

**Mr. James Thomas - Surviving through my music, book series.**

**I was born in 1962 in the city of New Orleans. That year the United States saw the Cold War continue to worsen when the Russians placed Ballistic Missiles on Cuban soil just 90 miles away from the Florida coast and JFK was threatening war with U.S.S.R., unless those missiles were removed, which later they did. Music had taken a completely new direction with Folk music evolving into protest music thanks to artists like Bob Dylan, yet meanwhile in England the Beatles record the single "Love Me Do" was rising to the top of the charts.**

**On TV, "The Beverly Hillbillies" was the hot new TV show at the time, and the first James Bond movie "Dr No" was the movie hit of the year. In the USA we saw the beginning of a big change that the youth were about to go through and would eventually change the free world!**

**I was going through my own changes in 1965. I was the youngest of three brothers and I just started to learn how things worked in the real world or should I say the pecking order in a young family. I was told that my mother wanted a girl after having two boys, but I guess fate was not willing to allow that to happen when I came along. Yep having three boys could wear out any parent because we loved to eat, bounce off of walls and beds, and of course wrestle each other to the point of knocking over things in a room that was too small to hold even one boy. The three of us were almost two years apart from each other. There was Gary the oldest brother, who was the most responsible one out of three of us and liked to take charge. Next came Larry, somewhat shy and was two years younger than Gary. Larry was the nice one out of the three of us. As a child, Larry, would give candy to other kids just to make friends. I was almost two years younger than Larry. My father, named George, was a well built man, receding reddish brown hair that was slicked back like most men did back from the 50s. He had blue eyes and a smile that could charm just about anyone. He was a WW2 veteran and had a cigarette always hanging out of one side of his mouth and looked like the type that you would not want to mess around with.**

**My great Aunt said he was a daredevil type when he was younger, and would constantly get speeding tickets from riding his motorbike down the middle of some streets in Monroe, Louisiana where he grew up before he moved to New Orleans after he got out of the military. Before the war, it was said that he even got a speeding ticket one time for doing over a hundred miles per hour. He was trying his hardest to settle down and in some ways, my mother must of had some effect on him as he did stop drinking for a while after we were born. However, you could still see he had some fearless ways because he owned several guns and was more than willing to use them. He spoke with a stern voice**

and never wavered on what he thought or had opinion on. Of course he had a softer side and loved us boys and was thankful to have my mother as his wife. He actually met my mother in a hospital while recovering from a motorbike accident that took his leg, which forced him to have a artificial leg that made him walk with a limp. My mother was working as a nurse's aid and that is where she fell for my father. My father always like to crack a joke or two to keep us laughing.

We seemed like a normal family striving to make it in the city of New Orleans. However that was going to change in the blink of an eye one night. It was a hazy night when the whole family left some friends of my father and mother

That night was really no different from any other weekend night with families sitting out on the porch with a sunset breeze coming through and visiting family and friends. Some folks were playing music on the radio, some were just talk, while others were just watching everyone else. My brothers and I sat in the back of the car and my father and mother sat in the front of the car with my father driving. Music and singing songs in the car were always popular with families back then, and we were no different. My mother would turn around and start up a song like It'cee Bit'cee Spider or Old McDonald had a farm. After we got through with singing, my dad would usually turn on the radio, and music would fill the car up to where I would find myself singing the same lyrics on the rest of the way home. My dad loved Elvis Presley. Like many other people who met Elvis back then, people also like to embellish how they knew him well, and of course my dad was no exception and would tell stories how he knew him at one time. But somehow I think he just saw him at a distance on stage like most people did, but hey it's nice to support a dream that may be true. When ever a slow song would come on the radio, my dad would always say, okay kids, be quiet boys, daddy wants to hear this song. You could tell my dad was really trying to connect with my mom on a particular slow song, because his hand would always slowly move right into holding my mothers hand, as he took a glance over and gave a smile.

On the way home there is a bridge near New Orleans called the Sunshine Bridge. It is a tall and steep bridge and sometimes it felt like a big tall roller coaster when you were going down. As we were going up the bridge sometimes you could feel the bridge shaking from trucks passing by on the other side. The night was coming in fast and by the time we got to the bridge, it was already dark. As we were driving up the bridge, my brothers and I were just about asleep. Then when we were at the very top of the bridge, within a split second we hit another car coming from the opposite direction. Our car spun around and hit the side of the bridge. The other car slid straight into the other side of the bridge gate just barely getting hit by another car right behind it. We all were shook up pretty badly. It was a miracle that my father, and my two brothers Gary and Larry and myself were not

hurt. However as we looked over the seat we could see that my mother was hurt badly. She broke her leg, and was bleeding badly from her right side. Years later she told me that she had gotten over 126 stitches on the side of her body from the long gash on her side. she was in the hospital for months after that.

My father always claimed that the car from the other direction had their bright lights on, but we found out years later that the accident was really due to drinking and driving which these two things just don't mix together. My brothers and I saw changes that year that would forever change our lives. Some say, the most formative years in a child's life is from the age of birth through six years old. I guess my formative years was not exactly the best a child could have after that day, but we all had to stay positive and encourage one another. However money became tight, doctor bills were coming in, and with my mother still in the hospital and my father needing to work to make what little money he could, the state took all three of us away and put us in foster care homes. My mother told me it was the hardest thing she ever faced when having to let go of us when we went into foster care. I was in foster care for almost a year and half and what made things worse was that my two brothers and I found ourselves in two different foster care homes. My brother Larry got it the worst and was not as fortunate as Gary and I, because he had to go to a different foster home with 9 kids and the living condition was very poor. Gary and I on the other hand were able to live with a nice family in a two story brick house. Our temporary foster care parent's name was Mrs. Bowman.

