

LIVING IS SO BIG



Life Appreciation

"Darkness to Light"

By: Christopher & Jesus Agudo

Based on a true story

LIVING IS SO BIG

This book was written to show what transpired before and after the birth of Living Is So Big. It gives a detailed view of both darkness and Light. It tells a true story of a family hit hard by a near tragedy.

Despite all of the clutter, distractions, depression, negativity and darkness that come our way, we still have the choice to see and realize all that life has to offer. The love, happiness, joy, positivity and light exist each and every day. What you choose to bring into your life is solely up to you. We ask that you make the realizations of all the good that life has to offer and truly begin living your life to its greatest potential.

Our first LISB event on August 29, 2010



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Christopher Jay Agudo
& Jesus Agudo

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PREFACE

Before April 10th 2010, not much effort was put into living our lives to the fullest. Every day for us was just that, another day, nothing special. However, on that day, our views on living life were forever changed. After we nearly lost our youngest son, life itself has become so much more precious. We made the realization that living *itself* is so big, and life should always be appreciated.

LISB spreads awareness about the positive and uplifting moments in life that most of us tend to pass over, forget, or take for granted. It seems to have become commonplace for us to focus on the aspects of life that make us feel uncomfortable. Most of us have a natural tendency to dwell in feelings of sorrow and despair. This narrow form of thinking ultimately blinds us from the bigger picture, that Living Is So Big!

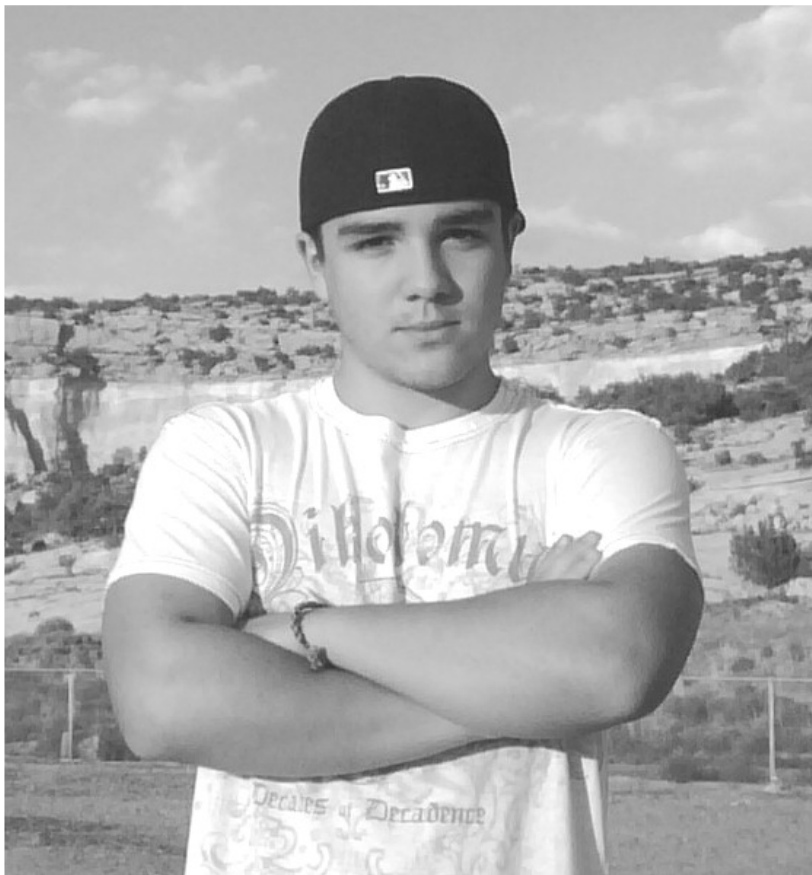
Regardless of what anyone is going through, it is the intention of LISB to make the day brighter and more fulfilling. It is our intention to provide reasons to continue living, while developing genuine appreciation for the little things in life, and gaining a deeper understanding that the world itself and everything in it is truly beautiful.

LIVING IS SO BIG

“Darkness to Light”

Chapter 1

Darkness



Christopher Jay Agudo

As I tightened the rope around the branch I knew for certain it wouldn't come loose this time. I learned from the first failed attempt that I needed to tie the knot tightly enough to hold my weight. I double knotted the rope around the branch, and then did another and another, until my fingers became sore from tightening as hard as I could. I readjusted the rope around my neck and did a practice pull. I leaned forward off the branch into mid-air and looked at the ground. "Alright, I guess this is it."

Now let's rewind a little bit and find out why I'm in this situation on April 10th, 2010. Hi, my name is Christopher Jay Agudo and here is my story of how I fell into the darkness.

* * *

The bell rang as a feeling of relief poured out of me. "Don't forget that all of you have a quiz this coming Friday. And don't think that you can get out of it by skipping that day. I'll only make the quiz harder for you on Monday," my history teacher said playfully. We all left the classroom to go do whatever we wanted to since it was the end of the school day. As for me, I was going to play football with my friends on the field like I did every other day after school.

As I left the building to go play football, I felt a refreshing breeze of cool air grace me. I noticed the vivid sky stretching out with a couple of puffy clouds scattered throughout the sea of blue. The leaves and palms of the trees danced around in the wind. The fresh smell of recently cut grass lingered around the premises. What a beautiful day. I mean, this was Florida after all.

"Hey, you're Chris, right?" I turned around and noticed a really pretty girl with curly brown hair from one of my classes. I was excited that she decided to talk to me. As cool as a cucumber I said with a smile, "Yeah, you're in my English class. It's about time you started talking to me."

“Yeah, well we should hang out,” she said happily as she walked away. Her words had me cheerfully sitting on a cloud. I felt like king of the world.

What an amazing day this was turning out to be. The weather was beautiful, I was about to play football with my friends, and now this. Wow. Getting hit on by this beautiful girl made me start to feel like I might actually be able to forget about Sarah. Sarah was back in Kansas, and I was here in Florida. I didn’t live there anymore, and I couldn’t just miss her forever. I guess it *was* about time to move on. There were just a few months left before I was supposed to graduate high school. Life was getting better.

At that moment, I felt my cell phone vibrate in my pocket. I looked to see who was calling. It was Dexter, a good friend from Kansas. I had no way of knowing at the time, but this call was going to forever change me.

“Hey, Chris.”

“Hey, what’s up bro? Long time, no speak. How you been, man?” I asked.

“Mike and Anthony. They died, dude. They were drinking and driving and didn’t make it. They burned and couldn’t escape, man.”

Mike and Anthony were two of my good friends.

At first, I thought he was joking. I mean he always joked around. So I replied, “Oh, that sucks. How do you know?” as I waited for the punch line.

“It’s the talk around school. There’s a news channel website that has their story fully covered. If you don’t believe me, go to kmbc.com and see for yourself. They were so stupid for doing that! Why would they do that?” I heard his voice crack. It seemed really weak and distant.

I thanked him for letting me know. I wasn’t sure what else to say. I said I would check out the website when I got home.

I was in disbelief. I didn't know what to think. I had it in my mind that there was no way anything like that could happen to any of *my* friends.

I was in shock. I needed to find out for myself if Dexter was telling the truth or not. So, I decided to skip the football game and instead went straight home.

When I got there I checked the news website and found the story about my friends. "2 Olathe South Students Killed in Crash". There was a video, and I knew all the kids who were interviewed. In fact, Mike's picture in the video was a picture that I took one day when we were hanging out at his house.

A strange feeling started brewing within me, something I had never felt before. When I say it was strange, I mean STRANGE. I didn't understand this feeling, nor did I know what to think. So I went on a jog in an attempt to gather my thoughts. I didn't know what else to do. I ran for almost two hours.

I kept seeing the story play in my head. I couldn't believe what I heard. They said the car went through the intersection at a high rate of speed, snapped a power pole in half, flew 100 feet and clipped the corner of a roof, then flew another 75 feet before it caught fire and burned. I knew it was real because I saw the news report with my own eyes, but part of me refused to fully accept that it was *my* friends who died in that car. I went to sleep that night in a state of numbness.

The next morning came and with it came school. I still felt nothing and couldn't figure out why.

The bell rang and lunch, one of my favorite parts of the school day, arrived. "Chris, are you going to the field after school to play some football?" my friend Max asked as he was chowing down on a slice of revolting cafeteria pizza. He probably asked me that since I didn't show up the day before. I didn't feel like telling him why. Since I planned on being there that day, and to keep him from asking any more

questions, I responded, “Yeah, of course, dude. What kind of a question is that?” He looked at me in agreement. I loved playing football every day. Why wouldn’t I be there?

For some reason, the school day seemed to go by much slower than usual. It was as if time had slowed down. As my teachers lectured, I became more distant with each word. I blocked out their voices. My notes transitioned from equations and useful information to drawings and random scribbles. My thoughts kept going back to Mike and Anthony. It started getting to me. Out of nowhere, I became angry.

It was starting to hit me that my friends were really gone. They weren’t coming back. I was never going to see them again. Why would they do that?!

As I sat in my Math class, I found myself much more bored than usual. Even though I liked my teacher, I couldn’t concentrate on anything he was saying. It got to a point where I just couldn’t sit there anymore. So, I went to the bathroom to splash water on my face. I walked up to the sink, turned on the cold water, and wet my face with my hands. The water didn’t help. I still felt overwhelmed. And since no one was in there I punched the glazed concrete wall as hard as I could. I’m surprised I didn’t break my hand.

This release of anger seemed to calm me down temporarily. I took a deep breath, dried my face and went back to class. As the school day came to an end, I just wanted to go home. I hoped no one would notice or talk to me as I was leaving. I knew I told Max that I would play football when I spoke to him during lunch, but for some strange reason I decided to go home instead. I wanted to be alone, but I didn’t know why. So, I skipped the football game for the second day in a row.

* * *

As the days passed I began to change. I was becoming angrier and sadder. I was changing from a silly,

fun-loving and happy Chris into a sad, angry and upset Chris. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and I didn't know what to do about it. I never thought that I would lose *any* of my friends. I certainly couldn't have imagined that I would lose two at the same time. I mean, I'd heard on the news before about teenagers dying from drinking and driving, but it was always people I didn't know. I never thought that I would have to deal with something like this. Well it happened, and I was struggling.

I had started feeling really bad. I didn't know how to describe this feeling. The only term that seemed to fit was "depression". I had heard about depression before, of course, but I didn't want to put myself in that category. No way. Not possible. Me? I'm not depressed and never will be. Only weak, hopeless, and sick people are depressed. I had it in my mind that I was just angry and sad. Depression could never happen to me.

I kept all these feelings on the inside because I was embarrassed. I didn't want anyone judging me. So, I decided that NO ONE could know about this! I was going to hide this terrible new feeling and continue to appear as happy as I had always been. No one would know about the new me.

* * *

That Sunday night before school, this unfamiliar new feeling was so bad that I felt like I just needed to lie down. I told my parents that I wanted to go to bed early. I never went to bed early.

I walked upstairs to my room and closed the door behind me. I went straight to bed and started crying. It was finally starting to really hit me. This was all real. The crash happened. Anthony was gone. Mike was gone. We were never going to be able to hang out again. It just wasn't fair. I was so angry. I ended up crying myself to sleep that night.

The next morning, the sadness was still there. It just wasn't going away. So, I gave in to it. It seemed like I had

no choice. But I still wasn't willing to admit to anyone that I was depressed, even though I was.

At this point, it didn't even seem to matter that my parents loved me infinitely. Oh, and I knew that they loved me. I always got the "I love you" and "we are proud of you" along with the hugs and kisses. But, I was too depressed to care. It was as if I didn't want to be loved.

I dragged myself through the next three days. I felt no love and had no fun at home or school. Everything looked bleak. What was once colorful became black and white. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. Each day was darker than the day before.

As I was trying to do my homework that Friday night, the dog across the street was relentless. "Bark, bark, bark." It just wouldn't shut up. I had almost no patience and my temper had developed a really short fuse. This dog was certainly not making me feel any better.

As it continued to bark I asked myself, "Why am I even doing homework? I mean seriously, who cares about homework? I don't. It's super boring and pointless anyway." So, I decided I wasn't going to *do* homework anymore. I no longer saw the point. This feeling of depression caused me to start making some very irrational choices.

The barking didn't stop. I couldn't take it any more. I slammed my pencil on the table, stood up, and crushed the ground with each step as I walked towards the front door. When I got outside, the barking sounded like an alarm going off that just wouldn't stop. I wanted to find the owner and make them feel my frustration.

"Excuse me, do you live here?" I asked the lady.

"Yes, can I help you?" she replied.

"Well, you know your dog has been barking for about thirty minutes. I have a headache. Your window is open for the whole world to hear. And it doesn't sound very appealing to someone trying to do their homework across the street."

I was very straight-to-the-point with her. I didn't even care if I was disrespectful. My mind was running a million miles an hour. Part of me wanted to cuss her out, kick down the door, and run her over with a bus. But I hadn't yet fallen that deep into the darkness. Even though confronting this lady the way I did was out of character for me, I still somehow knew that cussing and breaking down doors was not very civilized. And I didn't have a bus.

"I'm so sorry. It's just that my dog doesn't like being alone. I had to leave for a little while. I opened the window so she could breathe and not be claustrophobic in my room."

She looked distraught.

"Well, next time close the window!" I said as I walked away furiously. My temper was getting out of control.

This depression was putting me in a very dark place. It was controlling my thoughts and feelings. And it was now beginning to have power over my actions.

When I got back to the house, I cemented my decision. I wasn't going to do homework ever again. So, I shoved everything into my backpack and threw it in my room. I lied to my parents and told them that I had finished my homework even though I hadn't.

I decided to go running instead. I grabbed the ipod and earphones and set up my favorite playlist. I thought maybe I could outrun my feelings.

I went through the front door and ran without looking back. I ran so long that by the time I got home it was already dark. I felt a *little* calmer, probably because I was physically exhausted. So, I decided to go to sleep.

The next morning came with the sound of my alarm. I shut it off quickly and remained in bed. I looked at my phone and saw that it was Saturday. I got angry at myself because I had forgotten to take off the alarm.

As I continued to lie there, I started thinking about a strange dream that I had the night before. It seemed so real. My two friends were there. And even though I was aware within the dream that they had died, they seemed so happy and healthy. I asked Mike, "So what's it like on the other side? How does it feel?" He didn't respond. He just smiled.

What exactly did that dream symbolize? Was it a message to let me know that they were okay and that I didn't need to feel depressed anymore? This thought gave me peace for a moment. But it was only a moment. It was just a dream. Reality set in, and I knew my friends weren't happy and healthy. They were dead.

* * *

On Monday, I saw that my grades had begun to slip. Since I wasn't doing homework anymore, I wasn't surprised. I had stopped caring. The only reason I continued going to school at all was because it gave me something to occupy my time, and it helped me to appear normal. Although I may have seemed like my old self on the outside, on the inside I was going through turmoil. It was becoming more and more obvious that the old Chris was gone. My world was going dark.

A heavy darkness followed me everywhere I went, and I welcomed it. What other choice did I have? I seemed to have no control over it anyway. I had become a puppet to the darkness... this feeling of depression.

I didn't feel any sense of hope in the world in which I was living. At least that's how I thought at the time. If the sun was shining, I saw the dark rain clouds that were there to block the light. There never seemed to be any rays of light for me.

The bell rang as everyone rushed to leave school. As I walked out of my class, Max was waiting for me. "Cuban, you missed every game last week. You gotta play today so

we can wreck everyone on the field.” He called me “Cuban” sometimes because, well, I’m Cuban.

“You know what,” I lied, “I actually have a lot of homework to do and am not feeling that great. I think I’m coming down with a cold.”

He stared at me and said, “Alright man, I’ll see you later.” We did a handshake and parted ways.

I was surprised he didn’t ask any questions. I had never missed so many games in a row before. Lies were now pouring out of me like a broken fire hydrant. I was getting good at lying. It was becoming easier to avoid contact with people.

As I walked outside to get picked up from school, I noticed all around me that kids were laughing and playing. Something as natural as that felt foreign to me now. I felt uncomfortable around all of that happiness. It’s as if I couldn’t even remember how to feel like that. The light was gone. Every breath I took was heavy in sorrow; my mind was engulfed in a web of negativity.

“How was your day?” my Mom asked the familiar question as I entered the car. She lowered the volume of the radio to hear my reply. “Regular,” I said, which was my usual answer to that question. “What do you mean ‘regular’? Your answer is supposed to be ‘good’ or ‘awesome,’” she said with a laugh. I smiled so that happiness would show on the outside.

I had become very good at covering my true feelings. Absolutely no one knew that I was depressed. I became a master at hiding it. I was the puppeteer to the puppet, the captain to the crew. I was a genius within my own mind.

When we got home, I lied to her once again and said that I had no homework. I walked straight upstairs, closed the door behind me, took my backpack off, and threw it against the wall. I turned the TV on and then did absolutely nothing. There was no excitement in my world. Today was just another day of my existence.

Then, a thought came out of nowhere. It was as if the thought didn't even come from me. It said, "What's crappy in my life?"

For some reason I started dwelling on that dark thought. I mean, I really started thinking about it.

BAM! The first thought came to me:

"Well, Mike and Anthony got burned alive."

They didn't deserve to die. They were young, living their lives, having fun, and not worrying. I had just spoken to Mike last month. We talked about hanging out the next time I visited Kansas. It just wasn't fair. They were always smiling and cracking jokes. Why them and not me?

