

Chapter 6

Dream Life...

"Truth will always be truth, regardless of lack of understanding, disbelief, or ignorance." —W. Clement Stone

With Amber asleep, I left the bedroom and called Michael. "I found a lump behind Amber's ear... it's hard... about the size of a nut." There was panic in my voice and I knew it. "Oh, Patti, it's probably nothing. Don't get so upset. You always expect the worse. She probably fell down and bumped it or something." "Michael, I'm taking her to the doctor tomorrow. What if it's cancer?!" "Cancer," he laughed, "Oh, quit exaggerating, will you? You don't *need* to take her to the doctor tomorrow. Just wait; it'll go down in a couple of days." "It's *not* a bruise, Michael. It's not black and blue at all. I'm going to take her to the doctor tomorrow!" "Don't take her yet. I'll come over tomorrow after work and take a look at it. I'm not paying half of a doctor bill for something I haven't even seen."

I spent the night tossing and turning, afraid of the truth, avoiding the demons. My eyes would open, I'd reach over to Amber to search out The Lump and—DAMMIT—find it still there. "Why won't it go away... just disappear?" I wanted to exist in this wonderful world we just discovered with Gary and Todd, not the anguish of losing my daughter. I wanted to rush the night to know what it was. Morning couldn't come soon enough.

At 9 am sharp, I called a naturopath, Dr. Soda. He had an office just off the Milford Green. "Yes, I'll see her without an appointment." I called Michael at work to see if he wanted to go with us. By 10am, we were walking up the driveway to his office. I knocked. He seemed kind and comforting and knowledgeable. He led us through the Waiting Room and into the Examining

Room. I pulled back her hair to show him The Lump. Neither my body language nor my expression betrayed the alarm I felt inside. I knew that Amber was studying my face and I didn't want to frighten her.

He felt it, tried to move it, pushed on it, looked perplexed. "It's probably a calcium deposit." "Are you sure? Could it be cancer? Do kids even *get* cancer?" He seemed to be amused at this. "No, it's not cancer." He exchanged looks with Michael and then looked at me. He, too, thought I was overreacting.

He explained "body salts" as he handed me a bottle of homeopathic "CALC-FLOR 6x, The Schuessler Cell Salts." He instructed me to place three tablets under her tongue three times a day. "Come back in seven or eight months and we'll check it again." I left, feeling uneasy deep in my heart, but in my mind I tried to see things logically. "*He's* the doctor, not me. How do I know what it is? They're right, I'm just overreacting. I'll just give her the salts and it'll be gone in no time."

I was in the middle of a juggling act; three balls were in the air at once: Amber's health, my job, and my relationship with Gary. It was now September and I could feel the chill of winter in the air. The Teletrack job was coming to an end; the building was nearly finished. The thought of working construction outside, struggling to stay warm, and trudging building materials through the snow was not appealing at all.

"I'll open up that art studio I've always wanted." I found a couple of rooms on the second floor of a building on the Green in downtown Milford. The landlord would give me two free months rent if I cleaned, painted, and fixed them up. Oh, how I wanted to have my own business; a legacy for Amber that would carry on if anything should happen to me. I signed the lease and got to work.

I was busy—*very busy*—so busy in fact that I hardly had time to think. And certainly no time to let my mind wander. I worked full time, took care of Amber, and began to renovate the studio. Since the address was 15 River Street #3, I named it "Studio 3."

A month went by as I faithfully gave Amber her salts and kept a wary eye on The Lump for any changes. Call it "mother's intuition," "nagging doubt—" whatever—but for some reason, I

couldn't stop thinking about the possibility that they were wrong and I was right. "This is *cancer*." It was still on her head and it seemed to be *growing*. "Or is it? Am I getting carried away with this? Nobody else is concerned. She doesn't have any symptoms and it isn't bothering *her*." I tried to accept it, make it part of her anatomy, even part of our life. Amber even gave it a name; she called it her "Bump."

I tried to stay involved, wrapped up, some would say. I didn't want to have any idle time to dwell on my anguish that lingered just below the surface. The studio was a good diversion; work was, too. I needed to become physically exhausted every day before I could fall asleep at night. No matter what I did, The Lump was becoming the center of my life. It dominated *everything*. I washed her hair and touched it; feeling myself silently gasp. She'd laugh and toss her head; it flashed at me like some obscene gesture. I couldn't will it away, pray that it would disappear, or even expect a miracle. No doubt in my mind, *it wasn't getting smaller*. It was growing—slowly, slightly—but *growing*. And with it, so was my fear. Nobody would believe me. There was nothing to worry about. I was overreacting.

