

THE NEW HORIZON

THE NEW HORIZON

A Memoir

By Phyllis Shamoun

This book is drawn from Phyllis Shamoun's own writings, diaries, and letters, compiled and shaped into a single narrative with her family.

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PART ONE: BEFORE THE STORMS

1. The Convention

I have to tell this the way I've always told it, which is to say — the Lord had a plan, and I was much too busy being twenty-one years old and pretty to notice Him working it.

I was born and raised in Big D, and I want you to know I had it all growing up — the good life, brains along with the beauty, if I'm allowed to say so at my age, and I believe at ninety-one I have earned the right to say whatever I please. I modeled for Neiman Marcus as a girl. I went off to Notre Dame and came home again to work in Social Work, which I loved, because even then I think I always needed to be needed by somebody. I had never spent a single night of my life anywhere that wasn't paved. I did not know what a tractor was for. I certainly did not know I would one day live in a mobile home in the middle of a cotton field in Mississippi with five children and a rooster that crowed at all hours — but that story comes later, and I am getting ahead of myself, which is a thing old women are allowed to do.

It was 1957. There was a fraternity convention — young men and women from all over, dressed up, full of themselves the way you are at that age, when you believe the whole rest of your life is still a rumor about somebody else. I was not looking for a husband that weekend. I want that on the record. I had a perfectly good life in Dallas and no particular

hurry to leave it.

Joe Shamoun was there from Mississippi, and I did not know his name yet, and he did not know mine, and by every account I have ever heard — not from him, mind you, he would never in a hundred years have told me this himself, that was not his way — by every account from the men who were standing beside him, Joe looked across that room, found me in it, and said, out loud, to whoever happened to be near him: “I’m going to marry that girl.”

He had not said one word to me. He did not know if I could carry a tune or hold a conversation or if I even liked Mississippi men. He decided the whole matter before I’d so much as looked back at him. I did not hear about this until years later — Guy told me, at some family gathering or another, laughing so hard he could barely get the words out, “Phyllis, he said it before he even asked your name!” — and Joe just sat there with that quiet little smile of his, not denying one word of it, which was as close as that man ever came to admitting anything.

That was Joe my whole life with me. He was not a man who announced his feelings twice. He said the biggest thing he would ever say about loving me one time, to a room full of his friends, before he had even earned the right to say it — and then he spent the next sixty-five years proving it instead of repeating it. I have known women whose

husbands told them “I love you” every single day and I promise you, I would not have traded Joe’s one declaration, made to the wrong audience entirely, for a thousand of theirs. A man who says a thing once and then lives it for sixty-five years has said it more than a man who says it every morning and means something different by it every time.

He made his trips to Dallas after that — more than a young man with any sense would have, if the girl hadn’t been worth it. He was patient with me in a way I did not deserve and did not understand yet, because I had never had to wait on anything in my life, and here was a man from a small town in the Mississippi Delta, quiet, serious, not the least bit interested in impressing me the way the Dallas boys tried to, and I found myself — I will confess this now, at ninety-one, with nothing left to protect — waiting for his phone calls in a way that frightened me a little.

He finally convinced me. I want you to know it took convincing, because I was born into a family that never wanted for anything, and Greenville, Mississippi in those days was not exactly the Neiman Marcus catalog. But there was something in that man — steady, sure of himself in a way that had nothing to do with bragging, a man who had already decided the whole shape of his life and was simply waiting, patiently, for the rest of the world to catch up to what he already knew — and I married him, and I moved to

a town I had never heard of, into a life I could not have imagined for myself, and it was, without one single moment of hesitation on my part looking back on it now, the best decision I ever made.

I did not know yet about the store in Paducah, or Ivy Golden, or the trailer on Old Leland Road, or David, or any of the thousand things — the wonderful and the unbearable both — that were still asleep somewhere up ahead of us, waiting their turn. I only knew that a serious, quiet man from Mississippi had looked at me one time across a crowded room and told his friends, before he told me, that his whole life had just been decided.

He was right. It had.

2. Big D to the Delta

Greenville, Mississippi did not look like anything I had ever called home.

I want you to understand what I was leaving, so you can understand what I found. I had grown up paved. Sidewalks, streetlights, a father who never once let us want for a single thing this world had to offer. I had never in my whole life seen a cotton field, let alone stood beside one and watched the wagons go by loaded so high and white it looked like the fields themselves had turned to snow. I had never heard a tractor, never once considered what a combine was or did, and I promise you the first time I saw a snake sunning itself in the middle of the road, I nearly turned that car around and drove myself straight back to Dallas without so much as a goodbye to my new husband.

But Joe had a life waiting for me down there, and it was not the life I had pictured for myself, and I want to say — at ninety-one, having lived both lives now, the paved one and the unpaved one — that the unpaved one turned out to be the real one. The one that mattered. I did not know that yet, riding into Greenville for the first time. I only knew everything smelled different, and moved slower, and the whole town seemed to be waiting on something I couldn't name.

Daddy's store — Joe's, I mean, though by the time I arrived it had become "ours" the way everything of his became "ours," quietly, without him ever making a show of it — sat out in Paducah, a little township not much more than a crossroads, surrounded by a few large farming families and a great many good, hardworking country folk, most of them Black families who had been on that land longer than any of us. During the harvest you could stand at the edge of the property and watch the cotton go by all day, truck after truck, wagon after wagon, and it looked, I always thought, like the whole world had been dusted in something soft and holy.

It was out there that I came to know Ivy Golden.

Ivy had been Joe's family's right hand for years before I ever arrived — drove his grandmother wherever she needed to go, kept an eye on the property, and loved that family, I came to understand, every bit as much as they loved him. He had a beautiful name and an even more beautiful heart, and Joe adored him the way you adore the people who were simply always there, steady, since before you had words for steady. My oldest son used to run off to Ivy's house whenever tempers flared in ours — I remember one particular night the boys had gotten themselves worked up about something, and while my oldest went straight to Ivy's, Gregory, the baby of the bunch, climbed a tree in our own

yard instead and fell asleep up there till the middle of the night, which tells you something about each of those boys even then, if you knew to look for it.

When Ivy passed, Joe buried him in one of his own suits. I want that written down plainly, because it tells you more about who my husband was than anything I could say about him directly. I went to that funeral with Joe, and I had never in my life been inside a Black funeral home, and I cried so hard during the singing — such a sound, such warmth, grief turned all the way up into something that felt almost like praise — that Hazel and Doc Jackson had to fan me right there in the pew like I was the one who'd lost somebody. I suppose, in a way, we all had.

I have thought about that funeral many times since, more in these last few years than ever, watching what my own children turned into over money and gold and things that don't mean one thing in a casket. Ivy Golden had nothing, by the world's measure, and he was loved by an entire family who buried him in a dead man's Sunday suit and meant every stitch of it. I think about that a great deal now.

Downtown Greenville, when I finally got used to it, was small but it had its charms — Doe's Steak House, which I came to love, and our little Catholic church, a small stone replica of some grand cathedral somewhere, as if the town had decided that even a small congregation deserved a taste

of something majestic. It was not Dallas. I want to be honest and say there were nights, those first months, when I missed Dallas so badly I could have cried into my pillow, and some nights I did. But Joe was patient with my homesickness the way he was patient with everything, which is to say without a single word about it, just steady, showing up, letting time do the work that talking never could have.

We built our first home on Kirkland, a corner lot right in the city, and that is where our babies started coming — one after another, quick as anything, five of them inside of what felt like no time at all once I look back on it, though it did not feel quick living through it, I promise you that. David first, our oldest, with a mind so sharp even as a baby he seemed to be watching everything, filing it away. Then the others followed close behind him, the way children do when the Lord is being generous.

I did not know yet, rocking my firstborn son in that little house on Kirkland, what the years ahead had waiting for him, or for any of us. I only knew that Joe worked from before light until after dark, that there was not a lazy bone anywhere in that man's body, and that he was building something — a store, a family, a name — the same slow, silent, certain way he had decided to marry me in the first place. Brick by brick. Word by word, if he said them at all.

We outgrew that little house before we knew what hit us. Five children in sixteen years will do that to a family faster than you can plan for it. But that is its own chapter, and I am not ready yet to tell you about the eye we lost, or John's leg, or Sharon's little arm in its cast, or any of the accidents that come with raising a house full of children too close in age to ever really slow down.

For now I only want you to know this: I came to Greenville a Dallas girl who had never seen a cotton field, and Greenville — the store, the church, Ivy Golden, the whole slow unpaved world of it — made me into somebody I would never have become on my own. I did not choose that life. Joe chose it for both of us, the moment he told his friends he was going to marry me. But I would choose it again, every single time, knowing everything I know now about what it would eventually cost me to have loved that hard, that long, in one place, with one man, for sixty-five years.

3. Five in Sixteen Years

I have heard people say that time moves slow when you're young and raising babies, and I want to tell you plainly — whoever said that never had five children arrive inside of sixteen years the way mine did.