I was told years later that as soon as the social worker drove up with Gary and I got out of the car, Mrs. Bowman ran down the steps with a big smile after taking me into her arms and positioning me on her hip while stretching her other hand out to Gary's hand. Gary had a little backpack on his back while walking up the steps and as soon as we got up to the front door, out came Mrs. Bowman's son and daughter. They were older than Gary and I, and Mrs. Bowman's daughter took Gary's hand from Mrs. Bowman's hand and brought Gary right in the front door. I guess things are going to be okay as long as I'm with my older brother Gary.

Years later Mrs. Bowman also told me that when she first got us that I did not say much because I was missing my mother. But Mrs. Bowman told me that she had a way of taking your sadness and turning it into a smile. She told me that one day she could see that I was not happy and feeling sad maybe I was missing my mother or something, so she decided it was time to break the ice and help me to forget my troubles. Mrs. Bowman was like most women, great at multi tasking and that particular day she was cooking gumbo when all of the sudden she decided to stop everything and turned off the stove. She next moved the pot to the side and walked over to me and grabbed me out of the chair and carried me over into the den where she put on a record and started singing to me. It was the Song called

**The Twist - by Chubby Checker. She started dancing with me while I was in her arms and then she decided to stand me straight up on the floor while holding both my hands and continued to dance. As the music played, all of the sudden her two children came in and were dancing too. Her daughter was also smiling and wiggling my feet while we laughed and danced. Last, Gary came running out of the bathroom while trying to pull up his pants, buckling his belt, and wondering what all the excitement was about. Then Mrs Bowman, turned the music even louder and I found myself actually humming the words "Come on Baby" let's do the twist. I think that was a turning point for me. Music made me feel happy and it seem to make everyone else happy too I noticed.**

**I think about how music and songs have always been a part of our culture in human history. I mean think about it.....the Babylonians, the Egyptians, Persians, Romans, Asians, all native cultures, even down to the colonial years you would hear people either playing love and festive songs which motivate, inspire, or make our moods more enhanced. Of course drinking wine most likely enhanced our music even more so, but you needed to have the music and song to start with. In bible times, I once read that David sang to King Saul, however his style was more like word poems set to the harp. I was no different then the billions on earth that heard music for the first time and had learned the power or effects it can have on us. That day with Miss Bowman taught me that despite losing my mother and father, my security, and my world being turned up side down, I found out that day that music was healing and the perfect escape from my little troubled world.**

**When Miss Bowman played that song that day, that's where for the first time, I gave my first smile since the accident. I guess I was going to be alright after that day. Gary was adjusting too, but kept asking Mrs. bowman when dad or mom would be picking us up. Gary never gave up and knew that dad and mom would come get us one day. However my brother Larry was having a difficult time adjusting. Larry had to stay with Mrs Freeman who lived too far for us to visit often. Mrs. Freeman's house looked a bit worn down and she seemed to be into making money instead of taking good care of kids. So having more kids did not bother her too much because the state was paying her a nice fat check that kept her and her bum of a husband with plenty of cash. Unlike Mrs. Bowman who was teaching Gary and I how to eat and properly hold a fork or spoon, my brother Larry was being neglected in the worst way and actually learned to eat his food with his hands we found out later on. We all had no clue how bad things were for Larry until two years later when he came back to live with us. My mother must have suffered greatly being stuck in that hospital while her three boys were thrown into homes of people she never knew. She suffered from depression for the first time that year from having to recover in a hospital, with no money and not knowing when or if she was going to get her three children back. I would not wish that pain on any mother, but she kept trying to fight and worked hard at**

recovery so that she could first get a job again, save up enough money, and develop a new home for us all to come back too.

My father on the other hand, was not the most affectionate man around and had a hard shell on him from being in ww2. However he cared and tried his best to keep us positive and he was working when he was not drinking. He grew up poor, acted like a reckless young adult, and then joined the service during ww2. later after the war, he flew a crop dusting plane and crashed his plane, damaged his leg and that is where he met my mother Josephine while recovering in the hospital. But one thing I have learned over the years is that guilt is the most powerful destroyer of self confidence and can become our own personal demon while repeating the wheel of torture.

My dad's drinking which no doubt caused my mom to get hurt in that car accident, and put her in the hospital for months, had also caused her to lose her job and forced her to have to put her three children in foster care with complete strangers for one to two years, but she also had to deal with guilt and my father's guilt which caused him to drink over the whole disaster. My mother handled it with tears and fighting to get us back as a family. My Father on the other hand must have kept it in which must have caused him to drink even more as time went by. Also the events that happen to us as children also had profoundly different effects on each of us. For instance my oldest brother Gary looked at my father as a great father who hardly drank and was very supportive of my mother and the family. However, my younger view, looked at him as tough, abrasive, and abusive riddled with shame and guilt which caused him to drink and escape from the real issues that he should have faced. Two sets of eyes, but yet two very different opinions on how we view things from our past.

