

A MEMOIR OF
A POWERFUL JOURNEY OF LOSS, RESILIENCE, AND SELF-DISCOVERY

UNTIL THE WHEELS FALL OFF

GARY STEPHENS JR

2G's
M E D I A

New York, NY

Until the Wheels Fall Off

A Memoir of A Powerful Journey of Loss, Resilience, and Self-Discovery

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2Gs Media LLC, Licensing Division

Email: team@2gsmediallc.com

www.2gsmediallc.com

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This is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. Dialogue has been recreated from memory to the best of the author's ability.

Content notice: This book contains profanity and discusses terminal illness, cancer, death, grief, family dysfunction, and medical trauma.

Dedication

To everyone carrying heavy burdens in silence
and finding the strength to rise again each day.

To the caretakers who give their all—emotionally, mentally, and physically—
often without recognition, yet with unwavering love.

To the couples who choose to keep fighting for each other
even when life tests every promise made.

And to those battling health challenges—
may you feel seen, honored, and encouraged.

Every struggle teaches you something success never could.
Keep pushing. Keep believing. Keep Struggling Successfully.

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Preface

NOT IN A MILLION YEARS DID I imagine writing a book—especially about my personal life. But I’ve always believed in practicing what you preach.

For over 20 years, I’ve run a business and financial consulting firm. When people ask, “What kind of business should I start?” I respond honestly: “I don’t know you well enough to give a meaningful answer.” But I advise them to pay attention to what others consistently recognize in them—and then we can explore a business based on that.

If people keep pointing out a certain talent, strength, or natural ability, it’s likely worth taking seriously. Sometimes the ideas we brush off—or the compliments we hear repeatedly—hold the key to something bigger. Exploring those suggestions can lead not only to self-discovery, but possibly to a path that aligns with who you truly are.

After experiencing a personal family tragedy—going from a house full of life to being the only life left in the house—and delivering four eulogies within a four-year period for some of the closest people in my life, those around me began encouraging me to share my story. Based on my personal hardships and the emotionally charged speeches I delivered, many believed I had the power to inspire others.

At first, I resisted. I didn’t feel like I could inspire anyone. I didn’t think my story was remarkable enough to be told. I simply considered it my life—my reality, the hand life dealt me. What I did for my family didn’t feel extraordinary; it felt like the natural thing to do. Everyone has their struggles, and many have stories

far more dramatic or seemingly more deserving of attention. More importantly, I thought people might not even believe the things I'd been through—the personal drama, the way I experienced loss, and the unbelievable twists of life that sometimes felt too unreal to be true. They might see it as an exaggeration or something I'd made up.

Still, the encouragement never stopped. Beyond friends and family, even people I had never met would hear parts of my story and say things like, “Your life sounds like a book.” I heard it so often that I wondered—were these signs I should pay attention to?

There were moments that stood out. After I delivered one of the eulogies, the officiating pastor addressed the audience and shared how impressed he was by the speech. He told everyone in attendance that I had a gift, and even offered to support me if I ever wanted to pursue a path in ministry.

There was also a conversation with a colleague who confided in me about their personal health crisis. As we spoke about my journey, they mentioned that a book sharing my experience could offer others a different perspective on navigating life's challenges—and perhaps provide the inspiration someone might need to keep fighting through their own health crisis.

And finally, a close friend, Amir Sealy—whom I've known since I was five years old—said, “You have a compelling story that needs to be told to a wider audience.” He reminded me that so many people are fighting life's challenges in silence, and that my experience might help others see their struggles differently—or simply remind them they're not alone. He spoke with such conviction that I had to take him seriously. Amir not only knew every part of my life—the ups and downs—but he also experienced much of it with me. For him to say it was a story worth sharing, I couldn't ignore it.

Reflecting on these moments shifted my perspective. My next question became: What kind of book should I write? Should it be a self-help book? A guide? Something inspirational? That's when Amir told me, “Just tell your story the way you've told other people's

stories—like you did in those eulogies.” He explained that those speeches resonated because they were authentic and honest, and that’s what people connect with.

