by the unspoken rule: "Whatever problems occur in the house stay only with those who know about them in the house." Besides, this was information that most adults would not have been willing to share with Martin and I, who were only four and five.

I was the older of the two of us. Martin was my shadow, wanting to do everything his big brother did. Because we were so close in age and looked just alike, we were often mistaken for twins, something we would both get tired of hearing as we grew older.

Grandma Louise lived in a corner apartment at 17th and Franklin, which was just on the outskirts of a neighborhood called Five Points, a place that once was called home by America's first self-made female millionaire, Madam C. J. Walker, in 1905. Five Points was Colorado's oldest black neighborhood, and had evolved from its beginnings in the 1800s.

Today, it is home to many of the low- and moderate-income people who live in the inner city of Denver. The neighborhood received its historic name from the five streets that come together in the very center of the community, which also housed many black businesses.

The place where all five streets came together, at 27th and Welton, used to be the hot spot in town for blacks in the 1960s and '70s, a time when there was no longer a need for the banner song, "We Shall Overcome," or for silent marches, or for rigorous hours of prayer. This was the era of the "we have overcome" generation of blacks who had spent most of their school years during the civil rights movement; the new fight was to become the first to win the race of immediate self-gratification. To that end, nightclubs, food joints, and gambling shacks were available throughout the strip that many of the frequenters referred to as simply "The Points."

Many of the black stars and entertainers from that era would come here to perform and hang out at the Rossona Nightclub, a place where all the pimps and hustlers hung out. This was also the place that captured my dad's attention from the very moment he arrived in the big city from the little country town of Little Rock. The old country boy in him would never be again. Gambling, drinking, using drugs, and chasing women became the forté of this highly achieved high school graduate.

My mother had migrated with her siblings and their mother, my Grandma Mae, to Five Points, too, from Lubbock, Texas. The Points would later become a hangout spot for her as well, which eventually led her to cross paths with Dad.

As the '70s came to an end, Five Points became home to increasing numbers of poor blacks and Hispanics, with a few sprinklings of poor whites here and there. Many of the blacks who had money headed across Colorado Boulevard or "The Boulevard" to Park Hill, where there were beautiful parks and single-family homes. "The Boulevard" became the street that clearly separated the two neighborhoods of Five Points and Park Hill—one side, a home to thriving black families, businesses, and schools; the other, a home to poverty, drugs, and uncontrollable violence.

At Grandma Louise's house, I could often be found in front of the huge window in the dining room, which stretched from floor to ceiling, staring at the flow of traffic and people coming from Colfax Avenue, which was only about a block away. Colfax Avenue was another place that street hustlers, drug addicts, and prostitutes called home. It was a safe place for whites who did not dare to venture into the strip of Five Points.

Colfax was also the dividing line between Five Points and Capitol Hill, which was home to affluent whites. I hated even walking near the neighborhood of those stuffy white folks dressed in their conservative navy blue business suits—those stuffy white folks who always looked at us with hesitation in the stores, who turned up their noses as they hurried out and drove off in a BMW or a Mercedes-Benz.

I sat in front of the window for hours every day, waiting for the moment when the fire trucks would come screaming past the window, bypassing the red yield signal at the corner. It amused me that the fire trucks didn't have to abide by any traffic rules as they came coasting out of the fire station a couple blocks from our apartment. *Maybe I'll be a fireman someday!*

Not long after Martin and I arrived at Grandma Louise's house, we were joined by my dad's baby sister, Aunt Milly, and her daughter Donna, who was the same age as Martin. They came to live with us following Aunt Milly's divorce and the sudden death of her nine-month-old son. It was always difficult for me to suppress the feelings and many questions I had following his death, but somehow I knew any conversation after the funeral would only add to the hurt and pain that Aunt Milly was already experiencing. She always said the one thing that always kept her going was her strong faith. But I had a million questions. *Why did God let babies die? Would I ever see my little cousin again?*

Cleanliness went hand in hand with Grandma Louise. The fresh smell of Pine-Sol swept through the house on a regular basis. The floors were always mopped and swept. The walls stayed nice and white. And it all happened with plenty of help from Donna, Martin, and me. There never seemed to be any dirty dishes or dirty clothes lying around. Despite all Grandma Louise's hard work around the house, however, the three of us did manage to keep the dining room flooded with baby dolls and football helmets.

Going to church was mandatory in Grandma Louise's house. We were in church with Aunt Milly every Wednesday night, Friday night, Saturday afternoon (for kid's choir rehearsal), and on Sundays for what seemed to be most of the day. I loved being in the kid's choir.

The church we attended was called The House of Joy, and that it was—a hand-clapping, foot-stomping, gum-popping, head-swaying, body-shaking, tongue-shouting, leg-jerking, body-stumbling church in the neighborhood of Park Hill, which was about the only thing that brought us to that side of town. It seemed as if everyone who attended the church had a nice big expensive car, and wore nice suits and big colorful hats to match their glamorous dresses; at least, that was my observation from the church van that brought us to church because we didn't have a car.