The one positive thing that I can think of when I was put into foster care was that I was lucky to be with my oldest brother Gary and to have Mrs. Bowman as my foster parent. Mrs Bowman did not put up with any horseplay from us boys, and She never treated us any different than her own children. Some people like reading, or sports, or working obsessively on their careers, or just raising children and being all into their families. In Miss Bowman's case, she loved music. She played music so much that she could tell you what artist sang what song at any given time. She also loved to hear the local bands at that time playing in the French Quarter. We had a culture full of great time artist, like Louie Armstrong, Fats domino - (look up other great artist in 1963-1965)

In New Orleans, we have many cultures living in a melting pot. Years ago as history would tell you, the French once owned the Louisiana territory, then the Spanish also played a roll in our surroundings when you look at all the iron fencing around our houses later on in time, New Orleans's black population grew to about 30%. So most of us grew up having

the best of French, Spanish, Black, and Creole food all around us. When you hear about New Orleans having a culture all of its own making with great food, it's really true. Who else would boil and cook mud bugs and then deceive ourselves by calling them crawfish as though they are some sort of fish that's actually healthy! Oh how we love our crawfish!

Around that same time the war in Vietnam continued to worsen as the Americans continue to bomb North Vietnam and lose more men, and of course the Anti-War movement grew that year with 35,000 people marching on Washington to protest against the war. There is also civil unrest with rioting, looting and arson in Los Angeles. This was also the year that we saw the mandating of health warnings on cigarette packets. The latest craze in kids toys was the Super Ball and The Skate Board was absolutely the coolest thing around. Fashions saw a change in women's skirts and men's hair grew longer as The Beatles release 4 new songs including "Help".

4 years later In 1969 I was now seven, and boy did things change rapidly for all of us! The Beatles had even longer hair then they first did, (show hair growing long in history at that time) and you had Motown bands like???

Summertime back then just like today are the best times for kids, right?! I mean hey, all we could do was play, while everyone else had to work. In New Orleans everything seemed to move just a little slower during the hot summer months. The people also walk a little slower for a reason down here. Maybe it's because the air is humid with a sweltering heat feeling that forces you to walk slow or you will sweat to death. Even the dogs that normally bark their heads off, would lay down on the front porches during this time of the year while they try to stay cooler without getting excited or overheated. In New Orleans it was common to turn on the water hose and let that water flow right over your head to cool things down a bit. Fire hydrants were often turned on to help us cool down and have a hour of pure fun and joy. For us young folks those summer months while out of school also meant there was nothing to do, but to play outside or get into trouble.

During that particular summer as a boy growing up in the 1960s I remember an old man named Mr. James Thomas who owned a part thrift and record shop on the conner where I lived. There was not anything fancy about Mr. Thomas's store, but he seemed to have just about everything a boy my age could want in that store. Oh sure he had many music records that were old and new, but he also had used toys, household products and gadgets of all kinds that were once very popular and needed to be bought by poor folks like us. I suppose some people may not have wanted to shop in his store because he was a dark brown man with mostly white grey hair and we did have some prejudice people in our neighborhood at the time, including my father, which I was too young to understand why or how different I was from my father's views. My mother on the other hand was non

judgmental and would often debate my father on his being prejudice. My mother met Mr. Thomas, and said he was nice man and to stop talking bad about him.

Mr. Thomas was close to retirement age and seem to enjoy working in his store. Of course every now and then Mr. Collins who was a white man who also was close to Mr. Thomas's age, lived down the street and would want or pick out something in the store he never really needed and get all worked up over the prices and stand there at the counter and try to beat down the price on what he wanted. I think Mr. Collins was bored and this was his way of making time pass in Mr. Thomas's shop. Plus I think he liked Mr. Thomas because every now and then I would see the two of them sitting outside drinking a soda sitting down at a table under the porch playing cards.

Mr. Thomas had a friendly smile when you walked into his store, so you can see why most people liked him. He would always say to me, whatcha doing there Jr., are you being good? I always responded with a low faint voice saying yes sir. After closing his shop each day, Mr Thomas would take some time and sit on his front porch every evening just watching the people and cars go by. He seemed to enjoy that time of day because he looked peaceful always smiling and waving his hand when someone walked or drove by.

When I first met Mr. Thomas, it was probably not really the best way to meet him. Being that I was a poor boy with very little money like most in our neighborhood, at that time, I also had an eye on this old pop up box that was located on a high shelf right in Mr. Thomas's shop. When ever I went into that shop, I would just keep staring at that old box. I once saw another customer turned the handle a few times and a toy would pop right out the top the box. I just had to have that old toy pop up box for myself I thought at the time. Even though Mr. Thomas's shop had plenty of music records, candy and other things, I just kept coming across that pop up box. Mr. Thomas was a business man trying to make a buck anyway he could. Plus his store was a local hang out when I got bored. That's where if I had a dime, I would spend it on candy. But that pop up box never left my thoughts and each day I kept thinking of a way to steal it.

So late one evening after Mr. Thomas left his shop, and I saw him walking down the street towards his house, and I decided it was time for me to break in his shop and get that toy pop up box. I broke in his shop by breaking a window and climbing in through it while falling on the floor. It was slightly dark that evening, and after I ran into something and made it fall, all of the sudden the light switch came on, and there he was, Mr. Thomas with a shotgun pointed right at me. My eyes were wide open and I was scared shitless with my knees shaking. He yelled out, what the Hell are you doing in here boy. With a shaky voice I told him I wanted the toy box. He lowered his gun and grabbed me by the arm and marched me right over to my house. As we walked Mr. Thomas gave me a good talking to.