The dark thought continued, "Awesome. What else, Chris?" I became obsessed with trying to come up with reasons why my life was so bad.

"Hmm. Well I've been dealing with these terrible headaches that have never seemed to go away."

I had been getting headaches basically every day for the past three years. At one point, they were so severe that they had actually caused me to be home-schooled for an entire semester. I remembered times when my teacher would come to deliver the lesson plans and I wasn't even able to open my eyes. I had to sit in my room in the dark and just deal with the pain. No matter what medication the doctors gave me, it never helped. I got some relief from the pressure when I went to sleep, but the headaches would always be waiting for me when I woke up. It was very painful. When I was a Freshman I was on the school football team, until the headaches became so bad that I couldn't play anymore. That sucked. I couldn't even hangout with my friends as often as I wanted to. There were times when I could barely do any physical activity, and days when it was so bad that I couldn't even lay down flat because the pressure would increase. Sleeping on the recliner was my only hope of getting rest at times. At one point the pain was so severe that I could barely move my

head. Our family doctor thought I might have had meningitis, so my parents rushed me to the emergency room. I wound up getting admitted and having a spinal tap performed. The spinal tap was incredibly painful, and it only relieved the pressure for twenty minutes. Even though it was basically a waste of time, any relief was good, so I wound up having several more procedures done in the hope that I would get relief that would last. However, that didn't happen. The hospital visits continued. I basically lived there. I was in and out of hospitals for over two years. We even traveled all the way to the Mayo Clinic in Ohio to see a specialist. Nothing worked.

“Yeah, that really sucks! Geez Chris, what else is there?” The dark thought began to take on a life of its own.

“Oh, how could I forget about Sarah?”

I really, really liked Sarah. She and I were about to start a relationship before I moved from Kansas to Florida. We moved because, in the past, while visiting Florida, my headaches disappeared. We thought the lower elevation or difference in pressure would help my headaches. It did for a while, but they started coming back. Had I stayed in Kansas, she might have been the one. If I was going to have to suffer with these headaches anyway, couldn't I at least be in Kansas where she was?

“Anything else?” asked the darkening thought.

“Well, I'm doing beyond terrible in school.”

I stopped doing homework. I stopped listening and I stopped caring. My grades dropped so low that it would take a miracle for me to graduate. In no time at all, I had gone from a B average to being in serious danger of failing.

In my darkened hopeless world, I started to believe that it was best to dwell on the negative. I decided that it would be good to focus on these things. So I did just that.

Anxiety crept under my skin; my mind was itching for a way out of the illusion I was creating. I was held captive thanks to this feeling of depression. I became very

uneasy with the anger that boiled up beyond anything I had ever felt before.

With no apparent way out, the darkness within me whispered quietly, "I'll commit suicide."

This thought caused a sense of ease to wash over me. I felt calm for the first time in a long time. It was as if I had finally found a cure. I found my *final* solution.

Then a voice said, "Come on Chris! You're smarter than that! You just can't say it and presto, it happens. No! You got to do The Deed, man." My darkness had just spoken to me.

My darkness had completely overtaken me. It had become the president, vice president, government, judge and jury. It had become the authority in my life.

I began to think about ways to end my misery. What would be the least painful way to do it? Well, I didn't want to use a knife because that seemed like it would hurt.

Then my darkness threw out an idea. "Well, get a gun... quick and painless!"

"I don't know where to find one and that'll be loud. I don't want people hearing it," I responded.

Thinking intensely, I began to pace back and forth furiously. While punching my pillows to release steam, my darkness returned and said, "Forget how you will end your life, Chris. Just think of *when* it will happen." That left me thinking some more, so I sat down and laid my head on my hands.

"Chris, dinner is ready!" I heard my Mom yell. So I got up and went downstairs to join my parents for dinner. As we ate, I acted as normal as possible. I knew I could never allow the silly, fun-loving and happy Chris to disappear from the outside.

I took a bite of Mom's spaghetti then placed my fork down on the plate. Then suddenly I said, "Hey, Spring Break is coming up in a few days and I really wanted to go

to Kansas to hangout with Stephen and all my friends up there.”

My Mom and Dad discussed it. They wanted to make sure they could afford a plane ticket for me and that I would have a place to stay. I was glad they seemed willing to let me go.

“Yeah, it’ll be great; I’ll take pictures and have a fun time.”

My parents talked about it while I ate in silence. I honestly have no idea what they said. I was totally in my own world.

When I finished eating, my Mom’s voice brought me back. Apparently they had finished discussing it.

“We just need to figure out where you’ll be staying. If you can figure out who will pick you up at the airport in Kansas and where you’ll be staying while you’re there, we can book a flight for you,” she said as I carefully placed my plate in the kitchen sink.

“Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad. I’ll figure it out,” I said.

Then I went into my room and closed the door behind me.

“Thought I left ya, Chris? You see... *that’s* how you’ll do it. Go to Kansas during Spring Break to visit your brother and friends, and then you’ll take your life,” my darkness explained.

“Yeah, you’re right. And maybe I’ll try to have some fun first. I mean, my life sucks and I have nothing to lose. Since it’s all over anyway, I’ll just do whatever I feel like doing. Then BAM! I’ll do The Deed.”

As I looked at the date on the calendar, I started to feel a new anxiety. My heart was beating really fast. I could barely wait till Spring Break. There were only a few days to go.

I took out a notebook and a pen from my backpack. I tore out a sheet of paper. I sat down on my bed and began to write a couple of sentences. I needed to leave a letter. I didn't want anyone guessing why. I wanted to tell them myself to make sure they didn't worry and knew that it was going to be okay. But nothing I wrote seemed to sound right. So I crumpled up that sheet of paper and threw it out. Then I got another sheet from my notebook and began to write again. "Alright, Chris, you got the ball rolling. Now don't screw this up. Finish that letter and make it sound good! You have five days left and you have to keep up the façade. No one knows what you're going through... excellent!"

My darkness was popping in and out when it pleased. It didn't bother me. It started to become second nature. I took a deep breath, placed the pen to the paper and the first words written were:

"I'm sorry. Realize that none of you caused this to happen but me..."

I had begun writing my farewell letter to my Mom, Dad, Brother, family and friends. With each word my darkness was right there with me.

Three days passed and nothing changed. Except, the letter I had been working on was pretty much done. I even continued working on the letter during some classes. That's how much this whole ordeal about ending my life consumed my every thought. My darkness was there when I woke up, when I was at school, when I was at home and even tucked me in at night. It was there all day every day.

"Good job, Chris! I'm proud of you! You completed your farewell letter, and it only took you three days," my darkness boasted. "But it did, of course, take you three damn days to write one simple letter. You're weak and hopeless and don't you forget it!" My darkness loved bringing me down.

It was the Thursday before Spring Break, and it was going by slowly just like every other school day. First, second, and third period seemed to drag on forever. I used to look forward to the middle of the day, where I had lunch and weights class right in a row. That was the only part of the school day when I wasn't stuck in a desk and felt a sense of freedom. Eating lunch with my friends and lifting weights helped temporarily relieve some of my anxiety. However, this time, as I was on my way to weights class, my darkness showed up to ensure I didn't forget that it was still there. I was feeling depressed all on my own, but my darkness brought that to another level.

The bell rang and my teacher started taking roll.

“Johnson!” he yelled.

“Here!” Johnson said back.

“Jackson!” he yelled again.

“What it do baby boo?” Jackson was a goof.

“I'm not your 'baby boo' Jackson. I am your teacher. Don't get it twisted.”

Everyone laughed and chuckled. Everyone, that is, except me. I didn't like this teacher. He thought he was hip by having just as much back talk and sass as all the students. Real cool, man, I thought sarcastically.

Eventually, he got to my name. Since he took roll from Z to A that left me as the last person to be called.

“Agundo!” he yelled.

Clearly he meant me, but I wouldn't respond immediately due to his lack of effort in pronouncing names correctly. I had corrected him before. “It is 'Agudo',” I even broke it down for him, “Uh-Goo-Dough.”

“Agweedo!” He yelled this time.

“It's Agudo! Get it right!” I yelled back at him.

I really had no patience for a teacher I didn't even like trying to have a laugh at my expense.

My rage caused a scene to play in my mind as he was mispronouncing my last name. I imagined walking up to this teacher and knocking him out with one punch. It would have felt good. He would have deserved it. I saw myself crossing the room and hitting him square in the face with a solid right hook. I started to get up.

“Okay everyone, go inside and get changed. Then meet me in the weights room.”

Al-most. I’m surprised that thought didn’t turn into a reality... courtesy of my darkness.

The rest of the school day progressed with the usual anxiety: heart beating quickly and mind running fast just like all of the other days that had passed. It had become normal. This was now my world.

Once home, I ended up in my room again. I closed the door behind me and did a belly flop onto my bed. It was a really hot day and that didn’t help how I was feeling. I ripped off my shirt and turned the ceiling fan on its highest setting to try and cool off.

“What’s going on, man? You irritated?” my darkness asked me annoyingly.

“I just want it to be Spring Break already. I want out of this world,” I said.

“I understand. I know how you’re feeling. Be patient. Your time will come soon. You’re problems will be solved. You’ll feel so much better when you end your life. Just trust me.” Its voice trailed off.

Feeling reassured, I decided to pull out the letter and go over it. I took it out of my pocket and started analyzing it carefully. I noticed that I didn’t finish it correctly. So I grabbed a pen and added two words at the end, “Love, Chris.” Now it was complete. It was a masterpiece. So I folded it up and put it back into my pocket. Finishing the letter caused a sense of peace to wash over me. I knew I was going to sleep well that night. I had become relaxed, and

although I knew this feeling would be gone in the morning, I knew for certain I would feel that way forever soon.

It was the last Friday before Spring Break and my plan was coming closer to being fulfilled. I called my friend Will and he said that it would be cool if I stayed with him while I was in Kansas. I told my parents. They booked my flight. Everything was going according to plan.

“Your last day of school today, buddy. Make it count. This will be the last time you will see your friends here in Florida.” My darkness stated the obvious, like I didn’t already know.

“Alright, folks, today is the last day to donate any money. Whichever teacher wins gets a pizza party for the class. So help a brotha’ out,” my history teacher said as the whole class laughed.

There was a silly contest going on at my school. They were trying to collect money to raise funds. The teacher with the most money in their jar would win a free pizza lunch for their class. I just so happened to have a twenty dollar bill in my pocket. When the bell rang, I waited for everyone to leave.

I didn’t want to be seen giving away twenty dollars for this contest. I mean, even if my teacher won, it wasn’t like I was going to be there for the pizza party anyway. But, I decided to donate the twenty dollars because I wanted my last impression on this teacher to be a good one. He had helped me out in the past immensely with my grade and was a great person.

“Whoa! You sure you want to donate *twenty* dollars?” my teacher asked.

“Yes, I don’t need it anyways and I’m pretty sure you’ll win,” I replied.

“Thank you, Chris. This is a great thing you are doing.” He paused and continued to look at me closely and asked, “But is everything okay?”

Oh no! Why did he ask me that question? Does he know about my plans? Am I not as good as I thought I was at covering up my true feelings? I thought I was a master of disguise. I mean, this whole time no one had asked me if everything was okay. My heart started to feel like it was going to beat out of my chest. But, my darkness took over my speech and helped me compose myself. It couldn't let me freak out now. We were too close.

“Yeah, everything is great. I just really don't need the money. And hey, you'll get a free lunch too! I'm sure you'll win!”

“Excellent, Mr. Agudo. Thank you very much,” he said sincerely. Then his tone changed to one of concern, “But I noticed your grade has been slipping and you're not doing your homework. If this doesn't change, we are going to have to do something. I don't want to see you fail,” he said.

“Yeah, I know. I've been having a lot of family issues and been putting school second. Over Spring Break next week I am going to catch up on all my homework, and when I get back my grade should be back to normal,” I said as I forced a smile.

“Now that's the spirit! I'll see you after Spring Break. Have a great day and a great break,” he told me.

“You too,” I said.

I walked out of the classroom. My darkness had come up with an excellent lie. My cover hadn't been blown after all. We held it together. We were still on track, but it was too close of a call. That was the most nervous I had been. I didn't plan for someone asking me if everything was okay. Nevertheless, my darkness and I were still on our way. I was a master of disguise after all.

Out of no where a sudden rush of sadness poured through me like a waterfall. I had a tremendous urge to let out tears of sorrow. But my darkness wasn't about to let me do what I wanted. It yelled, “You better not! At least not in

front of everyone you won't! Stop it right now! Get through the f-ing day and reevaluate the plan when you get home."

I mustered up the will to keep a poker face throughout the rest of the school day. When I got home, I went straight to my room and closed the door behind me like I was on autopilot. Before I could even sit down I heard my darkness once again, "So what's the plan, Stan?"

Instead of turning the television on, I just sat there with the blinds and curtains closed. It was dark in there. As dark as the world I was living in. I went over the plan again with my darkness.

"I will take the plane to Kansas and be there for the week of Spring Break. During my stay I will hang out with my friends and my Brother, and I will do whatever I want. After all, I don't have to worry about consequences any more. The last night I am there I will take my life! I don't know exactly how yet... but I will."

"I guess that works. Just go through with The Deed or else," my darkness warned me. It wouldn't allow me to lose my focus.

It was getting late. Knowing that this was one of the last times I would see my parents, I wanted to be as loving and caring as I could be.

"Hey, Mom, don't do the dishes. Let me do them," I said as I was cleaning up the kitchen table.

"No, it's okay. I'll do them," she replied.

"No, Mom! I want to do them. I'm trying to do something nice," I said as I faked a smile.

My Dad heard me and said, "Let him do the dishes. He's trying to help out."

"Yeah," I agreed with him.

So I ended up doing the dishes and vacuuming the whole house as well. Even though I despised doing it, I cleaned the house to the best of my ability. Since I would never see my parents again, I wanted their final memory of

me to be a good one. I knew that they thought my doing all of this was out of character because my Dad said with a laugh, “You should start doing this more often.”

The clock was ticking down. Tomorrow was the day of my flight to Kansas. Almost time to complete The Deed.

“Don’t get all mushy on me, Chris. Keep focused on what needs to happen!” My darkness barked at me. In resistance to that remark I felt compelled to say one last thing to my parents. So, before they were about to go to sleep, I walked into their room and said, “Hey, I just wanted to say I love you,” as I gave them both a hug and kiss.

On the way back to my room, I could feel my cheeks tense up. I began to cry as a sudden rush of sorrow devoured me.

I hurried into my room and closed the door behind me. I took the farewell letter out of my pocket and put it in my wallet to make sure it was safe and secure.

“Your two good friends burned alive and died in a car crash! It’s obvious these headaches are NEVER going away! The girl you were supposed to be with forever is more than a thousand miles away from you! You suck at school! And don’t even get me started about your grades, bud. Sucks to be you, Chris! End your pain and suffering by doing The Deed, man. Your time is almost up. Oh, and don’t forget how worthless you are!”

My darkness was my mentor. It was the one to remind me how bad I had it. It would always reinforce my reason for what I was going to do. Thinking about all these negative things in my life really got to me, making my mind cloudy and making me feel crazy. I mean, it really got to me. So, I put the television on and cried into my pillows so my parents wouldn’t hear me. I cried so hard that I nearly suffocated myself.

When my sorrow tantrum finally came to an end, I turned the television off with a click of the remote. I tossed it on the floor and went to sleep.

“Chris. Wake up!” my Mom proclaimed as she stood in my doorway. “Come on! Get up so you can eat breakfast. We have to leave in two hours to drop you off at the airport.”

She watched me move around as I murmured, “Ok.” I knew that if she got a response from me that she would leave me alone. I eventually got up, brushed my teeth, washed up and got changed. I walked downstairs and made some cereal. Before I knew it, it was time to go.

“Let’s go, guys! I don’t want to be waiting in the car for more than five minutes,” my Dad said as he went out the front door. My Mom left the house shortly after him. This left me by myself to take it all in, for I knew I would never see this place again. It used to be my home, my safe haven, the place where my Mom, Dad and I lived.

I ran to my room and lay on my bed. Goodbye, my comfy bed. I rubbed my fingers across my red and blue comforter. I inhaled the smell of my bed to get it stuck in my memory so I wouldn’t forget it. Then I got up, grabbed my bags and left.

It was a quick thirty minute drive to the Gainesville Airport. We arrived, and my Dad double parked next to the sidewalk by the front entrance. We all got out of the car and I grabbed my bags from the trunk.

“Chris, take lots of pictures! Don’t forget!” my Mom said cheerfully.

“Yeah, I know. I will,” I replied.

“Love you! Have fun!” both my parents exclaimed.

I then grabbed my bags and started walking through the airport entrance. I looked back and I saw my parents driving off. At this point I felt like a lone rider in the Wild, Wild West on a journey through the Valley of the Shadow of

Death. The only difference was that my destination was directly in the middle of that valley.

I continued through the airport towards my gate. I was forty-five minutes early, so I found a seat and waited for them to start the boarding process. The time passed quickly. They soon called my name and I boarded the plane.

“Don’t worry you’re not alone. I’m here with you,” my darkness said as I was looking for my row. My seat happened to be towards the back, next to the bathroom. Awesome. Now I was going to have to smell everyone’s business.

I placed my carry-on bag into the overhead compartment. As soon as I sat down, I felt a wave of sleepiness hit me. So, I shut my eyelids and before I knew it, the flight was over and we had landed. Then I got up, grabbed my bag, and walked towards the front of the plane.