David came first, and he came into the world already looking like he was taking notes on it — I have told you that already, but I want to tell you again, because it turned out to matter more than I could have known, watching him in that bassinet on Kirkland with those sharp, watching eyes. After David came the others, quick as anything, one after the next, until our little corner-lot house in the city of Greenville had a crib in nearly every room and a Shamoun child underfoot in every direction you looked.

Joe worked the whole time. I want that understood — there was never a season, not one, when that man was not out the door before light and back long after dark, building the store, building us, building whatever it took to keep five babies fed and a wife who had grown up wanting for nothing suddenly wanting for sleep more than anything Neiman Marcus ever sold. I kept the home. I want to say that plainly too, without apology, the way we did things in those days — I tried golf once, I tried tennis with the ladies, and I felt the whole time like I was wasting minutes I would never get

back with my own children, so I stopped trying anything that took me away from my group of five. If Joe wasn't going, I wasn't going. That was simply how I was built.

The house on Kirkland had been plenty when we started. It was not plenty for long. Five children in sixteen years will turn even a comfortable home into something bursting at every seam, and comfortable was already generous for what Kirkland had become by the time our youngest was walking and our oldest was nearly a teenager, tall enough to look me almost in the eye, already carrying himself like a man twice his years.

I remember the drives we used to take, all of us loaded into the car, out past the edge of town to look at empty lots in Greenville, dreaming out loud about a home we hadn't built yet — Joe pointing at this piece of ground or that one, me shaking my head at half of them, both of us laughing about it more than arguing, though there was some of that too. We had outgrown Kirkland, the fifteenth home ever built on that street, if you can believe it, in a town not big enough to have fifteen of anything, and there was no use pretending otherwise any longer.

So we sold it.

I did not know yet, standing in that empty house on Kirkland for the last time, what the years just ahead of us actually held — not the dream home we thought we were

driving toward, not right away. I did not know about the mobile home, or the storms, or the son we would visit through glass one day, none of it. I only knew that Joe had that same quiet certainty on his face he'd had the night he told his friends he was going to marry me, and I had learned by then, after all those years, to trust exactly what that particular look on his face meant.

We were about to become a family that lived on wheels for a while, in the middle of a cotton field, closer to the ground and further from everything I had ever known than I could have imagined the day I left Dallas. And it turned out to be some of the richest years of my whole life, though I would not have believed you if you'd told me that, standing in that empty house, watching the last of our furniture get carried out the door.

4. The New Horizon

The home we bought fell through — twice, if you count both close calls the way I do, both times for reasons that felt, even then, like the Lord Himself reaching down and steering us somewhere else entirely, whether we understood it yet or not.

The first time, it was a misunderstanding over money that killed the deal the very same morning Joe had gone to shake hands on it. I shouted “hooray” right there in my kitchen, which tells you something — some part of me had already known, without knowing how I knew it, that the house wasn’t ours to have. The second one fell through when the owner tried to raise the price at the last minute, and Joe, being Joe, simply told the man no and walked away without a second thought, the same way he’d once told a room full of fraternity boys he was going to marry a girl he hadn’t even spoken to yet. He did not negotiate with people who tried to take advantage. He simply walked.

That night, half-joking, worn thin from two houses lost in two months, Joe said, “I guess we’ll move into a trailer.” We laughed about it. I want you to know we laughed about it for a solid day before I realized some part of me could not stop turning the idea over. A trailer. Clean, new, nothing anybody else had lived in first. I drove past the trailer lots

the very next afternoon after picking up the children from school, just to satisfy my own curiosity, and by the time I walked into that first one — shag carpet, closets bigger than I'd imagined, every modern thing you could ask for — I had already half fallen in love with a life I had never once considered for myself.

Joe thought I had lost my mind. “You can’t be serious,” he said, and I was as serious as I have ever been about anything. We had land — a good deal of it, right behind his parents’ place, close to Grandma Rosie and Grandpa Charlie, close enough that the children could run free the way children are supposed to run, with the store just down the road and family close enough to call out to. It took some searching before we found the right one — big enough bedrooms for three growing boys, a room for the girls, a bar that fit our three black barstools like it had been built around them — and the day it finally arrived on a truck and got set onto that gravel Joe had insisted on laying down first, thank the Lord he did, because the rains came almost before we’d finished moving in and did not let up for what felt like a season.

We named it, without much ceremony, simply by what was already painted on its side: The New Horizon. My son Joe — named for his father, though we never called him that to his face — said it sounded like the name of a ship, and something in me caught on that, held onto it, though I could

not have told you why at the time. I only knew, watching that name catch the last of the daylight the evening we moved in, that I hoped it might weather whatever storms came looking for us the way a good ship would. I did not know yet how many storms that would turn out to mean, in every sense of that word.

The years on that land went by faster than I could keep hold of them, and not without their cost. One of my sons lost an eye in an accident I still cannot bring myself to describe in detail, even now, even this many decades later — some hurts a mother simply keeps behind glass of her own. John broke his leg the way boys that age break things, running too fast toward something that couldn't wait. Sharon Lee — my baby girl, the one who would grow up to be the one who never once left my side, all these years later, all these decades down the road — broke her small arm and wore her little cast around like a badge of honor, proud as anything, too young yet to know what real breaking would someday feel like.

And in those same years, we lost two men who had shaped so much of who Joe and I were before we'd even met each other. My own father, back in Dallas, passed in 1973. Grandpa Charlie, right there on the land beside us, followed the next year, in 1974. Two griefs, one right on top of the other, in the middle of a life already crowded with five children and a rooster that crowed at all hours and a husband

who worked himself half to death every single day to make sure none of us ever felt what he had felt, growing up with so much less.

I did not have the luxury, in those years, of grieving slowly. There was too much life happening all around the edges of it — too many children, too much cotton going by on the road outside, too much work still to be done on the home we were still dreaming of building. So I grieved the way I have grieved everything since: quickly, quietly, on my knees some nights when nobody else was watching, and then back up the next morning to feed five children breakfast, because that was simply what a mother did, whatever she was carrying underneath it.

The New Horizon held us through all of it. Every storm, every loss, every accident, every ordinary miraculous day. I did not know yet, sitting on that patio that doubled as a tennis court, watching my boys chase a ball across the same ground where we had buried two griefs in two years, that this strange little house on wheels was about to give me some of the funniest, wildest, most purely joyful stories of my entire life. That is the next thing I have to tell you. But I wanted you to know first what it was built on top of, underneath all the laughter — because I think that is true of most joy worth having. It is built on top of something it survived.

5. Storms

I want to tell you about the night Joe threw a bag of money at our oldest son and hollered at him to run it in for a touchdown, because if I don't tell you that story with all its foolishness intact, you will never understand what it was actually like to raise a family in a house that could pick up and blow away.

We had heard, the way everybody in that part of the country had heard, that mobile homes and tornadoes did not mix. We did not think much about it — you cannot live every day of your life afraid of a thing that might happen, or you will never live at all — until the night it stopped being a thing that might happen and started being a thing that was happening.

The children were all asleep. Not a single one stirring, not even a mouse, the way it goes right before the Lord decides to test you. Joe had the television on low, watching the news the way he did most nights, and I saw his whole body change before I understood why — he'd spotted something on the weather radar, a tornado sitting right at the bridge, close enough that there was no time left for being calm about it.

“Get the children out!” he hollered, and something in his voice took the last of my sleep clean away.

Then — and I promise you I am not embellishing one bit of this, ask anyone who was there — Joe grabbed the money bag off the shelf, shook my oldest son straight out of a dead sleep, and shoved it into his arms and told him to carry it. I woke the girls, slipped on my summer sandals without a thought for anything but getting them out that door, grabbed my robe on the run. The very moment we stepped outside, the lights went out behind us, every one of them, all at once, like the whole house had been holding its breath and finally let it go.

We ran across that tennis court in the pitch dark and the pouring rain, and it was slick as glass under our feet — I lost a sandal in the mud and never did find it again — and Joe was behind all of us banging on his own mother’s door hollering “I’ll break it down!” like a man who meant every word of it. Somewhere in all that running, the money bag came open, and bills went everywhere across that wet grass, and I remember thinking, with a clarity that still makes me laugh remembering it, well — this is it. This is how it ends, out here in the mud with the family fortune blowing away in a tornado.

Grandma finally got that door open, and we all but fell inside looking like a litter of half-drowned puppies, and once

everybody had caught their breath, my son told us what he'd been dreaming right up until Joe woke him — a football game — and when his father threw that bag of money into his arms in the pitch dark, he thought, for one confused half-second, that he was supposed to run it in for the score. I have never laughed so hard in the middle of being that afraid in my whole life.

That was not even the only time. There was another night, a summer storm that came up while Joe was in the middle of installing our air conditioner — the kitchen window open, covered with nothing but a thin canvas sheet — and the wind came first, then the rain in buckets, then hail hard enough to tear straight through that canvas like it was paper. A bag came loose from on top of the refrigerator and split open, and the dishes started flying clean out of the cabinets, and Joe hollered that he'd run for the car, and I grabbed my purse and my raincoat and my umbrella and went right out that door after him feeling, I told him later, exactly like Mary Poppins about to catch the wind and sail off with it.