Blacks streamed in from all across the neighborhood, parking their cars blocks away to attend a Sunday service that always sounded like a big party. The kids usually had their own service in the church basement, right beneath the floor-shaking adult service. After church, we kids always got a kick out of seeing the end results of a wild-

spirited adult service: the sanctuary looked and smelled like a hot, sweaty sauna, and the adults left with wrinkled garments, saggy Afros, and fluffed out Jeri curls.

On the days when children's church was closed, all the kids attended service with the adults. Attending these services, I grew accustomed to two things. First, Martin, Donna, and I always got smashed back against the hard, brown pews when Aunt Milly started shouting and praising the Lord; the slightest song from the choir or message from the preacher would send Aunt Milly into what looked like convulsions. First her head would start swaying back and forth, and then she would begin to speak in tongues. Suddenly, she would be hollering and jumping all over the place, and we always ended up smashed into the wooden pews beneath her. I was always embarrassed to have the whole church watching as the ushers pulled her up off us.

The other thing I could always count on was receiving those painful "wake yo' butt *up*" pinches. No matter how long the service lasted, we were expected to at least give the appearance of being attentive. Any adult who caught us playing or dozing off would give us "the pinch"—a twist and pull that often broke the skin—followed by the words, "Wake yo' butt up," or "Stop messing around." It amazed me how many of those same adults who found fault with Donna, Martin, and me couldn't seem to control their own unruly children.

If there was anything that caught and kept my attention during church, it was thinking about Grandma Louise's Sunday dinners. She never attended church with us, but, rather, had a nice dinner prepared each Sunday when we came through the door after church. She felt that many of today's Christians were a bunch of hypocrites. Nevertheless, when we got home we were greeted with the smell of hot buttermilk biscuits, cornbread, ham hocks, neck bones, candied yams, and warm gravy that I slopped across the tender fried pork chops. A sweet potato pie with homemade crust would finish things off. If someone prepared a good meal, Grandma Louise used to say, "They put their foot in it." Well, in Grandma Louise's case, she put her foot, elbow, hand, knee, fingers, ankle, and leg into everything she cooked.

In addition to loving food, I always had an ear for good music and enjoyed dancing, despite never really being a good dancer. Every Saturday morning, while cleaning, we listened to the gospel hour on radio station 1510 KDKO. Whenever a song came on that I liked, I'd start my routine—a slow winding of my hips in a circular motion. And, as the music continued, so did I. Faster and faster I went, winding my hips until finally everyone in the room erupted in laughter. I mean almost everyone but Grandma Louise and her sister Aunt Mary, who could do nothing but shake their heads in disgust. "There that boy go again, Louise, doing that ole nasty dance," Aunt Mary would say, showing stern disapproval.

Despite my obsession with "nasty dancing," I managed to stay dedicated to the children's choir. This involvement in the choir later led to an opportunity to make a recording of our favorite church song, "Peanut Butter and Jelly." Thumbing through a case of 45-rpm records and seeing my own song always gave me great joy. After months of preparation, the day of the recording session finally came. The journey to the recording studio called for a long ride through many unfamiliar suburban neighborhoods, but I didn't mind; I was running on pure adrenaline. The fifteen-passenger church van took us

through foreign-looking neighborhoods with big yards and fancy cars. Farther and farther from Five Points we traveled, until, finally, we arrived at the studio.

Martin, Donna, and I scrambled out of the van in a mad dash behind the older kids, who had bolted out and into the studio. It was time to go to work.

“Okay, everyone, take your places,” the choir director said as she settled us in the studio, leaving to watch and listen from the monitor in the other room. Martin, Donna, and I were bumped to the back of the tightly occupied room by some of the older kids, who just so happened to be the choir director’s kids, nieces, and nephews. Offering little resistance, we took our places in the back beneath the microphone that hung from the ceiling.

After being given our three-second lead-in count by the director over the overhead speaker, we launched into our song. “I don’t want no peanut butter and jelly ...,” we sang with great pride and joy. “I don’t want no peanut butter and jelly ...”

And, in an instant, we were abruptly interrupted by the director, who came back into the room. “That is not the way we practiced this song. Now let’s get this thing right, because we don’t have a lot of time,” she said, exiting the room.

“All right. Once again from the top,” she instructed from the overhead speaker.

We began again, Martin, Donna and I singing at the top of our lungs, trying to keep pace and avoid being drowned out by the older kids. “I don’t want no peanut butter and jelly ...,” we continued to shout. “I don’t want no peanut butter and jelly ...”

Again we were cut off by the director, who came storming back into the room. She scanned the room looking for the weakest link, and giving us a look that said, “Y’all better get this thing right.”

And, just as before, we were given the cue to start. Again, the three of us joined in just the way we had practiced the song a hundred times before, singing out at the top of our lungs, “I don’t want no peanut butter and jelly ... I don’t want no peanut butter and jelly ...”