“Thank you for flying with us. Have a nice day,” the stewardess said with a smile. She repeated those words to each passenger as they exited. When she said it to me I stared directly into her eyes with no smile. While entering the terminal, I started wondering if she had been able to tell just how depressed I was. I mean, I’ve been told that the pupil of the eye is the seat of the soul. Maybe this stranger could tell how I was feeling by looking into my eyes. I grinned and shook my head. Nah, she didn’t notice. I grabbed my stuff from the luggage carousel and proceeded to the entrance of the airport where I called my Brother to see where he was.

“Hey, what’s up, dude? Where are you at?” I asked.

“I’m almost there. Just be ready in the front. It’ll be quicker,” he replied.

“Sounds good,” I said.

I walked outside and waited for about five minutes. Soon enough, a black Ford Focus pulled up to where I was standing. My Brother parked the car and popped the trunk.

Stephen, and his good friend, Brad, got out of the car. They helped me with my bags. Then we proceeded to leave the airport.

“So, what are your plans while you’re here?” Stephen asked while driving.

“Hang out with my friends from Olathe and hangout with you guys in Emporia,” I said.

My darkness was content at this point. Everything was going dandy, crisp and clean, just like planned.

“Yeah, it’s going to be fun,” my Brother said. He and Brad went on to tell me a story about when they had gone to New Orleans. As they were talking, I was staring out the window. To the left of the highway was a never ending corn-field. To my right was a never ending corn-field with an occasional barn. The sky was vast with a light blue ceiling. I stared at the one or two clouds that were floating high in the sky.

Even though it was a two-hour car ride, it seemed to go by quickly. They dropped me off at my friend Will’s house in Olathe. That is where I was going to be for the duration of my stay in Kansas.

“Alright, man. I’ll pick you up in three days so you can come over to Emporia.”

“Alright! Sounds good, Stephen! See ya later. See ya, Brad,” I said.

I picked up my bags, went to the house, rang the bell and waited for an answer. I couldn’t wait to start doing whatever I wanted. I was anticipating the freedom.

“Yo! What’s up! About time we’re hanging out again,” I told Will as he helped me with my bags.

“Chris, this is your last week. Go crazy. Have fun. Yes, even though you are going to have to do The Deed; even though your life sucks, at least try to have some fun. Watch me. I’ll do it for you,” my darkness encouraged.

Unfortunately, I was feeling too depressed to have fun. But, I'd soon find out what it had been promising. I went on autopilot and my darkness took over my every thought and action. It was strange, yet I welcomed it. What else could I do? This was my last week on earth.

I noticed Will's Dad out of the corner of my eye. He was sitting on a recliner watching TV. I didn't get a hello or any welcoming words. I didn't care. It's what I expected anyway. So I kept on walking.

"Oh hey, Chris, how are you doing? What are your plans while you're here?" Will's Mom asked. I didn't really have anything to say. I had made it this far already and my plans were going so well that I thought about spilling the beans. I almost said, "Oh, you know, just going to kill myself." But, obviously that would not have gone over well. So I replied, "I'm fine. Nothing much, really. Just hanging out, ya know." I forced yet another smile and reached down to pet one of their dogs as it was jumping up on me.

"Well, we're glad you're back. Our home is your home. So, don't feel shy. You can raid the pantry and refrigerator if you want," she offered with a laugh as she walked away.

Allowing me to stay over during Spring Break, and giving me permission to eat all that I wanted was a bit much for me to handle. All of the hospitality made me feel like an outsider. They were just too positive and friendly.

I went to the room where I would be sleeping for the week and dropped my bags near the bed.

"Hey, dude, let's go. I'm taking my Mom's new car. Where do you want to go?" Will asked as he entered the room.

"I don't care yo."

He nodded and I followed him to the car. We got into his Mom's brand spankin' new Mitsubishi and took it out for a ride.

I was actually able to feel some enjoyment at this point. I knew my darkness was the pilot, so I just let it fly. Since I didn't seem to be able to have any fun on my own, I simply let go and allowed it to control me. If I were finally able to have *any* fun, I figured why not?

"Hey, Chris! I'm going to Quick Check to buy some cigarettes. You want anything?" Will asked while parking the car.

"Yeah, get me a pack of cigs too," my darkness replied.

I was only seventeen and had never smoked before in my life. I had zero knowledge about cigarettes and what brands to ask for.

"Okaaay... um what kind?" he asked.

"Dude, I don't care. Just get me a pack of whatever you get," my darkness answered as I tried to hide any embarrassment.

I handed him five dollars. Then he disappeared into the store.

"Doesn't this feel liberating?"

"You know what... yes. I don't understand why I'm doing this, but let's keep it going," I replied.

My darkness took that as a challenge. I did feel somewhat liberated, but at the same time I was feeling JUST as bad as I had back in Florida. I don't know how else to describe this feeling. I guess nothing really changed. I still felt worthless. And my darkness was right there to remind me. It was now in complete control of my ways.

Will opened the driver door and tossed a pack of Marlboro Red shorts on my lap. I picked up the pack and said, "Thanks." I watched him pack his cigarettes by repeatedly hitting the box on his palm. My hands mimicked his. Then I took out a cigarette and lit it. I coughed a bit at first, but after a few puffs, it was smooth sailing. In just a few seconds I felt like a professional smoker.

We pulled up to a red light. In the lane next to us was another nice car. "Race 'em, bro! We can beat them!" my darkness yelled. It was obvious that they wanted to race because they were revving their engine at us. The light turned green and tires screeched. I lowered my window and took in the thrill of the adrenaline. The wind slapped me in the face. We were going so fast, I felt like the car was going to take off and fly. My darkness yelled, "Oh, yeaahh!" and laughed. We beat the other car in the race and then headed back to the house.

* * *

Days passed, as my darkness and I continued to rebel against society. One time I was hanging out with a group of friends and noticed they were rolling a blunt. My darkness was thrilled. We eyed its creation intensely as one of my friends placed marijuana inside the paper.

"Alright, *now* it's a party," my darkness said.

"Oh, yeah!" everyone replied.

What seemed like only an hour turned out to be six. We sat in a circle in the living room just smoking the day away. It was a relaxing feeling, but at the same time very strange. Smoking marijuana was something else that didn't bother me anymore due to what had been decided. The Deed!

My darkness, in full control, lead me ever so carefully as the time passed by. I continued to be a rebel and have as much fun as it would let me. Well, the word "fun" had a different meaning for me than it did for my darkness. You see, smoking cigarettes, hookah, and pot, driving crazy, racing cars, drinking whenever I got the chance and being completely random was fun for my darkness. I just submitted and tried to enjoy the ride.

"OUTCAST, DISGRACEFUL, WORTHLESS, STUPID,
IDIOT."

My darkness reminded me daily so I wouldn't forget. It told me all the reasons why my life sucked. It never brought up anything positive. Never.

I left Wills house to spend a day with my older brother Stephen. I hung out with his friends, went out to eat and played some video games. It was just like when we were kids. I just had to see him again.

While my brother was driving me back to Will's house we talked, listened to the radio and then talked some more. Since I knew for certain this was the last time I'd ever see him, I tried to enjoy it. It was good while it lasted.

Then, I started feeling anxious again. I knew that ending my life was inevitable. "Remember The Deed, Chris. Time is almost up," my darkness reminded me. We rolled up to Will's house and Stephen parked the car.

"Alright man, next time we hang out is when I visit for Thanksgiving or Christmas," he told me.

"Yeah, definitely, dude. It's right around the corner," I said back.

I wanted to cry. This was my brother. I grew up with him. I've known him my whole life. I wanted to hug him, but I knew that I had to appear like the old me, so we did our usual hand shake instead. Then I exited the car.

"Alright, man, see ya around."

I shut the door and grabbed my bags from the back seat. As I was walking to the house, I looked back. It felt just like my parents driving away from the airport. As he was driving back to Emporia, I knew that he had no idea that he was never going to see me again. It made me sad, but nothing was going to change my mind.

"My man with the plan, you're so close now. The Deed will be done soon. You're almost cured," my darkness said as if it were patting me on the shoulder. "Good job, Chris." There were only two more days until I was

supposed to return to Florida. A return I knew that I would never make.

Once I entered the house, I started thinking about how I was supposed to leave Saturday morning. I was supposed to take a flight at eight a.m. That *was* the plan through my parent's eyes, my brother's eyes and my friend's eyes. Oh, but not my eyes. My eyes only envisioned the end of the road for me. All I could see... was The Deed.

Thursday night finally came to an end so I went to sleep. Then Friday arrived. My thoughts were focused, causing my heart to race as usual. Random anger boiled within me. At this point, these feelings were nothing new. My darkness was within me.

"Hey, bro! I'm gonna' go hangout with some people who I haven't seen in forever. Today is my last day here. It's not like we haven't hung out, right." I said with a forced smile and a fake chuckle as I met Will in the kitchen.

"Yeah, man. I had things to do anyway for tonight so I'll see ya later," Will replied.

Before I left the house, I walked into Will's room because I wanted to leave him something to remember me by. His room was extremely messy, as if a tornado had gone through it. There were clothes all over the ground. Dust covered everything. I walked over to his TV, placed my index finger on the screen, and spelled out a message, "DON'T FORGET ME. . . CJA." I left that message because I really didn't want to be forgotten.

"Perrrrrfect," my darkness chuckled. "The plan is going perfectly. Now, move, man! Leave the house. It's time to go see Aaron. I'll be leading the way for you. All you have to do is follow meeee," its voice trailed off once again. It was eerie, but like always I just listened to it. So, I headed to Aaron's house.

"Are you ready to party?" Aaron asked me as I entered the front door.

"Yeah, man! Where's it at?" I replied.

“I don’t know. But my friend invited me and I’m inviting you,” he laughed.

It was a plan.

The plan for the night was solid, but not my plan. I still wasn’t sure how I would accomplish The Deed. I had only gotten so far into my checklist. At this point I only knew when and where I would end my life: Spring break and Kansas. Check and check.

“But just how, exactly?” I thought.

“Don’t worry about that. Leave that to me. Just go with the flow, because I’m leading you to it.” So I listened to my darkness and went with the flow.

* * *

Standing in the kitchen, I was parched. So, I opened up the cupboard to find a glass. I took out a cup and sniffed it.

“Why are you sniffing the cup?” my darkness asked.

“I’m just making sure it’s clean. If it smells, I won’t use the cup. I’ve done this ever since I was a kid. So, it formed into a habit. It really isn’t weird if you think about it. You wouldn’t want to drink out of a cup that smells and isn’t clean, right?”

“Man, you are so weird! What a freak! Of course, they’re clean. They are in the cupboard, you idiot.”

“Stop talking to me like that! Stop it!” I said as I banged my fist against my head.

There it went again, bringing me down to an even lower low than I thought possible. I was pissed. I knew that my darkness was in charge. But sometimes, it just angered me beyond belief. I knew that I was outranked, but why did it need to bring me down *all* the time? The depressing voice finally shut up after banging my fist against my head. Then, I thought I heard someone coming into the kitchen. So, I quickly poured water into the cup and took a massive gulp.

Time was passing by faster than I thought. I ended up being in the kitchen for twenty minutes. But it felt like just a second. So, I finished the water, placed the cup in the sink, and went down to the basement where Aaron was watching TV. I wanted to get more information about the party. He didn't know anything new.

"Just give me the address later when I call or text you. I'm gonna go chill with Andrea and Zeke for now," I said as I started leaving.

While I was at Zeke's place, we watched TV until it started getting late. Eventually, I called Aaron, got the address and we all headed down to the party.

The night sky was illuminated by the moon and scattering of stars. It made me think about just how close I was. I knew that tomorrow morning my suffering would finally be over. I was becoming calm, until I heard:

"No, you told me something different! Stop contradicting yourself. Stop lying. You're being condescending!" Zeke screamed.

"Just stop! You see, it's times like these when you get so angry. I just feel like crashing this car right now..." Andrea retorted.

She was driving the car down the highway at about eighty miles an hour. She was yelling at first, but her voice started to get lower and lower. I could tell she was upset and wanted to cry. Zeke defused the argument by turning up the volume to a song we all knew.

"Maybe she'll crash the car, Chris. Wouldn't that be terrific," my darkness said joyfully. I didn't care. I honestly hoped that she would crash. I just wanted out of this world.

The remainder of the drive was quiet, but ultimately, I did get to the party safely. Oh, well.

As we walked into the apartment, we were each handed a glow stick. There were a lot of people there.

"Here, try some Jungle Juice," someone said.

I saw several half-gallon bottles of liquor, bottles of coke, and two large pitchers with juice in them. I had no idea what kind of liquor was in my cup, and it was pretty strong. But, I drank it down without asking any questions.

I mixed it up with different people at the party, and found myself gravitating toward random girls. My darkness was in the zone and in total control. It was talking to everyone for me. It even made a fool of me. It told me to talk to this one girl. But I wound up saying something strange, and she looked at me like I was weird and walked away. But I just didn't care. Tonight was my last night.

Someone thought it would be a good idea to pop open their glow stick and wave it in the air. Then the light got turned off, the music got turned up, and everyone joined in on the green glow fun. They all started opening up their glow sticks. It became a war. With the lights off, you could see glow-in-the-dark liquid everywhere! It was on people's faces, their clothing, the furniture, all over the place! I grabbed a glow stick and joined the war. "Yeaaaahhhh," my darkness yelled in contentment.

At one point during the party, I joined a group of people who were smoking pot. I found myself putting the pipe to my lips when it came my way. They were all laughing and having a good time. I was not. But I hid my despair and faked a laugh or a smile whenever it was called for. Even though my darkness was in control of me and it may have looked like I was having "fun" on the outside, I was still bitterly depressed. The laughter and smiles were not helping, and neither was the weed.

I knew my time was running out. It was midnight. My flight was at eight a.m. I only had eight hours left.

Some people were smoking hookah on a couch to my right, while others laid on the carpet in front of me talking to each other. Another group was having a conversation to my left. I looked at my phone and noticed that time was ticking away. I had been silent. I talked to absolutely no one. I was

a loner once again. I had been sitting alone for the last three hours straight.

My heartbeat became fast. I started to get angry again. I couldn't figure out why I kept getting so angry. I was anxious. My mind screamed for a way out. I yearned for an escape. Out of nowhere, I found myself telling Aaron:

"Bro, I'm not going to get on my plane back to Florida," I leaned over and explained.

"Noooo, you have to make your flight. You can't be late," he said in a friendly, teasing way.

"Nope, I'm going to be here forever." Since nobody could've known what I was planning, it felt good to tell someone the truth.

"Ha," he said as he dismissed me completely.

He smiled, and then turned back around to his other friend. My conversation with Aaron ended there.

"Alright, Chris, get up and leave," my darkness instructed. I did just that. I needed an excuse, so I got up and took my phone out of my pocket. I acted like I was getting a call. "Oh hey, Jamie. I haven't talked to you in forever. I'm surprised you called me." I held the phone to my ear saying "uh-huh" and "yeah" occasionally, as if I were talking to this imaginary girl named Jamie. I took one last look at everyone in the room. Then I turned toward the door, pretending to be in a deep conversation. "No, Jamie. Well it is new, fairly new." I continued talking to no one, walked down the stairs, and left the apartment building.

I left the phone up to my ear for a minute as I walked away. Once I knew that no one was around, I took the phone away from my ear. I couldn't believe how pitiful it was to use this as an excuse to leave the party.

While I was thinking about how pathetic I was, I knew that it would be rude to leave without saying goodbye to Will. He did, after all, show me a lot of hospitality by

letting me stay with him and his family during Spring Break. I felt compelled to send him a farewell text:

I'm a disgrace, to my family bro, I can't go on any longer im taking my phone off I'm sorry, I didn't want this to happen, I just needed to visit olathe again to see my friends atleast I saw my close friends again, and I saw my brother in emporia which I was wanting to see before I left, sorry will I'm glad I have had you as a friend too, a good friend tell my mom and dad I love them and am sorry for what I've done

It was freezing outside and all I had on was a t-shirt, jeans, and a pair of worn-out shoes. No coat or jacket. I didn't care though, my time was almost up. The cold wasn't going to stop me.

My heart started racing faster than it ever had before. I felt a mixture of feelings. I was angry and sad. I was frustrated. I was anticipating my end. "Okay Chris, keep on moving. It's time for you to go to sleep now. You're death bed awaits," my darkness affirmed.

The Deed was all I was thinking about now. I had no idea where I was, but it didn't matter. I didn't care. Not knowing where I was seemed appropriate.

I came across an alley with a few light posts here and there. It seemed dangerous, so I walked down it. "Since it's early in the morning, maybe some lunatic with a psycho mind will stab you. Yeah, Chris, that sounds good! Let's hope for an easy way out," my darkness encouraged. It was hoping for things like this and so was I. But after an hour of walking, I didn't come across any random killers.

Out of nowhere, I started feeling tired, extremely tired. A wave of exhaustion hit me and my eyes became heavy. My eyelids were shutting on me, but I fought it and

kept on walking. I saw a couch outside on the street next to a restaurant. It was torn up with the stuffing coming out. It was red, my favorite color. This beat-up couch started to look welcoming. I felt like we had something in common, so I decided to sit down and rest my weary, achy and tired legs.

I sat there for a good ten minutes or so watching the cars driving by and the birds flying around in the sky. Then I saw that the sun was beginning to rise. I took that as a sign that it was time for me to go. “Keep walking. It’s time to do The Deed. It doesn’t matter where you end up. Soon, you will be free of this harsh, ridiculous and pitiful world of yours.”

