

I'm Still Smiling!

The Positive and Powerful Life of Andrew Merey

by Peter Weisz

Chapter One

Meet the Devil

“The aim of the wise is not to secure pleasure, but to avoid pain.”

—Aristotle

Andrew first met the devil while lying naked and sweaty on the floor of a Palm Beach condo back in the mid-1980s. This was not surprising since among his horny and hormonal high school crowd, making love was about as commonplace an activity as making a bed. Sometimes even more so, depending on how strict one's parents were about such things. Fortunately, Andrew's were rather lax. They didn't ask, they didn't tell, and by the time he was sixteen, they didn't interfere and pretty much allowed him to set his own course. And that course, as often as not, led straight to the bedroom. And not to go make the bed.

Both of Andrew's parents are physicians — his father, John, a respected ophthalmologist and his mother, Daisy, an equally esteemed family physician specializing in weight loss and cosmetic treatments. Both his father's and his mother's families were Hungarian Holocaust survivors — both marked by amazing stories of survival. But more about that later. Back then Andrew's parents were leading busy lives, building their practices amidst the sun-soaked super-rich (and not-so-rich) of Palm Beach. Their hectic schedules coupled with Andrew's “sleepless in South Beach” sensibilities He had always believed that sleep is mostly a waste of time till his final days, he got no more than three to four hours of it per night. His parents and he would cross paths perhaps no more than once or twice per month. Their hands-off attitude about raising children was summed up in the words of Andrew's great-uncle Nick: “When it comes to bringing up the kids, John and Daisy have a *laissez-faire* and a *laissez passer* (*let it happen and let it pass*) policy.”

While he eventually grew very close to both his mother and his father, at that rebellious and rambunctious stage of his life, Andrew's rare encounters with them were little more than exercises in perfunctory parenthood.

"How's school?" "Good." "Good?" "Good." "Good."

His daily routine was well established. After school it was swim team practice, for example, and home by 5 pm for a nap and a few hours of homework and then out the door before his parents arrived home. Tiptoeing back in during the wee hours after an evening of social intercourse, Andrew was careful not to wake them. Some nights he would engage in what his parents dubbed "rampaging." This involved bringing some of his buddies and their dates back to the house for some late-night, low-volume carousing. Sometimes, Andrew and a friend He would simply play a round of chess while the girls watched in silence. Afterwards they would pair off and play more intimate games till three or four AM. Andrew would get up a few hours later, after his folks had left for work, and the daily grind would begin again.

The evening that Andrew met the devil in question was marked by an exceptionally luxurious tropical evening. It had been preceded by a spectacular September sunset and had featured a sky ablaze with the deep pinks and azures that may only be properly viewed by the fortunate few who, like us, found themselves young, naked, and very much alive along the sandy shores of Old Palm Beach.

By age sixteen, Andrew was already covering familiar ground, although it had been a bit of a struggle getting there. Sex had never been a forbidden garden for him. He could frolic in it at will, but he was forced to feel his own way. His parents were much too proper to ever actually provide him with any specific "nuts and bolts" sexual enlightenment. This resulted in great opportunity, but limited ability. It was like owning a brand new Lamborghini, but not knowing where to stick in the key. Andrew was offered a chance to lose his virginity shortly before his Bar Mitzvah at the tender age of 12, but he had to decline because he simply did not know how to go about it. No one had provided assembly instructions and he had no idea how to insert Tab A into Slot B. But after a few years of fumbling in the dark and more than a few frustrating faux pas, Andrew had become known as something of a "cox-man," — a slang term that is pretty much self-explanatory — among his high school's hotties.

Andrew was always young for his age. That is to say that his circle of friends were, for the most part, a good 12 to 18 months older than he was. So, even though Andrew was a sophomore, his partner that glorious evening was a sensual senior named June.

Despite the fact that their sexual activities had already led them from pillar to post — June invited Andrew to join her for one more go on the floor. Who was he to say no? June's parents weren't due home for a good 40 minutes so they had all the time two randy teens required.

Andrew silently obliged by laying down upon his back. He felt the cool brown floor tiles against his flesh as June embraced him. But then he felt something else. Something new. Something odd.

A quick, but sharp pain in his lower back, just at the spot where his spine touched the tile. June did not even notice his slight grimace. Andrew shook it off and didn't give it another thought. After all, he was young, healthy, and was certain he was going to live forever.

The pain passed a few minutes after he arose and Andrew simply concluded "I guess that's why we shouldn't do it on the floor." He quickly forgot about the whole thing and made his way to the shower.

But Andrew was unable to shrug off the pain for very long. Within a few days he started to feel a similar ache spreading to his buttocks and the backs of his legs. And now Andrew wasn't doing anything unusual. Just sitting in a chair for a while caused the pain to begin. He began slathering his backside with Ben-Gay and other drugstore ointments. Soon his friends could smell him coming a block away, but it really did no good at all. His only real relief — albeit temporary — was achieved by soaking in hot baths. Over the next few years, Andrew found himself taking at least three or four baths every day, sometimes even falling asleep in the tub. His feet, toes, and scrotum were in a constant state of "prune-ishness."

As the pain became more frequent and continuous, Andrew began relying on Tylenol (*acetaminophen*). Lots and lots of it. He started slowly, taking a pill whenever the pain would arise and it did the trick. For a while. Pretty soon he was taking two at a time, three and four times per day. By the time he was a sophomore in college, Andrew was consuming up to fifty Tylenol per day and it still wasn't doing the job. His mother would send him huge boxes filled with sample packets she had obtained from the pharmaceutical reps who called on her. When Andrew wasn't popping Tylenol he could usually be

found in the shower stall letting the hot water soothe his back. A ritual he underwent about a dozen times each day.

Around campus he became known as the “Tylenol Guy.” He almost never left home without it, and if he did, Andrew discovered that asking an attractive young lady in a bar for some Tylenol was a very handy pick-up line. Here’s one example:

“Excuse me, miss, but do you happen to have any Tylenol in your purse?”

“Hmm. Let me see? Yes, I think I do. What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing big. Just feeling kind of lousy because my Porsche is in the shop.”

“Come here, baby. Let mama take care of you....”

During the four years between his sophomore year in high school and his sophomore year in college, Andrew must have been seen by a thousand medical “experts.” He was pointed to most of them by his well-intentioned mother. She sent him to chiropractors who stretched him; to acupuncturists who pricked him; to physical therapists who vibrated him. Once Andrew almost went to see a veterinarian who was reputed to perform miracles on race horses. All these specialists had two things in common. They all took his money and they all delivered absolutely nothing for it. The pain was getting progressively worse and lasting longer and longer. This situation would tend to have an impact on most people’s lifestyles. But not Andrew’s.

He just loaded up on ever larger doses of Tylenol — and ever larger doses of denial. He took a more showers each day and simply went on with his life. Andrew played intramural basketball at his Ivy League school and continued his wayward ways on campus. In fact, Andrew was going out every single night of the week. Pain or no pain, he realized that these were his fleeting college years and he was at his sexual peak. He would never again experience the cloistered freedom from life’s responsibilities that he was enjoying within the hallowed Halls of Ivy. Andrew wasn’t about to let some lousy lower back gremlins ruin this cherished stage of his social development.