No sooner did we get to the end of the first verse, than the director came storming in again. *Now what?* By now, the eyes of the older choir members had become a bit shifty as they looked for someone to blame for the disharmony. *This is going to be a long night.* After a few minutes of shouting instructions and rearranging some of the older kids, the director left and we were given instructions from the sound booth to begin again.

The frown on our director’s face was a sure sign that she was about to reach her boiling point. No one wanted to see her reach that point, so we started again, singing just as we had sung in the past, but with even more “oomph”—“I don’t want no peanut butter and jelly... I don’t want no peanut butter and jelly ...”

Once more, the director stormed into the room, this time with her shoes and earrings off; she looked like a woman ready for battle. Many of the heads in front were clearly turned facing the three of us, implying that one of us was the problem. *What do ya’ll know?*

But it didn’t matter what anyone else thought, her opinion was all that counted. So, on that last occasion when she left the room, she did not leave alone. She took someone with her. That someone was me, led out of the room by my shirt, with my head down. I couldn’t believe it. “But I worked so hard for this opportunity,” I wanted to protest.

I spent the rest of my time at the studio watching from the monitor as the choir went on to record “Peanut Butter and Jelly” without me. Being taken from that room took away my opportunity to debut on an album—and all my dreams of becoming a singer as well. As I listened to the choir, each verse, each word, each note tore at my soul. I had failed. I sat next to the cheering adults quietly sobbing and not being consoled. My zeal for singing was gone.

This crushing moment left me with only my other childhood dream—to grow up and play for the Denver Broncos—which today seems a bit ironic. Given the fact that this was a team of players who very seldom, if ever, came out to visit with kids in my neighborhood, even though it was a team that had many black players who had come from similar environments. With no males in our household to introduce me to this dream, it would remain just that—a dream.

It was a dark autumn night as Martin, Grandma Louise, and I trod through the dry fallen leaves in our final stretch home from Burger King. The sounds of the leaves crunching beneath our feet bounced like music off the fancy marble walls of the bank, creating an echo effect as we walked past. The bank lay dormant, as everyone had deserted the premises for the evening. Quietness swept over the streets. The music of our stepping and crunching in unison was like the sound of a mesmerizing jazz song.

Then, suddenly, in an instant, our musical melody was interrupted by a streaking shadow. Grandma Louise was knocked to the ground. “Oh! No! He snatched my pocket book!” she yelled.

He did what? Furious, I took off in pursuit of the assailant, hoping to get close enough to deliver a nice swift kick to his shins and recover Grandma’s purse. My careless rage had me shouting at the fleeing coward all throughout the quiet streets. Finally, it became obvious that I was not going to catch the adult villain, who had taken flight through the alley. My heart was throbbing. Sweat dripped from my chin. I stood, slowed with fury, fists clinched. It was a tough decision to terminate the chase.

With my last step, I turned around to see Grandma’s face frozen in total disbelief. The disbelief seemed to have less to do with her purse being stolen and more to do with the screams of profanity that had come from my five-year-old mouth during my short pursuit.

“Boy, who in the world taught you to say words like that?” she asked me.

It wasn’t long after this event that Sherl, Melony, Martin, and I were back with Mom and Dad, living in a rundown apartment building that sat at the corner of 26th and Ogden in the heart of Five Points. Our new place was quite different from Grandma Louise’s home; many of our days were spent trying to exterminate the army of cockroaches that moved like wildfire through our three-bedroom apartment.

“Damn! That sucker got away again,” Dad shouted, while inspecting the mousetraps he had spread strategically beneath the stove, refrigerator, and sink and in every corner of every room. The days of waking up to the smell of bacon, eggs, and pancakes at Grandma Louise’s were over. Now there was a morning scramble out of bed to be one of the first to get the last divides of milk for the Captain Crunch cereal. And when you were not lucky enough, the alternative was cereal and faucet water. *Yuk!*

Even the way Mom and Dad decorated the apartment made this place different from Grandma Louise's place. Pictures of blacks and other cool art covered every inch of our walls. My favorite was a painted picture of twelve dogs sitting in a pool hall, drinking beer and playing pool, while a seductive female poodle sat at the end of the pool table showing the male dogs a little leg as an incentive for winning. Seeing this painting every morning when I rose always made me giggle.

The other picture that I found fascinating was the painting of an exotic Nubian queen standing with her hands on her hips, smoking a cigarette with her beautifully shaped Afro and her breast fully exposed to every passing eye. Man, how I wanted a girlfriend one day who would look just like that, cigarette and all.

The smell of incense filled our small living room, which was always strewn with flamboyant record albums of old-school artists. Curtis Mayfield, The Ohio Players, The Gap Band, The Commodores, The O'Jays, Earth, Wind & Fire, The Jackson Five, The Temptations, and, my favorite, Marvin Gaye, blared from our record player throughout the apartment complex.

My excitement to be with Mom and Dad outweighed my yearning to ask where they had been during the time we were with Grandma Louise. And, just like at Grandma Louise's house, neither of them spoke a word of it. Life went on.

In my new school, there were not many days that passed when I didn't hear one of my classmates talking about how they lived with only their mom and how they wished their dad was around.