I agreed with my darkness. So, I got up off the torn-up couch and continued on my way, walking to my final destination, wherever that was to be. Each step was brutal and tiresome. I just wanted to fall down on the street and get run over by a car. But, there was no way I was going to do that. There was too great of a chance that I would wind up surviving.

Suddenly, I started feeling a sharp pain in my abdomen. I was sobering up and realized that I needed to go to the bathroom desperately. I thought about peeing behind a building. But, I saw a Dunkin’ Donuts on the other side of the street.

There was a cement divider in the middle of the road. I looked to my left and saw a car coming towards me, so I ran across the first two lanes and climbed over the divider. Then I looked to my right and saw several cars coming from the opposite direction. I waited for a break in the traffic, and then I crossed the road to the grass and dirt. “Hey, just like Frogger.” My darkness tormented me as I was holding my stomach.

As I approached Dunkin’ Donuts, I saw that the open sign was lit on the door and started walking faster. As I walked through the parking lot, I saw a cop car parked outside. I didn’t think much of it. I just entered the store.

The lady behind the counter stared at me as I headed straight to the bathroom. Opening the bathroom door I started to unbuckle my pants as I moved quickly towards the toilet. I was relieved when the door automatically shut behind me because I had no intention of closing it. I had to go.

My darkness thought this would be a good time to yell at me. “You’re using the restroom in Dunkin’ Donuts?!?! You should have been dead by now! You should’ve held the piss and kept the pain. Maybe you would’ve burst and The Deed would have been done for you!”

My darkness was right. What was I doing? I didn’t belong in Dunkin’ Donuts. Stupid me. Only happy people buying their morning coffee belonged there. Well, at least I didn’t have that sharp, annoying pain anymore. Though, I probably should have kept it. My darkness was making more sense than ever.

As I finished washing my hands and face, I stared at myself in the mirror and looked at the disgrace I was. My hair was messy, my skin was oily, and my eyes were bloodshot and deep with sorrow. I felt dirty as dirt. “Whatever,” I thought as I walked out of the bathroom. On my way back out, I made no eye contact with the lady behind the counter.

I noticed two cops at the front door. One of them opened it for me as I walked out. Surprisingly, I heard one of them say, “Good morning.” Hmm. If only that cop knew what I was doing there. He probably thought I was there getting a cup of Joe on my way to work like everyone else. Ha. I was on the journey to the end of my life. The “Good morning” encounter with the cops showed me just how talented I had become at not allowing people to see what was really going on. I was able to slip by these cops without them asking me any questions. It was amazing to see just how good I was at hiding my true feelings, even though my mind was on the verge of destruction.

I hoped that no one else would see me like this. I looked like I was homeless. My hair was messy from pulling on it furiously. My shirt had a hole in it. I guessed I must have torn it at the party somehow. And I knew that I was starting to smell since I hadn't taken a shower for three days. With the way I looked, I wouldn't have been surprised if someone came up to me and tried to hand me some spare change. I was just a mess. But it did fit my thoughts and it did fit my darkness.

I began to cry. The tears just wouldn't stop. I had to get away from civilization. I didn't want to be where people could see me. So, I found a side street where very few cars were driving by. "How much longer are you going to be walking for?" my darkness asked. Then it proclaimed, "You see all these houses you're passing? I bet they are full of families and people who are happy and content with life. They're probably nice, warm and all toasted up under their blankets. It's early in the day and pretty damn cold . . . out here."

"Shut up!" I yelled. I wanted to keep it quiet for just a moment so I could think about how I was going to end my life.

"No, I won't! You got to do The Deed, man, and you haven't even thought of how you will do it!"

My mind was going crazy at this point. I swear if there had been anyone watching me they would have thought I had a severe case of schizophrenia.

"How about you go inside one of those houses and grab a knife from the kitchen. I'm sure they won't care. Just grab a kitchen knife and run away to a quiet place."

It had me thinking for a moment whether or not I could actually get away with it. I thought about doing just that. After all, I had been walking for who knows how long. I just wanted to get it over with. Then, I remembered the cops that were right down the street at Dunkin' Donuts. So I thought twice. I figured I would probably get arrested if I

tried breaking into a house, especially if they found me holding a kitchen knife. I would go to jail and my plan would fail.

I needed a new idea, so I continued to walk for what seemed like forever.

“You’re an outcast. You’re disgraceful. You’re worthless. You’re a stupid idiot. I’ve told you this many times, Chris. Don’t forget it!”

I was so tired from not sleeping. Thoughts of falling asleep gently brushed my mind. It seemed so appealing. The idea of sleeping tempted me further when I came across a grassy hill right next to a church. The grass looked super soft and comfortable. But, there was no chance of sleeping. I knew that if I went to sleep someone would find me and call the cops.

As I stared at the church in front of me, I briefly thought about going inside. But I didn’t deserve to go into a place like that. So I kept walking as the sun kept rising.

* * *

“You can’t catch me!” a young boy yelled. They were down by a stream which led to a sewer about thirty yards away from me. The smiles on their faces caused me to cry some more. I couldn’t stand being around happiness, so I had to get away from there. As I hurried away, I was expecting my darkness to say something mean and ridiculing, but I guess I was feeling bad enough.

It started to get much warmer as the sun was rising. My shivering bones seemed to calm down as I was thawing out. As I kept walking my darkness jabbed at me, “So what’s the deal, Chris? When is this going to happen? I don’t have all day, man. You’re just ‘killing time’. Get it?”

“I know,” I said. I just needed to find a spot and come up with a way to do The Deed.

As I kept walking I came up to a fence. I climbed over it, went up a steep hill, crossed a heavily trafficked

intersection and came up to a dirt road. I couldn't see the end of the road. It was like a lot of the roads in Kansas: flat, straight and seemed like it would go on forever.

To the right of the road was a white picket fence which went just as far. It was aged and faded, and a few of the planks were broken and missing. On the other side of the fence was an enormous grass field. It was bigger than three football fields. It looked peaceful. It looked like heaven. It was perfect.

I thought I was dreaming. At that moment I knew this would be the place. "Wow, it looks so peaceful," I had to say out loud. There were three trees surrounded by high grass in the center of the field and a lake to the left where the grass ended. "Go there, Chris. This is your great escape. Climb over the white picket fence and walk to your grave." I listened to my darkness, my enemy in disguise, and I did what it said.

I looked around and wasn't sure what to think. I saw a bright yellow sun in an amazing crystal clear, light blue sky, sprinkled with a few white puffy clouds. There was a slight breeze and the air was refreshing. It felt just perfect. This place was beautiful. It seemed like a good place to die.

I walked down towards the lake below and squatted beside it. I had my elbows on my knees and I was holding my head up with my hands. The wind was causing a gentle ripple effect on the water. Small waves appeared on the surface of the lake and then disappeared into nowhere. I reached my hands down and swished them about in the water.

"You're so close, Chris. I can feel it. This is the place. And just look at all the trees . . . I've got it! You . . . will hang yourself! It'll be quick and painless. Perfect!"

Then, I got up and looked to my right and saw a gigantic tree next to me. The tree was enormous. It had big branches perched high above the ground. I thought about climbing it, but the trunk was too big. There were also

prickly twigs wrapped around it like a blanket from top to bottom. I would have to find another tree.

I looked up and noticed several houses around the lake. I also saw an old couple jogging alongside the lake on a path. “Shoot, people are going to see me do The Deed.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anyways. All hope is lost for you. Your time is up. *This* is your place!” my darkness shot back.

So, I walked back where I came from and analyzed the first three trees. Each of the trees had twigs and vines wrapping around their trunks and branches. I chose the one in the middle because it seemed like it would be the easiest to climb. It had a bent and twisted branch reaching down, like an arm summoning me. That branch gave me access to another one that was about ten feet off the ground. I had found my tree.

I cleaned the sides of the higher branch to the best of my ability, and wound up cutting my fingers in the process. I didn’t care. It needed to be done. The ground was now covered with broken twigs and a few drops of blood.

I looked at the branch to my left and leaned forward. I grabbed it and held on. I put my left elbow on top of it and then my right. After a short struggle, I was able to pull myself up. Good thing I was fit enough to make it.

Once I was on top of the branch, I sat down and spent a few minutes taking in the view. I looked at the lake for a moment and gazed at its beauty. As I was admiring my surroundings, I started to feel pain in my forearms. I saw that they were scraped and cut. The branch did a number to my forearms as I was getting on top of it.

“Chris, you idiot! You have no rope! All that effort for nothing!” my darkness yelled viciously. I looked at my pants and remembered that I had a red bandana in my back pocket. I took it out and evaluated it, trying to figure out how I could tie it around the branch to create a noose. There was no way it would work. It barely went around the

branch. So, I put it back in my pocket. All this effort and I still couldn't do The Deed. Damn. But, I knew I needed to figure out a way. I was committed.

I got up carefully and dropped to the ground. I remembered seeing a hardware store while I was walking. I back tracked to the store. It was about a thirty minute walk.

As I entered the hardware store, I put my hands in my pockets so no one would notice the scrapes and cuts on my forearms.

"Excuse me, sir. How much is it per foot of rope?" I asked an employee.

"Well, that depends on what type of rope you'll be purchasing. Come on. Follow me."

I followed him to the rope section towards the back.

"So whatcha want, what type of rope?" He asked.

What type of rope? How was I supposed to know? He stared at me, waiting for a response. I couldn't think. I wasn't sure what to say.

"Regular rope" I said.

"Okay. Well, how long do you want it to be?"

I thought about it. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I just hurry up and figure out how much rope it would take to wrap around the tree and my neck. I wondered if this seemed suspicious.

"Uhm..." I said to break the silence. How long did I need it to be? I had never done this before. I was trying to think as fast as possible. I was trying to do the math in my head in order to figure out how much rope it would take to do The Deed. "Six feet," I said, hoping that would be enough.

He cut six feet of rope. I paid for it. Then I headed back to the peaceful grassy field where I was going to end my life.

On my way, I kept hearing my darkness. “Finally, Chris! FINALLY the time has come. All of your problems will vanish once The Deed is done. You won’t be worthless any more.”

I was almost back to my lovely tree, my ticket to freedom, when I opened the bag and looked at the rope inside. At first, seeing the rope made me excited. I knew my suffering was nearly over. But then, for no reason, my heart started to beat rapidly and I became angry and sad all over again. I hated myself. The anxiety crept and crawled under my skin. I was livid. So, since my left hand was free, I grabbed my hair and pulled on it furiously. Strands of hair got stuck to my sweaty hand which pissed me off some more. I mean, I was really pissed off! Standing in front of the tree, a leaf fell and landed on my head. I grabbed the leaf and violently tore it into pieces.

“Compose yourself, stupid! Just do The Deed already,” my darkness said. I grabbed the rope out of the bag and tossed the bag into the air. It floated away with the breeze and danced around the field. I watched it for a while as it tumbled away from me. Eventually, just like my parents and my brother, I said goodbye to the bag.

I swung the rope over the branch so that my hands would be free. I used the same climbing technique as before. I knew my forearms were about to get cut up again, but it didn’t matter. I was going to do what I came here to do. So, I went back up the tree.

While sitting on the branch again, I noticed two little kids to my left crawling under the picket fence holding some toys. I’m pretty sure they saw me. I had the rope hidden from their view. They probably figured I was just sitting in the tree having fun like they were. I watched them play for a little while. It was just like watching my friends having a good time at school. It was completely foreign to me. I just wanted them to go away.

A few minutes later, the kids decided to leave. “About time. We know they were just delaying the

inevitable, Chris. Now tie the rope around the branch and make sure it's secure. Enough foolishness! Enough wasting time! Do The Deed!"

I *had* wasted enough time. So, I wrapped the rope around the branch and tied the strongest knot that I could. When the knot seemed like it would hold, I reached down to grab the other end of the dangling rope and pulled it up. I realized the length of rope from my neck to the branch was going to be a little short. Fortunately, I remembered my red bandana and took it out of my back pocket. I combined the end of the rope with the bandana in order to make it long enough so that my head wouldn't hit the branch. I knotted them together to configure a noose that would fit around my neck. With six feet of hardware store rope and my red bandana, I made a noose.

"Whatever. It works. Just do The Deed, you piece of shit!"

I was sitting on the branch with the rope around my neck, looking at the lake, ready to drop, when I saw a red SUV driving across the field towards me. It slowed down. I thought it was about to come to a stop. I had no idea what they were doing. And I couldn't see inside the vehicle because their windows were tinted pitch black. I figured they were probably leaning their heads over to see what I was doing with a rope around my neck sitting in a tree. Before I could make any more guesses, they accelerated and turned down the field towards the lake. Then I saw that they were hauling a boat. I still wasn't sure what to expect from these people. While I was contemplating my next move, it drove back up the field towards my direction. But, this time it didn't slow down. They drove away and left me in peace.

"Who cares if they saw you, Chris! Just do The Deed!"

I listened to my darkness. I put my hands on the branch, palms down, lifted myself up, and pushed forward.

I was about to be free. I knew that everything was about to get better. My suffering was finally over. “Goodbye,” I thought to myself as I pushed forward and dropped.

“Shit!” I yelled. Instead of catching me in the air, the knot slipped. I didn’t tie it tight enough.

“Are you kidding me Chris? Get back up there and do it right! You think you can tie a damn knot? You idiot! Have you forgotten why you’re here?! It’s not getting any better, my friend. This is your only way out!”

I got up off the ground pissed off and stomped the dirt below me. Then I climbed back up to where I was and started over again.

As I tightened the rope around the branch, I knew for certain it wouldn’t get loose this time around. I learned from the first failed attempt that I needed to tie the knot tightly enough to hold my weight. I double knotted the rope around the branch, and then did another and another, until my fingers became sore from tightening as hard as I could. Now I knew the rope wouldn’t come loose. I readjusted the rope around my neck and did a practice pull. I leaned forward off the branch into mid-air and looked at the ground. “Alright, I guess this is it.”

My darkness spoke to me one last time, “No more mistakes. Just once more. This time we will succeed. We will no longer be in this world of misery.”

I was about to drop into eternity when my mind went quiet. For some reason, I decided to take out my phone and turn it on. My darkness wasn’t saying anything. I wasn’t sure where it was. I’m surprised that it wasn’t yelling at me. I don’t know what compelled me to check my phone, but I did. I still heard no orders from my darkness.

My phone powered on, and I couldn’t believe what I saw next. *Buzz* *Buzz*. It continuously vibrated. Voice message after voice message rolled in. Then texts started

coming in. There were easily a hundred missed calls. More texts and voice messages followed.

My eyes widened like I had just seen a ghost. I looked at all the missed calls and saw that my Mom and Dad, Brother, friends, and others had been trying to contact me. My only guess is that Will told my parents about my farewell text.

I started reading all the text messages and a feeling of love and light began to wrap around me. Are you kidding me? I couldn't believe that many people actually cared about me. My eyes started to water. I tried to wipe away the tears to clear my vision in order to see the screen better.

It wasn't working. I just kept crying. It became so intense that I had to grab a hold of the branch so that I wouldn't fall out of the tree. Since I couldn't see anymore, I decided to check my voice messages. So, I pressed and held one. I remember the automated voice telling me I had seventy five new messages. I couldn't believe I had that many. I started listening to them.

I let loose an ocean of tears. It was incredibly intense. I couldn't control it. I was crying like a baby being born. I heard my Dad's voice, my Mom's voice, my Brother's voice, my friend's voices and some voices I didn't even recognize. Each message was so positive, so encouraging. It really got to me.

I felt loved. The darkness was leaving.

Love and Light were intervening. It actually felt good, and I accepted it. Pure love and positivity were coming my way, and I accepted it. Minutes passed as I continued to listen to the voice messages. Tears were still flowing. I couldn't believe what was happening.

"Ahh!" I yelled. My mentality was changing. I could feel it. It was as if a light switch got turned on within me, signifying change for the better. "Ahhhh!" I could literally feel the darkness exiting me. "What am I doing?! What am I about to do?!?" I was beyond pissed at myself.

“So many people care about me! I can’t do this! I can’t. I won’t do this! I am smarter than this!”

My mind was clearing. I started to calm down somewhat. I was not going to do the deed. The tide had turned.

“You know what? Whatever problems I have in life, I’m just going to have to deal with them. They aren’t the boss of me! I control my life!” I said as I hammered the branch with my fists. The tears continued to roll down my cheeks.

I jumped down off the branch. I needed to let out the remainder of the darkness within me. It didn’t belong there anymore. I wanted to be happy again. I was finally accepting the Light. A new and improved Chris was being born.

I took a long look at my phone. I started thinking about my farewell text. I no longer wanted any part of the dark Chris. I decided to make things right. So, I sent this text message to my Dad:

I’m sorry

I suddenly became enraged. I was so angry at myself for what I almost did. Without thinking, I raised the phone into the air and smashed it against a rock again and again. Kneeling down, I pounded it against the flat-faced rock as hard as I could until it was obliterated. I felt relieved. I felt the cold hand of darkness release its vice-like grip. The light was beginning to surround me. I began to catch my breath. My heart rate slowed, and I was beginning to compose myself.

My mind was no longer cloudy. The dark clouds had dissipated. There was now sunshine entering my world. I was no longer anxious. I could now begin my journey back into the Light. I was going to become silly, fun-loving and happy again.

Rising up off my knees, I walked back to the picket fence. Before I left, I took one last look at the scene. I had

no intention of returning there ever again. The tree, the rope and the whole area looked surreal. Back there were the remains of a cloudy, distorted mind. That was the last of the angry, sad and upset Chris who had only been focusing on the negative things in life. I left my darkness there to hang itself.