Between the storms, though — and I want this part remembered every bit as much as the tornadoes — there was more plain joy in those years than I have had almost anywhere else in my life. My friends used to tease me something terrible about having the largest patio in town, on account of it doubling as our own private tennis court. You

could step right out our front door onto it. Before long the boys' room looked like a sporting goods store, twenty-five rackets or more hanging on hooks along the wall, hats and sweatbands and tennis balls scattered in every corner, and there were whole evenings, whole seasons, where the only sound coming off our land was children laughing and a ball going back and forth in the last of the daylight.

And then there was Mr. Norton.

Our neighbor, "Notorious Norton" the whole county called him behind his back, a big man who put me in mind of Santa Claus, if Santa Claus had gout and a temper and a habit of standing outside in his underclothes at all hours trying to start some old junk truck that had no business running in the first place. He had one door missing entirely off that truck, and you'd see him out there, one foot dangling out where the door should have been, gunning the engine at dawn like the whole neighborhood was obligated to be awake right alongside him. He called the sheriff on our little pony once for wandering into his corn, and when I went over to have a word with him about it, he hollered and carried on and told me I was starting big trouble — and I heard, from more than one person who ought to have known, that his trips up to Chicago were frequent enough to make a person wonder exactly what kind of business he was in. My children called him Martin Norton behind his back and never once forgot him, and I don't suppose I ever will either.

I think about those years now — the storms real and imagined, the money in the mud, Mr. Norton and his one-door truck, twenty-five tennis rackets on a wall in a trailer in the middle of a cotton field — and I understand something I did not understand while I was living through it. We were happy. We were poor by some measures and rich by every measure that has ever actually mattered to me, and we did not know yet how much harder the real storms still ahead of us were going to blow. The New Horizon weathered every single one that came for it those years. It held.

I wish I could tell you every house does.

6. McClain Drive

We finally finished the home on McClain Drive in 1979, and I want you to understand what those two words — finally finished — actually cost us to be able to say.

Years of waiting. Years of planning and re-planning, of watching Joe come home from the store too tired to do anything but look over blueprints at the kitchen table by lamplight, adjusting this wall, moving that window, the two of us dreaming a house into existence one exhausted evening at a time. We had lived in that trailer far longer than either of us had ever intended when we first laughed about the idea of it, and somewhere in those years the joke had become simply our life, and I do not regret one single day of it — but I will tell you, the day we finally walked into McClain Drive and understood it was ours, truly ours, built exactly the way we had dreamed it all those nights at that kitchen table, I cried harder than I had cried at any storm.

It was quite an accomplishment. I want that written down plainly, without any false modesty, because Joe would never have said it about himself and somebody in this family ought to say it about him. A man who started with nothing — no trust fund, no family money waiting to smooth his way — built, with his own two hands and his own two decades of sacrifice, a home on McClain Drive that people in that town

still speak of. The family had grown up almost entirely in that trailer, and by the time we finally moved into the real thing, our three oldest were nearly grown themselves, and I remember standing in the doorway of that new home thinking, with a kind of ache I had not expected, that we had built the house our children needed years too late to raise them in it the way I had once pictured.

But there was still so much joy left to have in it. Life on McClain was good — truly good, the kind of good you only recognize in hindsight, which I suppose is the way the Lord designed it, so we would not spend the good years too busy bracing for the bad ones to actually feel them.

By 1990, all three of our children who would marry first had done so, and we threw them a lovely engagement party right there at the home, out on the terrace, and it remains, to this day, one of the most magical nights of my entire life. The band played until half past midnight. Everyone ate and danced until their feet gave out. We had the Mayor there, and the Chief of Police, and Arthur — Joe's oldest and dearest childhood friend — served as our butler for the evening and loved every single minute of playing the part, fussing over the details like it was his own children being celebrated. Even my mother, who had never in her life been the most complimentary of what Joe and I had built together out of hard work and love and a trailer full of tennis rackets, gave me a nod of approval that night that I had waited the

better part of thirty years to receive. I felt it land somewhere deep, that nod. I still feel it, telling you about it now.

Heaven was shining down on us that night. I want you to sit with that sentence for a moment before I tell you what came next, because I need you to understand — really understand — that we did not see it coming. Not one bit of it. We had weathered tornadoes and buried grandfathers and raised five children in a house on wheels and built ourselves, brick by brick, exactly the life we had once only dreamed about at a kitchen table by lamplight.

And then, less than a year later, on the ninth of January, everything we had built nearly came apart in a single phone call.

That is the next thing I have to tell you, and it is the hardest thing in this whole book to write. But I promised you the truth, all of it, the wonderful and the unbearable both, and I am not going to stop keeping that promise now, however much it costs me to keep it.

PART TWO: THE FIRST HELL

7. January 9th

David came to have dinner with us that January the way he did most weeks, and it was only partway through the meal, overhearing him talk to his father in that low, careful voice men use when they are trying to keep bad news small, that I understood something terrible had already happened before he'd walked through our door.

It was worse than what he'd told us at first. There had been a dispute — a commercial builder who was not paying his laborers on time, tempers run hot the way they will when a man works hard and does not get paid what he is owed, David and an eighteen-year-old boy who worked alongside him caught up in the middle of it. I do not fully understand, even now, every piece of what happened that day, and I am not going to pretend to you that I do. I only know what came after, which is that my son — my firstborn, the one who had watched the whole world with those same sharp, careful eyes since the day he was born in that little house on Kirkland — was arrested and charged with Capital Murder.

The newspapers ran it up and down the whole Delta. The radio had a field day. The television, too. I sat in my own home and watched my son's name pass across the screen attached to a word I could not make fit him no matter how many times I heard it, and I understood, in that moment, that

whatever life Joe and I had spent thirty years building — McClain Drive, the store, the good name we had worked so hard for — none of it was going to protect us from this.

That was the beginning of our hell. I do not use that word lightly, and I have not used it once in this whole book until now. But there is no gentler word for what those next three years actually were.

Our days took on a shape neither of us had ever lived before. We went to the bank and cashed CDs early — money we had been saving, money that had a name and a purpose before that January — because the lawyer needed his fee up front, and he told us plainly, without apology, that he did his best work when his money was already on the table. I understood him. I did not like him for saying it, but I understood him.

Most people were kind to us, I want that said. They brought cakes and pies and casseroles the way people do for a funeral, and in a way, it was one — a kind of death, the death of the life we had known, even with David still breathing, still ours, still somewhere in a cell we had not yet learned how to picture. I do not know how I would have survived those early weeks without my faith. I have told you already that I am not a woman who cries easily in front of others. I cried plenty in those weeks, alone, on my knees, asking God a question I did not yet have the strength to ask

anyone else out loud: why my son. Why this. Why us.

Our days, from that January forward, belonged to attorneys. That is the truest thing I can tell you about that entire year.

8. Wednesdays and Saturdays

They put David in a cell by himself. There had been so much written about the case, so much attention on it, that the jail decided isolation was safer — for him or for them, I was never entirely sure which. It had no running water. There was a leak in the ceiling that dripped for longer than it should have before anyone fixed it. We could only see him Wednesdays and Saturdays, and one time — one time — I forgot my license at home, and they would not let me in to see my own son over a piece of plastic in my wallet. I have never in my life felt so powerless over something so small.

I remember what it did to me physically, approaching that jail. My whole body would change before I even reached the door — a weight would settle on my chest, my breath would go thin, and I would say to myself, over and over, the same four words: I will not cry today. I bit down on my own tongue more than once, hard enough to hurt, so that the pain in my mouth might somehow carry off some of the pain in my heart. It rarely worked. It got harder every single visit, not easier, no matter what anyone tells you about growing used to hard things.

His wife brought his two little boys to see him — Matthew Joseph, still a baby, and John David, just old enough to understand there was glass between him and his

father and not old enough to understand why. I watched that child climb up onto a folding chair just to be closer to the window, reaching for a father he could not touch, asking with his whole small body a question none of us could answer for him. David would light up the moment he saw them. Whatever else that year did to my son, it never once dimmed what he felt looking at those boys.

The guards were not kind to him. I want that on the record plainly, without softening it the way I have softened so much else in this book. They chained his arm to a post outside and told him, “Run, boy — run,” and there is no way to hear those words about your own son and not feel something in you go cold and then catch fire, both at once. He was let outside once a day. It took most of his time there before they allowed him even a radio, though other men in that jail had one from the start.

I sat with him in the sheriff’s office some of those visits, because the sheriff — and I noticed this, I noticed it every single time — could not quite look me in the eye. I believe now that he could see plainly what I could see: a young mother, a four-month-old baby dressed like a small teddy bear, and a son who did not carry himself like the word the newspapers kept using about him. David went straight for the baby every time, every single visit, before he said a word to any of the rest of us. I sat and looked at the shackles on my son’s feet and thought of Christ on the road to Calvary,

and I know how that must sound to somebody who has never sat where I sat, but I promise you, when your own child is chained and you cannot do one thing about it, your mind goes looking for whatever comfort it can find, and mine went looking for Him.