"Man, my dad was supposed to come by this weekend, but he never showed up," was the common complaint many of them shared. I felt like the luckiest kid in the world to be able to say, "Well, my dad lives with me." Hearing these stories gave me a deeper appreciation for my dad and the time we spent together.

Often, when I was not in school, I could be found tagging behind Dad at Green's Gambling Shack, listening through a haze of cigarette and cigar smoke to the old blues songs blaring from the jukebox. I got a chance to hear and see him and his buddies talk big stuff and lose big money.

"Nah, one mo' hand," a drunk loser would yell out to Mr. Green, who sat at the end of the table wearing a folded down gray hat, chewing on an inch of cigar, and holding a bat, which sometimes came in handy against the unruly.

"Man, you already done lost all yo' money. Now it's time to go home," Mr. Green would insist, shoving the drunken card player out the back door. The theme song for most of the drunken losers when they got kicked out of Mr. Green's was that of a classic blues song by BB King, "The Thrill is Gone." Oh how macho such a place seemed to be to my young mind.

But it wouldn't be long before changes in our household would challenge my newfound fondness for Dad. One night I awoke to horrifying screams and pleading. "No, no! Please ... don't hit me any more ..."

"Martin, you hear that?" I said, shaking him awake. "We got to get Melony and Sherl."

By the time we got to the hallway, both Melony and Sherl were already there, trying to peer through the darkness to see where the screams and commotion were coming from.

We tiptoed down the hallway hand in hand to discover that the commotion was coming from Mom and Dad's room. Through the door we heard the blows as Dad's fist connected with Mom's frail body. Her fading voice by now was only able to whisper, "No more, please! No more."

The sound of each blow that penetrated through the door and into my ears created a fire of rage in me that would burn for what seemed like an eternity.

The shouting and cursing stopped later that night, but the screams of Mom getting beaten merciless by Dad never ceased in my mind and reduced my enthusiasm for him to lukewarm. *How could any man beat a woman like that?*

Though the violence was severe and occurred often, none of us dared to call the police—not through any of the terrifying, violent-filled nights that followed. I believed that the police in my neighborhood were as dangerous as the perpetrators. I had borne witness from my window one night to a couple of "boys in blue" unleashing their wrath on a helpless drunk in our alley.

Awakening to this type of madness was painful and was like awakening to an alarm clock sounding off prematurely. Many nights I woke up in a cold sweat. "Man, there they go again," Martin and I would agonizingly express to one another.

As time went on, I began to anticipate the violence, lying down each night trying to get mentally prepared for the battles. I would spend hours tossing and turning, not wanting to fully give into the darkness and torment of the night.

What always made the violence-filled nights even more difficult to comprehend for me were the nonchalant faces Mom and Dad masked themselves with each following morning. Even at the tender age of six, I wanted to know what was wrong in Mom and Dad's relationship so I could fix it for them. The last thing I wanted was to be fatherless like many of my classmates at school. *What can I do to help?*

It didn't take long for the drama at home to start affecting my behavior and attitude in school. I started to become withdrawn, and I hated school. In many ways, my situation at home was starting to sound like that of many of the other students. My dad was present, but many of us were children who were growing up before our time. Flying off the handle on my teachers and classmates seemed to ease the pain that I was feeling inside, and I started to lose ground academically as a result. "I don't have to do a damn thing," were the words that I adopted when I did not want to do work in the classroom.

"Well, I guess you will have to do it later," my teacher would say, never following up on her promises.

It would be Mom's younger brother J.R. who would bring a temporary end to the beatings.

Uncle J.R. was athletic and strong and twice the size of Dad. Women all over town fainted to be in his presence, but his true and only love was his older sister, my mom, Fae. She had looked after him when Grandma Mae turned to alcohol to cope with the pain of losing my grandfather, whom I never knew. Mom and J.R. and their siblings had bounced in and out of foster homes and, as a teenager, J.R. had even lived in an abandoned car for a while until Mom rescued him. I welcomed his presence in our house.

"Man, I'll kill you if you ever put yo' hands on my sister again," Uncle J.R. yelled in his many unsuccessful attempts to catch Dad, who would flee out of the house through whatever window or door was nearest. "Fae, I don't know why you stay with that no-

good bastard,” he adamantly expressed, heading out the door, mad at Mom for staying with Dad.

Regardless of his strong disapproval of Mom’s relationship with Dad, J.R. was always ready and willing when the next call came for his assistance. *And so life goes on.*

Bullies were also a big part of the lifestyle among the kids in our apartment complex. Bullies roamed the floors of the complex every day seeking out the blood of the weak. If they couldn’t find any victims there, their journey usually brought them to the park across the street where many of us played and sought peace from the chaotic environments of home.

One day, while Martin and I were playing on the merry-go-round, Richard, one of the lead henchman in the club of bullies, approached Martin out of the blue and let him have it right smack in Martin’s stomach. *Wham!* Immediately, I began to scan the area for Melony and Sherl, our playground protectors. *Damn, they’re nowhere in sight,* I thought to myself, knowing what the possible action was before me.