Andrew spoke to his parents by phone about once per week and they would invariably ask about the back pain. He minimized things and said he was dealing with it and please send more Tylenol. Although his mother was forwarding regular monthly care packages filled with huge boxes of the stuff, his parents really did not have a clear picture of the severity of his situation.

He failed to mention to them, for example, that by the second semester of his sophomore year, he was no longer able to sit through an entire fifty minute class session. He found he was forced to stand for the final ten minutes or else the pain became overpowering. But there was someone Andrew did confide in fully. Jeffrey.

Jeffrey Yager was, at that time, a plastic surgery resident at Presbyterian Hospital, part of Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons. He was also dating Andrew's sister, DeAnne and would not long afterwards marry her. Jeffrey — who would go on to become something of a celebrity surgeon, appearing on 20/20 and other TV shows frequently — understood Andrew's situation fully and fortunately offered him some advice that would change everything:

“Andrew, you've got a chronic condition. You've been faking it and getting by, but that's not going to work much longer. You've got to deal with this thing now. Forget all the chiropractors and the other quacks,” he told him. “You need to see a first-class neurologist.” Andrew said okay and Jeffrey gave him the name of a Dr. Eugenia T. Gamboa who practiced at the Neurological Institute of New York. Andrew made the appointment for the following Saturday and hopped the subway to her office. Dr. Gamboa was a compact Filipino woman who had been first in her class at medical school in Manila and spoke Tagalog, as well as Spanish and English. He liked her immediately even though she told him something he was not too happy to hear.

“I really don't know what's wrong with you, Andrew, but I intend to find out. You need to be off your feet for a week in the hospital,” she explained after examining him. “You've got some nerve problems in your back and I need to run some tests on you.” Andrew agreed to check in to the hospital in a few days, but, of course he had to inform his professors that he would be missing a week of class. Some were understanding and offered strategies to make up the classwork. A few were real asses. After informing his parents that he was going to the hospital, Andrew packed a bag and took the subway over to Columbia Presbyterian. Soon after he was checked in to his room, his father phoned from Florida.

“I'm here in my room, Dad,” Andrew told him. “They want to run some tests on me to find out what's wrong. Dr. Gamboa wants to do an MRI. She says I need to be off my feet here for a week.”

“Oh,” Dr. Merey responded. “Do we *really* need to be there?”

“Well, Dad,” Andrew said ratcheting up the urgency in his voice, “I haven’t been in a hospital since I was born, so this is kind of a big deal for me.” His father got the message and he, along with Andrew’s mother, arrived on the very next day.

The first test Dr. Gamboa ordered for Andrew was an MRI. Unfortunately for him, this was all taking place about one year before the advent of gadolinium contrast. When injected into the body, gadolinium makes tumors clearly visible on an MRI scan. Today, gadolinium is used in about 30 percent of all MRI scans and greatly improves clarity and hence improves the diagnostic accuracy. Had Andrew’s first MRI taken place a year later, after gadolinium started to be widely used, his outcome would possibly have been different.

Without the gadolinium, the MRI scan Andrew underwent showed nothing. The radiologist could see the spinal column itself, but was unable to peek inside. And inside, it turned out, was where the devil was dwelling. On top of that, in those days, the designers of those big Magnetic Resonance Imaging machines gave very little thought to the comfort of the patient who was forced to remain stock still in a cramped and claustrophobia-inducing tube for hours and hours on end. Of course everything metal had to come off and Andrew wound up leaving his expensive gold chain necklace behind after the scan (it was later recovered).

By the third day, Dr. Gamboa, having gotten nowhere with the MRI, ordered a lumbar puncture, also known as a spinal tap. Andrew had heard of spinal taps but after Dr. Gamboa went into detail about how it was to be done, he wished he never had. It sounded absolutely horrible and guess what? It was even worse than she had described it. Imagine, if you can, being strapped face down on a cold slab with your hands and feet restrained in cuffs. As you peer about, you spot a masked and gloved figure approaching you with a needle the size of a javelin. You desperately want to wake up from what is obviously a nightmare induced by too many drunken screenings of Friday the Thirteenth when you feel the tip of the needle penetrate the sorest and most sensitive spot on your body. Someone says sardonically: “Now don’t move. Okay?” Right.

The idea here is to insert a needle between two lumbar vertebrae and suck out a sample of some cerebrospinal fluid. That’s the fluid that surrounds your spinal cord and brain and protects them from injury. Examining the fluid can help a doctor diagnose such serious diseases as bacterial infections like men-

ingitis, and other disorders like Guillain-Barre and multiple sclerosis. It can also help detect tumors.

So, as Andrew gritted his teeth and strained at his straps, a medical resident put the Godzilla-needle into place between his fourth and fifth lumbar vertebrae. The plunger inside the huge syringe's barrel was slowly pulled back. Spinal fluid was supposed to flow into the vacuum this created. But it didn't come out. In fact, nothing came out. Everyone seemed to be very surprised by this.

"Wow, Andrew," said the resident, "you must have very thick spinal fluid. I can't get any of it into my syringe." Andrew didn't know if he was supposed to apologize about his "cream of mushroom soup" spinal fluid, so all he did was moan and raise his eyebrows as if to ask "What now, doc?" He quickly wished he had not asked.

"Let's take it up a notch," said the guy with the big needle, trying to sound jocular as all get out. But Andrew wasn't buying it and he decidedly did not like the direction things were going. This was supposed to be one brief painful moment in time and then it's all over. He began to perspire as the resident told him what would happen next.

"We're going to go in a bit higher where I suspect your spinal fluid isn't so thick. So hang in there, buddy." Andrew was not sure which two vertebrae they penetrated this time, but the agony was the same and so was the outcome. Another dry well.

So they did it again. And again. Until finally they decided to bring in a specialist. Dr. Jacqueline Bello was, at that time, a neuroradiology fellow at the Neurologic Institute of the Columbia University Medical Center. Immediately after completing her fellowship, she was selected to serve as the head of neuroradiology at the Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. She explained that she was going to perform something called a "cisternal" puncture in an attempt to pull fluid from between the cervical vertebrae in Andrew's lower neck.

So another smaller (thank God) needle went in. This time they hit pay-dirt and were able to extract some fluid. Dr. Bello immediately ordered that contrast dye be injected into Andrew's spine. This procedure, she explained, was called a myelogram and it enabled the doctors to get a clear glimpse of what was going on inside. Things were moving very quickly now and once the film was processed and analyzed, a proper diagnosis was carried out and the hor-

rible truth began to emerge. The dye was not visible on the X-ray below the first lumbar vertebra. Something was blocking it, and it could only be one thing.

Andrew had a tumor!

They could see that no dye that had reached down to his lumbo-sacral area (lower back). The doctors concluded that there had been a tumor growing for years inside Andrew's spinal column. The growth had caused pressure and was what accounted for his years of pain in that area. But the tumor was not encapsulated. That means that the cancerous cells of the tumor were not confined to a specific spot and were instead floating freely, or disseminated, throughout his spinal column. A few such "seeds" in one's spinal fluid is considered manageable, but the level of dissemination here was much greater. The reason behind this fact is the subject of some controversy.