When I began telling people I was planning to write a book—and that it would likely be a memoir—many said, “That’s a good choice. Writing a memoir might be therapeutic for you.” But when I gave that statement real thought, I realized the book itself wouldn’t serve that purpose, because my therapy had already come through the grieving process.

My therapy came through the grief itself—through the long nights of silence, the memories that replayed like films in my mind, and the moments of reflection that forced me to confront who I had been and who I was becoming. As I recalled moments throughout my life, I began to connect those experiences in ways that helped me understand my ability to endure loss and face the hardships that followed.

I wasn’t just recounting memories; I was reliving them. I saw connections between moments I had long forgotten and lessons I didn’t know I had learned. I started to understand how earlier experiences—childhood challenges, family dynamics, even small decisions—had quietly prepared me for the storms I would later face.

Ultimately, I decided to write a memoir. I felt a memoir would allow me to tell my own story in my own voice—in my storytelling way, in my style of humor, which will even include a few curse words. My intention is to share my grieving process and the stories I revisited that helped me through personal hardship. I’m not claiming that my story is extraordinary—but I’ll let readers decide its value for themselves.

This memoir isn’t a manual or a guide. It’s a reflection—a look back at the path that grief forced me to walk, and how retracing that path helped me find meaning in places I never expected. I’m not offering answers. I’m simply sharing the process that unfolded when I was brave enough to ask myself the hardest questions: Where did my

resilience come from? What in my past had prepared me—without my knowing—for the hardest chapters of my life?

It shows how I looked back on my past for those resources, how I turned grief into therapy, and how the process of remembering became the path to rebuilding. My challenges came through loss and grief. Yours might come through illness, career setbacks, relationship struggles, or any of the countless forms adversity takes. But the principle is the same: within your past experiences—even the painful ones—are the resources you need to face what's ahead. I hope my journey illuminates your own path.

Through writing, I discovered that the very act of remembering became a bridge between loss and understanding. It helped me see more clearly how I had survived, and how every experience—both the painful and the ordinary—had shaped the person I'd become. In many ways, the process became less about searching for meaning and more about accepting what life had already revealed.

What emerged is a story that speaks to more than grief alone. For couples, this memoir opens a window into what “for better or for worse” can look like when tested by real hardship. For those navigating their own relationships, it offers an honest look at what those vows demand when life doesn't go according to plan.

It's also a testament to the reality of caregiving—the physical, emotional, and financial toll it takes, and the quiet strength required to keep showing up every single day. In my case, that journey began with women's health battles that redefined what care, patience, and endurance truly meant. If you've ever cared for someone, or prepared yourself to, you'll recognize the balance between exhaustion and compassion that comes with it.

It also offers insight into the complexities of family dynamics—how, in moments of crisis, the very people you expect to lean on can sometimes be the ones who let you down, yet you still find the strength to keep going.

Ultimately, this memoir is about endurance, what it means to keep going when life challenges everything you've built. Whether you're facing illness, grief, or the weight of family and personal adversity, my hope is that these pages remind you that even in your hardest moments, you can still find the courage to stand firm.

That's what *Until the Wheels Fall Off* means to me. It's not just a phrase; it's a metaphor for holding on to what matters most through every twist, turn, and setback. Whatever your version of struggle looks like, I hope this story reminds you to keep pushing forward and never stop believing in your ability to overcome.

Chapter 1

That Moment

I RECALL BEING A YOUNG ADOLESCENT TELLING myself, “I can’t wait until I get grown and be on my own.” I used to say “get grown” as if it were grammatically correct. I suspect I wasn’t the only one making naïve statements about adulthood.

Upon reaching adulthood, we’ve all learned one thing: “Life be life-ing!” This thing called life is one big oxymoron—giving us the greatest gifts while also delivering the most painful experiences. None of us are immune. Life doesn’t care about your race, nationality, or financial status—which I came to understand in the hardest way.

On April 30, 2021, I stood at my wife’s bedside holding her left hand, while the end-of-life nurse held her right hand. With a calm yet somber voice, the nurse pronounced, “The official time of death is 8 o’clock p.m.” In that moment, my world changed forever. My wife, Maleka Clinkscale-Stephens—my partner of 29 years—lost her two-year battle with cancer.