David told me not to worry. He told me to take a trip, to get on with my life, as if a mother could simply set down a thing like that and walk off. He read his Bible when the confinement got to be too much to bear any other way. “It’s all in the Bible, Mom,” he told me once, and I believed him, because I needed to believe somebody in that place still had solid ground under him.

They shaved his head at one point, and I dreaded seeing him that way before I ever saw it — asked God plainly to help me not react, not let my face show him one more thing to carry. When I finally did see him, he seemed, strangely, in better spirits than he’d been in weeks. He thanked me for a book I’d sent him, by a writer named Oswald Chambers, and said he’d taken to it. I still think of that book every time I see a copy of it anywhere, all these years later.

He wore his watch the whole time he was allowed to. I think it was the last small thing that still connected him to the outside world — to time moving normally, to a life where a watch meant appointments and dinners and ordinary Tuesdays instead of Wednesdays and Saturdays measured

out in visiting hours.

I do not know how to end this chapter except to tell you the truth: it did not get easier. Every single person who has ever told me it gets easier has never once had a child behind glass. It got harder, every visit, all the way to the end.

9. What a Waste

There is a particular kind of grief that comes from watching a brilliant person be treated like nothing, and I lived inside that grief for two years without ever once getting used to the taste of it.

I remember thinking it plainly, sitting across from my son in that jail: what a waste. A handsome, gifted young man, raised right, loved without limit, and here he was being spit on for no reason at all, just to provoke him, just because someone in a uniform decided he could. I remember a small kindness that broke my heart more than any cruelty did — ten dollars given to a jailer on David's behalf, and how he told me it felt to him like pure gold, like the most precious thing anyone had handed him in months. Ten dollars. My son, who had grown up with every advantage Joe and I could give him, treasuring ten dollars like it was a fortune.

We ran into something in those months I had not expected and did not want to believe about a town I had come to love. When it came time to find him proper counsel, someone we trusted told us plainly that they could not find a Black attorney to represent him locally — that we would have to go out of town to find one. I did not understand, at first, why that mattered so much to David, why he pushed so hard for it. I understood it better by the end. He told me,

more than once, “Momma, you must leave here.” I did not know if he meant the jail, or Greenville itself, or something larger than either one. I still am not entirely sure. I only know I had not realized, until that year, exactly how much prejudice was still quietly shaping the place I had raised my children to call home.

I wrote, in my own diary that year, that David was an original masterpiece that had been destroyed and could not be repaired or replaced. I meant it the way a mother means a thing like that — not that he was ruined, but that something had been done to him that could never fully be undone, no matter what came after. Treated like an imposter. A copy. Something to be thrown away and forgotten. I could not reconcile that with the boy who used to run to Ivy Golden’s house when tempers flared, the boy who climbed a tree with his little brother instead of fighting, the man who lit up like a struck match every single time he saw his own children through a pane of glass.

I noticed small things changing in him as the months wore on. A patch of grey coming in at his hairline, far too young for it. His body thinner, his long arms and legs somehow longer for how little was left of him around them. And then, in the middle of all of it, on one ordinary visit, he looked at me and said the thing I have never once been able to say back to him without my voice breaking: “Well, Momma — one good thing. I’ve already had my family.”

He meant his boys. He meant that whatever else that place took from him, it could not touch the two small sons who reached for him through that glass every single Wednesday and Saturday. I have thought of that sentence more times than I could ever count, in the years since, on every hard night this family has handed me. I've already had my family. There are worse things a person could learn to hold onto, in a cell with no running water and a guard who told him to run.

10. Free

I was not there the day they finally told him. I wish I had been. I have imagined it more times than I can count — the door of that cell opening for a reason that had nothing to do with a visiting day, nothing to do with Wednesday or Saturday at all.

The truth came out the way the truth eventually tends to, in its own time, on its own terms, long after we had stopped being able to predict when or whether it ever would. The real man responsible for what had happened that day came forward — I do not know, even now, what finally moved him to it, whether it was his own conscience or simply the weight of watching an innocent man serve time that was never his to serve — and once he did, the whole terrible architecture of the case my son had been living inside of for two years came down all at once.

Two years. I want you to sit with that number the way I have had to sit with it every day since. Two years of Wednesdays and Saturdays. Two years of a little boy climbing onto a folding chair to reach a father he couldn't touch. Two years of shackles, and a shaved head, and ten dollars that felt like gold, and guards who told my son to run like he was something less than a man.

And then, one day, it simply ended, the way a storm ends — not gradually, not gracefully, but all at once, the sky clearing before you’ve even finished believing the worst of it is over.

I do not have the words, even now, even having written every other hard thing in this book plainly, to tell you exactly what that day felt like. I was not standing there when the door opened. But I know what it felt like the first time I held my son as a free man again, no glass between us, no chains, no visiting hours to watch the clock against. I know I did not let go of him for a very long time. I know Matthew Joseph and John David got to touch their father with their own two hands, finally, after two years of only ever reaching through a pane of glass, and I know that is a mercy I thanked God for every single day for the rest of my life.

David built himself back from that. I want you to know that plainly, because a story like this one could so easily end on the injustice of it and leave you there, and that would not be the truth of what happened next. He did not let two stolen years become the whole of his story. He went on. He lived. Whatever it cost him underneath — and I believe, to this day, that it cost him more than he ever let any of us see — he chose, over and over, in all the years that followed, to be a father to those boys and a son to us and a man who had survived something unthinkable rather than a man defined by it.

I think of that when I think of everything that came later — Joe's death, the lawsuit, everything Gregory did to Sharon and to me in the years after his father was gone. I think: this family has already survived worse than money. We survived two years of an innocent man in a cell. We can survive greed too, God willing, though I will tell you honestly, there were nights during the lawsuit when I was not at all certain of that.

But that is getting ahead of myself again. For now, I only want to leave you here, at the end of the worst of it — my son free, my grandsons finally able to touch their father, and a family that had just learned, the hardest way a family can learn anything, exactly how much it was capable of surviving together.

We did not yet know how much of that capacity we would need again.

PART THREE: THE LONG MIDDLE

11. Grown

There is a stretch of years in every family's life that nobody writes songs about, and I have come to believe those are usually the years worth the most.

By 1990 all three of our older children had married, and the house on McClain Drive that had once felt too small for a family bursting at every seam began, slowly, to feel too large and too quiet in a way I had not prepared myself for. I would walk past bedrooms that had belonged to teenagers not so long before and find them holding nothing but furniture and dust and the particular silence that comes after a house has finished the job it was built to do. I do not think anyone warns you about that silence. They warn you about the noise of raising children. Nobody sits a young mother down and tells her about the quiet that comes for her thirty years later, and how much of a grief it is, even wrapped up as it is in so much pride.

But grandchildren have a way of filling a house back up faster than you'd think possible, and ours did exactly that. I watched George and Ellen arrive into this world through Sharon the way I'd once watched my own five arrive, and I want to tell you, there is nothing — nothing — that puts the wind back into an old woman's sails quite like watching her own child become a parent themselves, doing all the same

impossible, exhausting, holy work you once did, only now you get to watch it instead of living inside every minute of it. I spoiled those two children the way only a grandmother is allowed to. I make no apology for it.

Joe did not slow down, not really, not in any way that would have satisfied a doctor telling him to. He still went to the store most days long after most men his age had handed such things off to somebody younger. He still had lunch with his own parents nearly every single day, right up until we lost them, because that was simply who my husband was — a man who believed, all the way down to his bones, that you did not wait for a special occasion to show up for the people who raised you. I watched him fill his siblings' gas tanks more times than I could count, pack their trunks full of groceries without a word about it, no charge, only love, exactly the way he had always done everything that mattered to him — quietly, without announcement, the same way he had once told a room full of fraternity boys he was going to marry me and then simply spent the rest of his life proving it instead of repeating it.

His temper, which had run hot when he was a younger man — I will not pretend otherwise, there were nights early in our marriage when Joe Shamoun could rattle the windows with how he felt about something — leveled out over those years into something steadier, something closer to the man I believe God had always intended him to become. I think

raising five children does that to a man, if he lets it. I think burying his own father, and then his own mother, and watching his oldest son survive two years behind glass, softened whatever hard edges were left in him into something more like patience, more like grace. By the time our grandchildren knew him, they knew a grandfather who moved slow and spoke slower, who would sit with them for an hour over nothing at all, who had somewhere, somehow, made peace with a life that had cost him more than most men would have survived with their peace intact.