For the remainder of his life, Andrew firmly believed that the dissemination of the cancerous cells in his spine had been aggravated by the unsuccessful spinal probes carried out by Dr. Gamboa. The difficulty the doctors encountered in extracting spinal fluid from his lower spine was not caused by any unusual thickening. Andrew believed that the reason the needle could not suck out any fluid was because its tip had punctured, and was then lodged inside of, the tumor itself. By poking holes through its surface, not once, but repeatedly, the encapsulation was breached and many more such seeds or cancerous cells were released into his system. Or so he believed.

This view was not shared by other members of Andrew's family, most notably, his father. Dr. John Merey maintained that Andrew's tumor had always been disseminated and that there was no encapsulation present at the time of his diagnosis.

Would Andrew's condition have been more treatable had those spinal taps not taken place? Would the tumor have shown up in the MRI film had Andrew waited another year and undergone the test after gadolinium contrast had been introduced? Suffice it to say that Andrew believed this to be the case. But he, at the same time, realized that, at this point, such questions were academic and largely irrelevant. He had a tumor in his spine, the seeds of which had spread, and this was, he understood for the first time, an extremely serious condition.

Once Dr. Bello's diagnosis was fully understood by all present, the medical staff reacted in a somewhat less than professional manner. They freaked out.

No longer concealing her alarm, Dr. Gamboa — deadly serious this time — announced: “Get him into the OR immediately!” Andrew was rushed into the operating room where a team of surgeons, headed by Dr. Ben Stein, opened his spine and worked on him for more than five hours. This Ben Stein was not the actor who played Ferris Bueller's economics teacher, but a celebrated surgeon of the same name. Dr. Stein was the head of neurosurgery at Columbia Presbyterian who was considered to be a medical god by his colleagues and patients — a god who would occasionally deign to descend from Mt. Olympus to perform miracles upon mere mortals such as Andrew.

Rightly or wrongly, Andrew was plagued by disturbing questions. “If only. If only they had discovered the tumor before poking around trying to pull off a spinal tap, it may have remained more or less encapsulated and been easily removed surgically. I would have walked out of that hospital a healed man and my struggle would have ended right there.”

But that's not the hand that Andrew had been dealt. Dr. Stein and Dr. Gamboa — along with a full contingent of white-frosted docs, residents, and students — all came to see him and his parents once Andrew had been rolled out of the recovery area. They explained the situation, trying to put things into layman's terms that Andrew could easily understand.

“We've had a look and the tumor has wrapped itself around the nerves inside of your spinal column. It looks like burnt sugar surrounding your nerve tissue,” explained Dr. Stein.

“We opened up a bunch of your vertebrae during the operation, Andrew,” Dr. Stein continued, rather condescendingly, “We took samples of the tumor and had them biopsied. What you have is called spinal myxopapillary ependymoma.” That was certainly a mouthful.

Dr. Gamboa then said: “It is a very slow-growing tumor that typically first appears in the area called the filum terminale which is the little tail that hangs down at the end of your spinal cord. This type of tumor is more or less benign, although some people term it as having a low-grade malignancy.”

Andrew could see that his parents were becoming more anxious with each word coming from Dr. Gamboa's lips. Andrew was waiting for the part where

she would break into a broad smile and tell them that it had all been dealt with and he would soon be going home cured. That did not happen.

Dr. Stein took over and pointed out that myxopapillary ependymomas were usually well-defined and shaped like elongated sausages with a smooth surface.

“These types of tumors, if fully encapsulated, are easily removed and dissemination and metastases are extremely rare. These patients never have a recurrence.”

“I don’t understand,” said his dad, gesturing with his hands. “Then why didn’t you remove it during the surgery?”

“This tumor was not encapsulated. The nerve roots are penetrating right through it. Removing it would be like trying to get chewing gum out of your hair.

only
to do



The
way
that

would

be by

cutting your hair.” But, of course, in this case it was not hair but Andrew’s major spinal nerves that were hopelessly entangled by the tumor.

“There was no way we could have known there was a very rare tumor in there when I ordered the spinal tap,” said Dr. Gamboa, somewhat defensively. She neither specifically confirmed nor denied Andrew’s suspicion that the situation had been aggravated by poking the tumor with the spinal tap needles. Of course, if she had only had a crystal ball she could have foreseen that in another year gadolinium contrast would have enabled her to discover the tumor without the need for a spinal tap and this matter would not have been an issue. But as it were, Andrew clung to the belief that were it not for the repeated needle probes into his lower back, the level of dissemination would have remained at a treatable and manageable level. A belief that, according to his father, was inaccurate.

Andrew’s parents, both doctors, had a high regard for Dr. Bello’s diagnostic acumen, especially when it came to reading spinal cord MRI’s. It seems Dr. Bello enjoys a unique gift that allows her to mentally envision two-dimensional films in three dimensional space. Combining this ability with her nearly photographic memory, Dr. Bello became a valued resource over the coming years in helping to interpret the progress of Andrew’s illness. Once a year, the Merey family would embark on a pilgrimage from Florida to New York, bearing Andrew’s freshest MRI films. Dr. Bello would consistently analyze and deeply review them with the family each time. This was no small feat since myxopapillary ependymoma presents with very slow-growing tumors. Detecting any change, even after a year had elapsed since the previous MRI, was not at all easy. A tumor’s growth of at least 15% was required for it to be detectable. It was akin to watching grass grow. Very slow grass.

The annual pilgrimages continued for a quarter of a century. What began as a special professional relationship evolved into a warm friendship that has outlived Andrew and endures to this day.

Some months after receiving the diagnosis, when Andrew asked his future brother-in-law, Jeffrey, to conduct some medical research about myxopapillary ependymoma, he asked to him search for prior cases where the tumor was not encapsulated. It took some time for Jeffrey to carry out the necessary research (this was pre-Google). He reported back that the most recent case he could locate was treated a full 18 years before. What Andrew had was very rare indeed.

Back in the hospital that day, Andrew was beginning to understand that he was confronting a very rare and a very serious disease. This enormity and singularity of Andrew's condition made an impact on all the medical providers present. After receiving the diagnosis, Dr. Gamboa ruefully whispered to Andrew's father: "This has to be the saddest case of my entire professional life."

At this point, Andrew's mother, Daisy, placed her arm around his shoulder as she stood bravely beside his bed. They were galvanized into a family during those very tense moments. Even though all three of them lived their lives more or less independently, at this moment, they were somehow welded together as they struggled to grapple with the facts as they were being revealed to them. But nothing — not family ties, not medical background, not the stiff-backed combined resolve of two parents whose families had survived Hitler — could have prepared them for the words that the anointed neurology surgeon was about to say next:

"He's not going to live to see twenty," muttered Dr. Stein grimly. Andrew was nineteen at the time.

Fighting back the tears, Andrew leaned over to his father, whose eyes had already started welling up, and gestured across the gaggle of white-coated medical mavens surrounding his bed.

"I'm going to go to attend all of their funerals."

During his final days, Andrew wrote: "That was February 13, 1990. Twenty-five years ago. Many of those docs are long gone, but I'm still breathing, I'm still kicking, and I'm still smiling. I'd like this book to explain why."

Chapter Two

Back In The Day

Andrew had often heard that your life flashes before your eyes just before you die. When that didn't actually happen after being issued a death sentence by his doctors that day in the hospital, Andrew concluded that reports of his imminent demise were in fact "exaggerated." Yet, over the following days and weeks, he did begin to think back about who he was and where he had come from. It is not a common thing for a 19-year-old kid to come face-to-face with his own mortality, but that was the situation. Andrew was looking the devil right in the eye and he was terrified.

