

the
Sugar Queen



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*How Grit, Love, and a Mysterious Gift Built a
Great Life and a Beauty Empire*

CHAPTER 1



An Enigmatic Moment in Time

I AM SEVEN YEARS OLD. *The nurses think I'm only six. That's the age they wrote on my bed card, and I'm pretty mad they didn't get it right. They're making me younger than my seven wise years.*

I'm here for my tonsils. Nothing serious. It will only be overnight, my mother told me. Some of my friends had their tonsils out and talked about it at school. It doesn't hurt until afterward, and then they give you ice cream to make your throat better and pretty soon you feel OK again.

I hope I get to pick the kind of ice cream.

The nurses smile and ask me questions. Do I feel all right? Am I warm enough? They take my temperature. When one picks up my arm and holds my wrist, she's feeling my pulse. I know about pulse. It means my heart is beating. Of course it is. What did they think?

They dress me in a strange nightgown and take me away on a table with

wheels. It's kind of an interesting ride, looking up at the ceiling while they push me, and listening to the nurses talking.

In the room where the doctor will do the operation, there are no windows and the lights are very bright. The doctor and nurses are wearing surgical masks—so I can only see their eyes—and gowns and long rubber gloves. I know about those outfits, too. I've seen them on television, on shows about doctors and hospitals.

Someone fits a different kind of mask, something rubbery and tight, over my face and tells me to breathe. They're putting me to sleep. No problem.

Time stops for a while. I don't know how long.

Then it starts again, and something is different. I feel tension in the air. The doctor and nurses are clustering around me, anxious and busy, talking fast. Far away, I hear an unfamiliar word: *hémorragie*.

But I am elsewhere. I am looking down at the commotion around me, down at the doctor and nurses in their masks and gowns. Something much more important is happening up here where I am, something that fills my world and shoves everything else aside.

New, powerful feelings overwhelm me.

Deep inner peace. Relief. Gratitude. It's over!

Then it happens. I feel a hand, a very gentle, loving kind of feeling as the hand rests on my right shoulder. I can sense that it carries some type of authority over me, but I don't feel subservient in any way. I feel completely at peace. That is, I do until a beautiful calm male voice says, "You must go back."

"I don't want to go back," I think.

"You need to go back," the voice replies.

"I don't want to go back there."

"Your time is not over. A lot of people are depending on you."

"It's not a good place. Please," I plead. "I don't want to go back to that family."

“You never need to worry. Do not be afraid. You are never alone. We are always with you.” He doesn’t say “I.” He says “we.”

And then, for a while, all is dark again.

CHAPTER 4



The Turnaround

EVERYBODY SHOULD GO TO A FEW MEETINGS of Alcoholics Anonymous—the ones for adults, the children’s—and shut up and listen. The stories people tell there are raw reality, the reality of what can happen in life. It’s easy to dismiss an alcoholic, to say “What a drunk” and move on. But we don’t know what got them there. The past is not an excuse, but it happened, and once alcohol becomes an addiction, it’s pretty darned hard to get rid of.

The back story for my father, Guy Gagné, starts in Quebec, in a family reeling from an unjust accusation of murder. The roots could also go back further; I don’t know. What is certain is that the father of Guy and his brother and sister disappeared from their lives, sent to prison for murder even though he protested that he was innocent.

I fully believe in his innocence, partly because of the jail-house writing and artwork he left behind, and partly because the family was certain they not only knew who the real killer was, but

also understood the social currents that allowed him to get away with scapegoating my grandfather. Even now, with Grandfather Gagné long dead and the crime long forgotten, there are those in my family who would like to research and write the full story. It hasn't happened yet, but maybe someday we will. Convicting an innocent man of murder is a nasty business, and the effects can endure for generations.

With their father in prison, Guy and the rest of the family fell victim to economic deprivation and the scorn of people around them. The children, my father and his brother and sister, were forever marked by it. In adulthood, all three of them spiraled down into alcoholism and dysfunctional behavior.

That was the opening chapter for my drunken dad.