I used my forearm and my hand to wipe the tears from my face. I took a deep breath, turned around, and climbed over the picket fence.

I was suddenly overcome by the desire to go home. I pictured myself eating a home cooked meal, taking a nice warm shower, and sleeping in my comfy bed. I saw myself hanging out with friends and cracking jokes. I envisioned a happy and better life. I thought about my homework and all the catching up I would have to do. But, that no longer worried me. I would just have to do my best. I somehow knew that everything was going to be okay.

As soon as I allowed the Light to enter my world, my thoughts and mindset quickly changed. My darkness was the dark and tainted part of me. It was my own worst enemy. It had convinced me that focusing on the negative was all I could do. I allowed it to grow and take over to the point where I *actually* wanted to take my own life. It was my choice even though I didn't realize it at the time. Perhaps, if I had tried focusing on the positive prior to this dark journey, I would have never gone down that dark, hopeless road.

A new chapter was beginning. Sunshine was returning to my world. There was no looking back now. So, I started back on that same dirt road that had brought me to this dramatic turning point in my life. I walked for a long time and eventually came to a gas station. There was an old man behind the counter reading a magazine. I regretted smashing my phone at this point, but I needed to press onward.

“Hi, I was wondering if I could borrow your phone. I need to make an important call.”

“Pay phone, outside,” he said.

So I gave him a one dollar bill and he changed it for quarters.

I left the store and walked around to the back. I patiently waited for the person in front of me to finish their call. I was feeling sick and my body felt like it was shutting down. My head hurt and I was starving. I just wanted to go home.

The woman finally ended her conversation. I picked up the phone, grabbed a few quarters out of my pocket, inserted them into the slot and dialed my Dad’s number.

“Hello?” my Mom asked as she answered his phone.

“It’s me, Chris.” I honestly wasn’t sure if she would even recognize my voice. It was weak. Hearing my Mom again made me happy.

“Chris?! Oh my God! I’m so glad to hear your voice! I love you, very much! Where are you?”

My eyes watered up when I heard her tell me that she loved me. At that very moment, I felt extremely ashamed of what I had almost done.

“I don’t know where I am right now.”

“Okay, hold on. I’m going to hand the phone to your Father. Don’t hang up. Okay?”

“Okay, I won’t.”

She sounded concerned, like any worried mother would be. Then I heard my Dad’s voice.

“Hey, Chris! I miss you buddy. We are on our way to the airport to be with you. Where are you located?” His voice was comforting to hear.

“I don’t know. Uhm, I need to ask the man inside for the address of this gas station,” I replied.

“Hold on. Don’t go anywhere,” he said.

“I’ll be right back.” I needed to get the address.

Since I was out of quarters, I was hesitant to leave the phone behind. It was my only lifeline to my parents. I gripped it tightly and paused for a moment before carefully laying it down. I hoped no one would try to use the phone while I was away from it. With that thought I quickly walked inside to ask the man.

He gave me a sheet of paper and a pen. I wrote down the address, double checked it, and read it back to him. He confirmed it. So I bolted out the door and picked the phone back up.

“Hello?” I asked, hoping my Dad was still there.

“I’m still here. Did you get the address?”

I read off the address and began feeling even more relieved. While talking to my Dad, I heard my Mom in the background on her phone with Stephen. He told me to wait where I was. To my surprise, I was told that my brother was less than a mile away. He also told me that he and my Mom loved me and reminded me that all would be well. With that, we said our good byes.

I sat down on the curb waiting for my brother to arrive. I felt my eyelids slowly shutting. I was exhausted, but I couldn’t go to sleep. I was excited about seeing my brother again, but I also felt embarrassed. I mean, what would he think of me? What would my parents think of me? What would everyone I knew think of me? What would my brother’s reaction be when I got into the car? I hoped he wouldn’t call me stupid.

I watched the cars drive by while I waited to get picked up. I was starting to be able to be at peace with my own thoughts. I was concerned about how everyone was going to treat me, but I knew that I was now in control of my thoughts and actions. After all, *I* had convinced *myself* that my life was worth ending. But now I had hope. The negative thoughts were gone. It was just me, myself and I. No darkness. That was the way it was going to be.

When I saw the familiar black Ford Focus park right beside me I got up and took a deep breath. I hoped he wouldn't be mad at me. Brad was in the passenger seat, so I reached to open the back door. As soon as I touched the door handle, Brad jumped out. "You can have shotgun," he told me. I wondered why. Did they feel bad for me? Did they feel like I needed to have attention? I sure hoped not. All of this was my decision, so I was the one who needed to get back on track. I didn't want pity. I didn't want anyone thinking I was still depressed. Even though I knew it would be difficult for people to believe, I wasn't. I was on my way to a good life and didn't need anyone thinking I was fragile. I knew my mindset had already started changing. I was on my way to being silly, fun-loving and happy once again.

I knew it was going to take hard work and dedication to get back to my old self, but I knew it was possible. It had to be. I had already improved so much. My darkness had vanished and was no longer in control of me. My mindset had changed. I no longer had deep feelings of anger, sadness or anything negative. My habitual negative thinking was going away. I just wanted to get back home.

When I got in the car, it was awesome. Nothing special happened. They treated me like everything was normal. The conversation was nothing out of the ordinary, and they didn't ask any prying questions. I guess they didn't want me to feel awkward. It worked.

Stephen explained that we would be going to the Norlen's house. The Norlen family were good friends of ours. When we lived in Olathe our two families would get together for school functions, family outings, and occasional dinners. My parents felt it was the safest place for me to be until they arrived from Florida.

We made it to their house and Stephen parked on the street next to their driveway. My brother and I said our goodbyes to Brad as he left to do some errands. Stephen and I walked to the front door. "Hey guys! Come on in," Mrs. Norlen exclaimed. She was very welcoming.

I thought it was going to be awkward at their house. When we were just hanging out watching TV, it felt like everyone was intentionally trying to act as normal as possible. But, they did a pretty good job and I liked just having idle conversation and not doing much. I liked that a lot. It didn't feel strange. I was so glad that everyone wasn't staring at me and asking questions. It was a relief. I was able to relax and just go with the flow.

Turns out, while I was gone there was an Amber Alert out for me. Since I was a minor, my name, and details about me being suicidal and running away were put up publicly in the hope that someone would recognize me. Once the police realized that I had been found, it was protocol to have officers come to my location in order for me to be evaluated professionally. So, the cops were on their way to the Norlen's house.

"Chris, two police officers are going to be coming here to ask you a couple of questions. Have you smoked marijuana or done any drugs while you were gone?" Mr. Norlen asked me privately as we stood in the hallway near the front door.

I knew that I had. Crap. But it was only a couple of times here and there. And *that* was only because I thought I wanted to end my life.

"I did," I heard myself say.

I wasn't sure if I should've told him the truth, but I did anyway.

"Okay, well the police may want to drug test you to see if you are intoxicated. They may do that based on the current set of circumstances. So, just be aware that if they ask you, it is only protocol. Don't be alarmed."

I wasn't going to lie about what I had done. I was ready to face the consequences. I was on my way back to a good life. I had to be honest about everything.

Ding *dong* the doorbell rang and everyone got up. We all went to the front door as Mr. Norlen opened it.

Two uniformed policemen were at the door. They wanted to talk to me in private.

"How are you feeling?" inquired one of the officers

"What is today's date?" asked the other.

They were just trying to make sure that I was okay and not under the influence or intoxicated. They seemed very cautious of me at first. They had their hands casually placed on their gun holsters. I'm sure I did look pretty scary. For all they knew, I could have been tweaked on Meth, ready to jump at any moment and attack them. But, the cops were actually pretty nice to me. They treated me with respect and were obviously trying to keep me calm. I already was.

Eventually, they finished their questioning. They told Mr. and Mrs. Norlen that I was going to be taken to the hospital to get evaluated and cleaned up.

"Okay, Chris, I'll follow you to the hospital in my car. Don't worry," Mr. Norlen reassured me.

I walked with the two officers to their car.

"Don't mind the seats buddy, they're plastic and a little uncomfortable, but it'll be a short ride," one of them said.

Since I wasn't under arrest, they didn't handcuff me. They just placed me in the back seat. It wasn't as bad as they made it out to be.

Before they shut the door I noticed the sky was crystal clear, with white clouds all around. There was a gentle breeze and the sun was shining. I knew that this was a sign that everything was getting better.

In the back of the cop car, I looked at the heavy duty black bars between the front and back seats. There was also a thick plastic window in front of the bars. The exterior windows had black bars on them too. Even though I knew I wasn't, I couldn't help but feel like a criminal. I felt like people were staring at me and judging me at every

light. But, it was okay. I understood that this was just part of the process. I was a minor, there was an Amber Alert issued for me, and that was a big deal. I knew that I was on my way to a good life. Even though I was sitting where law-breakers usually sat, I just knew that it was okay and everything was going to be good.

"Alright, buddy, here we are. We're going to take you inside so they can evaluate you. Then you're free from us," one of the officers told me as we arrived at the hospital.

As we were walking to the entrance I noticed Mr. Norlen right behind us. I had actually forgotten that he had been following the cop car. The fact that he volunteered to be by my side as I was going to the hospital gave me a sense of comfort. I was glad to know that I wouldn't be alone.

The wait turned out to be awhile. They took my name at the front desk, sent me to triage, and then put me in a small examination room. The police were going to stay with me in the room until a social worker came in to see me. Mr. Norlen wasn't immediate family, so he wasn't allowed in that room. But he said that he would be right outside until my parents got there.

So, I sat down on the bed and ended up dozing off for a while as I was waiting for whatever was supposed to happen next. I was so tired, and finally felt comfortable enough to allow myself to sleep for a bit. After a short nap, I opened my eyes and noticed a lady at the door. She was the Hospital Youth Counselor.

"Hi, Christopher, my name is Judith. I'm here to talk to you. How are you feeling?" she asked. She had gray curly hair and was wearing a sweater vest. She reminded me of a grandmother. Her appearance and tone-of-voice put me at ease. I was glad that she was there.

"I'm okay," I replied.

She assured me that everything was going to be alright. She said that she was going to stay there with me until my parents arrived.

When she told me that, I felt even more relieved knowing that I would soon see my parents again. But I also felt ashamed. I knew that my Mom and Dad would comfort me and show me love and support. But I wasn't sure how they would react when they walked in and saw me in this condition.

Some time ticked by, and before I knew it, my parents walked into the room. Because I was so tired, I probably seemed like I was emotionless. My eyes were so heavy, and I wanted to sleep. But I forced myself to stay awake so that I could spend time with them. As they walked over to me, a feeling of "home" and "comfort" and "love" filled me as I saw them for the first time in what seemed like forever. They showered me with hugs and kisses. I got an overwhelming feeling that they would not be mad at me. It was almost as if I *knew*. I hugged and kissed my Mom and Dad like I never had before. I was so happy to see them and so happy to be alive.

My parents reassured me that everything would be okay. They continued to tell me that they loved me very much while giving me more hugs and kisses. At one point Judith pulled my Dad out of the room. Now it was just my Mom and I.

I reached into my wallet and pulled out the farewell letter, the last remaining part of my darkness. I told my Mom that I wanted her to take it from me. I didn't need it anymore. I handed her the letter and became quiet. I cried softly and hid my eyes behind my hands. My Mom held me as she fought back tears of her own.

I knew at that very moment that I would never again attempt to take my own life. But, my parents didn't know that. No parent could know that about their child. I knew that my parents would be there for me, but I never could have imagined how far my Dad would go to prove to me just how big living really is.

Chapter 2

Light



Jesus & Iliana Agudo

I was *going* to save Christopher's life. I needed to do whatever it took to make him realize that life was worth the living. That was my only thought, my single-minded focus. I was determined to take whatever measures were necessary to make this happen. My son was not going to leave this earth until he was old and grey, and most certainly not before me or his mom. Not if I could help it.

The day was April 10th, 2010. We thought it would be just another day in the life of the Agudo family. It was not. Hello, my name is Jesus Agudo and this is the story of how my wife and I almost lost our youngest son and what we did to get him back.

* * *

It was a beautiful, sunny Saturday in Gainesville Florida. I had just woken up and noticed the sun rays shining through the blinds of my bedroom. I couldn't wait to have our family routine go back to normal. We really missed our son last week while he was away for Spring Break. I especially missed family movie night. Christopher would always pick out great rentals. Since both of our boys were young, we've sat down as a family and watched a movie every Friday night. And since Stephen, our oldest son, was away at college, we really cherished the time we got to spend with Christopher. I was so happy that he was coming home.

My wife, Iliana, was sound asleep next to me. I looked at the clock. It was just after six a.m. Christopher should have already been packed, in the car, and on his way to the airport. It was still two hours before his eight a.m. takeoff, but I figured I would give him a call to find out exactly where he was. To my surprise, when I called, it went directly to voicemail. I wondered if he had turned his phone off because he was going through the security check. Perhaps his battery was dead.

I waited a bit longer and tried calling him again. There was still no answer. I only heard the sound of his recorded voice. I wasn't too concerned because I knew that he was a responsible teenager. It was still an hour and a half before his departure. I knew it wouldn't be long before he called and told me that he was on his way home. It didn't cross my mind that he would miss his flight.

Another thirty minutes passed, and there was still no word from our son. I began to wonder a bit. It was uncharacteristic of him not to get in touch with his parents before something as big as taking a flight. Whenever he stayed at a friend's house, he would always give us a call and let us know that he got there ok, and he would tell us when he was about to leave. I figured there had to be a valid reason why we hadn't heard from him.

Even though there was now only an hour before his flight, I assumed he had to be at the airport waiting to board. He must have just had cell phone issues or bad reception. I knew he still had enough time to get through the security checkpoint and make his flight as long as he was at the airport. I was sure he was at the airport.

My wife woke up around seven and I let her know that I had not yet heard from Christopher. There was less than an hour left before his flight was supposed to be in the air. It wasn't like him not to keep in touch. Since his departure time was quickly approaching, my mind began to wander. I began thinking of *other* possibilities.

What if he overslept at Will's house? What if he stayed the night with someone else and lost track of time? What if he was doing something else altogether and never left for the airport at all? Our family has always emphasized the importance of punctuality. I couldn't believe he would just oversleep and miss the flight. He couldn't just be hanging out with his friends and not paying attention to the time. Could he?

At nearly eight a.m., I became concerned. Since we left Kansas ten months ago, Christopher kept in contact

with a lot of his friends there. What if he wanted to stay in Kansas? What if he had no intention of returning to Florida at all? What if he resented the fact that we moved away from his friends?

This got me thinking about why we moved to Florida in the first place. We made the move to try and help him get relief from his incessant headaches. For over three years, our son was suffering from vicious headaches that wouldn't seem to leave him alone. We had done everything we could for him. We took him to several different doctors, tried over-the-counter and prescription medications, and did everything we could think of to try and give him some level of comfort. We even took him to specialists in other states. At one point, a spinal tap was recommended. They believed the pressure in his head might lessen if spinal fluid was taken out. The pain he dealt with on a daily basis was palpable. I suffered as a father, watching each day as his pain continued with no relief in sight.

In 2009, we decided to take a break from all the doctors, so we took a trip to Florida to visit my wife's cousin. When we got there, it was like a miracle. For some reason, his headaches actually got better for the first time in a long time. We thought that the difference in elevation and pressure, since Florida is much closer to sea level than Kansas, might have been the reason he was getting relief. Since we had moved around several times as a family, it wasn't a big deal to try a new location that might be helpful to my child. And the move did seem to help him. He was able to function better. He was no longer as sensitive to light and sound. He was able to go outside and play basketball with some of the neighborhood kids. He even felt good enough to play football after school, which we knew was a big deal for him since his headaches forced him off the team in Kansas. He seemed much more alive. But, perhaps he decided that he wasn't willing to leave his friends in Kansas behind after all.

Is that what was going on? Did he not want to come back home? My mind started to run wild with all of the possibilities why he wasn't getting in touch with us.

Although I was worried, as Iliana woke up, I had no concrete evidence that would give me a reason to panic her. So, I told her that all was well despite my doubts. I saw no reason at that moment to burden her. Even though I had a bad feeling, and Christopher's departure time was about to pass, I told her it should only be a matter of minutes before we heard from him. But the minutes continued to roll by with no word from our son. A red flag came up when his departure time came and went. I knew something wasn't right.

It was now after eight in the morning, and his flight was supposed to be on its way to Florida. So we decided to call the mother of the boy Christopher was staying with in Kansas, to see if she could shed some light on the situation. We were hopeful that she would know what was going on. When Will's mother answered the phone we were relieved that she picked up. But, our relief was to be short-lived.

"What? What do you mean you don't know where he is?" Iliana's voice was a mix of shock, confusion, and anger. Although my ears heard what she said, it did not compute. At that moment, I was literally unable to comprehend how it was possible that she didn't know. Our son was seventeen years old. We expected the adult in charge to be responsible enough to know where he was. Whenever we took responsibility for minors, we always knew where they were and what they were doing at all times. How could she just not know?

Will's mother said that she would go into her son's bedroom to see if Christopher had overslept, while Iliana waited impatiently. She told us that the two boys had planned on going to a party the night before. She said that Will decided not to go, and Christopher was supposed to be back at their house in time to be taken to the airport. She was under the impression that Will would have taken him

to the airport by now. My wife became visibly concerned as Will's mom went to see if our son was there sleeping.