All sorts of crazy ideas go through a person's mind when he or she tries to cope with the reality of a nightmarish situation. One begins to wonder if he or she was, in fact, living under a family curse. You see this was not the first time a member of Andrew's family had been placed under a sentence of death. His father and grandparents were condemned to die by no less of a personage than Adolph Hitler. Their stories of miraculous escape during the Holocaust are worthy of books of their own. In fact, his mother Daisy *has* written about her childhood experiences in a book called **Firstborn in Tangiers** (2008, Perfect Paperback, 226 pages). I encourage you to read the book in full, but meanwhile, here are a few highlights:

(Insert passages from Daisy's book).

Andrew's father, Dr. John Merey, was saved thanks to an historic event in the annals of the Holocaust. In 1944, when he was a four-year old child in Nazi-occupied Budapest, he and his parents managed to get aboard what became known as the Kasztner Transport. This train, carrying more than 1600 Jews to eventual safety in Switzerland, was named after a highly controver-

sial figure, Rudolf Kasztner. Kasztner, in his role as head of the Hungarian Jewish Aid and Rescue Committee had negotiated with Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi SS officer in charge of sending all of Hungary's Jews to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. The Germans permitted the transport to leave Hungary to safety in exchange for a ransom of gold, jewelry, and cash. Here are a few excerpts from his father's account of his family's rescue:

(Insert passages from John's essay / speech and letter from Aunt Irma)

Sailing to the US in a Liberty ship as part of the very first post-World War II wave of Jewish immigration, his father's family arrived to Baltimore harbor in April of 1946. There, the family was met at the pier by two of Andrew's great-uncles, Miklos and Laci. The new arrivals were transported to New York where their first home was in the back of Laci's medical office in Queens, New York.

Andrew's paternal grandfather, Ernest, was a graduate civil engineer in Hungary. He had earned his degree prior to the onset of the "numerus clausus" decrees that restricted Jews from attending the universities of Europe. His diploma, with its embroidered official seal proudly rested on the wall of Andrew's office. Ernest preferred to work at his thriving decorative marble business. It was thrifty great-grandfather Gabor's cache of money that that would eventually allow him and thirteen other members of the family, including young John, to buy their way onto the Kasztner train and rescue.

Andrew's maternal grandmother, Ernestine, was a member of the prominent Hungarian Munk family that was involved with the Manor Confectionary Company throughout the entire Austro-Hungarian empire. After the suffering they had endured during the war, Ernest, Ernestine, and Andrew's father, John, felt as though they had arrived to paradise as they stepped freshly onto the streets of Queens, New York.

Andrew recalled his grand-father Erno telling him: "We had heard in Europe that the streets of America were paved with gold. This turned out to

be true as long as you were willing to bend over and pick it up.” As was the case with many immigrants of their generation, developing a strong work ethic was not a problem for either of his parents, and it was this factor that lay behind the substantial financial success that they enjoyed in later years.

His father’s family lived in a one-bedroom apartment for six years as John Merey grew into the All-American boy. After graduating from Forest Hills high school, he followed his parents’ advice and began pursuing a career in medicine. John graduated from Union College in Schenectady after which he enrolled at Columbia Medical School. He did his residency in ophthalmology at New York University Medical Center — which is where he met his future bride and happened to be the place where Andrew would soon be born.

Andrew’s parents met each other on a blind date in 1966 arranged by a family friend who, based on his grandmother’s description of his father as someone who preferred “tall and blonde,” women. She didn’t know anyone that fit that description, but she did know Daisy, a petite Hungarian brunette recently arrived from Morocco. The romance blossomed between the ophthalmology resident and the co-ed working on her masters degree, but shortly thereafter his mother’s employer relocated to San Francisco taking Daisy with him. His mother continued her studies at Berkeley, but John lured her back to New York with the prospect of a fellowship in pharmacology at NYU that he had helped to arrange.

Daisy turned out to be an extraordinary student, earning both an MD and a Ph.D. from NYU. Andrew’s parents wed while his father was undergoing his ophthalmology residency. Both his sister, DeAnne (b. 1969) and Andrew (b. 1970) arrived not long afterwards. As soon as his father received his medical degree, their first order of business was to get out of New York. After growing up in the near Saharan climate of Morocco, his mother simply could not tolerate the cold New York winters and implored John to set up his practice in a more hospitable and tropical latitude. The closest destination that filled the

bill — a mere two and a half hour plane jaunt from New York — was southern Florida.

Touring the region during a scouting expedition, the young couple received a sign that they should make their new home in Palm Beach. Actually it was a “For Rent” sign advertising some available medical office space. After noticing the sign his parents stopped to check it out. John signed the lease on the spot and the family has resided in Palm Beach County ever since.

As mentioned, Andrew was born in 1970 at NYU Medical Center. It was there that an event took place that evokes marvel to this day. How many people have ever enjoyed a friendship that dates back to the first day of their lives? Well, Andrew was proud to say that he did actually have just such a friendship.

At the time Andrew was born, mothers were required to stay in the hospital for at least a week after delivery — even if both mother and child were in good health. It was a different era. The following episode that took place shortly after Andrew was born illustrates this point. After emerging from the womb, Andrew was placed immediately into the nursery without his mother having had even a glimpse of her new baby. Shortly after Daisy was wheeled back to her room, a charge nurse entered wearing a broad smile.

“Well, Dr. Merey,” she asked his mom, “are you ready to meet your brand new son?”

“Wait,” exclaimed his mother sitting up, “I’m *not* ready! Let me put on my lipstick first.” One thing Daisy always taught her son was try to make a good first impression.

Andrew clearly made a great first impression with the hospital nursing staff. When the time came for a newborn nurse to hold a baby-bathing instruction class for all the new mothers on the ward, it was smiling little Andrew, the cutest baby on the floor, who was selected to serve as the demonstration model infant.

Daisy was sharing a semi-private room on the maternity floor with a Mrs. Pariser who delivered a baby boy about six hours after Daisy did. Since Andrew was born before midnight and Alan was born after, their birthdays are one day apart (October 9th and 10th). Daisy and Mrs. Pariser got to know one another rather well after being confined in that small room together for a week. Not surprisingly, their two families remained friends during the year the Mereys remained in New York. But after the Mereys moved to Florida, the two families drifted apart and lost touch with each other. But the fates intervened.

Fast forward five years into the future. By some quirk of karma, both the Merey family and the Parisers, independent of one another other, wound up living on the tony little island known as Palm Beach, Florida — less than one mile from each other! And like all good Jewish boys, both Andrew and little Alan Pariser were sent to Camp Shalom, the summer day camp operated by the local Jewish Federation. Alan and Andrew became buddies, having no idea that they had already met one another on the first day of their respective lives. Naturally, they soon felt the need to arrange for a sleepover play date. This, of course, required that their mothers meet one another at after-camp pick-up time to size up one another. The meeting took place and of course no adult names were mentioned. “This is Alan’s mommy” and “Hi, I’m Andrew’s mother.” After a bit of squinting at each other and then some drop-dead shocked incredulity, the two stunned moms embraced as the realization of this major coincidence sunk in.