I want to tell you about the ordinary Sundays, because I think they matter more than anything else in this chapter. The whole family gathering at McClain, or later at whichever child's home was hosting that particular year — too much food on the table, the way you always make when you're happy and don't quite trust the happiness yet not to disappear on you. David's boys grown taller every time I saw them, Matthew Joseph and John David turning from the small children I had watched reach through jailhouse glass into young men with their whole lives still ahead of them, untouched, or so I let myself believe, by what their father had survived before they were old enough to remember it clearly. Lisa Ann's family. John off pursuing his medicine, already so serious, so driven, even as a young man — I should have guessed he'd end up a surgeon, the way he approached everything in life like a problem that could be

solved if you were only careful enough about it. Gregory, in those years, was still simply my baby boy, still simply Sharon's closest friend in the family, the two of them thick as thieves the way siblings close in age sometimes are, before whatever happened to him later happened. I want that written down plainly, because I think it matters, going forward in this book, that you understand: there was a Gregory before all of this. A whole person, a whole boy who once climbed a tree instead of fighting, who loved his sister so much it worried me sometimes, how attached those two were to each other.

I did not know, gathering everyone around a table that was always, always too full of food, that I was living inside the last long stretch of ordinary happiness my family would ever get to have together, all seven of us, before the world found new ways to test what we were made of. I am glad I did not know it. I do not think a mother could bear to know a thing like that in advance. I think the Lord, in His mercy, only lets us see it once it's already behind us, so that we get to have the joy of it clean, before we understand what it cost to have had it at all.

12. Alpharetta

We were old before I let myself use that word about us.

I want to tell you how strange it is, growing old inside a marriage — how you do not notice the years accumulating on the man across the breakfast table from you, because you have never once stopped seeing him the way you saw him the night he told a room full of strangers he was going to marry you. But the mirror does not lie the way love does, and neither do the doctors' visits, which had begun, by then, to take up more and more of our calendar, and neither did the quiet way Joe had started needing help with things he would once have refused to admit he needed help with at all.

Sharon had been asking us for years, gently at first and then not so gently, to come be closer to her. I understood why, even as I resisted it — some part of a mother never stops wanting to be the one doing the caring, not the one being cared for, and moving to Georgia to live near my own daughter felt, for longer than I want to admit, like an admission I was not yet ready to make. I had built a whole life in the Delta and in Dallas both. I had a store, a church, a history in that ground so deep it ran under everything I was. Leaving it did not feel like moving. It felt like amputation.

But Joe's health had begun to turn in ways neither of us could keep pretending were temporary, and then the world itself turned strange and frightened all at once — I do not need to tell you what those COVID years were like, everyone alive during them carries their own version of that fear — and Joe and I found ourselves, two people who had never in sixty years been the type to sit still, virtually homebound, dependent on each other in a way even our sixty-five years of marriage had not quite prepared us for. I want to tell you plainly: it was my pleasure to care for him in those years. I do not say that the way people say things they feel obligated to say. He had been the love of my life since a convention in Dallas when I was twenty-one years old, and caring for him at the end of his strength, the way he had once cared for all of us at the height of his, felt less like a burden and more like the last, quiet gift I was allowed to give a man who had never once, in all our years together, made a show of asking for anything.

So we sold what needed selling, and we said goodbye to a house and a store and a piece of ground that held more of our life inside it than either of us could speak about without our voices catching, and we moved to a quiet town outside Atlanta called Alpharetta, close enough to Sharon that she could reach us in minutes instead of hours, close enough that when the day finally came — and some part of me believes now that some part of both of us already knew, without

saying it out loud, that the day was coming — she would be the one standing beside us when it did.

I will tell you, because I promised you the whole truth of this and I intend to keep that promise even where it costs me something to keep it: those last months in Georgia were some of the sweetest of my entire marriage, underneath all the fear of what was coming. Joe slowed all the way down, finally, after a lifetime of never once sitting still, and I got to sit with him — really sit, hours at a time, nothing between us but each other — in a way our whole busy, crowded, beautiful life together had rarely allowed. We talked about things we had never quite gotten around to saying out loud in sixty-some years of marriage. He told me, more than once, in that quiet way of his, that he had no regrets. That whatever else this life had cost him — his father, his mother, two years of his oldest son behind glass, decades of work that never once let up — he would live every single day of it again, exactly as it happened, if it meant ending up in the same chair, on the same porch, beside the same woman he'd pointed out across a crowded room before he'd ever learned her name.

I did not know, sitting on that Georgia porch, how few of those quiet afternoons we actually had left. I am glad, again, that I did not know. I got to have them the way I got to have that last magical night on the McClain terrace — clean, unclouded, before I understood what they were about to cost

me to have had at all.

PART FOUR: JOE

13. The Waiting Room

I want to tell you what an ordinary morning it was, because I think that is the part people never understand about the worst day of your life. It does not announce itself. It does not clear its throat first. It walks in wearing the same clothes as every other Tuesday you have ever lived.

We had a doctor's appointment. That is all it was supposed to be. Routine — a checkup, the kind we had gone to together more times than I could count in those last Georgia years, the kind where you sit in plastic chairs under fluorescent lights and read old magazines you have already read twice and complain, gently, to each other about how long it's taking, because complaining together had become, by then, its own small form of intimacy between two people who had run out of new things to say to each other after sixty-five years and had long since discovered that the old things, said again, were plenty.

Joe was in good spirits that morning. I want that remembered plainly, because so much of what follows is going to sound like darkness, and I do not want you to think it was dark the whole way through. He'd made some joke on the drive over, the kind of small dry joke he'd been making for six and a half decades, the kind I still laughed at every single time even though I'd heard some version of it a

hundred times before, because it was his, because the sound of him saying it was the thing I was actually laughing at, not the joke itself. We checked in. We sat down. We waited, the way you do, the way we always had, side by side, his hand finding mine on the armrest between us the way it had found mine in a thousand waiting rooms before that one.

I turned my head — I do not even remember why, some small ordinary reason, someone's name being called, a sound from the hallway — and when I turned back to him, everything had changed in the space of that one turned head. He was in distress. Real distress, the kind that does not look like anything on television, the kind that makes your whole body understand what is happening a full three seconds before your mind is willing to let the word form.

“Save me,” he said. “Save me.”

I have heard those two words in my sleep more nights than I can count since. I do not think I will ever stop hearing them. My husband — a man who had never once, in sixty-five years, asked me or anyone else to save him from anything, a man who had built a family and a business and a whole life out of nothing precisely because he had never once waited for anyone else to save him from a single hard thing — looked at me in a doctor's waiting room and asked me, plainly, twice, to save him. And I could not. That is the part that has never once let go of me. I could not.

I do not remember every detail of what happened next the way I remember the small ordinary things that came before it — that is its own strange mercy, I think, the way the mind protects you from the sharpest edges of the worst minutes of your life, blurs them just enough that you can go on living afterward. I remember calling out. I remember people in uniforms appearing, the way they do, fast and calm in a manner that terrified me more than panic would have, because their calm told me, before anyone said a word out loud, exactly how serious this was. I remember the ride to the hospital feeling both instant and endless, the way time does that to you when it matters most, folding in on itself so that I could not tell you afterward if it took ten minutes or an hour.

I called Sharon from that hospital hallway with a version of my hands shaking that I had never once felt in them before, not even the night of the tornado, not even watching my son through jailhouse glass. She was there faster than I had any right to expect a person to be there. I do not know, to this day, how she made that drive in the time she made it in. Mothers know things about their children's love that cannot be measured in minutes and miles, and I knew, the moment she walked through those hospital doors, that whatever was about to happen, I was not going to be the only one standing in the middle of it.

The others came too, in their own time, the way each of my children has always come to everything in their own time and their own way — some faster, some slower, some already halfway to a decision about what this all meant before they'd even seen their father's face. I am not going to tell you every detail of who said what in that hallway, because I have spent enough of this book already telling hard truths about my own children, and I want, in this one chapter, to keep my eyes only on Joe. He deserves at least one chapter that belongs entirely to him.

I sat beside that hospital bed and held his hand the same way I had held it on the armrest in that waiting room not three hours before, and I want to tell you something I have never told anyone else, not even Sharon, not even my own priest: some small, terrible, honest part of me was grateful, in the middle of the worst hours of my life, that I was the one sitting there. That after sixty-five years of being the one who packed the trailer and drove the children through the storm and cashed the CDs early and sat across from a shackled son on Wednesdays and Saturdays — after a whole life spent being the one who did the hard, quiet, necessary things nobody thanked her for doing — I was, at the very end, still exactly where I had always been. Beside him. Holding on.

He did not say much more, in the hours that followed. He did not need to. I had spent sixty-five years learning to hear everything Joe Shamoun meant even when he said

almost nothing at all, and I understood, sitting there, everything he could not say out loud anymore. That he loved me the way he had loved me since a convention in Dallas when we were both too young to understand what we were promising each other. That he was proud of what we had built, all of it, the trailer and the storms and the store and the five children and the grandchildren who bore his name into a future he would not get to see. That he was, even then, even in that bed, still trying, in whatever way was left to him, to take care of me one more time, the way he had taken care of everyone he had ever loved, quietly, without a single word of announcement.