Even though I already had a feeling that something was wrong, I was still shocked when Will's mother came back and told Iliana that her son was there but Christopher was not. Apparently, Will had woken up long enough to say that Christopher never came back from the party. He had no idea where our son was. Hearing this news hit us like a ton of bricks.

"Where is he? Find out now! How can this be?" Iliana cried repeatedly. She was extremely upset.

Christopher was now officially missing. I was beside myself. I knew that Will's mother was a good caretaker, as our son had stayed there many times before. But, at this moment, I couldn't understand how any adult could allow a child to go missing. Her son was in his warm bed, safe and sound. Our son was nowhere to be found. I was in a state of resentful anger.

As Iliana got off the phone, I knew I needed to focus. I had to remain composed. I knew that freaking out and getting angrier wouldn't get Christopher back any faster. I started thinking about my son's phone. I knew it was off, but since I had a background in telecommunications, I decided to start there.

I logged into our AT&T online account to see our son's call and text activity. I gathered all the numbers that he had dialed or texted within the last twenty four hours. Iliana started with the most recent calls. She didn't care if she had to wake up everyone in Kansas in order to find out where our son was. She placed call after call. Several of them went to voicemail, but everyone she spoke with had the same response. No one seemed to know where he was. It was as if he had disappeared from the face of the earth.

She made phone calls for a solid hour, calling friends, family, and friends of friends. Even with our concerted effort, we still had no luck in finding our boy. It

was mind boggling. There was no reason for Christopher to behave this way. Why didn't he call us? Why didn't he at least tell someone where he was going or what he was doing?

An hour after we spoke to Will's mother, she called Iliana. The information she was about to give us would forever alter our lives. It would put us to the ultimate test of parenthood. It would break us down, crush us, and spit us out.

"I'm so, so sorry. My son just woke up and turned on his phone. He found a bad text from Christopher early this morning. He will be forwarding it to you now. It looks like a suicide text."

I wanted to know what was said because it seemed like the life had been sucked right out of my wife. She turned and stared at me with watery eyes and repeated what Will's mom told her.

That very moment, the forwarded text message came through and Iliana read it to me. Then she gave me her phone and I looked at it myself. It was even more painful to read than it was to listen to. It was the message that would forever change life as we knew it. The text message came in as follows:

I'm a disgrace, to my family bro, I can't go on any longer I'm taking my phone off I'm sorry, I didn't want this to happen, I just needed to visit Olathe again to see my friends atleast I saw my close friends again, and I saw my brother in emporia which I was wanting to see before I left, sorry will I'm glad I have had you as a friend too, a good friend tell my mom and dad I love them and am sorry for what I've done

My heart broke. It was the worst pain I had ever felt in my lifetime. The thought of losing my child was almost the death of me. I sat on the edge of my bed and cried the

hardest I had ever cried in my life. Both of my fists were clenched over my eyes. An overwhelming flood of tears ran down my cheeks. My arms became saturated from crying.

As I sat there in pain and sorrow, the many memories of Christopher began to flash through my mind. Memories from Iliana being pregnant with him, the day he was born, him saying his first words, taking his first steps, all the hugs and kisses he would give us and growing up to be a wonderful, loving son.

At this point, I had completely broken down. I became an angry, confused, and desperate father who only wanted his son back home.

I got up off the bed and began to pace around in circles, grasping at my hair. My thoughts became irrational as I wondered what could possibly compel my son to want to take his own life. I started yelling out, "If he's dead, I'll sell everything in the house and never come back here! I'll just live under a bridge! Nothing would matter anyway! I'll never come back to Florida!"

The outburst of cries became uncontrollable. The tears just wouldn't stop. I was consumed with anger, pain, and sadness. It was the worst I had ever felt in my entire life, and it hit me all at once. I was getting hit from all directions, like I was in a boxing ring fighting a much stronger opponent. I was overwhelmed. I was getting beaten up by my emotions. They had me up against the ropes and I was definitely losing this round.

Iliana, however, was somehow able to hold it together. She made it clear that she was going to follow through at all costs to find our son. Her powerful motherly instinct kicked in. While I was still in the middle of my breakdown, a mother's superpowers had Iliana back on the phone calling our oldest son Stephen. She had the strength of a hundred women.

She began the lengthy process of contacting everyone who might be able to help find our son. Her first

call was to the local police in Olathe. Then, she called the state police and nearby hospitals. The state police issued an Amber Alert since he was only seventeen and the nature of the emergency was time sensitive. She called everyone on the list I acquired from logging into the AT&T account. She called his friends once again to explain the urgency of this matter. We needed to find Christopher before it was too late. We reached out to his friends in the hope that someone would know where he had gone. We were hoping that someone would find him before he did the unthinkable.

The fight with my emotions had almost gotten the better of me. But, I knew I couldn't just sit there crying like a baby while my wife did all the work. Somehow, I was finally able to compose myself and begin a new fight, the fight to save my son's life.

I was *going* to save Christopher's life. I needed to do whatever it took to make him realize that life was worth the living. That was my only thought, my single-minded focus. I was determined to take whatever measures were necessary to make this happen. My son was not going to leave this earth until he was old and grey, and most certainly not before me or his mom. Not if I could help it.

So, I started sending loving and uplifting messages to Christopher's cell phone via text message. I sent message after message:

Don't do it.

Mami and I love you.

Stephen loves you.

Abuela loves you.

You have family and friends that care.

Stay alive my son.

I love you.

Come back home.

Please call or text us.

Listen to your voicemails.
Mami left you voice mails. Please listen.
We can make changes.
We miss you.
You will grow old and have babies.
You make us laugh and smile.
You are an incredible young man.

While I was flooding Christopher's cell with text messages, Iliana started calling and leaving loving and caring voicemails. She left messages like: "Please, let us know where you are. We're not mad at you. We love you. Please just call. Let us know that you're ok."

We had both become relentless. We hoped that maybe, just maybe he would see or hear the love that we were sending out to him. It was the cry of love, compassion and positivity. We continued this bombardment of love as the hours went by. We thought that if just one of those messages could reach him, maybe he would change his mind in time.

Many of Christopher's friends that we contacted also started sending him messages and voicemails. There were even people we didn't know that heard about our plight and started sending our son messages. Christopher was receiving love from all angles, from family, from his friends, and even from friends of friends. Dozens of people were doing everything that they could for our son. We were truly appreciative for all the support.

While we were doing all that we could on our end, the state police were also very helpful. They would check in with us and give us periodic updates. Even though they rarely had any new information to offer, I was grateful that they continued to call. It helped me to remain positive. They reassured us that they were doing everything they could to find our son. They were hopeful that calls would

come in because of the Amber Alert. We still held onto the hope that Christopher would try to contact us.

Three hours had passed since receiving that devastating text. Then, out of nowhere, we received another text message. This time, it was from Christopher's phone. It was two little words:

I'm sorry.

My heart skipped a beat. The impact was huge, but my emotions were mixed. At first, those two words gave us some hope. Our son had communicated with us. We now knew that we were on his mind and this message meant he was still alive. But, for how long? Then, I began to think that this was it. This was the nail in the coffin. Was this message the last one we'd ever get? Was he about to leave us? I wouldn't allow myself to get caught up with that line of thinking. Not this time.

Without any hesitation we called him back. We desperately wanted to hear his voice. We wanted to know that he was still alive. The phone just rang and rang. He didn't pick up. We called again and again, but it just went to voicemail each time. That didn't matter. We took it as a positive sign. Just knowing that his phone was on gave us some hope.

I immediately notified the state police before they had a chance to call us back. I told them that we had received a text message from Christopher, and that his phone was on. They suggested doing a triangular trace on the cell phone to narrow down his location. Within ten minutes they called back.

The police were able to triangulate his signal and said that Christopher was located somewhere in the Shawnee Mission neighborhood. They said they had already dispatched a squad car to that area. I thanked the officer and asked him to call us the moment they knew anything else.

It was a major breakthrough and a relief to hear. We now had real hope that our son would be found. Iliana and I looked at each other and smiled for the very first time since this ordeal started. We hugged and comforted one another. As I stared into her eyes I could see her pain, and I knew she could see mine. We knew that we weren't out of the woods yet.

Iliana went back to work and contacted our oldest boy, Stephen, once again. She directed him to start driving towards Shawnee Mission. Only a few minutes after the police traced Christopher's cell, it would no longer ring. It started going straight to voicemail again.

I figured the battery must have died. Why else would it suddenly turn off again? I was so frustrated. Why wouldn't it just stay on!

Enough! I wasn't willing to wait for the next text message or phone call. I knew that we needed to get to our son as quickly as possible. I told Iliana that I was going to book a flight to Kansas. Within minutes, I was on the phone with Continental Airlines. I told them about the emergency situation. They were sympathetic, and the airline was kind enough to give us a decent rate on two round-trip tickets from Gainesville to Kansas City that departed in less than three hours.

We never packed so fast in our lives. This trip was no vacation. We were on a mission to get our son back. We were on a mission to Shawnee Mission.

We jumped into our Mitsubishi Outlander, backed out of the driveway, and began to race towards the Gainesville airport.

My wife and I began discussing what might have caused this to happen. We had heard of other families going through this, but it never crossed our minds that it could happen to us. We never imagined that anyone in our family would become suicidal. This was a wakeup call, and we were going to make sure that we did everything right.

When we were about halfway to the Airport, my cell phone rang. It was an unknown number with a 913 area code. Kansas! Since I was driving, I handed the phone to Iliana.

“Chris?!” she exclaimed.

I jerked my head so fast. I couldn't believe it. Iliana was actually speaking with Christopher. For a moment I forgot that I was driving as I continued to stare at her in amazement. Iliana put her hand on her forehead and thanked God he was alright. Christopher was actually on the line. It was not a recording this time.

I turned my head back towards the road in relief. We had contact, and this gave us what we longed for. We knew for certain that our son was alive.

At that very moment some life was breathed back into both of us. It was a huge victory. “I'm sorry” wasn't a final goodbye after all. I couldn't wait to talk to him myself. I wanted to hug and hold him and tell him how much I loved him. Iliana was thankfully able to do one of the three. She said, “I love you, Chris,” and gave me the phone.

When she handed me the phone, it felt like a gift. The ability to speak to my son was something I would never take for granted again.

When I spoke to him I tried to keep calm. I had no way of knowing his state of mind, so I tried to maintain my composure and be comforting. I didn't want to risk saying *anything* that might drive him over the edge. Therefore, my choice of words had to be very selective. I had to make certain he knew that we weren't mad at him. I needed him to know that it was all going to be ok.

“Hey, Chris. I miss you, buddy. We're on our way to the airport to be with you,” I said.

“I want to go home,” I heard him say.

Those five words were music to my ears. My eyes began to water and I wanted to cry again. But, I remained

strong and continued the conversation. Hearing my son's voice lifted a great weight off my shoulders.

"Standby, Stephen is on his way to pick you up," I reassured.

He was a bit shocked and relieved when I said that. He had no idea about the ongoing search for him. He was unaware that we had already narrowed down his location to somewhere in the Shawnee Mission area, or that we had dispatched his brother to find him. Christopher sounded weak and tired. I couldn't wait to have him picked up so that his ordeal could be over. But first we needed to know exactly where he was.

"Where are you located?" I asked.

He had no idea and that worried me a bit. We were too close, and at this point I couldn't afford for anything to go wrong. We needed to know his location if we were going to pick him up.

Iliana had Stephen on the other cell and told him to continue driving around the area until we knew more. Christopher said that he would have to put the payphone down to ask the gas station attendant for the address. My heart skipped a beat again. I didn't want to sever the only connection I had with my son.

"Hold on. Don't go anywhere." I said.

I couldn't bear the thought of losing him again. Hearing his voice was the only thing that gave me hope that everything would be ok. My cell phone was the lifeline.

However, he insisted that he needed to leave for just a moment to get the address. He promised he would be right back. If Stephen was to find him, I had to let him go. It was a gamble that I had to take. I still believed in Christopher.

I waited anxiously while he went to get the street address. When he came back on the phone my heart rate began to stabilize.

Iliana was on the phone with Stephen and I was on the phone with Christopher. As we drove to the airport, we each had one of our son's voices in our ear. Even though it was through the use of modern technology; for those moments, our family was back together again. Hearing their voices energized our very souls. These were our boys and we were a family.

As soon as Christopher told me the address I had Iliana relay the information. When Stephen programmed his GPS, he discovered that he was only five miles away and quickly told us the good news. I allowed myself to relax a little, but I couldn't calm down completely until I knew that my boys were together. When Stephen told me he was less than a mile away, Christopher said that he wanted to be closer to the street to make sure he was visible. I was hesitant to get off the phone, but I wanted to make certain that he would be found. So, I told him I loved him and that we would be back together soon as I reluctantly hung up.

Once Stephen informed us that he had arrived, we were finally able to breathe a genuine sigh of relief. Our boys were together and we were on our way to be with them.

We wanted to make sure that Christopher would be taken to a safe place. So, Iliana instructed Stephen to take his brother to the Norlen's house. Our families had been friends for several years, and we felt comfortable with them. The boys were going to stay with them until we got to Kansas.

After solidifying the plan, Iliana finally felt relaxed enough to hang up the phone with Stephen. Then she started calling the people we had reached out to for help. First, she notified the state police with the good news. They removed the Amber Alert and sent a squad car to the Norlen's residence. Then Iliana called everyone else that had been trying to locate Christopher. She thanked them and joyfully explained that he was safe.

* * *

Iliana and I had been assigned separate seats on the airplane because we got our tickets on such short notice. We were unable to talk to each other during the flight. Sitting by myself gave me the opportunity to regroup and gather my thoughts. I started to think like a chess player. I had to be five moves ahead at all times. I had to develop a plan and carry it out with care and precision. We needed to make sure we dealt with our son correctly. We couldn't allow our actions or reactions to cause him any stress. My wife and I had to make sure that he got the proper care. I needed to be willing to do whatever was necessary, and I needed to make sure that there were no loose ends. My son's well-being was all that mattered. I was going to do everything I could for him.

While I continued thinking, I wondered what could possibly have been going through his mind. What was he going to do now? I couldn't believe that he had actually been willing to end his own life. How could this have happened? Where did it come from? What could have made our silly, fun-loving and seemingly happy son so sad, angry and upset that he would want to die? Iliana and I had not seen any signs. Was he *that* depressed and we didn't even know it? Why now or why at all? Only Christopher could answer those questions.

I wasn't going to allow myself to dwell on all those unanswered questions. We just wanted to hold our son again and tell him how much we loved him. We wanted him to know that there was nothing that would stop us from doing whatever it took to make him feel better.

* * *

Several hours later, our flight landed in Kansas and we exited the airplane. Walking was not an option. The sooner we could get to Christopher the sooner we could all begin the healing process.

We grabbed our carry-on bags and ran to the rental counter. As soon as we got into the rental, we raced away. We were in a race to see our son. He was hurting and we needed to be there with him. The sound of his weary voice still resonated in my mind.

We called Stephen periodically for updates. We wanted to know how close he was to the Norlen's home. During one of those calls we asked him to tell us how Christopher looked. Since he was sleeping next to him in the car, Stephen spoke to me in a low tone-of-voice so he wouldn't wake him up.

"Christopher looks like he's homeless. His clothes are filthy and he has body odor. His nails are dirty, his hair is oily, and his eyes are blood-shot."

I wasn't surprised to hear that he was in pretty rough shape after such an ordeal. But his clothes could be washed, he could take a shower, and he could get some rest... because he was alive.

Even though I was incredibly grateful, I was still feeling a lot of pain because of this life altering day. The emotional stress had taken a toll on my mind and body. My heart was not yet completely healed. After all, this was my son, my baby boy. If he had taken his life I would have never forgiven myself.

We drove as fast as we could to the Norlen's house. We were so excited that we were finally going to see our son in person. We had almost lost him, but here he was. When we got to the door, our hope was temporarily deflated. We found out that Christopher had already left with the state police.

Mrs. Norlen told us that Christopher was on his way to the hospital to be evaluated, and that her husband was following right behind the police car. We thanked her for her family's willingness to help our son at this critical time, and immediately headed for the hospital.

While driving through Olathe, it brought back memories. I was reminded of Christopher going to school here. He used to have so much fun with his friends. It made me think about all the good times we shared as a family. We lived in a nice house and had barbecues outside in the summer. He was in High School and would have his friends sleep over at our home. We had some great times with both of our boys here. I wondered if Christopher had thought about these same memories and no longer wanted to live in Florida. I was prepared to make whatever changes were necessary to make certain he never felt compelled to do anything like this again, even if it meant picking up and moving once more.

When we pulled into the hospital parking lot, Iliana and I had a brief discussion about how we needed to be calm and loving. We wanted to make sure that we didn't excite him since we didn't know his emotional state. As we walked through the emergency doors, we were just thankful that we were about to see our son again.

"Hi, we are here to see Christopher Agudo. He just came in to be evaluated," I said to the nurse at the front desk.

"Yes, have a seat and someone will be right with you," she said.

As we sat in the waiting area, it felt like days were passing by. We were so close now. We knew that our son was somewhere on the other side of the wall, just barely out of reach. My wife and I were restless, worried, and impatient. We had flown halfway across the country, and all we wanted was to be with our son. The wait was brutal.

As we anxiously waited, we noticed a doctor walking towards us. "Mr. and Mrs. Agu. . .?"

"Yes!" we said in unison.