There are no words that adequately describe the weight of hearing those final words. I leaned in, kissed her lifeless forehead, and whispered, “Thank you for the best 29 years of my life.” In that moment, I did the one thing I had told everyone I would never be able to do—watch my wife take her last breath. The fear I had always imagined simply wasn’t there. My deep love for her made fear irrelevant.

There was no space to collapse under the weight of what had just happened. Immediately, I was forced to move into action. I contacted the funeral director and let them know we had reached the moment we had planned for. Then came the task I dreaded most—walking down from the second floor of our home to the first floor to tell my mother-in-law that her only child was gone.

My mother-in-law, Annie Clinkscale—whom I lovingly called “Mother-in-Law”—had been battling Parkinson’s disease for over twenty years and was blind from severe cataracts. When I reached the first floor, she was sitting quietly in her reclining chair, unaware that I had entered the room or that I was about to hold her, anticipating the weight of the news I was about to deliver.

I gently lifted her into a hug and said, “Mother-in-law, I am so sorry. Maleka just died.” Her anguished scream was unlike anything I had ever heard—raw, piercing, and unforgettable. A mother’s cry is different. It’s the kind of moment you never forget—the kind where you can actually hear the sound of deep pain.

Shortly after, the funeral director arrived to remove Maleka’s body. I requested two things: that Maleka not be placed in a body bag and that the staff bring her body to the first floor so her mother could say a final goodbye to her only child. The director honored both requests. The staff carefully placed Maleka, wrapped in the bed sheets, onto a stretcher and brought her to the living room, and laid her body on the floor in front of her mother.

I helped my mother-in-law lie across her deceased daughter’s chest, where she caressed her head and repeatedly sobbed, “I love you, Maleka. Oh, my baby, I’m going to miss you so much.” I stood there watching, feeling pressure build and then release in my chest. I wanted to stop this—to rewind time, to fix it—but all I could do was stand there. Even now, the memory brings tears to my eyes.

Next, I had to focus on my wife’s services and burial. I was determined to handle everything with the utmost care and respect.

To understand what happened while planning the funeral, you need to know about our family dynamics.

As I mentioned, Maleka was an only child of Annie. My father-in-law, John Clinkscale, had two children before marrying Annie, but in their household, it was just the three of them—Maleka and her parents, a small, tight-knit family. When Maleka and I got married, I initially felt like an outsider to their close bond. My own insecurities made me believe it would be impossible to integrate into their three-person circle.

I now realize how wholeheartedly my in-laws embraced me as one of their own. Together, the four of us functioned as a genuine family, always looking out for one another. As Maleka and I were both business and financial consultants, we took on managing their finances and household affairs as they aged. Maleka handled their monthly bills, while I reviewed their overall financial health and prepared their annual tax returns.

In 2013, my father-in-law suffered a stroke and passed away several days later at the age of 84. For the next eight years, it was just the three of us: my mother-in-law, Maleka, and me. I took care of them both and made sure they were well cared for.

I thought planning her funeral would be straightforward—just me, her mother, and the church family handling the details to honor her life. I was wrong. Relatives who hadn't been involved in years suddenly showed up with opinions about how the Clinkscale family affairs should be handled. They had a lot to say about money they hadn't contributed to and decisions they had no part in making.

One of those relatives was a 90-year-old woman I had to ask to leave my house. I know how that sounds. I'll explain later. These people introduced unnecessary drama to an already difficult situation. What matters here is that despite the chaos, I stayed focused on what Maleka deserved—a funeral that honored who she was and what we built together.

Then there was the COVID pandemic—we were still in the thick of it, which presented additional challenges. Indoor gatherings were capped at 25% capacity, which meant I needed to find a church big enough to let in as many people as possible while following the rules. Maleka's church family stepped up. They found a massive church that could hold us. They handled the program. They took work off my plate so I could focus on just getting through it. I needed that help more than I knew at the time. I was filled with gratitude for having arrived at this point of the funeral plan.