Alan and Andrew remained good friends throughout elementary and high school. Although Alan’s family was considerably more religiously observant than Andrew’s, this fact did not pose any sort of obstacle to their friendship (other than the fact that Andrew was forced to party without him on Friday nights throughout high school). Alan got into Brandeis University where, after one semester, he became a father and he decided to drop out. Alan and

Andrew remained friends despite the distances separating them — even after Alan moved to LA so his wife could pursue her acting career. Alan and Sondra finally landed in Las Vegas where, after some ups and downs in the real estate business, they today operate a successful marketing franchise. In fact, it was Alan that Andrew and his wife, Bridgette, were visiting a few years ago, when Andrew discovered that the dry climate in Las Vegas was very beneficial to his medical status. Based on that visit, Bridgette and Andrew decided to relocate to Nevada. Alan and Sondra were wonderful in helping them adjust to life out west...and to life in general.

So the story came full circle. Two babies who first came face to face in the maternity ward of NYU hospital when they were but a few hours old, wound up helping each other cope with all of life's many challenges. "That's definitely one for the books, folks," Andrew commented.

Growing up in the shadow of the world-famous Breakers Hotel, in a high-rise dubbed none too cleverly as "Sun and Surf," unquestionably had its plusses. For one thing, the natural beauty surrounding them. Their unit was not on the ocean-view side of the building. Rather it was on the less expensive "nothing-view" side. Nevertheless, it was a short hop over to the lush sandy beach. As kids, they would visit the shore and swim in the warm tide every single day. Until 1976, that is. That's the year that the Jaws movie came out and the family immediately stopped venturing into the water. A few years later, Andrew's parents became close friends with a leading area dermatologist, Lewis Kaminister, who enlightened them about the hazards of too much sunlight. They stopped going to the beach altogether at that point.

Andrew was soon enrolled at the Wee Wisdom Montessori School in Delray Beach. Andrew's mother recalls how, on the first day of school, Andrew was apprehensive and decided to cling to a tree rather than enter the school building. Miss Rita, the enlightened Montessori instructor employed an advanced holistic teaching technique to overcome Andrew's psychological re-

luctance. She picked him up like a sack of potatoes and carried him into the building slung over her shoulder.

His parents were not exactly what you might call risk-takers, despite, or perhaps due to, their Holocaust background. This was especially true in his mother's case. After so many years in a high-rise condo, Daisy and John felt that owning a free-standing home would be a good idea. They located a "fixer-upper" on Ridgewood, also located on Palm Beach Island, and bought it with the idea of remodeling the home and making it into their new beach-side residence. One fine day, his mother visited the place and discovered that, like most uninhabited properties in Palm Beach, the place was overrun with lizards, frogs, insects, and assorted crawly creepy creatures. She freaked and that was the end of that. Andrew's parents to this day continue to live up high in the sky where such infestations cannot reach them.

Although his folks were more or less risk-averse, Andrew decidedly was anything but. He loved taking chances and seeing how far he could push things. His parents still tell the story of when Andrew was nine years old and their family of four decided to embark on a Caribbean cruise. One night, his father awoke around 2 am and peeked into his cabin to look in on Andrew. Only he wasn't there. His dad had personally tucked him in around 9 pm and naturally became alarmed. After awakening his mother and his sister, Andrew's dad alerted the crew who immediately initiated a deck-to-deck search. Fearing the worst, his parents began listening for voices outside of stateroom doors and then knocking if they felt someone inside was awake. In this way they found young Andrew, merrily playing stud poker with a bunch of adults in one of their private suites. Andrew learned his lesson (more or less) after that, although Andrew does not recall his father ever becoming angry or raising his voice with him. John simply sat Andrew down and calmly explained what he had done wrong. Finally, John said: "It's okay to have fun on a cruise ship, just don't go overboard. OK?" and then gave the lad a little wink.

The simple fact was that Andrew could not sleep for very long. Whether on land or out at sea, he was a confirmed insomniac for most of his life. Andrew recalled as far back as kindergarten being ordered to lie down in his sleeping bag during nap time and then laying there for 45 minutes just watching the other kids sleep. Doing the math, he discovered that he had always slept about half as much as the average person. That translated to about an extra four hours of awake time per day which meant that by 2015 he had spent as many years awake as an average 52 year old man although he was only 44. “By the time I’m 60 (and he did have every intention of turning sixty), I will have experienced the same amount of ‘living’ time as an average 70 year old.”

Although there was never any medical evidence to support it, Andrew’s father always suspected that his son’s sleep aversion may have been due to the developing tumor in his spine. It’s hard to say if this situation made him old before his time or wise beyond his years, but it is clear that his insomnia was something Andrew had little control over. He claimed he never suffered any ill effects due to his little need for sleep. In fact, Andrew never actually regarded it as a condition. To him, four hours per night was simply the norm.

Andrew’s schooling continued at Palm Beach Public School on Coconut Row. When Andrew was in fourth grade, a new boy joined the class by the name of David Roy. Dave and Andrew became fast friends. It was a friendship that would endure for the rest of Andrew’s life.

The home Andrew recalled with the utmost fondness was located on a little Palm Beach street known as Bahama Lane. That was the place where he dreamed his dreams and cried his tears as he struggled through the tumultuous trials of adolescence. It was something of a golden time, partly due to his parents’ desire to shield their children from the discrimination their families had endured during the Holocaust.

While Andrew never confronted antisemitism directly as he was growing up, he had a vague notion that it existed. Alan and he were really the only two Jewish kids living in in the north end of Palm Beach during those years. This dearth of Jewish families was not too surprising given the history of antisemitic policies practiced on this “Winter Getaway Playground for the Super-Rich,” as the island was billed in those days. In the mid-1970s there were only 1200 Jewish families in all of Palm Beach County and although this was a full ten years after the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act, and thirty years after the Holocaust, Jews were still being denied admission to the swankier watering spots and posh little boutique hotels that dotted Worth Avenue. To this day, the private Everglades Club remains restricted to caucasian members of the Christian faith.

Of course such restrictions are difficult to enforce unless it is required for all Jews to wear big Yellow Stars. Andrew had a clear recollection of attending birthday parties, thrown by his gentile classmates, at restaurants and hotels that he later learned did not permit entry to Jews. “Well I just went in there and nobody asked me for my Baptism papers,” he would respond when asked how he got away with it.

At Twin Lakes High School, near West Palm Beach’s City Center, Andrew was following in the footsteps of his older sister, DeAnne, who had been an exemplary and serious student. Andrew’s style was, shall we say, more care-free and less intense when it came to his studies.

The paucity of Jewish families in the Palm Beach area became something of a problem as Andrew started dating in high school. While it was important to his parents that he eventually marry a Jewish woman, restricting him to only dating such girls (as Alan’s parents had done) would have meant no social life at all. So he wound up dating *shiksas*. Lots of *shiksas*.

By the time Andrew arrived to the Columbia University School of Engineering, he valiantly made the attempt to date Jewish girls, but nothing really

clicked. He came to the conclusion that if he were ever to fulfill his parents' wishes about having a Jewish wife, she would have to be a convert.

Andrew did not flaunt the fact that he was sleeping with *shiksas* in front of his parents. In fact he kept it a secret. This was because he believed, at the time, that his actions would have upset them. So he quietly kept his private life to himself. But looking back, Andrew did come to realize that they probably would have been tolerant and understanding of his situation. "Sometimes a guy just doesn't give his folks enough credit," was his observation.