We answered him before he had a chance to finish pronouncing our last name. Our hearts were racing. This was the moment. We knew that it would only be a matter

of seconds before we finally got to see our son. Our family had been blindsided and nearly devastated by a tragedy. It was now time to put us back together. We got up and followed the doctor through the doors that lead to the back.

“Room 202. He’s in there.”

The doctor pointed to a door that was just a few feet away. As we approached, there was an older woman standing outside the door. She seemed friendly and pleasant.

“Mr. and Mrs. Agudo?” she asked.

“Yes,” we replied eagerly.

“My name is Judith. I’m the Hospital Youth Counselor. Your son tried to commit suicide. He also admitted to taking drugs. He’s in a very fragile state of mind. You will find that he is exhausted and confused. The confusion is likely due to lack of sleep. Try not to overwhelm him with too many questions.”

We thanked her and headed straight through the door where we saw Christopher lying in bed. I was shocked by his appearance. His condition was just as bad as Stephen had told us over the phone. His eyes were bloodshot, his clothes were filthy, there was dirt underneath his fingernails, and his hair was greasy and matted. He was also lethargic and incoherent. But, none of it mattered. Just seeing that he was alive with my own two eyes gave me an immeasurable sense of relief.

His physical condition made no difference to us. We were just so grateful that he was still with us. We felt completed. No matter how old he became, he would always be our son. We love both our boys with all our hearts. They mean everything to us.

Life began to pour back into our souls when we were able to see, hold, and hear him again. The pain wasn’t completely gone, but the love we felt for our son was stronger than ever. It is hard to put into words just how overjoyed we felt.

However, I was only able to savor our reunion for a moment. Judith pulled me aside to explain a few things while Iliana remained with Christopher. She advised me that he would need to go to another hospital for a week in order to be further evaluated. This was standard procedure for minors that had attempted suicide. She informed me that he would be taken to Two Rivers Psychiatric Hospital. She said that the hospital had a great reputation, and our son would be well taken care of. I thanked her as she left to begin the paperwork.

I went back into the room and attempted to talk to Christopher while he drifted in and out of consciousness. When he would doze off, I just looked at him in disbelief at how much he had grown. I couldn't believe how fast time was flying by. It seemed like only yesterday I was changing his diapers. But now he was seventeen, soon to be eighteen, and about to graduate high school. His whole life was ahead of him. I imagined him married with kids of his own and living in a nice house, where his mom and I would visit. I was enjoying thinking about his future.

When he woke up again, I assured him that everything was going to be ok. I promised him that he would be home soon. He looked at me and nodded in acknowledgement. As his eyes fluttered with exhaustion, I reached over to adjust his pillow to make him more comfortable.

While I was comforting him, the EMS team came in. They transferred him to a stretcher and began to wheel him away. They informed us that they would be taking him to Two Rivers. I grabbed Christopher's hand and told him he didn't need to worry because we would see him there. I told him we would be right behind the ambulance.

Then, I asked the EMS driver for directions. Since he did not know the address, he told us to keep up with him so we could follow. Since I was not familiar with the area or the route, I did my best to keep pace with the ambulance without breaking too many traffic laws.

After a forty-five minute drive, we made it to Two Rivers Psychiatric Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri to register Christopher for a seven day stay. We parked and walked towards the main entrance. The parking lot was creepy and surreal. It was dark and after business hours, and there was only one light on. That made it difficult to locate the door. Eventually, we found it and walked into the main lobby. Most of the lights were off inside, and it felt like a scene out of a scary movie. We nervously waited for someone to come and greet us.

We weren't sure what to expect since it was late in the evening, and most of the office personnel had gone for the day. After a few minutes, a night attendant approached us and helped us fill out the admission papers. She then gave us a brief rundown of what to expect, visiting hours, et cetera. After finishing the registration process, we were ready to see Christopher again. We thought we would have been able to see him, but to our disappointment, it was not permitted because it was so late.

Much to our dismay, we were informed that we would not be allowed to see him the next day either. Iliana and I were not very happy about this. But, we knew that it was a secure facility and it was for the protection of the patients and visitors. We were sure that whatever the professionals were going to do on the first day would be critical to their evaluation and treatment plans. We desperately wanted to be near Christopher again, but we would have to wait another twenty four hours.

It had been a long, exhausting day for us. On the forty-five minute drive back to the hotel from the hospital, we turned on the radio and listened to light music to try and relax.

The next day, we remained in the hotel and only left the room to eat. The day before still ran through our minds. Recalling what had transpired during the previous thirty-six hours felt like a bad dream. But it wasn't a

dream. It was our reality and we were anxious to move forward.

On day two of Christopher's stay, Iliana and I woke up early to head towards the hospital. We wanted to see him as soon as we could. When we arrived, we entered the front lobby which was well lit and full of people this time. It seemed like a completely different place. It was a far cry from the dimly lit, seemingly vacant building we saw last time. We were given visitor's badges and headed through the security doors. After seeing the condition he was in two days ago, we wondered how he would look when we saw him. We had built a tremendous amount of anticipation.

To our delight, we saw Christopher sitting in a large interior waiting area. We rushed over to him and gave him big hugs and kisses. He was cleaned up and looking much better. Life seemed to have been breathed back into him. His clothes were clean and the smell was gone. His nails still had a small hint of dirt, but his hair was nicely combed, and his eyes were bright.

We spoke casually and tried to pretend that it was a day like any other. We asked normal questions like "How are you feeling?" and "Are you eating well?" and "Are you getting along with your roommate?" We didn't want to open any fresh wounds. We wanted to give the professionals the opportunity to do what they could to help him start healing. We wanted to make sure that we didn't agitate him during this process.

Christopher was reserved and acted almost as if nothing had happened. We were hoping that he would open up and talk to us. But he didn't seem to want to talk about what happened, and we were ok with that. We weren't going to rush him.

We only had an hour to be with him. So, we did our best to say things that were positive, uplifting and loving. He cracked a smile here and there, but remained distant. I knew a lot had to be going through his mind, but we were going to give him the time he needed to process.

When our visit time was up we told him we loved him and said our goodbyes. It made us so happy to see him looking better. We knew it would take time to find out what had been happening on the inside.

Day three arrived and we wondered what to expect next. What new progress would we see? Perhaps we were hoping for too much too soon. But, in any event we couldn't wait to see him.

We arrived at the hospital, received our visitor badges, and went through the same process as the day before. Christopher was waiting for us in the day room again. We swarmed him with hugs and kisses without delay. He looked even better than he did the day before.

This time, he had a deck of playing cards in his hands. While we visited with him, he would shuffle them repeatedly. We noticed other patients were doing the same. He explained that it was part of the therapy, and continued to shuffle the cards during our visit. We were, of course, happy to see him, but he wasn't very expressive, and he still seemed somewhat detached. He just spoke one word sentences and shuffled the cards. It was basically a repeat of the previous day. But we were going to be patient.

At this point, we had yet to hear from any of the professionals at the hospital. Were they doing everything they could for our son? Was he going to be ok when he got home? What did they want us to do to help him recover from this? Since no one was ready to give us any further information, we wound up with more questions than answers.

The fourth day came and we hoped for something new. Little did I know that something really BIG would happen. The morning routine was the same as it had been. Except this time, once we passed the security doors, we were detoured into an office. We were told that we would be seeing Christopher's therapist to discuss his progress.

The therapist welcomed us and explained that she had been working with our son for the last couple of days. She told us that he was quiet and seemed to be feeling better, but he still needed to be watched over very carefully to ensure that he did not fall back into his previous state of mind. She went on to talk about the daily schedule and his eating habits.

Then, she called our son into the office to join us. She wanted to see if he had anything he wanted to say. She wanted to give Christopher the opportunity to open up and talk.

When he came in, he told us that he was feeling better and was looking forward to going home. He kept his answers brief. The therapist thanked him for being honest and asked if he wouldn't mind going back to his room while she continued talking to us. I thought the conversation would go on as it had been. I never could have expected what happened next.

It was April 14th 2010. This would be the day that catapulted my mind into overdrive. This would be a day like no other. This would be the day of a new birth that was going to save my son's life.

The therapist shut her office door and turned towards us. She sat down, pointed her finger at me, and said:

“You need to surround him with *reasons* to live for.”

She made it my responsibility to save my son's life right then and there. I was totally stuck on what she had just said.

Reasons? I was confused. Why did she word it like that? Didn't she mean all I had to do was surround him with love? What did she mean by *reasons*? What did she mean by *surround* him? Reasons to live for? I had never thought about this before.

Ok, so what were the reasons? Well, I'm his father. That's one. He is my son. That's two. We love him. That's

three. Then my mind went blank, blankity, blank. I'm supposed to surround him with reasons, and all I can think of are three? I knew there had to be more. But, what were they?

The rest of the conversation was a complete blur. I began to go over her statement again and again. Living had to be bigger than just three reasons. Living had to be bigger than that. There had to be more reasons to live for.

While I was thinking about what these bigger reasons were, I remembered a phrase that my other son, Stephen, used to describe his college parties. The phrase was "so big". Every party they had in college was "so big".

Then BAM! It seemed to have come out of nowhere. I came to a conclusion. Even if I could only think of three reasons when I was put on the spot, I knew that living had to be bigger than that. I knew that living *was* bigger than that. Living was so big. It is. LIVING IS SO BIG.

The finger pointing gave birth to a new creation. It was a quest to save my son's life. I knew I needed to find more reasons why life was worth living, and show him that living is so big.

Yes, living is so big. I had it now. But how could I prove it? I decided to start by building a website and asking people to share their reason for living. I would ask people to share reasons why they appreciated their lives. I would gather them all, proving to Christopher that there were, in fact, many reasons to want to be alive. I would show him how big living really is.

The master plan had been created quietly in my mind as I sat there in the therapist's office. Before we ended the meeting, I had already had planned the next steps.

In the parking lot, Iliana and I sat in the rental car as I told her that I just discovered a way to save Christopher's life. We had been told to surround him with reasons to live, and now I knew how. We sat in the parking lot for at least

thirty minutes as I did all of the talking, explaining the phases of my vision to her. She was amazed and excited at the idea and believed it would definitely help our son. It gave us a new path in life. It was something that she knew the family would do together.

I needed to piece everything together correctly if I wanted my plan to succeed. The first step was to get a website name and register it. I did not delay. The moment we got back to the hotel, I created and registered the domain name www.livingissobig.com.

Next, I needed to set up the hosting account for the newly purchased domain. Once again, there was no hesitation. It was set up that very night.

After securing the hosting, I had to physically build the website. Within thirty minutes I had it up and running with an “under construction” image on the front page. I was on fire with this new mission. I had become unstoppable with this new passion, for proving that life was worth the living.

It was nearly seven p.m. and I started noticing that I was extremely hungry. Iliana insisted that I take a break for dinner. I told her that I wasn’t going to eat before I finished the next part. Not even the hunger pains could prevent me from completing my master plan.

Before I could take a break, I needed to order 200 blue wristbands with the words “Living Is So Big” printed on them. I knew it would help me in getting more reasons from the people that I came across. My plan was to give each person one wristband if they gave me one reason why life was worth living for them. Instead of offering “a penny for your thoughts”, I was going to offer a “wristband for your reason”. And since wristbands seemed to be one of the latest trends, I thought this idea would be appealing.

I would then share those reasons on our website for Christopher to see. I figured the more reasons listed, the more likely other people were to create a post. I knew that

the tradeoff of one wristband for one priceless thought would be successful.

After ordering the wristbands, we took a break for dinner and found the nearest restaurant. We sat down, ordered, and ate within twenty minutes. Iliana and I knew that there was much to do.

When we got back to the hotel I proceeded to finish making the website functional. I had dabbled in web design for years, so it wasn't difficult for me to create a basic website.

The website, livingissobig.com, was up and running all in one night. I couldn't sleep much that evening because I had a lot on my mind. I knew there was a lot left to do. The layout of the website needed to be intuitive enough that people would know how to leave us their reason. Living Is So Big was about to be an everyday part of our lives.

The next step was to start telling people about Living Is So Big. I asked my oldest son to help me by spreading the word around his college campus. He loved the idea and wanted to do whatever he could to help his brother.

Since it was the weekend, he said that he would do whatever he could as soon as he went back to school on Monday. However, that very night, Stephen took it upon himself to create a fan page on Facebook.

In order to bring this all together, I had to post the very first reason on the website. It was like breaking a bottle of champagne on a ship that was about to go out to sea for the first time.

The very first reason given on the website:

Living Is So Big... because you are my child and I love you no matter what happens.

Posted on Wednesday, April 14 @ 22:41:15

Iliana and I loved looking at that post. Seeing the project coming to fruition made us happy. After looking at

it for a while, we decided it was time for us to get some rest. Tomorrow would be an interesting day.

Day five of Christopher's stay in the psychiatric hospital came with a new-found confidence. I now had hope in a plan that would help ensure Christopher's healing process. But I didn't tell him what I was working on just yet. I wanted him to see for himself, although it was difficult for me to contain my excitement. I had a brand new energy within me and he seemed to notice.

"Hey dad, what's going on? What's with the big smile and hugs?"

"I'm just happy to see you, and I love you. Only two more days until you get to come home," I said.

I couldn't wait to get back to work to see what else I could do with Living Is So Big to help my son. That day, Iliana and I began to reach out to our family and friends. We asked them all to share a reason.

That very night, someone posted the second reason:

Living Is So Big... because you do make a difference and without you it would make life harder for those who need and love you.

Posted on Thursday, April 15 @ 16:46:48

Although we didn't know who posted this reason, we were thankful that someone shared their priceless thought. It started proving that people really did care and were willing to help others in need.

That night I focused on working with the website graphics. I used Adobe Photoshop to create the logo and other images reflecting what Living Is So Big was about. I used blue and white theme colors. Blue was easy on the eyes and portrayed a sense of tranquility. When I saw that it was getting late, I decided to call it a night.

On day six of Christopher's hospitalization I came to the conclusion that the concept of sharing reasons to live for really could work. People were willing to share their

reasons for living. The compassion of others began to shine through on our website.

When we headed back to the hospital to see our son, we were excited because each day had been better than the one before it. This day was no exception. We began to see a real improvement in Christopher. He starting talking more and was beginning to open up. He smiled more frequently and was more receptive to our love. When we left the hospital we were excited because we knew that he would be coming home the very next day.

Day seven arrived and it was finally time for Christopher to leave the hospital. He had a smile on his face and was very happy to be going home. It appeared that life had been rejuvenated within him. His attitude already seemed quite positive.

However, I knew that we still needed to be incredibly cautious. After all, only three weeks ago he had everyone convinced that he was just fine. I couldn't take the chance that he was still just playing it off. Parental instinct kicked in. I was going to protect my son. I had to be certain that Christopher's new positive attitude was authentic. I couldn't let my guard down, not for a second. Our worst fear was that he would try again, and succeed in taking his life. Only time would tell how stable his thoughts had become. So, until the day came that we knew for sure, I was going to do what I was told. I was going to surround him with reasons to live for.

I was so excited when we brought Christopher back to the hotel. I couldn't wait to show him the website. I sat down with my son at the computer. "What is Living Is So Big? What does it mean?" he asked. "It's proof that there are so many more reasons to live than we could ever imagine. It helps us make the realization that we are surrounded with reasons to appreciate our lives each and every day. It's about life appreciation. People post their reasons online, and I would like you to post *your* reason." I explained. "Wow, that's cool," he said.

We were so happy to have Christopher back with us. It warmed my heart when he felt compelled to post his first reason:

Living Is So Big... because, FAMILY and FRIENDS care about you.

Posted on Sunday, April 18 @ 12:29:04

We left the hotel and flew back to Florida the next day. At home, it had become apparent that our way of life had been profoundly changed. When I went back to work and Christopher returned to school, even though everything may have appeared normal on the surface, there was a huge difference. Our views on living had changed. Each day we became closer as a family.

More reasons continued to be graciously given to us after the day Christopher posted his online. Individuals from across the globe posted about what they were thankful for and what was good in their lives. People wanted to help. One reason came in, then two, then four, then eight. Slowly but surely, the reasons were coming.

We all felt the love and energy from these posts. If I could have personally thanked each individual for what they shared, I would have. The response we got was overwhelming and we sensed a change within.

The three of us were feeling more alive. The influx of reasons posted on the website had us experiencing a tremendous amount of good energy. We found ourselves focusing on these encouraging reasons. We were surrounded with positivity, and we each noticed our thought patterns changing as we became more positive.

Most of the people who shared their reason wanted to know more about Living Is So Big. Many could relate to and appreciate this new cause, and even wanted to help. Some candidly admitted that they needed something like this in their lives. They were tired of focusing on the negative. It seemed to touch more people than we could

ever have imagined. We had dozens of new posts within the first month.

Living Is So Big was changing us. Living life no longer carried just a handful of reasons. Through the help of strangers giving us their priceless thoughts, the realization was made that living *itself* is so big, and life itself should always be appreciated. We, as a family, started truly appreciating our lives.

Our new way of life wasn't just a phase. Each day we could not wait to discover and share new reasons to live. We were focusing on the positive and the results were just simply amazing. Our bodies actually felt healthier; we had more fun and felt more loving towards everyone. Work and school continued as usual, but our way of thinking had evolved.

* * *

A couple of days later, Iliana and I went to Christopher's school and spoke with his guidance counselor. He still had a lot of catching up to do, but we were told that they would do everything they could to help him graduate. They knew what had happened and were both sympathetic and helpful. It wasn't long until Christopher was completely caught up and his attitude and personality were really starting to blossom.