At the last minute, I decided to deliver Maleka's eulogy. Before I explain what I said at the funeral, you need to understand something about Maleka: the church was her entire life. She'd been a member since she was born. The founding pastor—the current pastor's father—had officiated our wedding. My mother-in-law was a founding member of the church and gave it 50 years of her life. That community knew Maleka in ways even I didn't—they'd watched her grow up, seen her faith develop, walked with her through everything.

When the program came back listing her pastor to deliver the final eulogy, it made complete sense. He'd known her whole life. He was more than qualified to speak about who she was. But I felt a strong desire to be the one to close the service. As her husband, I needed that closure. I needed to tell all attendees what we built together in our 29 years. So I contacted the church and informed them that I would be the one to deliver the eulogy. They understood completely.

On the night of the funeral, I delivered a heartfelt 30-minute speech. Rather than recounting the events of our 29 years together—stories most of the attendees had lived through with us—I chose to focus on Maleka's extraordinary two-year battle with cancer.

I spoke passionately about the moment in 2019 when she received her diagnosis. From that day forward, she leaned heavily on her faith, displaying extraordinary courage and unwavering fearlessness. Maleka never saw herself as a victim. She refused to let her illness define her, maintaining a positive attitude right until her final breath.

During my speech, I shared some of the intimate moments that defined our journey. I spoke about our nightly routine of having end-of-life conversations before bed, a ritual born out of the uncertainty of whether she would wake up the next morning.

More significantly, I shared the theme of our relationship with the attendees—a bond that grew even stronger during her fight. That theme took shape during a moment of Maleka’s vulnerability, shortly after her diagnosis. She told me she was afraid of becoming a burden and said it would be okay if I chose to leave the marriage because of the challenges ahead.

I looked at her and said firmly, “You’ve never known me to quit or run from anything I’ve committed to.” At that moment, she extended her fist for a fist bump and said, “Okay, it’s me and you until the wheels fall off.” That phrase—“until the wheels fall off”—became the mantra of our relationship, a symbol of our unwavering commitment to each other.

From that day forward, it became part of our daily routine. When I left the hospital, we exchanged a fist bump. Before we went to sleep, it was a fist bump. Sometimes, we’d do it randomly, just as a reminder: “Until the wheels fall off.” It wasn’t just a phrase; it was a promise we lived by throughout her entire fight.

My speech continued as I shared the last passionate moment that perfectly exemplified our relationship theme. On the Thursday before her passing, around 4 p.m., Maleka began transitioning into the final stage of her journey. The nurse instructed me to retrieve the end-of-life medical box from the refrigerator—a box containing medication meant to sedate her into her final moments.

The nurse explained that after administering the medication, Maleka would lose consciousness. As the nurse began the process, the reality of the situation became overwhelming. Unable to bear it, I went into our bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, crying. I had told myself I wasn’t ready to watch her take her last breath. Moments later, the nurse came into the room and said softly, “She’s asking for

you.” Confused, I replied, “What do you mean? I thought you gave her the medication to sedate her.” The nurse nodded, “I did, but it appears she’s fighting it.”

I walked back into the room, uncertain of what to expect. As I turned the corner from our bedroom to the living room, I saw Mal lying in the hospital bed we’d set up in what used to be our living space. The back of the bed was upright. Mal saw me re-enter the room and smiled at me.

“Hey, what’s up, Mal?” I said, trying to steady my voice.

With great effort, fighting against the medication coursing through her veins, Maleka raised her arm off the bed. Her hand trembled from the exertion. Then, slowly, deliberately, she formed a fist and extended it toward me.

I stepped closer because I knew exactly what that gesture meant. Her voice was so faint that I had to lean in close to hear her words. Barely above a whisper, she said, “Until the wheels fall off.”

I gently bumped her fist with mine and repeated our mantra back to her, “Until the wheels fall off.” She smiled at me—her last beautiful smile—and then slipped into unconsciousness minutes after. Those were the last words she ever spoke to me.

Overcome with emotion, I began to walk back to the bedroom, tears streaming down my face. As I turned around, I saw the nurse standing in the hallway, tears in her eyes. She had witnessed Maleka’s final gesture and said, “I just witnessed a real-life love story.”