Perhaps it was just that Jewish girls found Andrew to be too nerdy. He started getting into computers when he was only twelve years old, banging away at his first Apple][Plus. He taught himself Turtle Logo and then Basic and pretty soon he was coding in Pascal and TurboPascal. Memories of spending endless hours, if not days, playing Castle Wolfenstein, Microsoft Flight Simulator, and other computer games with his girlfriend at the time, would bring a fond smile to his lips in later life. Those games seem quite primitive by today's standards, but they were aggressively addictive to an impressionable young geek like Andrew.

Beginning in 1982, Andrew began spending his summers at Computer Camp International located in Moodus, Connecticut. He took to the place like a proverbial duck to water from the moment he arrived. His father recalls that Andrew immediately took a seat in front of a computer screen upon arrival and he was planted in the same spot four weeks later when his parents came to collect him. The camp was all computers during the day, with talent shows and kids' circus at night. During his first week at the camp, Andrew experienced an epiphany when he realized that his beloved computer games could be "copied" (pirated, actually). It was there that he was introduced by the counselors to Pascal, his first full-fledged programming language.

What with his computer camp experience each summer and his blowing through all the computer classes offered by his high school, Andrew was a full fledged “Big Bang Theory” geek by the time he graduated from Palm Beach High School. During his last summer before graduation, Andrew was enrolled in a program at the University of Florida at Gainesville called FSF or “Future Scientists of Florida.” The high schoolers worked under the tutelage of grad students who were tasked with developing a robotic arm that would be capable of economically picking — what else? — Florida oranges. While the engineering students worked on the hardware, they hotshot high school kids were asked to code the robotic field worker’s software.

Andrew recalled the never-ending whiteboard meetings where their young programming team was forced to endure the older engineering guys as they debated arcane details about the design of the robotic arm. Things would get pretty passionate and Andrew would watch these fellows nearly come to blows over whether or not the robot should move on wheels or on tractor treads, for example. The whole thing seemed rather petty to Andrew, but to them, it was a matter of fruit-pickin’ life or death.

His job came down to enabling the robot to visually distinguish between a spherical shape, such as an orange, and an oblong shape, like a leaf. Someone else’s code would teach the arm how to tell if the color of the orange made it ready to pick or not. He used Kirsch non-linear edge detector algorithms to accomplish this task and they worked perfectly. Years earlier, a computer scientist named Russell Kirsch figured out that you could determine the shape of an item by placing a digital compass in the center of it and rotating it in 45 degree increments. Repeatedly noting the furthest point across all eight compass directions would eventually yield an outline that could then be mathematically compared to another shape.

Although it was probably responsible for rendering thousands of migrant workers jobless, Andrew’s code worked perfectly and it is still being used in

robotic arms in orange groves across Florida. Did Andrew make any money for his efforts? Not a chance. Everything the students developed, every last line of code, became the intellectual property of the University of Florida. Andrew hoped that someday he would look into exactly how much money his code had earned the school to date. “It might earn me a season ticket to watch the Gators play,” he quipped.

While Andrew’s parents were pleased by his techno-savvy, they did not advise him to pursue computers as a career. That was merely a fun hobby. Everyone in his family, his teachers, everyone simply assumed that he would become a doctor. Both his parents were doctors. His great-uncle had been a doctor. His grandfather had been a doctor. So, his following that path was simply understood by all concerned. Including Andrew.

Once Andrew was accepted to Columbia, his father encouraged him to sign up for the school’s six-year combined program, after which he would have emerged — if he survived the rigors — with both an undergraduate and a medical degree. He did not follow his father’s advice since he did not wish to bust his chops for six years just to get a two-year career jump on his peers. After all, he was young. he had all the time in the world — or so he thought.

It was in the freshman dorm at Columbia that Andrew became a part of a circle of lifelong friends. The circle included Tim, Mark, Stuart, Ami and Cathy. Andrew pledged and then became a brother in the Alpha chapter of Columbia’s oldest fraternity, Zeta Psi.

After Andrew had experienced nine months of living in a hospital as a patient (after having received his dismal diagnosis), he wanted nothing to do with medicine. He became completely turned off to the point that the disinfectant aroma of a hospital corridor made him queasy. Andrew was familiar with a number of people who, after suffering and recovering from a serious illness, decided to devote their lives to medicine, either professionally or as a volunteer. Well, he wasn’t one of those people. He experienced the exact op-

posite reaction and never wanted to see another IV as long as he lived. But Andrew did love computers, so he opted to make that his career path. But more about that later.

While Andrew was known to “date around” in high school, he also had his share of more enduring relationships or, as they used to say, “steady” girlfriends. During his freshman year he met a cute classmate named Kim Bell. Kim and he became platonic “best pals,” but by the end of the school year things became more serious. Ironically, their romance succeeded in ruining their friendship. It was a case of the great being the enemy of the good. Suddenly things like jealousy, possessiveness, and control issues begin rearing their ugly little heads and by the end of the summer the relationship was kaput.

Andrew considered himself fortunate in that he was able to attract impressionable high school girls once he obtained his driver’s license and a slick “set of wheels.” His dad was one of the first true highway safety fanatics and he insisted that the only car Andrew be permitted to drive was a Mercedes-Benz. The reason? At that time, Mercedes was the only car that offered (driver-side only) airbags. I’m sure that some questioned how a Holocaust survivor could buy a car for both his son and daughter made by a German company known to have used Jewish slave labor during that period. Andrew knew of one such fellow — a witty Jewish survivor with a gleam in his eye and a number on his arm — who would ask the driver any time he got into a Mercedes: “Mind if I look in the ashtrays for my relatives?” While I’m sure it must have generated mixed emotions, his dad placed Andrew’s personal safety above any animosity he harbored against the Third Reich and its collaborators.

Andrew was even more fortunate growing up in that he was capable of tracing his childhood through a progression of “close buddies” with whom he shared every aspect of his life. Allen Pariser, of course was always there — sometimes in the background, sometimes up front — as his lifelong amigo.

But as Andrew reflected on the cherished friendships that was such an important part of his life, he viewed them as interlocking jigsaw puzzle pieces with the face of a childhood best bud on each one. Carter Smith to Steve Gordon to Alex Athenius and finally to David Roy, whom Andrew would label as his best friend during the final years of his life. In fact, David, along with his two daughters, was living in Andrew's home at the end, since they were in need of housing after David's break-up with his girlfriend.

It was those lifelong friends Andrew found himself thinking about as he sat alone in his hospital room after the "death squad" doctors and everyone else had gone. What was he going to say to Dave and Alex and the others? How was he going to avoid their pity — which is the last thing he wanted. Andrew recognized that he was going to need to rely on the strength of his friends and his family in the days that lay ahead. And so he made up his mind right then and there, that he was not going to let this stupid fucking tumor destroy his life. He would not succumb to it. He would throw himself into the fight and prove those white-frosted fools to be liars. And, in order to avoid the tears of his friends and family, Andrew would do it with a smile and in good cheer. He believed that as long as he was able to just keep smiling, he would make it through. Hence today, it is that everlasting smile that endures when those who knew and loved Andrew Merey pause to remember him.