His brother and sister never recovered. But Dad did, and I was there to see it, eyes wide open, ready to hope and afraid to hope. But it was true. Once he'd made up his mind to leave the bottle behind, his turnaround was dramatic.

It happened just as I was turning eleven, and for me it was like a birthday present.

It was Mom who instigated it, although when she dropped her bombshell she had no hope it would change him. She simply decided enough was enough. She told him she was moving from Ontario back to Quebec and taking me with her. She would be leaving my three brothers with him.

It must have been quite a shock for him, after all the years she put up with him, took care of him, and turned a blind eye to what he was doing to me. While he was reeling from this sudden announcement, she continued with her plans.

"*Lina, je va te déménager avec moi à Québec,*" she told me. Lina, I'm going to be taking you to Quebec.

I was happy and sad to hear this news. Happy because I knew, although nothing was said about it then or ever would be, that my mother was finally trying to save me from my father's abuse. For so long I had wanted her to save me, so long I'd stopped daring to wish

for it. I was cynical about my parents, not a good place for an eleven-year-old to be in. Did my mother realize that? Did she understand at some deep level how much my cynicism could harm all of us?

Had she sensed that my burning anger had brought me to a point where I literally felt like killing him? Was she frightened by my approaching puberty, which could take the whole festering problem into new and more dangerous terrain?

My mother and I are friends now, but these are not questions I can ask her. As far as both of us have come, the old habits of concealment and fear die hard in a family like ours.

Her decision to take me and go to Quebec, where her family still lived, shook our household to its foundations. The sad part of it for me would be leaving Welland and everything I knew. I had some pretty amazing friends, and I'd be sorry to be away from them. Friends who were more like family—the type of family I chose to be a part of. Loving, caring, and all that good stuff. No more sleepovers at the Halles' house? No more meeting Rachelle and Nicole at the playground on Saturday mornings? No more welcoming smiles from Madame Goulet?

But OK, I thought, let's go. Let's start fresh. I was all in. After all, I'd been told by the Universe never to be afraid. And though I was only eleven, I was already imagining myself, a future me, as successful, wealthy, and happy. I didn't foresee how I would make this happen, but I would. Maybe this move could be the first step.

And then another bombshell. The big one. The one that would permanently change life for all of us. My father joined Alcoholics Anonymous. And it worked for him.

If AA can perform miracles, it gave one to us. Overnight, Dad stopped drinking. Maybe he was ready, maybe in some hidden part of his mind he'd been edging toward change even before my mother shocked him into action. We will never know, and it doesn't matter. My mother won, and when she won, we all won.

Mom and I never moved to Quebec. We didn't have to. When Dad stopped drinking, our home life was transformed. The fights

stopped. The worries about where money would come from week by week stopped. And all the sexual abuse stopped, immediately and for good.

He didn't apologize to me. He never would. I didn't call him out on it. I kept my silence, just as he'd instructed when it was happening and he called it "our secret." The past was not erased. But it stopped.

FOR ME, MY FATHER'S TURNAROUND was an eleventh birthday present. For my mom, it was like winning the lottery. She now controlled Dad's paycheck. When his alcoholic fog cleared, he decided to hand it over to her every week. I suppose he wanted no remaining temptation to cash it at a bar and drink and gamble. But he also knew she would use it well. And she did.

Through all those years when he had made life so hard for her, saddling her with the responsibility for everything essential to our lives, it may be that his respect for her was quietly growing. How could he not have seen how strong she was, how well and intelligently she managed? His beautiful young bride Jeanette, all four feet ten inches of her, had become a force.

And that led to the next revolution in our domestic lives. Within a few months, now that she had a decent income in hand, my mother got us a four-bedroom house of our own. It was on Chaffey Street in Welland, still on the poor side of town, but it was ours! We owned a piece of land and a house! Maybe, just maybe, we would be happy in it, at least some of the time.

Dad's real personality emerged into the light. He was more easy-going and even. The violent, powder-keg temper was gone. He walked in the door after work and greeted Mom with a kiss and a gentle pat, not something I remembered seeing before. He was respecting his family's right to financial support and his daughter's right to her own body. And one of his best qualities, his humor, stayed with him. When he and Mom invited other couples over to play cards, I would hear their peals of laughter at his pointed one-liners. So it wasn't the alcohol that made Dad funny! It was who he was.