With my arm still being held tight by Mr. Thomas, we walked up my steps and he vigorously knocked on my front door. My dad came to the door and looked angry as Mr. Thomas and asked, why do you have my son. Mr. Thomas looked at my dad and said your son just broke into my shop trying to steal. Should I call the police or do you want to discipline your son and settle this by paying for my window? Even though most people in my neighborhood liked Mr. Thomas, my dad was not one of them, and in fact my dad had developed a hatred towards all black folks and was right out angry about the situation. My dad told us that years ago he had got hit while driving a motorcycle that a black man hit him with a pickup truck and that is how he lost his leg. Everywhere he walked he limped with his artificial leg. I knew he was prejudice as I worried what he might do next after he grabbed my hand from Mr. Thomas. However I think that particular day he was more angry with me than anyone else including Mr. Thomas and so he told Mr. Thomas he would pay to have it fixed right away. After the door closed, my dad gave me a hard spanking that taught me a lesson not to steal anymore.

After that day I stayed away from Mr. Thomas and his shop. But I could not help to study Mr. Thomas from a distance because I knew he was different then what I was use too. I mean after all he could have killed me that day in his shop. But he didn't, so I guess I grew to respect Mr. Thomas in many ways. Plus I knew he was right to bring me to my parents after I stole from him. Looking back, I think Mr. Thomas knew I was just another stupid kid trying to grow up in the neighborhood and was actually trying to correct my path. Weeks later I decided to take a chance and I walked by while he was sitting on his porch and to my surprise he smiled at me that day and so I knew from that day onward, it was going to be all right to one day make friends again.

Living right next to Our house was Mr. Peres and Mr. Peres never spoke to anyone except his live in girlfriend. Mr. Peres seemed like a bitter man, though I really don't know why. I could tell he drank a lot of beer because of the side of his house he had large trash bags that seem to clank a lot when he would shove the trash bags in the trash can. Plus he had a pile of beer cans under his house. It would smell bad some days. He drank Dixie beer because it was made locally at the time. His house was a little on the shabby side and was a rental, so in my mind, I've seen them come and go in this house and Mr. Peres was no exception and I thought he would be moving away in time too, so I never paid much attention to him or what was going on next door. Beside I was a kid, and all kids wanta do is be adventurous and play right?! We don't worry or care about what adults do.

But one day when I was walking home from school, I walked past Mr. Perez's house and the front door was open while he was speaking to his girlfriend and I heard him talking about how the blacks were moving in and they are bringing the neighborhood down. Just as he said those words, he turned while standing in the front door way towards me and



noticed I overheard him. Mr. Peres said hold up there boy, let me talk to you. I could tell he was trying to see how much I heard and was thinking of what to say or ask me. So he next said I heard you got into trouble with that Nigger Thomas. Then he asked me if I liked Mr. Thomas. I guess he thought I hated him but I did not say nothing because he scared the shit out of me, and then he said well I hate his black ass too.

After that happen, some time had past, and I was eight years old by the time I finally worked up enough nerve and decided that it was time for me to test the waters and become friends with Mr. Thomas. I had many reasons to not become friends with Mr. Thomas. For one thing, my father had forbid me to talk or make friends with him again because he was black and I was a white boy, which looked a little odd at the time. Honestly I saw no difference in color and wanted to make friends with Mr. Thomas again anyway, but I needed a plan. So one day I walked up and down the sidewalk a few times until I worked up enough nerve to finally say hello, he smiled and said hello too and then all of the sudden he right out asked me whatcha doing there Jr. Have you been good. I said yes sir, and then he asked me if I was looking forward to school starting in a few weeks? It was right then as he was asking me that, that I decided to sit next to him on the steps, about one step down from where he was sitting. He looked at me as I studied him more closely while he was waiting for my reply. I smiled back respectfully and said yes sir I am. He smiled and said yeah Jr. School is good for us because it makes us smarter!

On the side of his body, he had what looked like a small radio, and so he turned it on and searched for a station to listen to. Finally he settles on a station called WTIX. A song came on called ??? And Mr. Thomas starting singing it. It was as if he new the lyrics but would hmmm the parts that he did not sing the words. He tapped his foot, and I started to do the same. As the song continued we began to tap in sink for most of the song, and then a commercial came on. It was at point that Mr. Thomas told me something that I would never forget. He said Jr. Music will make you feel every emotion more intense. I had not clue what he was talking about, so I asked him whatcha mean? So he took a moment to think if way to put it in words that I would understand. He then asked me, have you ever felt sad? I said yes. Then he said, sometime music can make you even more sad then you ever felt before. Then he asked me, have you ever felt happy? I said you mean like when I play? He said yeah like playing in the water, or watching cartoons in the morning. I said well yeah, sure! Mr. Thomas next said, we'll music can make you so happy that you get goose bumps on your arms! Then Mr. Thomas said but of all things music does best would be to feel love deeper then you could understand! I paused as I was looking at him and said to feel love deeper with a puzzle look on my face. Again, he said one day you will understand, one day!