It didn't seem to bother Amber at all. Of course, in *front* of her, it didn't bother me either. Learning how to hide my true feelings, pretending to the point of convincing myself, and maintaining a facade were skills from my childhood that I mastered. They proved to be useful, even vital, as I did my best to protect Amber from anything or anyone that would hurt her and that included my growing fear.

Just like a typical three year old, she'd go to school everyday and play with her friends. She was typical, until they noticed. "What's *that*?" "Oh, just my Bump," she'd explain. "How did you get it?" "I don't know. I just *got* it, that's all. Hey, you wanna play on the swings?" She diverted their attention—and hers—to more important things.

We were both doing the same thing, trying to forget. Our life up to this point had been a struggle. Although we overcame each one and emerged stronger and still smiling, we were tired. Finally, our life had taken a turn for the better. Aside from The Lump, our life was perfect. We had moved aboard Sea Wing with

Gary and Todd. We finally found a family, a loving home, and hope for the future.

Docked at Brown's Boatyard, the boat became our refuge. Each morning, we'd pop our heads out of the companionway and watch the oyster men comb the river bottom collecting their gourmet treasures. At night, we'd gently rock to sleep, listening to the sounds of the water lapping against the hull. On weekends, we'd go sailing across the Long Island Sound to Port Jefferson, a quaint little harbor with huge sand dunes for climbing. Spending time together, being away from the pressures of land, spinnaker flying, taking the dinghy up the creeks to explore, cooking a meal while at anchor, watching the sunset from the forward deck, cuddling up in the cockpit to read the kids a story, these were the simple pleasures I relished. And I didn't want my fairy tale to end.

Winter was fast approaching and so was the cold weather. Living on Sea Wing, would be difficult at best. She was not insulated, we were living on the river, and the only source of heat was a very small coal stove. Though Gary and I did not want to live apart, we knew it would be hard on the kids, especially Amber who would be there full-time. It might even be dangerous as the docks would be covered with snow and ice. One slip, and she would be in the water and under the frozen surface. Even with a life jacket on, it would take only moments before she would die from hypothermia or drowning or both. Gary moved in with his parents; we moved back with Bambi. She was one of the few people in my life that always accepted me without question and supported me in my decisions. "You're always welcome in my home, Patti." We settled back into our room and some semblance of our old routine.

As a builder and craftsman, Gary was one of the best. He was putting the finishing touches on a house that Wil Armster, the architect/owner of Wood, Steel, and Glass, was building for the Winograd's. Jeff Winograd was a radiologist who worked at St. Mary's Hospital in Waterbury; his wife, Harriet, an artist. Gary told him about The Lump. "If Amber was my daughter, I'd find out *exactly* what it is." He recommended his friend, Richard Abraham, an internist. His office was in Canton, just over the mountain from the Bristol's and our old house. It'd been only a

couple of years since Michael, Amber, and I had lived there, but it seemed like a lifetime away. So much had happened since those carefree days of striking off into the woods with Amber on my back and Tara at my side. Now, I was constantly on the move, never catching my breath, never stopping to reflect.

Before we drove to Richard Abraham's office, Gary and I decided to see our old house. As we came around the bend and passed it, I felt cold and empty. A ghostly presence—part of my past—was in the car with us. Remembering the pain of our life, our hope, and our dreams turned into nightmares, was simply too much to bear. I quickly suppressed any feelings of wistful longing. I didn't ask him to stop. I didn't want to linger. I didn't want to remember. That pain was in my past and I wanted to keep it there for as long as I could. The pain in my present was nearly more than I could endure and I needed to be strong for Amber.

Every so often, I'd turn around and watch Amber as she slept peacefully in her car seat. "Look how beautiful and innocent she is, Gary, almost like an angel. God! How that lump scares me! What if it *is* cancer?" I whispered. "Don't worry, Patti, it's nothing serious." "But what if it *is*???" His desire to make it good... to make it right, dominated any doubt he might have had. "It's not." Oh, how I wanted to believe him, but didn't.