He was still out of the house a lot, but instead of drinking and gambling he was going to AA meetings and working longer hours to bring more money to the household. He didn't become a model husband and father. He still pushed all the household chores and yard work off onto my mom—I never saw him mow the lawn, the way other fathers in our neighborhood did. He didn't become a fully involved dad. But he became his real self, and the real Guy Gagné was a much better person than the drunken caricature we'd been living with. For me it was a revelation. We didn't suddenly become a father and daughter in the right way, but at least we were no longer spending time together in an outrageously wrong way.

Monsieur Goulet, who had always looked out for Dad at work, was really proud of him. "*Ton père va tres bien ces jours,*" he told me, with such warmth in his smile. Your father's really doing well. He helped Dad gain trust from his superiors, which led to their calling on him for overtime work, especially in the winter months. He put in very long hours clearing snow from streets and roads for morning commuters.

The new house wasn't big. The bedrooms were small, and we all shared one bathroom off the kitchen. It wasn't beautiful. But it was a real family home with an old-fashioned front porch, a front lawn, and apple and pear trees in the backyard. When autumn came, my brothers and I discovered we could rake up a big, tall pile of leaves and take turns leaping down into them from the porch. Then we'd jump up out of the pile, gleeful and laughing, brush off the leaves clinging to our jackets, and hop back up on the porch to take another turn. It's one of my favorite memories of that time and place.

I had my own room for the first time. My brother Norm did, too; and Serge and Danny shared the fourth bedroom. I slept on a sun lounge chair with no padding for the first few months, and then my mom got enough money together to buy me a brand-new bed with an oak headboard. How I loved getting into that pretty new bed that was not a hand-me-down from anyone, but all my own! I even had my own closet. It was made of plastic with a zipper, but it was white and new. Clean and fresh.

For my mother, owning that house on Chaffey Street was experiencing life on a new level. She had always worked hard and never had enough to show for it, from the time she was growing up on a farm. She had one of those stories: “I walked five miles to school, and we milked the cows before breakfast!” In her case it was true; that really was her past. Now she was a homeowner.

Of course not everything could change at once. I was still thinking in the middle of the night, “He’s going to show up.” I still had that fear. And if he had, I would have killed him. I had come to that point, and although I didn’t have a specific plan, I would have done it. There’s no two ways about it. But he never did. So slowly I started to realize, “He’s never going to do it again.” It was probably a solid year before I felt safe.

Sadly, however, Mom did not feel secure. She was afraid Dad would relapse into alcoholism, and her fear hung over our household. At first I was skeptical, too. But I gradually saw that his pattern of drunkenness and sexual abuse was truly broken. At the same time, my trust in my own growing strength was increasing. He was still much bigger than I was. I am a small person physically even now, and he was five feet ten and strong. But the conviction grew in me that I would simply never allow any man to abuse me again. I would be the lioness in my own physical defense that I had always felt I was in spirit, and now I was old enough to make that real.

As it turned out, the years ahead would prove Mom’s fear was needless. Once he made the decision to change, Dad demonstrated great strength in remaining sober and later helping others do the same. He became a pillar of what determination is. And that is something I will always respect in him. It must have been a tough thing for him to go through, to stop drinking completely and then, once he was clear-headed, to realize all the damage he had done. But he did it.

There is a family element to Alcoholics Anonymous, and my mother dedicated herself to helping my father regain his life. And in turn, she looked to me to give her support. I began going to AA with her on Sundays.

Sometimes we took along sandwiches for all the members. Mom

would prepare them, and I would cut away the crusts. That's how she liked to present her sandwiches, I guess. My brothers may have joined us a couple of times on my father's AA anniversaries, but for the most part it was Mom and I who were there for him at AA.

At the meetings I just listened, and the stories amazed me. This woman lost everything, that man lost everything. One guy lost a week of his life. He ended up in a whole other city and didn't know how he got there. The AA members ran the gamut: from all walks of life, all neighborhoods, all financial circumstances and social status. The stereotype is that alcoholics are losers, but I quickly saw that nobody is immune to life's uglier possibilities. And I was impressed by these people who told their stories and judged no one.