After that, we both talked about small stuff, this and that until finally I found myself doing

exactly what he was doing, just looking at people and cars going by as we made comments about either the type of car it was or who the person in the car was. Mr. Thomas knew just about everyone in the neighborhood because he had been living there before we even came along.

One day while we were sitting looking at cars driving by, all of the sudden I felt a flick across the back of my head. I turned my head and laughed as I knew that I had made a good friend that I grew to like and trust. You could see the wisdom in Mr. Thomas because he spoke profoundly with a deep voice that sometimes was soothing to hear. Every now and then Mr. Thomas would speak and tell a poem. Boy did I grow to want to hear his poems. They were always full of life, love, and passion. Mr. Thomas was slowly becoming a mentor to me in my young impressionable world.

Many evenings I would sit with Mr. Thomas as he taught me many things about what to avoid in life and how to be a better person. He talked with such confidence as a man with so much wisdom. He would point out how people get into trouble and how I could avoid such mistakes. I really grew close to Mr. Thomas over that summer. I actually admired his family too. Even though he was old enough to be my grandpaw, you could see that his older daughter loved him whenever she came over to visit him and Miss Thomas. Mrs. Thomas was also nice, and when it got late she would come to the front door and ask Mr. Thomas to come in and eat supper. She always invited me too, but I knew if I ever got caught inside Mr. Thomas's home it would be trouble for me and maybe him too, because my dad told me to stay away from Mr. Thomas and his shop.

While walking home one day after a great evening of sitting with Mr. Thomas, Mr. Peres, stopped me and then said to me, boy I noticed you sitting there with that Niger Thomas! I said so, he ain't a bad person in a low shaky voice. You can see the anger flaring up after I said that and Mr. Peres said, "he ain't a bad person" , you listen up boy, you better watch yourself if you know what's good for you. I can see you becoming a Niger lover. I never thought much about his words at the time, but it did let me know he was prejudice. After that day, Mr. Peres never spoke to me again. He just gave these looks like he hated the fact that I would sit with Mr. Thomas often during those hot summer evenings on his porch.

One day my dad came home early from work and saw me sitting with Mr. Thomas on his porch, and as soon as he got out of his car, he yelled at me to come home right now. My dad was a muscular man who had a high receding hair line. He looked like a tough man that did not trust people to often. He was a chain smoker and sometimes drank heavy at night. Also my dad owned shotguns and a hand guns and would often use the N word around me and my brothers.

So I knew that my dad did not like Black folks but I also felt he would never do anything to hurt them or anyone for that matter. Being that he fixed things for a living, I also knew he had a black man named Tyron working part time for him and I would often see them loading up the truck with things that were fixed and repaired for delivery and they would sometimes joke with each other.

Mr. Thomas, even though he was much older than my dad, he seemed to know how the world worked. His wife every once in a while would bring out cookies for us to eat some evenings and give us both a cold glass of ice tea. I guess I was slowly becoming the grandson he never had. He must have been a good dad when he was younger I thought to myself. Mr. Thomas told me that his son was murdered a few years back and I think I reminded him sometimes of his son. Even though I had a different skin color, Mr. Thomas took me on as kid who needed to learn about how we are all alike when it comes to surviving.

My Mother was totally different. My mother's name was Josephine, she worked two jobs, cooked, cleaned and tried her hardest to take care of us while fighting with my father on the nights he drank.

My mother was the social butterfly while my dad was more to himself when he drank. One day my mom brought me to work, and it seemed as if everyone loved her! We lived in what was called a shotgun house which is a long house in the shape of an elongated square. We all had crew cuts back then and all three of us boys slept in the same kingsize bed.

I guess you can say I was closer to my mother than my dad. You see my being the youngest of three boys and well let's say more sensitive than my brothers, this also made me the only one of the three boys that my dad would call momma's boy. I use to hate when he called me that, but after a while I knew deep inside that I was and over time I began to be proud of being called a momma's boy. I loved my mom more than anything. I even went through the stage when a young boy feels like his mother will make everything all right no matter what happens. My mother was sweet, but tough enough to handle my dad. People at her work also loved her. I remember one thanksgiving my mom would cook for hours and make many dishes for folks at her work. She was the giving type no matter how poor we were. I would sometimes sneak and listen to how her friends would come over and give her hugs and thank her for being a true friend. You can say she was loved and appreciated. Most of mom's friends were of a professional nature, dressed well and educated. Her friends coming to our house was perhaps an eye opener because we had cars and trucks that were, let's say a little on the older and dented side. I remember one of my mom's friends named Rosemary was one her best friends. Miss Rosemary had driven

up to our house one day and as I peaked out the window, I could see her looking around as if someone might steal her car, the kind of look when you keep looking back after double checking to make sure your car was locked. Miss Rosemary had brown hair trimmed short, but puffy hair around her head. She kind of looked like a school teacher but her skin was young looking because she kept up her looks and shape at the age of 40. I believe she was my mothers best friend and the two of them seem to talk and talk not just on the phone but when she came over for a visit. Other than seeing and hearing my mom be a mother around us boys, when she was around her friends she was funny, cheery, and had a lively personality. I think I could see why she was loved by her friends because she made them laugh and smile most of the time that I would sneak and look and listen from around the second room that led to the front den. I always liked studying people and I could not help to study Mrs. Rosemary. I also had developed coping habits like bouncing my head against the car seat or my pillow on my bed. It seemed to me that the only thing that would calm me down was my music.