Chapter Three

Defiance

The emotions that coursed through Andrew as he sat in his hospital bed, taking in the enormity of the news the team of doctors had just served up, were powerful and plentiful. Anger, shock, amazement, frustration, confusion, guilt and no small quantum of panic as he stared into what had become the abyss of his future. Like most young men at that age, Andrew had never devoted a moment's thought to his own mortality. And now. Boom. It had collided with him head-on. The one emotion that did not emerge, however, was self-pity. In its place was a sturdy and stiff-necked sense of defiance. He found himself tapping into the same life force that had empowered his parents and grandparents and enabled them to defy the odds of their circumstances and build new lives in America. He regarded the tumor as his personal enemy — and just as his family had defied the death sentences that had been placed on their heads, now Andrew too would find the fortitude to “beat the reaper” and prevail.

It was this mind-set that provided Andrew with the strength to endure the ensuing months of hospitalization. His studies suspended, life quickly turned into endless rounds of radiation therapy. Although he was told he probably would not be able to father any children, the metal guard still was put in place before each treatment to protect his genitals from the radiation. As he had been warned, his hair began falling out in clumps. Each morning his pillow would be covered with a fresh layer of his straight black strands. Andrew also

received massive doses of cortizone intended to help him cope with the side effects of the radiation therapy. This resulted in extreme bloating and other highly unpleasant side effects. Andrew would suffer the consequences of receiving that much cortisone for the remainder of his life.

One bright spot, as Andrew underwent this extended ordeal, was the fact that his parents never left his side. Either John or Daisy was nearby, providing support and comfort, during every procedure and each difficult moment. They took shifts traveling from their Palm Beach home to New York, flying back and forth countless times each during Andrew's hospitalization. Although they may have considered it, Andrews' parents never suggested moving him to Florida for treatment. It was understood that he was receiving the best possible care in the best possible place in the world. But sometimes even the best is not good enough.

Andrew's condition did not improve despite the intensive and extended radiation therapy. The tumor persisted as the doctors watched his red blood cells, his white blood cells and platelet count all decline steadily. After several months of therapy had elapsed, in mid-May 1990, Andrew attempted to go home to Florida. Things did not go well during the journey. Unable to remain seated for more than a few minutes at a stretch, he reserved three adjacent seats in coach and flew south stretched out across them. Andrew never forgot the experience; particularly the intolerance of the flight attendants who forced him to sit up during take-off and landing despite his extreme pain. The rocky ride through New York's pock-marked streets en route to LaGuardia. And, perhaps worst of all, the obvious pity he read on the faces of his friends and family upon returning home.

Andrew did not fare much better after arriving home. All of the cortisone, all the radiation was bound to take its toll. He was still taking large doses of cortisone and this created a pathway to infection.

On the Friday prior to Memorial Day, Andrew began breathing laboriously. He was quickly admitted to St. Mary's Hospital in West Palm Beach with a diagnosis of pneumonia. Despite pumping him with intravenous antibiotics, there was no improvement. His parents and his sister DeAnne feared the worst. They slept each night on the floor of his hospital room, not wishing to be absent should Andrew's life force give out. Only a few days earlier, renowned puppeteer, Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppets, had died from an antibiotic-resistant strain of pneumonia. It appeared that Andrew was about to undergo the same fate. Fortunately, fate and medical expertise, intervened.

Andrew was seen by two specialists: Dr. David Dodson, an infectious disease expert, and Dr. Craig Altus, a pulmonary (lung) specialist. They both noticed the same thing. Andrew's hemoglobin level was dramatically low. Hemoglobin is a protein that is used by red blood cells to transport oxygen throughout the body. The oxygen Andrew was absorbing through his lungs was simply not reaching the organs of his body. The doctors ordered two units of fresh blood and Andrew began to rally immediately. The crisis soon passed and Andrew returned home by the end of the week. It was the first time that Andrew and his close family had come face-to-face with the prospect of his death. It would not be the last.

Despite Andrew's fortitude and defiant attitude, he could not help but succumb to occasional despair — but only during private moments of introspection. "Is God punishing me for some reason? Did I do something horrific in a previous life?" he would wonder to himself. Such questions are to be expected, of course. But Andrew never explored them with others. He was determined to present an upbeat attitude and his famous toothy grin in his dealings with everyone. He simply refused to accept the role of the tragic victim.

As the months wore on, Andrew eventually concluded that God was actually helping to keep him alive. Each passing day represented a victory over

the doctors who had condemned him to die before attaining the age of twenty. Little by little, Andrew began believing that God was protecting him by extending a divine stay of execution. This gradual change helped to elevate Andrew's spirits whenever he felt himself slipping into the depths of despair.

But beyond his spiritual redemption, Andrew's endurance actually made him into something of a medical miracle. During his initial year of treatment, he was referred to a support group made up of other victims of spinal cord tumors. Some twelve years later in 2002, Andrew attended another such support group gathering in Orlando. When he arrived he inquired about the other members of his initial group whom he had gotten to know earlier. Would any of them be attending? The answer was no. Andrew was the only member of that group still alive! Shortly before his death, Andrew conducted an inquiry, with his father's help, and discovered that no other patient had ever survived, as he had, for more than 25 years after receiving a diagnosis of myxopapillary ependymoma. Andrew's case has been analyzed by oncologists and he has been discussed at tumor seminars, attended by physicians and researchers wishing to understand and replicate his amazing longevity.

Was he a fluke of nature? Or did Andrew's singular positive mentality regarding his illness actually serve to extend his life? This question puzzled his doctors and intrigued all who knew him. But it never confounded Andrew. He fervently believed that as long as he kept smiling, he kept living.

Chapter Four

The Sunshine State of Mind

It was to the house on Bahama Lane that Andrew returned, wheelchair bound, after his nearly year-long treatment regimen at Columbia University Hospital. Little by little, and thanks to his own grit, Andrew was eventually able to discard the wheelchair and begin walking. Barely able to climb the stairs, he did not take well to role of invalid and although he appreciated the care he was receiving from his parents and others, he began feeling a bit smothered. Understandably, Andrew yearned to go back to school and complete his education. He soon enrolled for classes at Columbia.

Getting back to school and a somewhat normal routine did wonders for Andrew's mental outlook and seemed to accelerate his recovery. He discovered clever techniques that allowed him to manage his condition while at school. Climbing stairs on all fours, for example, when taking them upright proved too challenging. And when being seated on the ground was too painful, Andrew would ask a classmate to bring along a chair whenever the professor decided to move the class outdoors.

The rapidity of Andrew's recovery astonished his doctors. He was scheduled for another operation three months after returning home and used the time to strengthen himself both physically and mentally. By the time the pre-op exam was conducted his health had improved to the point that the surgeon (INSERT NAME OF SURGEON) announced: "If your condition were to

have been this positive *after* my surgery, I would have to declare myself a genius. Operation cancelled.”

It was at this point, towards the end of Andrew’s junior year at Columbia, that not only did his health take a turn for the better, but so did his life. It all began, oddly enough, at a Bar Mitzvah party. His parents received an invitation to attend a “Simcha Celebration” of the Bar Mitzvah of their friends’ 13-year old son. The Ben Simons, like Andrew’s mother, had long ago immigrated from Morocco. They had attended Andrew’s Bar Mitzvah some seven years earlier, so John and Daisy naturally accepted the invitation to the Ben Simon’s Boca Raton Bar Mitzvah. Realizing that the event would take place shortly after Andrew was due to come home from school for the summer, his father completed the enclosed RSVP card with the words: “John, Daisy, and Andrew Merey would be delighted to attend.” Andrew did not greet the news of his promised attendance very well.