When I shared this moment during the funeral, I could feel the empathy and emotion move through the church. It revealed a story of love, resilience, and the unbreakable bond Maleka and I shared—a testament to our life together, lived with faith and unwavering devotion to one another.

After sharing that story during my speech, I played a tribute video. The video mirrored the emotions I had expressed from the church’s elevated pulpit, showcasing the love Maleka and I shared throughout the years. It included cherished photos and video footage, highlighting

both our joyful moments and the courage Maleka displayed during her battle with cancer.

The video ended with a close-up image of our hands intertwined, accompanied by the words, “Until the wheels fall off.” It was a deeply emotional moment. As the video ended, the church offered a standing ovation, a powerful testament to the impact of Maleka’s life and our shared journey. I closed the speech with these heartfelt words:

“I know everyone in here, and the people afar are genuinely concerned about me because you know how close Maleka and I were. You may think it’s going to be difficult for me to move on, or how am I going to function without Maleka because of us being together for 29 years. And I tell you all, I’ll be just fine. Don’t worry about me. Yes, I am devastated. I’m truly devastated, but I will be just fine.

What Maleka did for me cannot be properly documented. She helped build this man that I am today. So, I’m just a Lego man that was built by Maleka. Also, I understand that I am not special. I am not immune from this thing we call life. What I did was nothing special. I did what I was supposed to do as a man.

As a man, you are supposed to take care of your family; as a man, you are supposed to provide and protect for your family. That is all I did for my dear wife. I made sure she had no wants, or no needs, and I stood by her side all the way to the end.

So, in closing, if Maleka never cried, never lost her faith, never moped around, or played the victim role, and she was facing DEATH! Then, I have no reason to be walking around here crying, moping and playing the victim, to be LIVING. So, I will be fine. Thank you all for listening to our story and sharing our story.”

The finale of the speech generated a second standing ovation within the thirty-minute eulogy. The response surprised me, and I was deeply humbled by the way Maleka’s life—and our story—had been received.

At the conclusion of the funeral, many people approached me to share their thoughts about the eulogy and the impact it had on them. Several described it as an act of strength, questioning how I was able to stand and deliver such words under those circumstances. What they couldn't see was how much it took to do so. I may have made it look effortless, but inside, I was hurting, and it was difficult.

Another difficult aspect of the day was that my mother-in-law couldn't attend. Her Parkinson's disease functioned on a distinctive three-day cycle: the first day was clear mental function, the second day marked by confusion and hallucinations, and the third day she spent sleeping for twenty-four hours straight. The pattern repeated like clockwork, allowing us to plan the funeral around this cycle.

While planning the funeral, I accounted for my mother-in-law's three-day cycle and physical limitations, scheduling the services over two days in hopes that she might be able to attend. The first day included a three-hour viewing followed by a two-hour service, with a final viewing and cemetery services held the following morning. I structured the schedule this way to give her time to gather herself and, hopefully, attend at least part of the services.

For the first time ever, she slept through two consecutive days and missed everything. When she woke up, she said, "I know I missed the services, but I'm ready to get dressed for the burial." Gently, I replied, "I'm sorry, Mother-in-Law, you slept through both days." Tears followed her simple response, "Really?", and I could see the sadness on her face as she realized what she had missed.

Looking back, hiring a film production company at the last minute, to cover the services, was one of the best decisions I made. They recorded the entire two-day service, capturing every song, prayer, and speech. They also live-streamed the services online, addressing COVID-19 restrictions, and filmed the cemetery proceedings.

After her two-day sleep, my mother-in-law entered the coherent phase of her Parkinson's cycle. Remembering I had hired a film company, she asked, "Did you film everything like you told me?"

When I confirmed, she asked to listen to the services. I sat beside her, playing the streamed video on my tablet. She sang every hymn, recited every prayer, and even recognized the organist and singer. I was grateful she was alert—that she got to experience this. But then it hit me: she was singing along to her only child’s funeral. I sat there listening to her voice, and I didn’t know whether to be thankful or devastated. Maybe both.