He was not a man of many words in this life. I do not know what language they speak in Heaven, but I have to believe, knowing him the way I knew him for sixty-five years, that wherever he is now, he has finally found the words he spent this whole life saving up, and that somewhere, in whatever comes after this world, he is telling someone — his own mother and father, maybe, or Ivy Golden, or the Lord Himself — exactly how he felt about all of it, in full, at last, out loud.

I was not ready. I want that said plainly, because I think too many people believe that after enough years, enough warning, enough doctors' appointments, a person can be ready to lose the person they have loved longest. I was not ready. I do not believe there is a version of ready that exists

for a thing like that. I only know that I was there, that I held his hand until there was nothing left to hold onto but the shape of my own hand around where his had been, and that some part of me — the part of me, I think, that had first fallen for a quiet, certain, twenty-something-year-old man across a crowded room in 1957 — understood, even in the depth of that grief, that I had just finished living the best sixty-five years any woman could have asked God for.

I did not know yet what was coming for the rest of us in the months just ahead. I did not know that grief, in this family, was about to be handed a second face — not the clean, terrible, sacred grief of losing Joe, but something uglier, something that would make me question, for the first time in my whole life, whether the family I had spent sixty-five years building had ever really understood what Joe and I had actually been trying to teach them.

But that is not this chapter. This chapter belongs to him. So I will leave it here, in that hospital room, holding a hand that had held mine through every single storm this life ever sent us, and I will let him rest, one more page, before I have to tell you what came for the rest of us next.

14. Sixty-Five Years

There is a particular kind of silence that moves into a house after a funeral, once the casseroles have stopped coming and the people who loved you enough to sit with you for the first hard week have finally, gently, gone back to their own lives. I do not think anyone warns a widow about that second silence. The first one, the one that comes the moment the heart in the next room stops beating, is loud in its own way — full of phone calls and arrangements and a hundred small decisions nobody prepares you to make while you are still in shock. It is the second silence, the one that arrives two or three weeks later, once the house has emptied back out and it is only you and the shape of where he used to be, that is the true one. That is the one that asks you to actually sit inside sixty-five years and figure out what it was.

I have had a great deal of time, in the months since, to sit inside that question. I want to try to answer it here, as honestly as I know how, because I think it matters — maybe more than anything else in this book — that whoever reads this someday understands what my marriage actually was, underneath everything that came after it ended.

It was not loud. I have told you already that Joe was not a man of many words, and I do not want you to mistake that for a marriage that lacked feeling, because I promise you it

did not. It was the opposite, if anything — a marriage built almost entirely out of action instead of announcement. He told a room full of strangers, one time, at twenty-some years old, that he was going to marry me, and then he spent the next sixty-five years simply doing it, every single day, in a thousand small ways that never once needed to be spoken out loud to be true. He filled his siblings' gas tanks without a word. He worked from before light until after dark without ever once complaining about the hours it cost him. He built me a home on Kirkland, and then a home on wheels when Kirkland wasn't enough anymore, and then finally, after years of waiting, a home on McClain Drive that stood as proof, brick by brick, of every promise he had never needed to say out loud because he was too busy keeping it.

I think about the trailer years often now — more, if I am honest, than I think about McClain, grand as it eventually became. I think there was something about being poor together, cramped together, five children and two dogs and a rooster that crowed at all hours, that taught both of us a kind of love that money can't buy and, as it turns out, money can't destroy either, no matter how hard some people in this family have tried these last few years to prove otherwise. Joe used to say, back in that trailer, that if you wanted to get closer to your family, you should go live in a mobile home. I did not fully understand what he meant by that until much later in my life, watching what happened to this family once

there was finally enough money in it for people to start fighting over. Closeness, it turns out, was never about how much room you had. It was about how much of yourself you were willing to give away to the people in that room with you.

I think about the night of the tornado, the money bag bursting open in the mud, my son thinking he was running a football into the end zone in the middle of the worst storm of that whole summer. I think about David, thin and shackled and still lighting up like a struck match every time he saw his own children through a pane of glass. I think about Joe at that hospital bed, asking me, twice, to save him, and how the last thing my husband ever said to me was a request I could not fulfill, and how I have had to make my peace with that, slowly, one hard morning at a time, understanding finally that love does not require you to be able to save the person you love. It only requires you to stay. I stayed. I stayed for sixty-five years, and I stayed in that hospital room until there was nothing left to stay for but the memory of his hand in mine, and I would stay again, every single time, no matter what it eventually cost me to have loved someone that completely.

I wrote something down, not long after the funeral, on one of those nights when the second silence was at its loudest. I was not trying to write a poem. I do not think I have ever once sat down in my whole life and decided in

advance that I was going to write a poem — they simply arrive, the way grief arrives, the way grace arrives, without waiting for an invitation. But I want to include it here, exactly as I wrote it, because I think it says what the rest of this chapter has been circling around better than any of my own prose ever could.

“Well Done” — August 13, 2025

*Thank You, Lord, for all Your gifts — the gifts
of love and wedded bliss. My mate was really
one fine man You gave to me as my “eternal
talent.”*

*Sixty-five years of wedded bliss — children
came & filled our wish. We really gave our
best for them, no regrets, our minds at rest.*

*So — when we see Your face, O Lord, and
stand before Your throne, we can hear You say
“Well done” — “Welcome to My home.”*

Amen.

Phyllis A. Shamoun, August 13th, '25

I do not have anything to add after that poem that would not diminish it. I will only say this, and then I will let this chapter rest, the same way I let Joe rest at the end of the last

one: sixty-five years is not a long time, when you are living it one ordinary Tuesday at a time, one doctor's waiting room at a time, one storm and one trailer and one shackled visit at a time. It only becomes a long time once you turn around, the way I have had to turn around and look at all of it now, and understand that you built an entire life, brick by brick, word by unspoken word, with one quiet, certain man who decided the whole matter, once, at a convention in Dallas, and then never once had to decide it again.

He was right, that night, to be so certain. It had taken.

And now I have to tell you what almost destroyed it.

PART FIVE: THE SECOND HELL

15. Gregory's Call

I do not remember exactly which phone call was the first one where I understood something had changed in my son. I wish I did. I think if I could point to one single moment, I could make some sense of it, the way you can make sense of a storm once you've seen the radar. But it did not arrive like the tornado did, all at once, a warning on a screen and then a scramble for the door. It arrived slowly, the way rot arrives in a beam you can't see from the outside of the house, until one day something you trusted gives way beneath your feet and you understand, too late, that it had been going soft for months.

Gregory wanted control. That is the plainest way I can say it, and I wrote it down, in my own hand, not long after Joe died, because I did not trust my own memory to hold onto something that ugly without proof: Gregory wants control — all documents. Feels power gone. I do not know, even now, what power he believed he had lost when his father died, because his father had never once given him ownership over anything that wasn't rightfully his. But grief does strange arithmetic in a person's heart, and my son had begun, sometime in those first months without Joe, to calculate his own worth in a currency that had nothing to do with love.

I want to tell you about a document I still have, because I think it says more than I could say trying to describe it after the fact. In the weeks after we buried Joe, I sat down and wrote a short list — for myself, mostly, and for the first lawyer we brought in, a woman named Rachel — trying to put into plain numbered sentences what was actually happening to my family, because it had started to feel too large and too strange to hold in my head all at once.

Children upset over signing probate papers.

Gregory wants control — all documents. Feels power gone.

It is all about the money, not about the Mother.

David & Gregory, creating havoc with Sharon.

Sharon has done everything for me.

Gregory & Lisa never came. They had other things to do. Too busy.

I want to disinherit them.

I look at that list now and I am struck by how calm the handwriting is, how orderly, for a woman who was, underneath every one of those numbered lines, absolutely terrified of what her own children had started to become. I think grief does that too — it makes you very precise, very organized, right in the middle of the worst thing that has ever happened to you, because organizing the facts is the only thing left that still feels like control.

It is all about the money, not about the Mother. I wrote that sentence myself, and I want you to sit with it, because it took me longer than I am proud of to admit it was true. I had spent ninety-one years believing, the way every mother believes until she is forced not to, that whatever else my children fought about, they would never once fight about me — not really about me, not about my body or my mind or my right to decide where I wanted to live out whatever years I had left. I was wrong. Gregory did not want to know how I was doing. Gregory wanted to know what was in the accounts.

I remember the specific coldness of it. Not shouting — Gregory is a lawyer, and lawyers do not shout when shouting will not win them anything. It was worse than shouting. It was calm, and careful, and dressed up in language about my welfare, about “concern,” about wanting to “protect” me, while every actual question underneath the concern was about documents, about signatures, about who controlled what and when. He began insinuating, not long after, that I was not entirely of sound mind. My own son, looking at a woman who had raised five children in a trailer and buried two parents and sat through two years of jailhouse visiting hours without ever once losing her grip on herself, decided it was more useful to him to suggest that I had finally lost it.

I am of sound mind and health. I wrote that too, in my own hand, underlined, because I understood even then that I might need to prove it to someone eventually, and I was not going to let anyone else's version of my mind become the official one.