“I’m a college student. Why would I want to go hang out with a bunch of 13 year olds?” he objected.

“I’m sorry,” said his father. “I should have checked with you first but now it’s too late. I said you’ll be there and they are setting a place for you. You’ve got to show up.” Andrew grudgingly agreed.

Seated at one of the “young people’s” tables, Andrew noticed that he was not the only non-Middle Schooler seated with him. Sitting directly to his right was a teenage cousin of the Bar Mitzvah boy. And guess what? She was gorgeous! “Hmm,” he thought to himself. “Maybe this Barsimon Bar Mitzvah thing won’t be such a drag after all.”

Andrew began thinking things over and soon came to the conclusion that there was more at work than merely Kismet to account for this fortuitous seating arrangement. He recalled that the day before a high school friend named Devon had visited Andrew at his home. Devon was the girlfriend of Andrew’s buddy David (INSERT LAST NAME). During her visit she used

the house phone to phone a friend of hers, Bridgette. Andrew's father, he recalled, overheard Devon's end of the conversation during which she discussed attending a Bar Mitzvah in Boca the following day. John commented to Devon: "Oh, we're going to that Bar Mitzvah as well. By the way, who was that you were speaking with?" The rest, Andrew speculated, could be assumed. A quick call by his mom to the hostess with an "Is it too late to change the seating chart?" was all it took. The hosts were a traditional Orthodox Jewish family and Mrs. Ben Simon was known to be something of a "*shadchen*" or matchmaker. Andrew did not object to all this, especially since he was quite taken with Bridgette immediately.

What followed was an unforgettable summer of growing affection on the path towards true love. Hours upon hours of phone calls whenever they were unable to be together caused Andrew's parents to issue a rare complaint about the phone bill. Bridgette was, at the time, working as a sous chef at a tony French bistro in Boca known as "La Nouvelle Maison." The restaurant was cashing in on the trendy "Nouvelle Cuisine" (French for "portion control").

The romance did not wither once Andrew returned to school to complete his senior year at Columbia. Despite parental warnings, the phone lines were kept heated by constant conversation during the fall and encroaching winter. It was six months to the day — the couple's six month anniversary — that Andrew found himself at home and at a crossroads. Was this the woman he wished to wed? To spend his life with? To build a family with? It was undeniable. He felt as though Bridgette was allowing him not only to heal, but to thrive. She nourished him in ways that no other girl had ever done in the past. One side effect of his ordeal was gaining a more mature perspective on things. He no longer found the swinging bachelor lifestyle all that appealing. It was time and he knew it. Now to convince Bridgette. Andrew knew the proposal had to be something spectacular.

While Andrew was away at school, his parents had sold the home on Bahama Lane and purchased a new one on Indian Road along the intercoastal on Palm Beach Island. The new house was acquired to better accommodate Andrew's limitations. It was L-shaped, with an entire wing serving as nearly a separate residence. This was Andrew's domain and it was here that he had invited Bridgette in order to pop the question. Not only pop, but also zap, whiz, and bleep. Andrew had decided on an early video game motif.

The relatively new phenomenon of computer video games was an integral part of an evening's entertainment among the couple and their buddies. Frenetic games of Castle Wolfenstein and Microsoft Flight Simulator in the giant screen movie room were usually followed by a group viewing of the latest episode of Beverly 90210 or Melrose Place. One of Andrew and Bridgette's favorite pastimes became clutching the joysticks as they dueled it out on-screen while playing "Smash TV." This popular "run and gun" game, put out by Williams Electronics, was a successor to one of Andrew's longtime favorites, Robotron 2084 and required intrepid players to battle waves of mechanical exotic enemies. The plot revolved around a futuristic game show in which players vie for prizes as well as their lives. Andrew had set up his wing of the house to simulate a real life version of Smash TV.

When Bridgette arrived to the door she was met with a sign that was a copy of the game's welcome screen. As she ventured inside, she encountered various familiar tools and weapons — all life size versions drawn from the game — that she was encouraged to buy via posted messages. As she progressed through the house, following Andrew's cryptic directions (i.e. "Pull the bubbly froth from the Chamber of Frost" which meant "Grab the champagne from the fridge."), she received instructions to follow the trail of flower petals leading up the stairs. Naturally, she obliged.

At the top of the stairs she observed the flower petals lead towards the closed door of Andrew's bedroom. In order to enter, Bridgette was required

by Andrew — with whom she communicated through the closed door — to recite a password which she had obtained earlier in the game. Once inside, she was asked by Andrew to take a seat on the plush upholstered chair that had been fully covered with fresh red roses. Smiling from ear to ear, Bridgette took her seat, catching a glimpse of all the signage Andrew had prepared announcing “Happy Six Month Anniversary.” “Wasn’t this all a bit much for a mere six month anniversary of our first date?” she thought to herself. She was correct.

Andrew observed tradition as he got down on one knee before Bridgette and presented her with a tiny velvet box. As he flipped open the box, containing a stunning diamond engagement ring, he asked her to become his wife.

Bridgette was incredulous to say the least.

“Is this for me?” she kept repeating over and over. Andrew let this go on for about one minute until he finally said: “Are you going to give me an answer?” The answer was Yes.

The wedding was planned for the following summer and meanwhile Andrew and Bridgette returned to their ongoing lives; he to Columbia and graduation and she to Boca and her career. It was also back to their routine of nightly marathon phone conversations that soon maxed out Andrew’s credit card limit. His parents had stopped underwriting his mammoth phone bills by this time. Despite Bridgette’s frequent jaunts to New York, this long-distance romance — or, by this point, engagement — was becoming highly problematic.

Andrew hit upon an idea and approached his college counselor about it.

“I became engaged over Christmas break,” Andrew told him, “and it is really tough with me here and my fiancée in Florida.” The counselor responded on a cynical note:

“You’ll get over it, Andrew,” he counseled. “I myself have met the girl I wanted to marry at least a thousand times and I’m still single.” Despite this bit of a damper, Andrew persisted.

“I have finished all my class course requirements and I’d like to finish my last semester at Florida Atlantic University.” With a bit of manipulation, the deed was done and an overjoyed Andrew returned home to complete his studies in February, 1993. He and Bridgette were wed soon thereafter.

Of course the 300 lb. gorilla in the room was Andrew’s medical situation. At the time he had met Bridgette at the Bar Mitzvah, aside from a bit of a limp, he had appeared to be in good health. As they got to know each other more intimately, Andrew explained his medical history to Bridgette candidly and sparing none of the details. Once it looked as though they were headed towards matrimony, Andrew shared the reality that he had undergone massive doses of radiation and that it was unlikely that he would be able to produce children. Bridgette was understanding and cheerfully spoke about the adoption option without batting an eye.

As to his condition, Andrew spoke about it in the past tense. “I HAD a tumor in my spine,” was how he would put it. He genuinely believed that he was getting better and that someday soon his illness would be nothing more than a faded memory. He also believed that Bridgette was a big part of that recovery. She was his therapy. More powerful than radiation and definitely much more fun.

To Be Continued...