We walked into Richard Abraham's office and then into the Examining Room. After introductions and explanations, he sat her on the table, pulled back her hair, and eyed The Lump. I studied his face. He was nervous... perplexed... anxious. He took out an instrument and measured it. "Three centimeters... no need to worry." His eyes were filled with doubt and betrayed his words. "I think you should bring her to George McGowan. He's head of Pediatric Surgery at Hartford Hospital." I thanked him for seeing us and told him I'd call McGowan.

I walked out of the office numb with worry and followed Gary and Amber to the car. I was drained of all hope. On the outside I was normal; inside, I could feel the twinges of panic about to break loose. My thoughts went out of control and I wanted to run away into the woods that I knew so well. The same woods where Amber, Tara, and I would hike and play and be with God. Beyond the din of my own thoughts, I heard that voice

again. "I am here... you are not alone... I will guide you through this." I dismissed it as quickly as it came. "I must be going crazy." I continued to worry.

My appointment with George McGowan was two weeks away. In the meantime, I moved through my life in a daze. Robotic movements replaced genuine feelings and expressions. I distanced myself from the world around me instead of being connected and involved. A wall went up to keep my true fears and emotions *in* and everyone else *out*. Time was not measured. I'd find myself sitting at a traffic light wondering how I got there and where I was going. I'd hang up the phone and forget who I just talked to. Food had no taste; it was merely a means to survive. Every child I saw was healthy —*every single one of them*. I was a machine, not a person. I had to function, not live.

Death was something I had no experience with before now. No one I knew died: No relatives, no friends, no one. Though I believed in life after death, reincarnation, and God, I'd never been faced with death. My growing fear gave way to the possibility of death... of Amber's death. For the first time, I allowed myself to envision it. I caught a glimpse of what was to come, in a barn in New Haven.

Gary and I took the kids to look at a building that an architect friend was considering for renovation. It was a large, three-story, abandoned barn near the downtown area. For days before our visit, it had rained and rained, and as we climbed the ladder that led to the hay loft, I could smell the musky odor of wet wood and straw. When we reached the top, we scattered in different directions. Gary and Stewart went to the far end to inspect the beams, Amber and Todd were holding hands and exploring the eaves, and I stood in the middle of the room, scanning the scene.

It was a huge room filled with bits of wood and straw and little else. A large hole in the roof was open to the sky; all the rain from the past few days had soaked the floor beneath it. I turned to look at the architect's plans when, without warning, Amber screamed, "*Mom...!!*" The word instantly faded away. I spun around to see the shocked faces of Amber and Todd as they disappeared through the floor. "*Dead... they're dead!*" It was more

than a thought, it was real. For a split second, I hesitated. I didn't want to face it; I didn't want to know. In two giant leaps, I was at the ladder and sliding down the steps. I expected the worse.

They were laying on the pile of wet wood, the floor they were standing on just seconds before. My eyes begged for signs of life and then I heard a moan. Gary ran over to Todd. I ran over to Amber. I saw her body move. "*She's ALIVE!*" I glanced over at Todd. He was sitting up—too stunned to cry—clutching his wrist. "Amber are you O.K.? Does anything hurt???" I strained to suppress my panic. "Stewart, call an ambulance!" She just laid there and moaned. Her eyes opened. "Amber, I'm here... I'm here... I love you... You'll be okay. The ambulance is on it's way. Just hang on." I was sure she had internal injuries. "Oh, God, please don't take her from me. *Please...*" I could hear the sirens getting louder. Within minutes, we were in the back of the ambulance and on our way to the hospital. I felt like I was standing on the edge of a cliff, grasping Amber's hand, trying to help her up. I could feel her slipping. I was losing my grip.

After x-rays and tests, Todd walked away with a sprained wrist. Amber was sore and shaken but had no other injuries. "A reprieve... a little more time." I wondered, "How will I ever go on if I lose her? I'm not sure I can endure the agony... the grief... the emptiness. God, I don't think I can." "You will."

Until our appointment with McGowan, I worked hard at surviving the day. Our routine was the same: Get myself up, fix a cup of coffee, wash, and get dressed. Afterwards, I'd go into our room and lay on our bed next to Amber, stroke her hair until she woke up, get her on the toilet, and start breakfast. She would sometimes watch cartoons while she ate and I fixed her lunch. Then, we'd pour ourselves and our belongings into the car, head to daycare to drop her off, then on to the construction site to work. The Teletrack job was finished but the Laborer's Union had another job for me. A wing was being added to Yale-New Haven Hospital and they were at the beginning stage of construction: The concrete footings.