We continued to share our new focus at every opportunity. The reasons continued coming in on the website. Living Is So Big was becoming a mission.

About a week after launching the site, an amazing and powerful post came in. It showed me that Living Is So Big could touch all lives. The post further proved that we all want to appreciate life no matter what difficulties we may encounter.

This post was written by user name "baldy":

Living Is So Big... when you have cancer. You realize life is short and you have to fight with all your might to win to stay here.

*You want to stay because of all of the people you love,
cherish, and care about.
You want to fight so you can see the stars and the moon on a
perfect night sky.
You want to stay to see your children grow and become
adults with all their dreams and hopes.
You want to stay so you can spread all of your love and
caring to others in the world.
You want to see all the smiles in the world and the laughter
with them.
I fight for all these things and then some.*

I fight because it is not my time yet..

Posted on Thursday, April 22 @ 07:40:40

* * *

A few days later, I saw Christopher dabbling with Rap/Hip hop music on a sheet of paper. That gave me an idea. Since he was in a creative state of mind, I wanted to continue surrounding him with positivity. So, I suggested that he write a song for Living Is So Big.

When I left him in the office, I thought it would have kept him busy for a good portion of the day. Shortly thereafter, he came into the living room where I was watching TV. He had fifteen post-it notes in his hands and said, "Here it is." To my surprise and amazement, he had completed a song in thirty minutes.

The first Living Is So Big song had been written. Iliana and I were eager to hear it. We walked into the office where he had been composing; we sat down and became his audience. When he sang the lyrics we knew that the words had come straight from the heart. The song had such deep meaning.

"That is an amazing song. We love it!"

I thought that we should record his song as soon as possible in the hope that it might be an inspiration for others. I used my Blackberry cell phone voice recorder for him to practice. He was a natural, and after a few attempts

we had the song recorded on the phone. Even though it was only the first draft, I listened to it again and again.

Christopher turned the song into a project. He was focused on spreading positivity, and went to work with his younger cousin to make a better recording, this time with music. Christopher's cousin created the musical beat and mixed it on her laptop. The two of them then recorded a track.

The completed song had the following lyrics:

Living Is So Big. Yeah, it's true
Why do we forget? I'm not sure but we do
Tend to lose it, Mis-use it, Abuse it
We need to remember what it's about, don't confuse it
The world today revolves on Negativity
Let's close that chapter in Life and see Simplicity

Yeahhhh, so keep listening

If you're feeling down talk it out
If you're feeling hungry eat sour crout
If you're feeling angry go ahead and shout
Just let it out, just let it out

Talk to your family, talk to your friends
Pray if you need to, say amen
Living Is So Big, don't forget
Voice your opinion, don't let it sit in

Don't forget, People care about you
Whether their family or friends
I guess it's who you are, it just depends
Live your life, tighten any loose ends
Have a lot of fun and accomplish what you can

Live life to the fullest

Don't hate, appreciate
Living Is So Big, so spread the joy

Living is so Big
Living is so Big
Living is so Big
Living is so Big

Yeah now, this is that part of the song where it gets
tense
Even if it doesn't sound it, it makes sense
We all got problems, we all got issues
We all got times when we need loads of tissues

Those are the hard times
Those are the dull shines
But we can get past them and do better with our time

Just take a look at me, I was low
But then I got the rebound and got up off the flo'

Now you got this song

Live life to the fullest
Don't hate appreciate
Living Is So Big, so spread the joy

Living is so Big
Living is so Big
Living is so Big
Living is so Big

Christopher was becoming more actively appreciative than ever. We were starting to believe that our son really had changed for the better. He was continually optimistic, and those thoughts put him in a good mood. Seeing him in a positive frame of mind made us happy. His smiles made us smile.

With the new state of consciousness he had developed, we noticed that his headaches were becoming less frequent and less severe. He no longer needed to take any medication, and we attributed that to his new mindset. He even did further research online to expand his knowledge about positive thinking.

Christopher mentioned to me that he rarely if ever saw me sick, and came to the realization, on his own, that it was likely because of my positive attitude. He suspected that this was part of my being healthy. I believed that he was correct.

Back in 1989, I had a boss whose elderly father once asked me to pick a positive word to describe how I was feeling. I replied with the word “terrific.” He then told me to always use that word as an answer to the question, “How are you?” If I didn’t reply with that specific word, I would have to put a quarter in the jar in his son’s office. Now that I look back on it, he was trying to instill positive thinking within me. It was a valuable life lesson which I have never forgotten. Till this day, I always reply with the word “Terrific!” to anyone who asks me how I am feeling. Now, if someone were to ask Christopher how he was feeling, he would reply, “Great!”

Our son continued on this positive path. As we watched, we started to learn from *his* example. It was apparent that he was honestly appreciating his life and we took notice. The child had become the teacher and the parents the students. He had taken from his experience, learned from it, and grown tremendously. In fact, he started to help others.

Christopher took it upon himself to send the boy that he had roomed with at the psychiatric hospital a few Living Is So Big wristbands. He wanted to spread the positivity and give his friend the opportunity to alter his consciousness in the way that he did.

* * *

In June of 2010, we no longer needed or wanted to stay in Florida. Since Christopher's headaches seemed to have disappeared, we made the decision to move to New Jersey so that we could spend more time with our family there. My mother, brothers, sister, aunts, uncles, niece, nephew and cousins all live in or around New Jersey. So, we moved into a small two bedroom apartment in Lyndhurst.

* * *

Two months later, we decided to share Living Is So Big with the world. We wanted to touch other lives as ours had been touched. We wanted to reach people on a larger scale. Our first official event was at a local flea market. A neighbor recommended this location. We got together and discussed a plan for the event.

We went online, registered and paid the fifty dollar fee. A flea market was a modest start, but what mattered was that we had a venue to share our message of Universal Life Appreciation to reach those who needed to hear it.

All that we knew for sure was that we needed to spread the message. It was a gut feeling, and a burning passion. We wanted others to experience the joy that we had found and make the realization that there are, in fact, an infinite number of reasons to live for.

The day of our first event arrived and we packed our car. When we got to the flea market, Iliana, Christopher and I began to set up. On top of a six foot table we put a plastic sheet, blank poster boards, and several of our Living Is So Big products. I had purchased items to help further spread the message. I thought that coffee mugs and shirts with "Living Is So Big" printed on them would be great conversation starters, and talking about something positive might help people have a better day.

We placed a hand painted sign on the front of the table in our eight foot by eight foot spot. Everything was set up around the blank poster boards which were the

primary reason we were there in the first place. We wanted people to write down one reason for living. If they gave us a reason why they appreciated their lives, we would, in turn, give them a wristband. All of the reasons would then be transferred to the Living Is So Big website. Our hope was that each reason, each priceless thought, would be read by someone and that it would affect their day for the better. Maybe one day even save a life.

As we sat behind our table on a beautiful, sunny August day we noticed that everyone there, except for us, had a tent. It soon became quite clear why everyone had tents, as my family and I ended up baking in the heat. But even the unforgiving sun wouldn't deter us; we needed to spread the message.

My wonderful mother, my aunt, and my older brother came by the table to show support. The flea market had just opened to the public and it was history in the making.

Even though our setup was simple, our passion was big. As it turned out, many people asked about our cause. We explained it to each and every person who inquired. I would either simply state that it was about life appreciation, or I would exclaim, "Living..." (and then extend my arms out for emphasis) "Is So-o-o BIG!"

People didn't hesitate to write down their reason. They understood and knew what we were about. Many of them thanked us for being there. Some said that it was exactly what they needed to hear. The reception was a positive one.

We continued throughout the long, six-hour day to explain the cause. The sun did not let up. Christopher and I were both got sunburned. Later in the day, someone gave Iliana an umbrella. Even with the sunburn, we all had a fantastic day. Everyone that came by the table was amazing. It was a wonderful and successful experience, and we knew right then and there that we would be doing many more events in the future.

We knew that we had been bitten by the event bug. Iliana and I began searching for possible sites across New Jersey for future events. We found a few immediately and proceeded to register for them.

The next event was scheduled in Ridgewood, NJ at “The Ridgewood Fabulous Fall Festival”.

We arrived in Ridgewood and this time we brought a tent. We set up our table and our brand new yellow and blue “Living Is So Big” banner.

We looked much more professional now. Christopher and I pulled out the tent and set it up within minutes. Unfortunately or perhaps fortunately, we were never told that this particular tent had the NY Giants logo and name all over it. It sure did attract a lot of attention. People came by asking for tickets. When we told them that we had nothing to do with the Giants, most of them stuck around anyway to inquire about our cause.

People were very appreciative and thanked us for being there that day. It meant a lot to the townspeople, especially considering what had happened. We were unaware that prior to our arrival a former local high school student had just committed suicide. Many people came by to share their reasons and picked up wristbands because of this recent tragedy. Our presence seemed to be no accident. Eventually, many poster boards were filled with heartfelt reasons in a variety of beautiful colors. This event really touched our hearts. It became evident that we needed to do much more.

The NY Giants tent served its purpose that day. We didn't get sunburned and it attracted many people.

We wanted to reach people all over the state and continued looking for more events.

Our next event was at “The Kenilworth Music & Street Festival”. It too was a great success. This time we had a solid white tent set up which looked a lot better. The street festival was packed. We loved seeing so many

people. We wanted to reach them all. While we couldn't make an impact on everyone, we wound up exceeding the number of reasons previously collected at other events. We also started to make some great contacts. We met one wonderful person in particular, Joan Coop Brennan, who would wind up helping us plan many more events in New Jersey.

* * *

In between events, Christopher, Iliana and I continued our everyday routine. I worked Monday through Friday, Christopher went to school, and Iliana remained at home planning events and working on the cause. We worked the Living Is So Big events around our daily routines. We made sure that they were planned for weekends or after hours so that our lives could remain as balanced as possible.

As our search for events continued, we asked family and friends to keep an eye out for us. One of our friends, Jose Hernandez, did exactly that. He called and informed me about a three day exposition in West Palm Beach, FL. It was called the "Living My Life Expo".

I called and gathered information about it. It wound up being rather expensive. The bare minimum for a booth was close to a thousand dollars, not including travel expenses. However, we were told that there would likely be as many as 10,000 people there.

We discussed it as a family and decided to go. There was no passing up the opportunity to reach so many people. So we made the long drive from Lyndhurst, NJ to West Palm Beach, FL.

For this event, we ordered a second, identical "Living Is So Big" banner to allow us to have one in front of our table and one behind us on the wall. This wound up starting a picture campaign. A photo shot with the LISB banner behind them became a huge hit. Our photo album grew significantly due to this idea.

The three days there were fantastic. Jose Hernandez was kind enough to volunteer his time for each of the three days to help us spread the message of Universal Life Appreciation. Many people passed by, and even though it was not quite the 10,000 expected, we enjoyed the stay and had a great time.

* * *

By the time the holidays came, Christopher still showed no sign of reverting back to his previous depression. He continued to research uplifting books and videos. He often shared them with us, and when he did we inevitably learned something new. We continued working on the Living Is So Big website and developing new ideas over the next couple of months.

* * *

One day, my cousin approached me and asked if we would do a Living Is So Big event in Passaic, NJ at the Shop Rite where she worked as a Nutritionist. It would be an interesting experience being in a large, well-known store promoting life appreciation. We were positioned near the exit, with a table showcasing our banner. As people exited the store with their shopping carts they had an opportunity to receive a LISB wristband. It was funny to see all of the shopping carts form a line to get to us. We had an impact on the flow of carts that were coming and going. At times it created a small traffic jam, but we loved to see that people were willing to go through this small delay to talk to us.

The next event wound up happening because a friend of ours asked us to present LISB in her classroom. She was a teacher at Passaic High School in New Jersey. It was a proud moment for me, my family and Living Is So Big. We were honored to be given the opportunity and did our best to try and make a positive impact. In the beginning many of the students were reserved and quiet. But, towards the end of our presentation everyone was smiling and had become more open. They appreciated us being there. Not only because they got out of doing

schoolwork, but because many of them got a new perspective on life.

During the presentation at the high school we asked the kids to come up to the poster boards and write down their reasons why living is so big. Many of them had to stop and really think. It was as if they had never thought about it before. When they wrote their reason, they were happy to receive a LISB wristband in the color of their choosing.

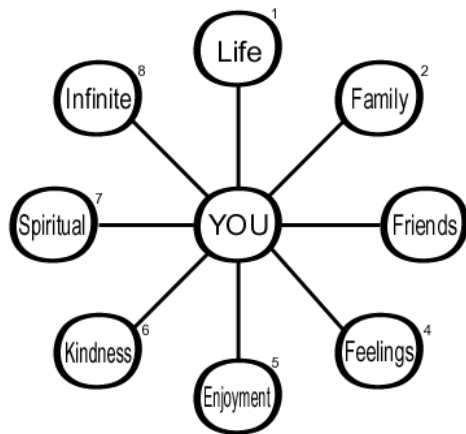
Days after this event, we found out that there had been a discussion in the class about life appreciation and LISB. Many of the students admitted to seeing life in a different way after hearing the presentation. They had a better understanding that, despite the bad things in life, they could choose to focus on and appreciate the good.

* * *

June of 2011 was a life changing month. We, as a family, decided not to renew our lease. We sold or gave away all of our furniture and most of our material possessions so that we could venture out on a new journey of spreading the message. We had no way of knowing where we would wind up, but our faith in this new way of life lead us out on the Living Is So Big road trip that continues to this very day.

Book Two

Since our family has been out on the Living Is So Big road trip, we have discovered many reasons why people appreciate their lives. We started to categorize all of the incoming reasons. It was broken down into what we call the “Eight Living Realizations”. A work book is in the process of being written based on this discovery.



Additionally, we have blogged many of our best encounters and stories from the road trip. All of these amazing stories are currently kept on a hard drive. They will be shared with the world one day soon. These stories are remarkable and many lives were touched. We want to share them with you but there is just too much to put into one book. “Living Is So Big – The Road Trip” will be coming soon.

Road Trip 2011

Photo was taken from a random vehicle driving by
and emailed to us.



Road Trip 2011 - Traveled cities and dates:

June 11 - 12 Travel from NJ to GA
June 13 - 16 Atlanta, GA
June 17 Gainesville, FL
June 18 West Palm Beach

June 19 - 20 Miami, FL
June 21 - 28 CUBA (the country)
June 29 - July 19 Miami Beach, FL
July 20 - 23 New Orleans, LA
July 23 - 27 Baton Rouge, LA
July 28 - 29 Lafayette, LA
July 30 - 31 Houston, TX
July 31 - August 5 Dallas, TX
August 5 - 6 Oklahoma City, OK
August 7 - 12 Lawrence, KS
August 12 - 14 Emporia, KS<
August 15 - 18 Lawrence, KS
August 19 - 24 Colorado Springs, CO
August 25 Grand Junction, CO
August 26 - 28 Salt Lake City, UT
August 29 - September 3 Las Vegas, NV
September 4 - 8 Scottsdale, AZ
September 9 - 10 Phoenix, AZ
September 10 - 16 San Diego, CA
September 16 - 18 Thousand Oaks, CA
(Includes Hollywood/Los Angeles)
September 19 - 21 Lawrence, KS
(1600 miles in 25 hrs)
September 22 - 24 Emporia, KS
September 24 - 29 Oklahoma City, OK
September 30 - October 07 Dallas, TX
October 08 - 14 Baton Rouge, LA
October 15 - 21 New Orleans, LA
October 21 - 23 Mobile, AL
October 24 - 28 Atlanta, GA
November 01 - November 11 Asheville, NC
November 12 Hillsborough, NC
November 13 Petersburg, VA
November 14 - 17 Baltimore, MD
November 19 Kearny, NJ
November 20 - 28 Harrison, NJ
November 29 Roselle, NJ
November 30 - 31 Harrison, NJ

The Cause

When Christopher made the decision that he no longer had any reason to live and tried to commit suicide, Jesus, his father, was going to take whatever steps were necessary to save his son's life. So, "Living Is So Big" was born. It worked. LISB did its job and helped keep Christopher positive and on his journey back into the Light. He is now and has been in the Light, living life, being appreciative, and giving back. Since this has helped Christopher in such a profound way, the family is now bringing it to the world.

"We vowed not to have anyone go through the pain that we felt when our son wanted to give up on life; that no parent or child should have to feel such pain. 'Living Is So Big' saved our sons life. Now it's time to pay it forward."
-Jesus and Iliana

LISB is now bigger than the reason why it was created. It now helps people all around the world. Today, Jesus (father), Iliana (mother), Christopher (son), and others are touring the United States to reach people. They have a genuine desire to effect a positive change in their lives. To date, they have traveled over 18,000 miles and have visited over 60 cities. They go to high schools, universities, stores, and various events spreading the message of Universal Life Appreciation.

Help "Living Is So Big" spread Universal Life Appreciation throughout the world. Together we can make someone's day a little better. And whether we reach one individual or billions, a smile created is beyond priceless. Your reason may just save a life!

Contact Us

If you would like to contact either of the authors, Christopher or Jesus from Living Is So Big please do not feel shy. We would Love to hear your thoughts.

Website Address:

www.LivingIsSoBig.com

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E-mail Address:

[book@livingissobig.com](mailto:book@livingissobig.com)

**This book was written to show what transpired  
before and after the birth of Living Is So Big.  
It gives you a detailed view of both Darkness**

**It tells a true story  
of a Family hit hard by a near tragedy.**



Living Is So Big Family



**"Darkness to Light"**

[www.livingissobig.com](http://www.livingissobig.com)