The meetings were in English, so I whispered translations to Mom as we sat there. "*Le monsieur dit qu'il n'était pas capable de retrouver sa route pour ce rendre chez lui!*" The gentleman couldn't find his way home. Or, "*La madame avait oublier d'aller chercher ces enfants.*" The lady forgot to pick up her children.

Everything is open in AA. Of course my father told his story, too, and I'm sure everyone there knew my role in it, although he never spoke about it while I was in the room. He never spoke about it to me, either. If he thought I would somehow forget, he couldn't have been more wrong.

Forgiveness would take years, decades. For a very long time, the possibility of forgiving him never even crossed my mind. But I supported my mom as she helped him work his way to a new life.

One thing was certain. Dad didn't want me to follow him down the destructive path he had taken. He once took me to a meeting of a group for alcohol- and drug-addicted teenagers and children, probably after I came home drunk myself in my early teens. I sat and listened to what seemed like surreal stories being shared by kids even younger than I was. One was nine years old. Can you imagine a nine-year-old describing a drinking habit and saying, "This was really bad for me"?

I think I would have avoided the trap of addiction in my life even without these experiences in Alcoholics Anonymous, because

I have always wanted to keep control of *me*. But the heartfelt stories I sat through stunned me. The losses, the tears, the falls, and yes, the deaths all resonated as a signal to stay away from substance abuse.

What impressed me most was the triumph these people experienced the day they admitted they had a problem. Simple and pure. I began to understand that my father, along with millions of other people who quit the bottle, would remain an alcoholic for the rest of his life. He would have to triumph each and every day, one day at a time.

Those AA meetings opened up a whole new side of reality for me, a whole new awareness of severe losses and how people accept them.

AND SO MY FATHER BECAME ACCOUNTABLE and responsible. Life improved. I was receiving some constructive guidance. But what has been shattered can never be pieced back together.

For my mother, one stressful lifestyle was exchanged for another. One that had her living for years in fear that he would return to drinking. One that had her giving her 100 percent support in all ways to help him through this change. And one that would have her paying for being his wife until his very last breath, always watchful, always taking care of him.

For me, another kind of damage had been done. My wounds were deep, and my anger extended to my mother as well as my father. Now that she had saved me, strangely I felt a massive letdown. She had showed that she *could* stop him, and as I saw it, that meant that all of it could have been prevented.

Now I know, from others in my mother's family in Quebec (never directly from her), that her oldest brother abused her and most of her sisters when they were little. That was another household where it was kept quiet, never to be mentioned. My mother hadn't known how to break the chain.

But whatever the reasons, it will always be true that she allowed me to be abused. And because she did, my relationship with her was warped, too.

As time went on, my parents proved many times over that they loved me. But in my first eleven years, he was alcoholic and out of control, and she was fearful and overwhelmed. His abuse and her inaction were a betrayal that robbed me of the security children should feel in their homes and the innocence that should have been my right.

It didn't defeat me. Maybe my inner lioness was too strong, or maybe my mother put a stop to it just in time. But there's no quick and easy recovery from this kind of childhood trauma.

I may not have been the only one affected. In those years when my brothers and I all shared the same bedroom—me on one side in a small bed and the three of them on the other side in bunk beds—it seems they must at least have overheard now and then. Were there times when one or two of them were only feigning sleep, and maybe even stealing glances? Did they even think I was in on it, somehow accepting it? We have never spoken of it, but if they did know what he was doing to me, they have had to carry the burden of that secret.

When I think of myself as a child, I want to go back there and give that little girl a great big hug, with all my heart and energy going into every muscle. I want to let her know, gently, that she is truly loved and she is a beautiful little soul.

CHAPTER 16



Catastrophe

H EY LINA, IT'S CAROLINE. Feel like joining us for a drink tonight?"
"Sure!"

"OK, we'll pick you up."