During one of our end-of-life conversations, Maleka said to me, “Please keep me alive as long as you can; I don’t want my mother to bury me.” I replied, “If I had that power, you wouldn’t be in this predicament, but I’ll do all I can.” Then, she gave me my final husband duty: “If I go before her, please promise me you’ll take care of my mother.” I assured her,

“You know I don’t need to make that promise—I committed to it a long time ago. I will take care of OUR mother to the fullest.”

As my mother-in-law continued to listen to the services, the reality of my undertaking instantly hit me. That day marked the first day of fulfilling my last promise to Maleka. Nonetheless, I was prepared. Maleka and I had already devised the plan, which included having our estate planning matters in order and legal documents updated. Because of our financial preparation, we were able to secure 24-hour services of home health aides for my mother-in-law.

A few days into my promise, caregiving became challenging. The first day after the funeral, my mother-in-law was fine listening to the services. The second day was uneventful, but on the third day, she began her usual sleep cycle. However, instead of waking up the next morning, she slept for four consecutive days without eating or drinking. Concerned, I contacted her neurologist, who advised me to take her to the emergency room.

While my mother-in-law was still asleep, I carefully carried her from the bed to my car. Getting out of the house meant navigating twelve concrete steps, and each one demanded my full attention. I moved slowly, settling my footing on every step, afraid of tripping or

losing my grip. Carrying someone who is asleep is especially difficult—their body is completely limp, and the weight can feel heavier with each step.

I managed to carry her safely to the car and gently placed her in the back seat, surrounding her with pillows for support. At the emergency room, the staff immediately attended to her, and preliminary tests confirmed she was dehydrated—which made sense after four days without food or water. She was admitted for further testing and treatment.

My mother-in-law woke up on the fifth day in the hospital. After completing their testing, doctors attributed her prolonged sleep to the trauma of Maleka's death. They warned me to expect ongoing uncertainty as part of her decline.

She remained in the hospital for four days, and as I had done with Maleka, I visited daily, timing my visits so I could feed her lunch and dinner. Those moments became deeply meaningful. She was my last connection to Maleka, and caring for her gave me space to grieve while still having purpose. During the final two days, she slipped back into a deep sleep. Given her condition, she was discharged while still asleep. This time, I carefully wheeled her out and again laid her across the back seat of the car, positioning pillows for support to get her home.

After that hospital stay, my mother-in-law was never the same. Her once-predictable three-day cycle became erratic; her communication deteriorated, she became fully bedridden, and her mental capacity declined as Parkinson's progressed into dementia. She often asked heartbreaking questions about Maleka, like, "How is Maleka doing?" or "Did Maleka eat today?"

Despite the difficulty of hearing those questions, I pushed through to provide her with the best care possible. As her condition declined, I arranged monthly doctor visits, nurses three times a week, and had all x-rays and blood draws done at home. I even had Maleka's longtime friend and hairstylist of thirty-two years come to the

house each month to do her hair. I wasn't going to let her lose her dignity just because she was declining—which is the level of care I promised Maleka.

On October 28, 2021, my mother-in-law turned eighty-five. During her scheduled doctor's visit on November 1, I was informed that her Parkinson's disease had progressed and she was approaching the final stage of her life. She would now require hospice care. The medical team estimated she had forty-eight hours to live. They recommended a hospice facility, but once again, I chose home hospice care. I wanted to be present for every moment and fully aware of everything being done on her behalf.

Home hospice is hell. You don't sleep. You're up every few hours checking on them, wondering if this is it. Every morning you nervously walk to their room, not knowing if they're going to be alive. Out of love and commitment, I did it anyway—for both my wife and my mother-in-law.

My mother-in-law far exceeded the 48-hour prognosis, which astonished me. Each day, the nurse would say, "She's very close—probably 24 hours." She went for ten days without food or water.

On the morning of November 11, 2021, I went downstairs to check on her. When I looked at her, I simply told the home aide, "She's going to die today." Her breathing mirrored my wife's during her final hours.

Anticipating a long day, I went out for breakfast. When I returned, the aide was in the kitchen washing dishes and said, "I just checked on her, and she's the same." But when I entered the room, I found my mother-in-law lying in bed—lifeless. I stood there, stunned by the realization that my last direct connection to Maleka was gone.