As time went on, I did have to toughen up a bit because where we lived was not the best of areas in New Orleans. I had made a few good friends, but I also made a few bad ones. One of those bad ones was Tommy. Tommy was on a different path than i was. He was a year older and was learning to take people's money with ways I never seen before. You see we lived close to the French Quarter in New Orleans, which was a haven for friendly tourist. One day Tommy asked me to come along and so I did. I stood off from a distance watching him go to work off of Bourbon Street. Tommy had some talent and would do a little tap dance, always drawing a crowd around him and after he completed his dance he would hold his old beat up black top hat out in front of him looking each of his prospective onlooker in the eyes, almost as if he was begging them but not saying a word. Most gave some change. Each time they did he was sure to say out loud thank you sir or madam, God bless you. When Tommy did not feel like dancing he would use a common trick that all scam artist would use and say, I bet you a dollar I know where you got your shoes? Some tourist would actually fall for this trick and stop and say, okay, where? Tommy would say..... on your feet, and while standing right next to that person, he would look up into there eyes, and he gave a big smile as if to say, I know it's a scam, but how can you resist me as a cute boy who needs the money. At the time I thought this was a great way to make money, so I tried the same shoe trick, but it did not work so well for me and I was getting rejection after rejection. One man got so mad at me, he took his cap off and started hitting me with it. I stopped asking after that, and just kept studying Tommy because he was really good at it. But I also started to study other people too. I became fascinated with how people acted on Bourbon Street. You had the bread man who would sweet talk the shop owner to sell more bread, the news paper man yelling out some catchy headline to sell more papers, the strip club doorway man telling you how pretty the women were inside, and even the politician who was running for city counsel was shaking hands

putting on a show of how he will bring good changes if he was elected, or the young man sticking his chest out thinking this somehow would make him more attractive to catch this pretty girls attention as he walked by. It seemed to me, as if everyone was selling each other off that street and I just had a blast watching people mastering the art of selling themselves. I also noticed that Tommy was getting tired of the same old tricks and was looking and thinking of some other way to make even more money.

Mr. Thomas got wind of me hanging around Tommy, and one day when I was sitting on his porch he felt the need to tell me that Tommy was headed into trouble and I should stay far clear of him. I didn't stop like I should have, but soon it would not matter anyway because Jimmy was off to a boys home for stealing money. I found out later Jimmy grew to like the money of tourist so much, that when they would open their wallet for that bet you a dollar where you got your shoes from trick, he decided to grab more money right out of their wallet while they were looking to pull out that one dollar for him. They say a police officer caught him after chasing him nearly two blocks.

As for me, since I was still not making any money and continued to think of how I could. One day I noticed that my dad had an old Shoe Shine box tucked away in his room filled with old junk. I thought this might be a way for me to make money. So I went out practicing my luck. To my surprise I was good and got faster and faster at shining shoes. I was the first boy I noticed on the street filled with people walking by, and soon I noticed grown black men doing what I was doing. Shining shoes making money. I never did see any boys working so I kind of felt special and boy did I enjoy taking my money and buying a cold chocolate milk right before lunch.

With a little pocket change in my possession, I would always stop by the record shop around the corner to look at the latest hit record. Mr Thomas would let me play some of the older slightly scratched up records but not enough to make them skip. That when I learned that music comes in so many different styles. At that time you had classical, reggae, rock and roll, soul music, or what they call RnB, and a new kind of music called pop. I liked it all because I was more interested in how each style and each song would make me feel. I tried to listen to the words of each song and make sense of it and see if it made me feel different. I would sometimes close my eyes and pretend I was there in the band playing each instrument.

My dad had an old record player I would use too. Sometimes I would play each record over and over again until the needle would scratch the record so much that you could hear more crackling and popping if you played the record too much. Music was the only thing in my life that gave me comfort. I came to realize that music could be played with all my feelings or moods. If I was feeling sad I would play music? If I was mad I would play

music? If I was happy I would play music? Or if I just needed a jump, I would play music too? Over time I found myself playing records each night before bed just to put my day to an end and escape. Sometimes my brothers or my parents would yell at me to turn it off because I forget that I was playing the record over and over again.

Winter was now here and I still had an adventurous side to me that continued, because sometimes I would sit up high within our tin roof porch cover and watch people go by. I guess I did that out of boredom. One day a man was walking by and just a singing away the song, I'm a Girl Watcher, Im a girl watcher, watching girls go by. What he did not know was I was watching him and singing that song.

One night I was glad I wasn't sitting underneath that porch because I heard a loud shotgun go off and ran outside and noticed a big shotgun hole in our tin roof cover. You see my dad would often clean his gun on the porch. I think he cleaned it often because he was use to doing so when he was in the Army, but I also think he did it because that was his way of letting folks in the area know that he had a gun and don't come messing around at our house because you might get shot. I was really not sure why that night he set off the gun shot, but I did notice that he had a few drinks when my mom came out screaming at him telling him to put the bottle down and how dangerous it was for him to be cleaning his gun with the children around. She gave him a good yelling that night.

