

'This is us': A life filled with turns, and being at the right place at the right time

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(Photo: Albert Cesare, Montgomery Advertiser)

This story is long. And it has to do with belief and trust and understanding why things happen when and how they do — and how to feed from that.

It has to do with circumstances falling into place, and stepping back to acknowledge the larger picture and seeing how the pieces fit together one by one. It is about survival and resolve.

It is about patience and it is about being humbled.

And it started with a message from a friend who said she had something for me, and asked when we could meet.

As busy schedules happen, it took a few days for us to get together. It came down to a Saturday, when we decided that after my early morning run, and dropping off my daughter mid-afternoon for a sleepover, that I would get in touch with her and drop by her house.

Was it something she could bring to church the next day instead? She said no.

It had not been an ideal week leading up to that Saturday. For several days, I had been on edge to the point I literally had to think before I spoke to anyone. Any word that came from my mouth was sharp to the point that I would snap at others and at the same time, wonder what was stirring in me. I shared with only a couple of people that something was off.

Something was wrong.

But I had no idea what. Family was good. Work was fine. Life was normal. But there was a Wednesday at Walmart a few days before Halloween — the Wednesday before that Saturday — when my daughter and I checked out in the self-checkout line, and the total cost came to a higher price than I'd hoped.

And I snapped. It was a hard snap, almost like a jolt within me that overtook me with a force I wasn't prepared for.

As we walked out of the store, I mentioned to my daughter, "I can't believe how much that upset me." But I knew I couldn't shake it off.

We moved on to an arts and crafts store so my daughter could find something for a Halloween costume. We parked, and as we started walking toward the store, my daughter reached out to take my hand.

And I said, "Don't," while simultaneously wondering, "What is *wrong* with me?" She slowly pulled her hand away from me, and it broke my heart.

We went our separate ways in the store, and my daughter soon found what she needed — a blank white face mask — and I found what I didn't need: a "Give Thanks for Wine" sign and a few candle holders. They were on sale, and I hoped they'd cheer me up. I'd have done anything at that point.

We headed home.

For two days, something within me burned. I tried pulling out of a Saturday morning group run, but a friend in the group I've met with for the past eight years suggested I still meet, and he'd act as a buffer. I found myself being short with them within the first few steps of our run.

I didn't talk much for the 13 miles we ran. It was better that way.

I returned home after the run, and made a large breakfast for me and my daughter. It was around 11 a.m. that morning as we sat eating in the living room. Auburn was playing an early game that day, Oct. 31, 2015, as we ate eggs, bacon, toast. As we drank orange juice and as I sipped my coffee.

And from nowhere, I felt a huge release from my body. And I felt I could breathe again. The pressure that had been building was gone as quickly as it had been embedded in me.

And I'll never forget that feeling, because what I experienced the previous two days had been unnerving. I took a couple of deep breaths just to be sure, and looked around my living room and life simply continued.

I don't remember whether Auburn won that day, but I do remember feeling free from that restraint, and feeling lighter than I have ever felt.

Within a couple of hours, I dropped my daughter off with a friend of hers and made plans to pick her up the following day. I text-messaged my girlfriend who had something to give me, and she was settling in for a nap and we agreed I'd contact her later.

I ran Saturday errands for a couple of hours, and on my way home, texted her again. And when I was only feet from turning into her neighborhood — and about 10 minutes from my own house — she texted back to say she was awake and to stop by.

And this is where the story begins.

I stood in the kitchen of my friend's home, and chatted with her and her husband. My friend gave me a bottle of wine with the label "Hope" on it. It was purchased as a way to raise money for breast cancer awareness, and given to my friend with instruction to give to me.

My mother died of breast cancer years ago, so this thoughtful gesture was most welcomed, especially on the last day of a month dedicated to breast cancer awareness.

We stood at the kitchen island, and drank a glass of red wine, and ate chips and peach salsa. Children hadn't started ringing the doorbell yet for Halloween, so we just stood and enjoyed each other's company.

Our conversation turned to the recent flooding in Texas, and my girlfriend asked how my father was faring in San Antonio. I hadn't talked to him that day yet, and texted him, asking him how he was holding up.

A few minutes later, he called.

We were just talking about you, I told him. How's the flooding?

He only responded: I've got some sad news to share with you. We lost your sister today.

What?

My sister battled depression for years. She had attempted before ... but, but, what?

I walked out of the kitchen and into the garage, where I tried making sense out of what my father was telling me. How? When? What? What?

Earlier that morning.

He just found out minutes ago.

What?

I walked into the kitchen again, and walked back to the kitchen island. My girlfriend tried to busy herself and not look at me at the same time. I said, simply: My sister died today.

She took her life.

My girlfriend gasped. And within what felt like seconds, she and her husband stood over me, praying. Making arrangements to watch my dogs. Take care of my house. Texas. I have to get to Texas.

What?

I cursed. I cried. And without knowing what else to do, I sat down at the kitchen table. And stayed there for another hour. The release from my chest earlier in the day? It took days or weeks to remember that. Time was a blur. I still don't know what to make of it, but know it was connected.

It had never happened before, and hasn't happened again in the past two years.

I went home in a robotic state, driving a route I haven't driven since.

I gave my daughter her last normal night for a while, and let her stay with her friends and made the decision to tell her the following morning that we lost her aunt. She needed her night. I needed her to have her fun.

She sent me photos of her and her friends after I returned home.

Smiling faces. Carefree tweens.

I told her she looked great, sending her smiling emojis, hearts and lots of exclamation points as I sat on my sofa and stared blankly at a muted television. UCLA was playing football. I made calls, contacted my father again, clung on to my dogs. Sent more smiles to my daughter.

My girlfriend texted me, asking whether I needed her there, and I declined. My pastor called, having heard what happened. He prayed.

And then I went to bed, having experienced every imaginable emotion in one single day.

This isn't where the story ends, but rather where realization comes in, and where you're able to look back weeks later and realize things in life fall in line at the right time. In the right places.

So often, we question decisions that don't line up where we want them to be. I firmly believe I was in the right place at the right time on that Halloween evening. That it was time placed before me in such a way that the situation was perfectly planted.

God's plant.

This wasn't a coincidental, "How lucky was I that things fell into place and I was at my friend's house at a time I needed someone?" situation. This was timing. This is about trusting your journey. This was trusting that you're not in control.

About trusting the time it takes to hear from a friend. Trusting the route you take home, and accept you'll never drive that route again. Ever. And also, that you'll never eat peach salsa again.

Luckily, I don't remember the types of chips we ate. Or the red wine.

Our life is trusting the last minute call before you miss a turn. Trusting the schedule. The chain of events.

This was you being placed where you belonged, instead of receiving news while driving, or while walking up alone to your house. Or missing the call altogether.

This is something we often look back on and realize every red or green light at every intersection was meant for us.

This is us, being placed where we'll meet that one special friend.

This is the road where you don't receive the promotion because there's a longer path in front of you that you don't see yet that has something more to offer.

The road you're able to look back on weeks later, and think, "OK. Now I understand." This is the trust where the relationship you thought would last forever, doesn't.

Because you haven't met "forever" yet. Your road has been set before you, but you haven't made the turn yet. This journey? The one with chains of events that lead you to where you belong? Don't question it.