Unlike Maleka's passing, when an end-of-life nurse handled everything, the pronouncement of death was different. I called the aide into the room so we could confirm that she had passed. I had to call the hospice hotline myself to report my mother-in-law's death and provide the approximate time. I waited for a staff member to

arrive and complete the paperwork before contacting the same funeral director who had taken Maleka—this time to take her mother as well.

I had to plan another funeral, following the prearrangements Maleka and I had already made. I knew exactly which dress my mother-in-law would wear, and once again, the church family stepped in to support me with the details. I chose to deliver her eulogy.

In that speech, I focused on gratitude—thanking those who had stood by Annie, Maleka, and me through years of difficulty. In laying my mother-in-law to rest, I fulfilled the promise I had made to Maleka: that I would take care of her mother until the end. I did so as graciously as I could.

If you've been following the timeline, you'll note that my wife, Maleka, and my mother-in-law, Annie, passed away just six months apart. During that time, I managed two home hospice cases and planned two funerals. Strangely, I grieved more intensely after my mother-in-law's death than after Maleka's.

At first, I couldn't understand why. With time and reflection, two explanations became clear.

The first was simple but painful: I never truly had time to grieve Maleka. Immediately after her passing, I stepped into the role of caretaker for her mother, determined to honor the promise I had made to her. Grief was postponed because responsibility didn't allow space for it.

The second reason ran deeper. With my mother-in-law's passing, I wasn't just losing another loved one—I was losing the last remaining piece of the Clinkscale family.

Thirty years earlier, Maleka and I were young college students, dating without any sense of what our lives would become. When she brought me to her childhood home to introduce me to her parents, I never imagined that their close-knit family would fully embrace me—or that my in-laws would become second parents.

We spent nearly every holiday at their house, and if not a holiday, then Sunday dinner. My mother-in-law believed in preparing Sunday

dinners. I remember when my father-in-law was still alive—the four of us sitting around the table, eating together. He loved telling stories about his younger days—wild stories that completely captivated me.

At the time, those dinners felt like they would last forever. We had no reason to believe otherwise. My in-laws were aging, but they were healthy. Maleka and I were young, vibrant, and full of life. The future felt promising—building our careers, making travel plans, and hoping one day to give our parents the joy of becoming grandparents.

When I returned to these memories after my mother-in-law's funeral, the second explanation became painfully clear. I never imagined that I would be solely responsible for burying all three members of the Clinkscale family. I wrote their obituaries. I created their tribute videos. And I faced the reality that my entire immediate family now rested in a cemetery.

Without children, I went from a house full of life to being the only life left in the same house Maleka had once brought me to as a visitor.

I never imagined having to navigate life alone—especially without the person who had been by my side for nearly three decades.

That once-immature statement, “I can't wait until I get grown and be on my own,” had finally become my reality. I was grown—and I was on my own.

This chapter is not the story. It only summarizes how my personal hardship ended. It shows what that ending looked like on the outside. Some may see strength because I didn't collapse after losing my immediate family within such a short span of time. But the ending was the easiest part—it offered a definitive outcome.

Since Maleka's death in 2021, I had to learn to live with grief and all it brought with it. Over the four years that followed, life continued to unfold, bringing additional hardships even as I was still learning how to live through the loss. I'm not offering a neat timeline or a chronological account of that process. That's not how grief—or life—works. It surfaces in fragments, in moments, often without warning.

I can't think of anything more painful than fighting so hard to prevent an ending—only to still lose everything.

Grief forced me to look backward. What comes next is the inside—how Maleka and I arrived at that moment; the events and disappointments that led there; the false hope, the emotional roller coaster of constant setbacks, and the relentless effort to avoid the inevitable. Then, how it affected me, how I lived through it, how I processed it, and how I eventually made sense of my personal tragedy.

Chapter 2
Why?!

AFTER MY MOTHER-IN-LAW'S FUNERAL, THE LIMOUSINE DROPPED me off at the house. I walked in, clutching a bunch of funeral flowers and a stack of sympathy cards handed to me. This was the first day of my new life—one without the responsibilities of caring for my family.