Spring was coming and one day an old car pulled up in front of our house while I was sitting with Mr. Tomas and a lady holding the hand of a little boy was walking up to my front door. I could not see clearly because it was a hot day and she had a umbrella blocking my view, but it looked like my brother Larry. As I stood up from the steps to see, Mr. Thomas said, go on boy and see who that is. I ran across the street and before I could get close enough my mother came out crying with happiness and picked up Larry holding him tight within her arms. Gary came out too and Larry hugged him, and finally I did after I ran up the steps onto the porch. It was great to have Larry home with us again. Of course I felt so strong about the power of music that I had to show my brother Larry all that learned and wanted him to like music as much as I did. I wanted to share every song but he did not like the variety of music and got board quickly until I put the only song that he wanted to play over and over again. It was called No matter where you are....I will always be with you.... Ohhhh girl. Yes he was feeling the music finally in his body.

My brother Larry was trying to adjust being back in the family. But it was not easy for him. His foster care takers did not teach him how to read or write and because he was left handed, this made things worse for him. I remember my mom trying to teach him at the kitchen table how to even hold a fork. Even though he was older then me, I felt like he was left behind in that over crowed foster care home. My oldest brother Gary on the other

hand, was doing fine. He was close to dad and helped dad with most things like moving stuff or handing my dad tools while he worked on fixing things. One day my brother came home with a bloody nose and told my dad that a boy had punched him. My dad instantly told him to hop in the truck and they went out looking for that boy. The problem with having a prejudice father is you never know what he might do against others. I waited for almost a half hour when they drove back up the drive way and I asked Gary what happened and he told me that they found three black boys and dad made Gary punch each of them in the face. At first I did not understand why my brother Gary was looking so sad. Then after he looked down he said but I'm not sure they were the same three boys and I may have hurt the wrong ones. I knew at that point violence should not be paid back with violence. My music was coming back to me again and again. I found myself fitting music or songs to every even in my life. A particular song instantly came into my head after I felt like my father and brother were wrong for hitting those three unknown boys and of course I had to run to my room and find it and play it.

A few days later my dad drove right up the street when he was going to the store to buy some beer that he told Mr. Thomas that he better not see him talking to any of his boys or they would be a price to pay. I wonder what Mr. Thomas must have thought after that conversation. Should he fear my dad. Did he feel like he was helping me? Was I worth the risk of violence when he had already lost a son. Mr. Thomas once told me that he hated violence and spoke of the pain he had from missing his son. He told me that his son was his pride and joy, and died unjustly because he was with the wrong crowd at the wrong time. I remember that day when I asked. Mr. Thomas how his son died and he told me he was riding in a car when one of the other boys was in trouble with some other hoodlum and that hoodlum shot at the car and struck his son in the chest. I ask Mr. Thomas if he missed his son. He said more then anything and you could see a tear falling as his voice choked up a little.

Neighborhood changing: The neighborhood was changing fast. It seemed to me like more black folks were moving in and I'm sure that put my dad's nerves on edge because of his prejudice views. Mr. Thomas's store was growing too because he had converted more of it into record store and music seemed to be taking over the country. As for me, I was learning to love music more and more as I continued to go into Mr. Thomas's store to hear the latest songs. Songs like? I was only ? But I could understand the changes around me. It was about that same time that (history around same time) seen in TV news took place.

Like every kid, I was just trying to make sense of the changing world I was living in. Many days just seemed to be filled with there own excitements. My father's idea of excitement was bringing us down to the local dump and as he looked for junk to take and fix up and sell, my brothers and I were able to pick out broken toys and make due with what we

found. Many times I would take apart what I found and learn how they work or should work. Evenings were pretty much the same. Of course I still snuck by to sit with Mr. Thomas, and I kept listening to his words of wisdom as he always told me story's about people's mistakes and how to learn from them. Sometimes Mr. Thomas sang a little song in a low voice. But my favorite was when he told poems.

When nighttime came, I developed a new ritual of turning on music before I closed my eyes. Music seemed to fill my mind. I became extremely aware of percussions and base notes, followed the rhythm and how these would compliment the voices of people. Some nights I would play a new song over and over again. Finally I would get so sleepy that I would turn off the record player and as soon as I laid down and fell asleep it seemed as if all of the sudden sunlight was glaring in my eyes within a few minutes later. However one night left a burning image in my life forever. It was late one night when I saw flashes through my window. At first it was a bright white, but seconds later the flash turned to blue and red from a fire truck. After struggling to wake up, I climbed out of bed and looked out my bedroom window only to see a great big fire burning. I ran out my room but everyone else was on the front porch already, including my brothers and parents. I could not believe my eyes. There Mr. Thomas was putting his arm around Mrs. Thomas as she cried while they saw there home burn almost down to the ground. They had covers over them and it was the saddest sight I ever saw.

I wanted to instantly run over to Mr. Thomas, but my mother grabbed me, she held me for a little while and a few moment later said you boys need to go back inside now, its late and you need to go back to bed. Thats when I noticed how everyone was dressed in pajamas with my mother in her robe. However my father was dressed in his pants and had a white T-shirt on. He even had his shoes on as if he was just coming home from a night of drinking again. I guess my seeing a big fire was scary enough to not worry about how we were dressed. The next morning I heard a loud knock on our door. There stood a police officer who was questioning my mom. He asked if she saw anything suspicious. Of course she said no. My mom asked why and that's when the officer said we believe the fire was arisen. Then he asked did you see anyone with a gas can earlier in the day? Do you own a gas can. My mom said yes, but my husband repairs many things including lawn movers. The officer asked where is your husband now? She said out working. Where was your husband last night? My mother said he was at the bar down the street. The officer asked what time was that? She said he got home after the fire truck pulled up. Well we will need to question him when he gets home. Here's my card, have him call us when you see him, and then he left.