Mom and Dad had always emphasized that, if one of us got into a fight, we’d all better be in that same fight—win or lose—or face serious consequences. A whipping when we got home was the last thing any of us wanted to face. But Richard was older than I, and twice my size.

With this dilemma hanging over my head and Martin on the ground on all fours crying, I thought it would behoove me to at least give Martin some backup. And so I took off running towards Richard in a half-hearted effort, hoping to land a few body shots. I was swinging and kicking like a wild man. *Take that, punk!*

Suddenly, in what seemed like a nanosecond, he delivered two serious hits. I lay doubled over on the ground; so much for that fight. Now I, too, had fallen to the mighty hands of Richard.

“You little punks want some more of me?” he shouted at the two of us, as we looked at each other fearfully not knowing how or if we should respond.

So we decided to do what most kids do when they are in trouble or in need of help on the playground—they flee home and get Mom and Dad, which is exactly what Martin and I did with no hesitation.

“Mom, Dad! That boy over there ...,” both of us yelled as we scrambled through the front door, trying to give our version of what had just happened, including my vain attempt to fight back, hoping to get some parental reinforcement.

“... and I hit him in the stomach,” Martin lied while gasping for air.

“Yeah, I kicked him ...,” I hyperbolized.

But the looks on Mom and Dad’s faces said it all. It wasn’t enough of an attempt. Our exaggerated story of the “shock and awe” campaign that we had bestowed on Richard had failed. We had to go back and face the bully in round two. As parents, they knew that, if we continued to run from Richard every day, we would never be able to set foot on the playground again. And, with that, we were led back out the front door and told, “Go back and do what y’all need to do.” The battle for playground peace was on. But this time we were not going empty handed. I pulled the belt from my shorts.

When we arrived back at the playground, Richard was already in pursuit of more victims. He stood throwing rocks at another group of kids who were hiding behind a giant

slide in the middle of the playground. Slowly, we crept behind a bush a few feet from Richard, looking for the opportunity to jump out and give him some payback.

Finally, the opportunity presented itself, and, when Richard bent down for more ammunition, I dashed at him and delivered a blow across his back with my belt buckle. Martin came in from the other side delivering kicks and punches. Things were looking pretty good for the new kids on the block in our stand against the playground bully. *Take that, punk! You better not ever mess with my little brother and me ever again!*

But, in that instant, just as before in round one, the script flipped, and Richard had my belt in his hand and was in hot pursuit of Martin and me as we headed for the hills trying to get some serious parental rescuing. In our long sprint home, it became very apparent to me that Richard was a kid to whom whippings were not foreign—probably from the receiving end, and definitely on the delivering end. Had I not known better, I would have thought it was my dad whipping the two of us; we both took hits all the way up to our front door, at which point Mom and Dad finally chased Richard off.

Mom and Dad could do nothing but laugh at what they had just witnessed. The sight of their sons being chased down the street hollering for help and getting whipped with the belt that was supposed to protect them must have been pretty amusing. *Ha ha!*

Despite the end result of this grudge match, we learned just how important it was to stick together through thick and thin. We also learned the ever-so-important lesson that sometimes it takes war to get peace. Ironically, we never had any more trouble out of Richard after that day.

Shortly after our confrontation with Richard, we moved into a three-bedroom, single-family house on 22nd and California Street, where we also found ourselves in a new school. Mom and Dad never said why the sudden move was necessary, but I figured it had to do with the fact that our family had just expanded with the birth of my baby sister Carmen. Be that as it may, things were starting to look better for us. What really made me believe that we were headed in a new direction was the additional arrival of our family dog Sheba. From what I had been able to gather from families on television, having a family dog equaled prosperity and advancement.

Our home still rested in Five Points, but on the other side, near downtown. Inside, the rooms were dark and gloomy, and outside the balding lawn boasted patches of weeds here and there. But, whatever the case, 22nd and California was our new home.

In school, it didn't take long to discover that being in a new setting with new kids didn't necessarily mean new and different social challenges. In fact, the words coming from the lips of my classmates on the playground during recess at Ebert Elementary reflected the same yearning the kids had had at my former school, Gilpin Elementary. There was an ongoing yearning for a daddy—any daddy—to come around and spend time with them. What would life be like if Daddy came around?

Our seven or so months together on 22nd and California had been the best time we had ever spent together as a family. The fighting between Mom and Dad had diminished greatly. *Wow, this feels great!* It almost seemed to be too good to be true. And, in fact, it was too good to last.

“I need to talk with yall’s momma and daddy. I need my money,” our landlord Mr. Mack angrily said to Melony and Sherl, who stood guarding the entry way into the house one day while Mom and Dad hid behind the door.

“They’re not here, they ah, ah ... went to the store,” Melony responded, just as she had been coached by Mom and Dad.

“Well, you tell them they’re late on the rent again and I need my money in a week or else.” Mr. Mack concluded, skeptically walking back to his dirty blue pickup truck.

“You make sure you tell them. They have until next week,” he yelled out the window over the sound of his loud, whistling muffler.