It was January 21, 1991. I was living in my new apartment, with the brocade curtains and freshly painted walls and freshly sanded floors. Highway to Fashion was underway. My translation assignments were coming in steadily, and I worked seated at my computer table, dialing up the Internet and listening to the *zzzt-beep-eeeeah-eeeeeah* we all had to endure to get a connection in the dial-up days. This was a good night for a break.

The friends picking me up were Caroline Rinderlin, Emil and Margaret's daughter, and a young man who was working in the Rinderlin's kitchen. We were going to a modest bar-restaurant only a

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thirty-minute walk away from my apartment, but it was a cold night, and I was grateful for the ride.

I had only one drink that night, but I stayed until the others were ready to leave. Meanwhile, our guy friend drank too much. When we left, I offered to drive, not thinking he would put up a fight about it. But he insisted on driving, and he assured us he was in good enough shape to get us home.

There's no point in my beating myself up for getting into that car. Home was too far for me to walk, I had brought very little money with me, and because we had come by car, I hadn't worn my warm coat. So many wrong decisions. Or were they? That depends on what you want to believe after you hear the whole story.

In the meantime, my children, I am telling you as your mother: Never, I mean NEVER, get into a car with a drunk driver. Find an alternate way home.

It was snowing, and the snowplows were out. That's good, I thought. Plowed streets should make the driving a little easier. We got in, and as we started leaving the parking lot, a voice from somewhere—I didn't know where—told me to put on my seat belt. Usually I buckled in my son, but I rarely used a seat belt myself. That night, though, I listened to the inner voice, and I did.

Our driver started to go too fast. I closed my eyes tight.

Then, for one moment, I could feel us swerving. I opened my eyes, and that was it. It is a moment in time I often stop myself from thinking about. It's painful to remember, but now I need to go there because it is an intricate part of this story.

Everything stopped in that one moment. I remember feeling intense panic.

Then I heard voices. Lots of voices. Men, women, questions, orders ... and then nothing again.

Someone was talking to me, telling me I was going to be all right. "Don't move. Help is here. Please don't try to move." Noise came from behind me. They were helping someone. Caroline! Wow. She must be bad. They were taking her away. I was in the front passenger seat,

fully bent forward with my head under the front dash. I knew I didn't want to move. My breathing was extremely shallow. I knew I was not all right, but I didn't want to move to find out anything more.

Then they came to me. I barely got the words out to tell them not to touch me. "Please, don't move me."

"OK, Lina." They'd gotten my name from Caroline. "We are going to take you out and put you on the stretcher."

"No, please don't."

"Why? Are you hurt, Lina? Where are you hurt?"

"I don't know. Just don't move me, please."

"We're going to have to take her. Lina, we are going to take you now..."

OH MY GOD! I had never felt so much pain in my life! I screamed and passed out again.

The next time I woke up, I was in emergency. The medical staff was taking care of Caroline, whose hip had been dislocated even though she, too, had been wearing her seat belt.

When I came to and turned my head, I saw that no one was around my bed, tending to me. Maybe that meant things were fine with me. And then I started to feel sick and in a lot of pain. As I began to cry and ask for help, a nurse came over and asked what was the matter.

How was I supposed to answer that? I was just in a crash, and I'm here in emergency. How do I know what's wrong?

Well, I didn't have to give her an answer. She gave me something to use in case I needed to throw up. Of course I needed to, and when I did, what came up was only blood. Next thing I knew, a whole team of doctors was around me. It was clear I had internal injuries. That would explain the torrent of pain when they straightened my body to extract me from the car.

They did a quick scope to see what was going on, and it looked as if I had torn my kidney and spleen. That's all I remember until I woke up a couple of days later in the intensive care unit. My mother was there with my father, red eyes and all. She was so afraid I wouldn't

recover well. Little did she know I had just gone through a divine intervention.

The healing process was long and painful. I remember the day they transferred me from the ICU to a semi-private room. I was terrified to leave the safe feeling I had with the ICU nurses.

For a week, I had tubes out of every body opening. They bathed me as best as they could. Feeding came from an intravenous line, and tubes took care of other matters. Drugs were regular, and when pain began to set in, I could always expect it would subside. All in all, there was nothing for me to do but sleep and not move.