David, for his part, joined in, in his own way — not the architect of it, I do not believe that, but willing, in those months, to make things harder for Sharon than they needed to be, willing to let old resentments about who got what attention find a new outlet in all this. I wrote that down too: David & Gregory, creating havoc with Sharon — threatened Sharon and John. I did not know yet, writing that sentence, how much worse the threatening was going to get before it got better, or that it would take my daughter's health — mentally, physically, financially — down with it before this was over.

Gregory and Lisa did not come. I want that in this book plainly, because I think silence is its own kind of cruelty, and theirs was loud in exactly the way silence can be loud when it is chosen instead of circumstantial. They had other things to do. I do not know what those things were more important than a ninety-one-year-old mother trying to understand why her family was coming apart in front of her. I have stopped asking myself that question. Some questions do not have answers worth the energy it costs to keep asking them.

I made my decision quickly, once I understood what was actually happening. John and Sharon became my power of attorney — the two children who had shown up, actually shown up, with their hands and their time and their patience, instead of their calculations. I want to disinherit them, I wrote, about the others, and I meant it in that moment with the whole of my ninety-one-year-old heart. Whether I ever went through with the whole of what that sentence threatened is a different matter, one I will get to later in this book. But I want you to understand that I wrote it, and that I meant it when I wrote it, because I think too many people believe a mother's love has no bottom to it. Mine does. I found the bottom of it in the fall of 2024, and it had my youngest son's name written all over the walls of it.

16. My Sharon

I have spent a great deal of this book telling you about my own hardships — David’s cell, Joe’s last breath, the tornado, the trailer. I have not yet told you, plainly, what it did to me to watch my daughter carry the weight of what came after Joe died, because I think it is the hardest chapter in this whole book for a different reason than the others. The others happened to me directly. This one happened to me sideways, through watching, which turns out to be its own particular kind of suffering — helpless in a way that active suffering never quite is.

Sharon has done everything for me. I wrote that in the same November notes where I wrote everything else, and I want to expand on it here, because “everything” is doing a great deal of quiet work in that sentence and I think it deserves to be unpacked properly.

She was the one who came when Joe was in that waiting room. She was the one who found me a home in Georgia when the Delta and Dallas both had finally become too much house for two aging people to keep up alone. She was the one who sat with me through the worst of the funeral arrangements, who fielded the phone calls I could not bear to field myself, who took my power of attorney not because she wanted power over anything, but because she was the only

one of my five children who had never once, in ninety-one years of my life, asked me for a single thing in return for her love.

And Gregory sued her for it.

I want to say that sentence again, plainly, because I think it needs to be said more than once before it can be fully understood: my son sued my daughter for taking care of me. He dressed it up in other language — money, gold, a Rolex, a ring that had belonged to my own mother, twenty thousand dollars that existed nowhere except in whatever story he had built for himself — but underneath every filed document, underneath every deposition and every subpoena, the actual charge against my daughter was that she had loved me too visibly, too consistently, in a way the rest of them had not, and someone in this family had decided that visible love needed to be punished rather than matched.

I watched what it did to her. I am her mother, and I have known her face since the moment she was born with those big brown eyes I once wrote a poem about without knowing, all those decades later, how much use I would still have for that same image — my sparrow, small and scrawny-legged and somehow, impossibly, strong enough to survive anything anyone threw at her. I watched the fight take weight off her that she could not afford to lose. I watched her stop sleeping the way a person stops sleeping when their

mind will not let go of a problem even in the dark. I watched her answer phone calls with a particular careful flatness in her voice that I had not heard from my daughter since she was a small girl learning, for the first time, that not everyone in this world was going to be kind to her.

I could not fix it. I want that written down plainly, because I think it is the hardest sentence in this entire chapter to write. I had spent my whole life fixing things for my children — packing the trailer, cashing the CDs, sitting through the shackled visits, holding the whole family together through storm after storm after storm — and here, finally, at ninety-one years old, I ran up against a thing I simply could not fix for the child who had never once asked me to fix anything for her.

All I could do was be there. I sat with her some nights when the invoices from the lawyers came in and she went quiet in that particular way that told me she was doing math in her head she did not want to be doing. I told her, more than once, that I did not care about the gold, that I had never cared about the gold, that her father had given me that box with three words on an index card and none of those three words had ever once been about money. I told her to let it go, eventually — not because I did not understand what she was fighting for, but because I had already lost one child to two years behind glass, and I was not prepared, at my age, to watch this family cost me another one, even if what it cost

her this time was only her peace instead of her freedom.

She listened to me, eventually. That is its own chapter, later in this book. But I want this chapter to end here, on the plain fact of what I watched her carry, because I do not think anyone in this family — least of all Gregory — ever fully understood what it cost my daughter to be the good one. Being the good one is not free. I know that now in a way I did not fully understand until I watched Sharon pay the bill for it, month after month, for three long years.

17. Nine Lawyers

I want to tell you what three years of legal war does to an old woman's understanding of time, because I do not think I fully grasped it myself until I sat down to write this chapter and tried to count the attorneys by name and could not, at first, get past six without having to stop and think hard.

Rachel was first. I have told you about her already — the woman I brought my numbered list to, the one who helped me understand, in those earliest raw weeks, that what was happening to my family had a name and a shape the law could recognize, even if it could not yet fix it. She did not last, in the end, not because she was not capable, but because a case like the one Gregory built does not stay still long enough for any one attorney to hold onto it for long. It grows new arms. It demands new specialties. It outpaces whoever is standing in front of it, again and again, until you find yourself, three years later, trying to remember the name of the fourth lawyer, or the sixth, the way you try to remember the name of a town you passed through once on a long drive and never meant to stop in.

I wrote things down during those years the way I have written things down my whole life, because writing has always been the one place I could put the parts of myself that had nowhere else safe to go. Some of what I wrote, from that

November, I still cannot read back without my hands going cold:

David has mental issues.

Gregory takes advantage.

Abuse has to Stop.

Trust done ASAP.

Isolating me — emotionally abusive.

Sending texts & pictures.

I do not want to explain every one of those lines to you in detail, because some of what happened in those years belongs only to me, the way some griefs are too particular to hand to a reader whole. But I want the words themselves preserved here, exactly as I wrote them, because I believe there is a version of this story — the version some people in my own family would prefer — where none of this ever happened at all, where a ninety-one-year-old woman simply lived out her last years in peaceful comfort while her children quietly settled a difference of opinion about an inheritance. That is not what happened. What happened is written above, in five short lines I wrote to myself in the dark because I did not yet trust anyone else to believe me.

The attorneys came and went. Some of them were sharp and cold in a way that served us well for a season and then stopped serving us at all once the case shifted shape again.

Some of them, I believe, simply could not stomach what they were seeing — a mother's own son building a case that hinged, in part, on convincing a judge she could no longer be trusted to know her own mind. I do not blame any of the ones who stepped back. This was not an easy case to stand inside of for very long. It asked something of everyone who touched it, and not everyone had that particular something to give.

By the time we reached the ninth, I had stopped expecting any lawyer to be the last one. That is its own kind of exhaustion — not the exhaustion of a single terrible night, but the exhaustion of hope worn thin by repetition, the way a stone in a river gets worn thin not by one flood but by three years of ordinary water passing over it, day after day after day.

Michael Wynn was different from the start, though I did not know yet how different. Harvard-trained, careful, the kind of quiet competence that reminded me, in some strange way I did not expect, of Joe himself — a man who did his work instead of announcing it. I did not know, when Sharon hired him, that he was carrying his own private grief the whole time he carried ours — a son of his own, sick in a way no father should ever have to watch a child be sick. I found out later, the way you find out these things, sideways, through some offhand remark that told you more than the person meant to tell you. I have thought of that man and his

son many times since, and I have prayed for both of them more nights than I could count, because I believe the Lord puts people in your path for reasons you do not always get to understand right away, and I believe Michael Wynn was put in ours to carry us the last, hardest mile of this particular road, even while he was walking his own far harder one alongside us.

Nine lawyers. Three years. A mother's own handwriting turning colder and more frightened, line by line, across a single autumn. That is what it actually costs to fight a war like this one, and I do not think anyone who has not lived through it can understand the number until they have counted it themselves, the way I finally sat down and counted it, writing this chapter, and found my own hands going cold all over again.

18. The Settlement

I was not in the room when it finally ended, and I have thanked God for that mercy more times than I can count.

Sharon came to me one evening — I remember it was evening, because the light does something particular in Georgia that time of year, gold and low and forgiving in a way the rest of the day never quite manages — and she told me what she wanted to do. Give Gregory the coins. Give him the watch. Give him my own mother's ring, which had sat untouched in my jewelry box for sixty-five years until four grown adults decided it was worth fighting a war over. Give him whatever number would finally make it stop.