Up to this point, I had never thought about—nor had the family ever talked about—where Mom and Dad got the money to take care of us. The only thing they ever said to us about money, whenever we asked for some, was, “Money don’t grow on trees” We never got an explanation of the source of the money in our household. Despite not having this answer to this question, the only thing that I could do was to be thankful for what we had. All I knew was that I had a roof over my head and clothes on my back. *Thank God.* So I thought.

But that was about to change, and change drastically. In the weeks that followed, we were kicked out of our place on 22nd and California. Our travels landed us briefly with a friend of the family, and then at the first of three motel rooms in which we would reside in over the next several months.

The Colonial Motel was a cheap, dingy-looking motel that sat beneath the overpass of Interstate 70, miles from our previous home and school, which we still attended whenever possible. I was so disappointed in Mom and Dad, but I dared not utter a word.

Martin and I slept in one bed, and Melony, Sherl, and Carmen slept in the other bed beside ours. Mom and Dad slept on the floor in our one-room dungeon. I cried myself to sleep nearly every night, hoping to withstand my frustration. *How did this happen? Why did all of this have to happen to my family?*

Mom and Dad gave no explanation for the change in our conditions, and their silence sometimes hurt more than the abrupt transition. I just wanted some assurance that things were going to get better. “Well, kids, we have just momentarily fallen into some tough times, but your momma and I are working hard to try to get a house,” were the words that the responsible, loving dad always shared on television with his family during tough times. And, just like on television, I yearned to hear those same words from Dad, but they never came. Life went on.

Living in smaller quarters meant other sacrifices also had to be made. Sheba had been left behind—man, how I missed faithful old Sheba. We left many of our clothes behind, and the ones we had were no longer clean and neatly folded in drawers, but were dirty, and wrapped in bundles of sheets in the corner. Each day I arose to put on the same clothes I’d already worn for days. *Why? Why does the dirty shirt with the black ring around the collar and musty armpits have to be resting on my back? Why are these socks that were once white, and are now smelly, brown and itchy, cling to my feet? Why am I wearing these pants that I have outgrown—these pants that now conclude in the middle of my shins exposing the gray ash of my legs to the world? Why all the painful remarks and laughter in school from my classmates? Why? Why? Why?*

Mom and Dad were also feeling the same pain and frustration that were brewing in me. Their ugly arguments and fights from the past started to resurface. Not having access to J.R. any more meant we had no choice but to endure and try to ignore Dad slapping Mom around in front of us.

With all this anger built up inside of me, school continued to become the place for me to unleash my wrath. If my teacher or classmates said anything to me I didn't like, they heard from me, "Kiss my ass, and, if you don't like that, I will kick your ass." It became an all-day, every-day slogan for me. In today's school system I would have certainly been labeled as defiant or perhaps even perceived as a child with an emotional behavior disorder. Or I might have been doped up with Ritalin, despite the fact that much of my difficult behavior was attributed to a painful and challenging home life that did not seem to be getting better.

The one time that always brought my classmates and me together for fun was recess. On the playground one afternoon, one of the kids yelled out, "Hey, let's throw rocks at the drunks across the street at the park." With those words, we all hopped up and scrambled through the playground searching for ammunition to throw over the six-foot-high fence that caged us within the boundaries of the school. I couldn't wait to unleash my wrath onto the hopeless drunks. The drunks in my neighborhood were considered winos. These were the folks who had surpassed the arena of alcoholics years ago and now made drinking cheap liquor a way of daily life each and every moment of the day. *At least alcoholics have jobs and families, these low-life drunks have neither.*

"Let's get them lowlifes," another yelled in our sprint to do battle. After gathering the last of the sharp-edged rocks we could find on the playground, we were ready for war.

"Let's do this," we all yelled in excitement, arriving to the fence to take aim.

"Ready, aim, fire!" Carlos, our class troublemaker, instructed.

As I cocked back to throw my sharp-edged rock, I experienced a heart-dropping discovery. As I looked at the faces of the "low-life drunks," my world was shook up. *Oh, no! I can't believe it.* The drunks who were about to be on the receiving end of our mayhem were familiar—they were my Grandma Mae and her friends. I couldn't believe it.

What should I do? With tears in my eyes, I continued looking at Grandma Mae as she stumbled through the park with the rest of the drunken winos. Slowly, I dropped the rocks I had gathered and held in my shirt and walked away as quietly as I could. I hoped no one would notice my retreat, especially Grandma Mae. Torn between further ridicule from my schoolmates and defending the humanity of my grandmother and her friends, I continued walking, head down and eyes low. My tears began to flow even harder when I heard the laughter of the rock throwers as they basked in the glory of claiming whose rocks hit which winos.

"Did you see that? My rock cracked that one over there in the head!"

"Aw, man, that ain't nothing—mine hit that one over there in the face!" I hoped desperately that Grandma Mae had not been on the receiving end.

Not responding, not doing what was right, not defending my grandmother, was a heavy burden that I would carry with me for some time.