The house was filled with an eerie silence. I expected to hear familiar sounds: the chatter of loved ones, the clatter of dishes, or simply a TV playing in another room. But those sounds were gone—only mental echoes remained. Those echoes made me pause, hoping to hear something that no longer existed. Even the steady presence of the home health aides—who had become part of the background of daily life while caring for my mother-in-law—was gone. Their voices, their movements, their routines had all disappeared along with her. The presence of other life had vanished, and the silence now carried a different weight.

This was my new normal: a home stripped of the life it once held. The funeral marked the end of an era—my life as a dedicated family man. Now, I am faced with the overwhelming task of navigating an uncharted existence, alone. Not only was this a new chapter, but it was also the beginning of the full-blown grieving process.

Grieving isn't a straight line. For me, it was chaos. My entire immediate family was gone—that reality hit me every morning. I'd tell myself I did everything I could for them, that I cared for them

with all my heart, which gave me a faint glimmer of pride. But even that thought couldn't pull me out of bed.

When my family and closest friends called, I tried to be responsive because I knew they were reaching out to check on my well-being—but the conversations were short. They could hear the cracks in my voice, the void that had taken over. I couldn't bring myself to fully express or articulate that kind of deep pain in words. I believe it's something you must live through to truly understand.

The first night alone was unbearable. Sleep eluded me. I couldn't stay in bed—it felt too big, too empty, haunted by the absence of the person who should have been there. Restless, I'd go downstairs to the kitchen, trying to kill time—grabbing something from the fridge, a drink, anything to occupy my mind. But to get there, I had to walk through the living room, past the spot where they had placed her body on the floor for her mother's final goodbye. Every step through that house was a reminder, every room holding a memory I couldn't escape.

Eventually, I'd wind up back in bed. That's where I sat in the darkness, switching between my tablet and cell phone. I opened the tribute video from her funeral and pressed play. Then I played it again. And again.

I must have watched it a hundred times that night. Each viewing brought fresh tears streaming down my face. I'd see her young face in our college photos—so full of life, so unaware of what was coming. Then I'd see the later photos, the ones where you could see the cancer taking its toll, though she never stopped smiling. The video would end with our hands intertwined and those words: “Until the wheels fall off.” And then I'd hit play again, desperate to see her face, to hear the music, to feel something other than this crushing emptiness.

The tribute video became both a comfort and a way of torturing myself. It let me see her again—but it also reminded me that seeing her on a screen was all I'd ever have now. There will be no more conversations. No more laughter. No more “Hey, Mal” and her soft “Hey” in response.

As I sat there in bed, watching and rewatching, my mind wouldn't stop racing. The doubt about how to move forward deepened with each loop of the video. In the house's quietness, my thoughts spiraled without control, offering no peace.

And always, that one-word question kept rising to the surface: Why?

Why did this happen to me?

Why my family?

The word why is so small, yet it holds a world of complexity. Its definitions—"for what reason or purpose," or "a reason or explanation"—offered no comfort, only a reminder of its ambiguity. It's a question that defies answers, leaving us to wrestle with it alone, each in our own way.

For some, "why" finds answers through faith, belief in a higher power, or divine purpose. Others seek meaning in the universe, karma, or the idea that everything happens for a reason. Defining your "why" isn't about solving a mystery; it's about finding a meaning that brings comfort and helps you cope with your specific life experience. But your personal "why" isn't universal—it may not make sense to others. For me, trying to understand the "why" behind my life crisis became an exhausting, emotionally draining pursuit.

The first "why" I tried to figure out was how we arrived at her health crisis. I kept wondering:

Did the doctors miss something early on?

Did they downplay her condition?

Did Maleka and I make the wrong decisions? Did we overlook signs?

The second "why" was about moving forward: Why should I get out of bed tomorrow? My family had always been my reason. I woke up every day with them on my mind—what they needed, what would make them happy. But what now? They were all in a cemetery. What would motivate me to move forward?

**Thank you for reading this early preview of
*Until the Wheels Fall Off.***

If this preview resonated with you, the journey ahead becomes even more powerful, and I'm confident you'll connect deeply with the rest of the story.

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