Then one day I woke up to a visitor. He pretended to be my brother to get admission to my room, but he was none other than the male friend who caused the accident and—get ready for this—ran away from the scene before the police and ambulance arrived. He left both of us in the car, Caroline crumpled in the back and me in the front seat, passed out with my head under the dashboard.

“Hi, Lina. I wanted to visit you to see how you are, so I told them I was your brother but I forgot my ID.”

“Hi.” It was very difficult for me to speak. Difficult for me even to breathe.

He just sat there for a few minutes, and then he began talking. He was truly sorry for the accident, he said. He ran away because he had already been caught drinking and driving and it would have been devastating for him to get caught this time. And he had a favor to ask of me. Could I tell the police he wasn’t drinking and he only ran away to go get help?

“You’re asking me to lie for you,” I said, “and here I am, in this bed, with a broken body. Are you kidding me?” I was getting emotional, way too emotional for my body to handle, I realized, and it appears the nurses thought the same thing. They were monitoring my heart rate, and now a nurse came in and asked my “brother” to please leave. She calmed me down, and I went back to sleep.

When I woke up another time, Jason was there. He looked so nervous. And he was only eleven years old. I could tell that it was

difficult for him to see me the way I was. I was Mom. A mom who loved to laugh, do things with him, and take care of him. That was his only visit to me while I was in the hospital. It was simply too much for him.

He told me later he was extremely angry with his father for not telling him about the accident. He found out about it at school because the teachers and his friends' parents read about it in the newspaper.

When my own friends read about the accident, they assumed I hadn't been wearing a seat belt. When I told them the real story, they realized I wouldn't even be there in the hospital to visit if not for that voice telling me to put the seat belt on.

We had hit a two-ton snow grater, a huge piece of machinery, so hard that the driver was thrown out of the cab and injured his knee. I would have gone head-first through the windshield and into the snow grater engine if I had not listened to that voice. The miraculous role it played seemed to me like a plan in action.

The authorities did eventually catch up with the drunk driver of the car, but by that time he was the last thing on my mind.

I spent about ten days in the ICU and then another week in a regular room. Then one day the nurse came to me to administer my pain needle. I rolled to my side and she said to roll to the other side. And then she said, "Well, I think I will administer this in your thigh, Lina. We are out of room!"

The next time I was due for a painkiller, they brought me pills. Pills! No bloody way. I wanted my shot. I was not happy, and I begged for an injection. It's easy to understand how someone can become an addict. Demerol had become my best friend. After leaving the ICU, I had stopped going to sleep when they gave me a shot. I loved the way the Demerol made me feel, so I would force myself to stay awake. I watched TV and enjoyed the ride. Yes, it seemed I was getting addicted.

Apparently they'd kept me on the frequent administration of this wonderful drug for too long. And now they wanted to punish me, as I



The sofa bed where I spent long, painful weeks of recuperation.

saw it, by replacing needles with pills. They gave me one more needle, but that was it.

I tried to think of ways to get one more, just one more. Maybe a tantrum, maybe if I fall out of bed. What's the best way to get one more needle? And slowly the desire began to leave me. The pills seemed to do their job. There was no euphoric feeling, but there was pain management.

When my release day came, I cried. The nurses asked me what was wrong, but I couldn't say that anything was wrong. I was just scared out of my mind to leave them, to leave this safe place that was making sure I was all right. I was having some serious separation anxiety.

A nurse came to sit with me, and we chatted. She said it was common for someone who suffered injuries like mine to be afraid to leave the hospital. My body was battered. I had damage to my neck from severe whiplash that still gives me pain today. I had fractured ribs, an impact injury to my shoulder, and pain and bruises everywhere. But the most serious wounds were the torn kidney and spleen, and for those I had two options. I could have surgery, but because of my fractured ribs and one broken rib, recovery would be challenging. Or I could opt to be bedridden until the kidney and spleen healed on their own, which might take more time.

I opted to stay in bed. That meant the bedpan system! Oh well, I wouldn't be the one who had to clean it. Probably that would be my mom.