Meanwhile, at home we were eating less and starting to see less and less of Mom and Dad, who would often return home in the wee hours of the morning with food from Church's Chicken or cinnamon rolls and milk for us. Mom and Dad's new behavior patterns were tied directly to the full-blown indulgence of their heroin addiction, something we were unaware of at the time. Nevertheless, we would scramble out of bed, still half asleep, to eat as much as our empty stomachs could handle before trying to

retrieve a few more hours of sleep before school the next day. This would be a pattern that would go on for sometime. *Is life going to get any better?*

“Hey, Fuji,” Dad yelled out to the foreign motel owner one day, who was watering the dirt in the parking lot in an attempt to keep the dust storms to a minimum. “Hey, Fuji,” he yelled a second time. Our key was not working and we couldn’t get into our motel room. “God damned Fuji, I know you hear me.”

Finally he responded. “I want you and you family off me property now,” the motel owner said in a foreign accent, walking toward us. “I had enough of you people.”

In an instant, a hostile bickering match between him and Dad ensued. At times it even seemed as though the two of them were going to break out in a scuffle.

Back and forth they went. It was difficult to decode some of the words coming from the foreigner’s mouth, but the root of the problem became obvious when he said, “You not paid rent in weeks, you must go before I call police.” There was no doubt about it; we were not getting back into the motel room. Everything in the room had to stay—as ransom for the neglected payments. *What does all this mean? He has to be joking about us having to leave and not being able to get any of our stuff from the room, right?*

Unfortunately, it was not a joke, but our new lifestyle reality.

The owner was serious as serious could get. And, before long, we were forced to give in to his unwavering demand to leave the premises. I couldn’t believe it. I longed to cry, but I knew it would do no good. I stumbled back to the car, led along by Mom, who held on to the end of my arm. We were leaving behind every possession that we owned, including my most cherished possession, snakeskin cowboy boots that Mom and Dad had just given me. We were left with literally nothing but the clothes on our backs. *How will we survive?* This was the question that I wanted answered. However, my beat-up emotions and the sad faces of my siblings said it all—this was real-life survival.

In the weeks that followed, we spent each day not knowing where or with whom we would rest our heads at night. We stayed in the homes of friends and in several other motels before finally landing at our new place on 38th and Williams.

Being in our own place provided some relief. I, however, was not going to let my guard down and was only cautiously optimistic about our future with Mom and Dad.

Slowly, I was starting to discover that the mighty concept of “time” could change a person’s perspective on life, but time alone could never wash away the depths of internal pain of individuals who had been wounded emotionally. In addition to this, I was also learning how to better suppress my feelings and hide them from the rest of the world. And so life went on.

Finally, after months in our new place, my siblings and I started to breathe a little easier, with the exception of Carmen, whose innocent heart and mind at a little more than one year of age were oblivious to our situation. Despite what we were feeling, the behavior of Mom and Dad remained the same.

After a long year in first grade that involved a lot of missed classes and failed assignments, I somehow managed to pass and move on to second grade. With Melony, Martin, Sherl, and me still attending Ebert Elementary, we had to become creative in finding transportation for our several-mile journey to school. This was a task of great difficulty. “How will we get to school today?” was the question of the morning. We

walked, caught the city bus, and even stole bikes from the neighborhood to get ourselves to school during the many days when Mom and Dad weren't around.

On the days when we couldn't find Grandma Mae to baby sit Carmen, Melony opted to stay home from her sixth-grade class with her.

"I'm the oldest, and it's my responsibility to take care of y'all when Mom and Dad aren't here, so y'all go on to school and I'll stay with Carmen," she'd say, pushing us out the door. "Go on. I will see you all when you get home."

And more and more we continued to see less and less of Mom and Dad, with the exception of the first of the month, the day our welfare check came—a check that we never saw any part of.

It was becoming the norm for our parents to be gone for days at a time without checking up on us. Nearly all our clothes came from the second-hand clothing shelf from the church around the corner through vouchers they gave to Grandma Mae. This clothing provided another opportunity for the kids at school to make fun of us. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that our gear had had previous owners when we walked into the school wearing shirts bearing the names of individuals and events with whom we had no connection. "Welcome to the Hernandez Family Reunion" and "Lisa and Mike Forever," a couple of my most-often-worn shirts read. I tried to buoy myself up. *Things have to start getting better for us at some point.*

Food was also becoming scarcer at home each day. Some days it seemed as if we were going to literally starve to death as we sat waiting and hoping for Mom and Dad to return with food—something that usually didn't happen. To that end, we learned how to become scavengers in our world. When we weren't gobbling down meals at school, much of our days were spent shuffling through the empty cabinets at home for food for ourselves and Carmen, who we were basically raising. A mayonnaise and sugar sandwich was now like a five-star meal.

Things had become so bad that, after returning in tears from our house one day, Grandma Louise told Aunt Milly that she was going to take custody of all of us. She had found us searching through our garbage and sink for food.