I arrived at the new job site at 7 am dressed in thermal underwear, overalls, flannel shirt, sweatshirt, wool socks, work boots, and hat. I kept a scarf around my neck to keep out the dust

and fumes. It was a frigid, windy, wet October day. I parked my car and walked to the edge of an immense pit. The foundation wasn't poured yet. My job was to carry the concrete forms to the workers so they could put them in place and ready for the concrete pour. I stood there, transfixed. A few heads began to turn in my direction, and then a few more. "Hey, lady, you need any help?" "Uh... yeah. Where's the job superintendent?" "Over there!"

Among the bulldozers, cranes, backhoes, and dump trucks, men marched around; some with loads; some empty-handed. Each one had a definite purpose to his movements; a job to do as part of a collective. They were so deep in the pit, they looked like ants and moved like them, too. I followed his finger. "Over *there* next to that trailer!" The wind carried his words away. "Thanks!" Undeterred and grateful, I aimed for the trailer and pushed my body through the steady wall of cold wind.

By the time I reached it, nearly all the men on the site knew I was there. A woman in a "man's world." What a sight to behold! And they did. It was 1979 and we were in the midst of the "Women's Liberation Movement." Women were just beginning to gain the same God-given power as men even though the "Equal Rights Amendment" had not yet been passed into law. Discrimination based on gender was still rampant. There was a war in the workplace between men and women and I was at the forefront... in the trenches—literally.

The "super" saw me. "Can I help you?" he said in a polite tone. "Hi, I'm Patti Calistro," as I shook his hand with a strong, confident grip. "The Laborer's Union sent me over." His eyes said, "Oh shit! Not a *woman!*" But I heard, "Oh, yeah. They called and told me about you. Well, what do think? Think you can do this kind of work? You have to carry those concrete forms up and down those hills and set them in place. Each one weighs seventy pounds, ya know." "Oh, sure, I can do that." As if saying it made it so. He held back a smile. "Well, you try it for a day and see how you do. Go over and talk to the foreman." I was grateful he was willing to give me a chance. I needed to support Amber... I needed to build a better life for us as much as they needed to build this wing of the hospital.

Down, down, down into the pit. I made my way past the obstacles to the foreman. "What? Are you kidding? You can't lift those forms!" I walked over to one, collected my strength, and lifted it. "See... no problem." Despite my small, 110 pound frame, I was stubborn (desperate) and it showed. I joined the "ants" who were lugging the forms from one place to the next. I was sweating and straining and trying my best not to let it show. "I need this job. I can't give up now." My body kept moving... moving by sheer determination, not strength. After a few hours, I began to feel weak, nearly defeated. "Not yet. If only I can make it to the end of the day." Another hour went by. "Lunch." I grabbed a sandwich and a hot coffee off the lunch truck, hoping food would rekindle my spirits and give me strength.

Oh, how I wanted to walk back to my car, not back into the pit. I felt the warm tears on my cold face. I pulled up the hood of my sweatshirt, wiped them away with my scarf, and returned to work. But the tears continued to flow. Soon, I couldn't stop them. I kept my head down and kept walking so they couldn't see my tears... they couldn't see me fail. I thought about Amber. "I'm strong... I can do this... I *have* to do this." And I did...

...until 2:00. At break time, I found the superintendent and admitted defeat. I was surprised that he didn't taunt me; he praised me instead. "Not many women would've done what you did. You should be proud of yourself." He was right. I was. But pride was not enough. I still had bills to pay and a daughter to support. I applied for a job working as a waitress in the clubhouse at Teletrack.

On November 1st, Amber and I drove up to Hartford Hospital to see George McGowan. Our favorite tape—the soundtrack to *The Muppet Movie*—was playing in the cassette player of my Volkswagen Square-back. We knew all of the words to all of the songs and happily sang along. When Gonzo started to sing *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday*, my eyes kept drifting from the road to Amber. She was sitting on her pillow so that she could see out the window; her hair was pulled into a ponytail. Sweet and innocent, she sat there with anticipation of another road adventure; her pudgy cheeks, button nose, and dimples on the tops of her hands. She was singing her heart out.