I want to tell you plainly that I told her yes before she had even finished asking. I had watched this fight take pieces of my daughter I did not know how to give back to her, and I had buried a husband and sat behind jailhouse glass with a son and survived a tornado in a mobile home with my whole family's savings scattered in the mud, and I understood, sitting across from Sharon in that gold evening light, that I had exactly one thing left in this life that could not be replaced, and it was not sitting in a fireproof safe. It was sitting across the table from me, thinner than she should have been, asking her mother's permission to finally put the fight down.

Take the coins, I told her. Take the watch, take the ring, take the money — take all of it, and let it buy us something no lawyer could ever put a price on. Let it buy us the rest of whatever years I have left, spent with the people who actually came when I needed them, instead of spent in conference rooms proving to strangers that I still know my own name.

It settled faster than any of us expected, once we stopped trying to win it and started trying only to end it. I have thought about that a great deal since — how three years of grinding, of nine lawyers and a mother's cold-handed diary entries and a daughter worn down to nothing, ended within days once somebody finally stopped asking to be right and started asking only to be free. Gregory got everything he had ever named in that lawsuit. Every object. Every dollar. I do not believe, to this day, that it has made him one particle happier than he was the morning before he filed the first paper against his own sister, and I say that without triumph, only with a mother's plain sorrow, because I would have given him twice what he took if it had ever once been about anything real.

I signed what needed signing. I said the things that needed saying, in the careful, sound, entirely-of-my-own-mind way I had spent three years proving I was still capable of saying them. And then it was

over — not resolved, not healed, not made right in any way that a settlement can actually make a family right, but over, in the only sense that mattered anymore: no more filings. No more subpoenas reaching for the people who had only ever tried to help us. No more of my daughter's sleepless nights spent doing math on a kitchen table.

I sat on my porch that evening, the same gold light settling down over Georgia, and I thought about a mobile home called The New Horizon, and how Joe and I had named it, all those decades ago, hoping it might weather whatever storms came looking for us. I thought about how many storms it actually did weather, and how the worst one, in the end, had not come from the sky at all. It had come from inside my own family, dressed up in documents and gold and a son's cold, careful voice insisting it was never about the money.

It was always about the money. I know that now, plainly, the way I know my own name. And I have made my peace, as much peace as a mother can make with a thing like that, with the fact that some of my children chose the money, in the end, over me.

But some of them chose me. And that, it turns out, was always going to be worth more than anything sitting in that fireproof safe.

PART SIX: THE NEW HORIZON, AGAIN

19. George and Ellen

I want to tell you plainly, before I tell you anything else in this chapter, that I did not raise my grandchildren the way I raised my children. I did not have the years for it, or the hands-on shaping of them day by day the way I'd had with my own five. And yet, when the worst came — when Joe died, and then when the lawsuit came for the rest of us — it was not my own children, by and large, who dropped everything and came running. It was two of my grandchildren. George and Ellen. Sharon's own.

George lives down the street from us now, in Fort Lauderdale, close enough that he could be at my door in minutes if I ever needed him, and I want you to understand what that closeness actually means, because it did not happen by accident. He chose it. A young man, still building his own life, still working harder than most men twice his age to make something of himself as a developer, and he chose to build that life within arm's reach of his grandmother instead of somewhere easier, somewhere less complicated by an old woman's doctors' appointments and an old woman's grief. He handles things now that I never once expected a grandson to handle — the attorneys, the details of the house, making sure the people who care for me are the right people, making sure I am happy and healthy in a

way that takes real vigilance to maintain at ninety-one years old. He carries more of this family's daily weight than anyone would guess from the outside, watching him laugh the way he laughs, easy and warm, like none of it costs him anything at all. I know better. I have watched him battling his own happiness some nights, trying to hold up a household and a business and a grandmother all at once, and I have prayed for him the same way I once prayed for David behind that glass — quietly, fiercely, asking God to give him back some of what he keeps giving away to the rest of us.

Ellen is the same, in her own way, though her way is busier, faster, dressed in the particular exhaustion of a woman who became a fine attorney and has never once, since the day she passed that bar exam, been able to fully set the work down. She is too busy. I want to say that plainly and lovingly both, because it is true and because it does not diminish one particle of how much she has helped us. She works the legal matters from wherever she happens to be, fits us in between the demands of her own full life, and shows up, every single time, even when showing up costs her sleep she cannot spare. I have told her more than once that she does not owe us this — that she has her own life to build, same as George does — and she looks at me, every time, like the very idea of not helping had never once occurred to her as an option worth considering.

I think about this often, weighing it against everything else in this book. Three of my own five children found ways, in the last years of my life, to make their love conditional — conditional on money, on control, on old resentments finally finding a place to land. And two children I did not raise with my own two hands, who came to me one generation removed from the woman who raised them, gave me something my own children could not: love with no conditions attached to it at all. They did not calculate what was in it for them. They simply came, and then they stayed, and they are still here, down the street and a phone call away, the two steadiest hands in this whole long, complicated family story.

I do not believe blood decides who shows up for you in this life. I believe character does. I have had the whole of my ninety-one years to learn that lesson, and it took my own family, in the end, to teach it to me the hardest and most thorough way possible — by some of them failing to show up at all, and two of the youngest among us showing up anyway, without being asked twice.

20. Where I Am Now

I am writing this from a garden.

I want you to picture it exactly, because I have spent a great deal of this book asking you to sit with hard things, and I think, having earned it, both of us deserve to end somewhere soft. Hibiscus along the back fence. A mango tree my grandson planted half as a joke that is, improbably, thriving. A pool that catches the last of the Florida light every evening the same gold color that used to settle over my porch in Georgia, as if the light itself followed me here, unwilling to let go of me any more than I am unwilling to let go of everyone I have loved and lost along the way to this particular chair, on this particular afternoon.

Two yellow butterflies visit most days. I did not expect, when I sat down to write about them the first time, that they would come to mean as much to me as they have — but they do, and I have written about them more than once now, because I have come to believe they are trying to tell me something I need, some days, real help to hear.

Two yellow butterflies fly to visit every day.

They seem so happy to be out to play. They share the symbol of hope for all the world to see, to tell us that everything will be okay, if

we just believe.

I believe it, most days. I want to be honest with you, in this last chapter, and tell you that not every day is a day I believe it easily. I am ninety-one years old. I have buried a husband of sixty-five years. I have watched a son survive two years behind glass for a crime he did not commit. I have watched three of my own five children choose gold over their own mother, and I have written things in the dark, in my own hand, that I never once believed I would live long enough to need to write. Some days the grief still finds me exactly the way it found me in that waiting room, sudden and total, and I sit with it the only way I have ever known how to sit with anything hard — quietly, on my knees some nights, asking God the same question I have been asking Him my whole life. Why. Simply, plainly, why.

I do not always get an answer. I have made my peace with that too, in these later years, the way I have made my peace with so much else this life handed me that I never once asked for.

But I want to tell you about the sparrow, because I wrote a poem about her too, and I think, of everything in this book, it is the truest thing I have ever written about my daughter.

*He should be gone, he is so small — but never
underestimate: the tiny one has nerves of steel
and can handle any weight. So — when crisis*

*comes to us and we fear the fall, Jesus comes
and catches us from it all.*

I wrote Sharon's name right next to that poem in my journal, because I knew, writing it, exactly who I meant. My youngest daughter, the sparrow of this whole family — small in the world's eyes, easy to underestimate, the one everyone assumed would simply absorb whatever was asked of her without complaint. She absorbed more than any of us had a right to ask of her. And she never once fell, not all the way, not permanently, no matter how many storms this family sent her way. I have watched her land on her feet more times than I can count, and I believe, the way I believe most things now, that it was never her own strength alone that caught her. It was grace, working through a small woman with nerves of steel, exactly the way the poem says.

I think about Joe more than I think about almost anything else, sitting out here some mornings before the heat comes up. I have written to him, in a way, in nearly everything I've put down on paper these last two years — asking Jesus to send the bus, asking to see his face again, telling anyone who will listen that I have already had my share of this life's riches and I am ready, whenever the Lord decides, to go be with the man who told a room full of strangers, one time, sixty-eight years ago now, that he was going to marry me.

*Hurry, Jesus, send the bus — the one that is to
pick me up. I'm very sad and need to go to see
my friends and my "special" beau. By the
way, his name is Joe.*

I do not write that from despair. I want you to understand that clearly, whoever you are, reading this someday — my own children, my grandchildren, some stranger who never knew any of us. I write it from faith. I have lived ninety-one years, most of them hard, all of them full, and I am not afraid of where I am going next. I have paid the price, as I wrote once, and I am only waiting, now, for the bus to come — and until it does, I intend to sit right here in this garden, watching my two yellow butterflies do their quiet, faithful work, surrounded by the people who actually chose to stay.

That is the whole of what I have to tell you. Not justice — I do not believe this story ends in justice, not the kind courts hand out, not the kind that makes the score come out even. Only a woman in a garden, the daughter who finally learned when to put the fight down, two grandchildren who showed up when it mattered most, and a marriage that gave her sixty-five years of proof that love does not need many words to be entirely, permanently true.

Well done, Lord. Whatever comes next — well done.

THE END