"Okay, Martin, you stay here with Carmen while we go make our run," Melony instructed before she, Sherl, and I headed out into the neighborhood grocery stores to steal cupcakes, cereal, soda, crackers, candy, and anything else we could fit into our pockets that would allow us to survive another day. At times, it almost seemed as if the store clerks felt our pain; often they made little or no attempt to stop us from entering the store and then running out the emergency exit with the stolen goods.

"Come back here, you little bastards," many of them often times yelled from the doorway, but gave no attempt to exit the premises of the store and follow us.

Over fences and down the allies we would run tirelessly until our arrival to the living room floor, to evenly divide the goods.

As badly as we wanted to, we never complained to Mom and Dad. We had been raised by the law, "Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother." This was an ancient gospel law that I often felt should have been extended: "Mothers and fathers shalt honor and support thy children." I left this only as a commentary in my mind, and life went on.

“I’ll tell y’all what, if y’all can have Carmen walking by the time we get back, me and ya’ mamma will take y’all roller-skating,” Dad said one afternoon, heading out the door with Mom and carrying two garbage bags full of “merchandise,” as they called it, draped over his shoulder.

With a marvelous deal like this, nothing else needed to be said. Immediately, we began setting up our training course in the living room.

“Hurry! Move that couch over there and move the other one right here,” Melony ordered Martin and me. The two couches, setting on opposite sides of the room, would now become destination points for Carmen.

“Let’s do it!” We chanted with great excitement and anticipation of roller-skating.

In no time, we were going at it, getting Carmen’s training underway. Back and forth we crawled from one couch to the other, guiding Carmen by the arms and looking for any signs of independent balance. Minute after minute, hour after hour, we treaded the hardwood floor on our knees, fighting off exhaustion with the thought of being able to finally go roller-skating with the other kids from the neighborhood.

“Walk to big brother,” I prompted her from a few steps away. “Come on, Carmen, you can do it!” Back and forth for several more hours we went, taking only a very short break or two.

Finally! Sure enough, by the end of the day, all we had done had paid off. Carmen was walking! We all celebrated, skipping across the squeaky floors. The thought of being able to go roller-skating with the other kids couldn’t escape my mind. Butterfly sensations rumbled through my stomach, and chills rolled down my back in my anticipation of our reward. I couldn’t wait to try to be the first one to scramble to the door and tell Mom and Dad the good news.

And so that evening we all camped out like puppies at the front door waiting for the mighty master to come home. We waited and waited to share our monumental accomplishment with Mom and Dad, competing for bragging rights as to whose efforts produced the winning result.

“I’m the one who got her walking,” Sherl asserted, spirits high.

“You must be crazy! Don’t you see those bruises and scratches on my knees from all that hard work?” I retorted, amid all the laughter, prompting Martin and Melony to take a glimpse at the bruises and scratches on their knees as well.

As the seconds turned to minutes and the minutes turned to hours, we continued to wait, late into the night. As we waited, we somehow fell asleep and later awakened to the bright sunshine of a new morning piercing through the sheets that we used for curtains over our windows. And still no Mom and Dad.

“I’m sure Mom and Dad will be home any minute, y’all know how they are,” Melony said, playing down the desperation we were all starting to feel.

With no phone in our house, all we had was Melony’s assurance that Mom and Dad would return to take us roller skating. Clinging to that small hope, we waited another day.

“Man, this is wrong! I hate the way Mom and Dad be doing us,” I finally said by nightfall, no longer able to withstand my frustration.

“What did you say?” Melony asked in disbelief.

“I said I don’t like the way Mom and Dad be doing us.”

“You shut your mouth and don’t you ever say nothing like that again!” Melony demanded putting an end to my frustrations. “You and Martin lie down, and I’ll see you all in the morning,” she concluded, tucking us in.

And so we spent another night hoping—hoping to see Mom and Dad, hoping to get our chance to go skating.

The following morning we woke to Melony bickering back and forth with what sounded like the police. I could hear the distinctive sound of their walkie-talkies cutting into the conversation.

“Young lady, we have called a social worker who will be arriving here any moment, and we need you and your brothers and sisters to go with her.”

“Please don’t take us. My mom and dad will be right back,” she pleaded. “They just went to the store.”

But the two sheriff’s men knew something that we didn’t know. Mom and Dad had been arrested for shoplifting and drugs and were headed back to prison again.

“I don’t want to go!” I yelled. “I don’t want to go!” Finally, the two sheriff’s men picked me up and stuffed me into the backseat of the social worker’s car where my sobbing siblings already sat, defeated.

Our ride to the crisis center was short, but I filled the car with much-warranted crying and screaming until I was hoarse and couldn’t yell anymore. Seeing our few possessions being set out on the street moments before we had left hadn’t helped, either.

This was the darkest night of my life. I lay sobbing my heart away in the foreign bunk bed of the crisis center, my face buried in a pillow soaked by salty tears and globs of snot from my runny nose. *Why! Why! Why do things have to be this way?* The time we spent in the crisis center still today is a void in my memory; but the nightmares of each night were the same daunting images that continued the breaking of my seven-year-old spirit.