My family and friends set me up in my living room on the sofa bed, with the TV remote control at my fingertips. Mom and a couple of her friends took turns looking after me. They prepared meals and washed me. I was completely bedridden for another two weeks, unable to get up at all.

Domenic, another of my hairstylist friends, came over to help wash my hair. I had a huge naturally curly blond mane back then, like a blond Diana Ross; and let me tell you, you have never seen such matted hair. He was a real sweetheart about it and did the best he could. Then he braided my hair to keep it from getting matted again. I was very grateful.

Several more weeks went by. I could sit up for short periods and walk to the bathroom. But all I did was eat a bit, watch TV, talk to friends, and sleep. I thought I might be ready to do some kind of work again. Highway to Fashion was far, far away, a distant memory. But maybe I could do the translation work. Focusing was getting easier now that I was off the drugs.

I was still in bed most of the time, and life was coming back slowly. But when I tried, I couldn't concentrate to do the translations. I couldn't sit up long enough.

Then one night I had a big scare. I could feel something was wrong with my face. I got myself to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. My face had drooped severely. And then I started to feel a strange pulling, numbing sensation down my side and my arm. I grabbed the phone and dialed 911. That's when the panic set in. I couldn't speak! Oh my Lord, I couldn't even form any words. The woman on the phone stayed calm. She said she was sending an ambulance and kept me on the phone. And that was that. I was back at the hospital.

Within an hour, all my senses came back and my face returned to normal. The Welland hospital kept me overnight and sent me for neurological testing in a nearby city the next day. After weeks of confinement, it felt like a day trip.

The neurologist couldn't find the cause of my stroke-like episode. He was an arrogant man, and after hours of testing, he had the audacity to say to me, "You're faking it." I will never forget that moment. "You should be ashamed," he said coldly, "for incurring this expense to the health-care system."

I lost it. I started to yell at him. "You're crazy! I'm the one who had to go through this thing that happened to me yesterday! I'm the one who was scared out of my mind! I'm the one who thought I might become paralyzed! How dare you say this to me? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Now he was nervous. "Calm down," he said.

"Calm down!! You accused me of something so low, and you expect me to calm down?"

He apologized, and I calmed down. But he was an idiot. Was he disappointed that he wasn't going to gain a patient to do more work on? Emotions are coming back to me as I write this. I am so angry at that doctor. I see his face in my mind.

Maybe he was unaware of the unique insurance situation I had fallen under. Maybe he thought I was faking it so that I could claim a bigger insurance payoff. People have made big insurance claims for far less than what I suffered. But the uniqueness was that in the Province of Ontario, Canada, for the month of January 1991, there was a no-fault insurance law black zone. We called it the black zone because it started January 1, 1991, and it stopped January 31, 1991. That was the only black zone ever known. On February 1, 1991, the insurance system went back to allowing claims. It was a like a joke, right? A joke on me.

All I was entitled to was \$10,000 to cover lost wages, including tips. It was pathetic!

What I didn't know then, couldn't know, was that this \$10,000 would turn into millions. Divine intervention.

At that moment, my concerns were basic. Please, nobody make me laugh. I could not sneeze, I could not cough. Swallowing hurt, too. And there was a second wave of pain I had to tolerate because all those meds and those Tylenols with codeine play havoc with the human plumbing system. To all the people who think I am full of it—back then, I was!

I was becoming concerned for my recovery. It seemed the end of this ordeal was never near enough.

One day I was overly emotional, worried about my future. I had lost the translation work. Day after day, I'd been in the same position on that sofa bed, not able to stay on my feet. I was worried about my son. How I was going to support us? What work could I do? When would I get back to any kind of work? Just what was going to happen to me? Feeling at a complete loss, with no control over my life, I cried in despair.

I hadn't forgotten the voice I heard as a child. *You are never alone.*

We are always with you. Now I desperately tried to reach the force behind that message, whatever, wherever it was.

As I cried, I prayed. I prayed with all my energy. I prayed for help to heal and for direction toward what was to come. I prayed, and I said with fervor that I would keep my eyes open for any sign. Just please send me a sign of what is to become of me, of my life! Please...

I fell asleep crying and praying.