After she closed the door, you can see she was thinking the same thing I was thinking. That the fire could have been caused by my dad. You could see it in her eyes as she just



stood there for a few seconds behind the door as if in deep thought. I began to wonder too. Where was he really that night? Somehow gas was used in the fire and we own a gas can. But noooo, my dad would not do that, I told myself, but I also thought maybe he did. He did not like Mr. Thomas at all. Plus I knew he drank and could have just walked right over and lit the fire.

For days after the fire I never saw my friend Mr. Thomas and I guess that gave me time to think about how could this happen and why to Mr. Thomas. I even walked by his store every day, but all there was on his glass door was a sign that said closed. Days turned into weeks and weeks into months. I could not believe how I found my self missing this old man who came into my life and all of the sudden he was gone. Just like that he was really gone! There was this one record that Mr. Thomas gave me before the fire called ? And I played that song almost everyday just to think of Mr. Thomas. He told me it was one of his favorite records and because he personally liked it, And I liked it too. I guess I was just trying to be as close as I could to him through the song that made me think of him.

During that time in my life things were getting worse in my house between my dad and my mom. My dad's drinking got worse and fighting got louder with my poor mom always crying in the end. I would normally sleep pretty good as I mentioned before, but now I was waking up to screaming and fights between my mom and dad. That's when my dad started to change and even I got caught in the middle of it..... One time my dad was so drunk that he took a shit on him self and laid in it the rest of the night. It was horrible and stunk up the whole house. He became more angry and one day saw me looking at him while he was drunk and said I bet you miss that N man more then me. It was at that moment that for the first time I was starting to think it was my dad who started that fire! The threats, the warnings, the fire, my dad dressed up late at night with shoes on, the smirky smile he had on his face that night. Or maybe it was Mr. Peres? He was pretty angry with me about always sitting with Mr. Thomas. I know it could not have been Mr. Collins, because Mr. Collins sat with Mr. Thomas many evening playing cards and they seemed to enjoy each other's company.

I felt helpless and now Mr. Thomas was gone forever. My own father was becoming in my eyes a monster as he drank more and more. Days after that he would ask me to help him fix something on the car and asked me to go get a certain type of tool. He said the name of the tool, but I just did not know what he meant or what type of tool he wanted. When I came back with the wrong tool, he got upset and told me to run off to mamma because I was a mamma's boy and of no use to him. I cried with hurt feelings but my hurt turned into even more anger. Some nights I would start to listen to angry songs like ?

About a week after he told me to run back to mamma, he was drunk again and all of the

sudden I saw a glass liquor bottle flying across the room crashing on the other side during another fight between my mom and him. Of course he was the one who through the bottle. Thank God it missed my mom.

If my dad was not drinking in the house, he was working in his shop. The burning question of who burned down Mr. Thomas's house kept me wanting to find out if it was my dad or not. At this point I felt it was him, but I had to prove it. I wanted to search his shop and find out what I could.

One night while my dad was out drinking, I decided to go snoop in his shed because I just had to find out if he was the one to burn down Mr. Thomas's house. The police told my mom when they question her as an eye witness what she saw or heard. My mom said she did not hear or see anything until the fire truck pulled up. However I remember the police officer asking her if she saw anything suspicious, and she said no. He also asked her if she saw anyone with a gas can earlier in the day? She said my dad had one. So you can see why I had to investigate and find out.

As I walked up to my dad's shop in the dark that night, I heard a sound of a tin can fall to the ground. I ducked behind the corner of the shed as I was glued to the wall waiting to see who was there with my eyes wide open. I was scared shitless! In the shadow of a dim street light I could see first a man's shoes and then the shape of a adult man standing right in front of me, but facing more towards our house and not at me. I held my breath with the sense that if I let out any sound he would turn towards me and that would be the end of me. Not more then two seconds later my favorite person in the whole wide world yelled out the back door for me to come inside! It was my mom! Thank you Jesus! I said to myself. I ran straight to the back door, but all of the sudden I was up in the air being held by the back of my shirt. With a low yet deep voice whisper in my ear, you better not say anything boy about me being back here or I will kill you, it was Mr. Peres. I said I won't, just let me go! My mother yelled out again Keith come inside NOW! At that point Mr. Peres decided to put me down and let me go. I ran to the back door like I was running for my life. As soon as I got in the door, my brother Gary was there and he said wants wrong with you? I said nothing, and yet I could feel a relief coming over my face that I was once again safe in my home.

That night, I kept looking out the back door window wondering if he was still out there. My dad was no where to be found, and there we were home alone with mom not having a clue as to what had just happened. After we ate, and I took a bath, I laid in my bed just thinking about why was Mr. Peres in our back yard? What also kept bugging me, why was he by my dad's shop? So I decided that I had to just brave it up and see what was in my dad's shop tomorrow morning. So I came up with a plan. I knew my dad stayed out late drinking and

slept late the next day because tomorrow is Saturday. So as soon I woke up I ran out the back door and to my dad's shop. It was a older shed that was made of all wood. I opened the door and the place was filled with old a/c units, TV's and radios, and everything that looked old but need repairing. It was obvious that my dad was a repair man and was fixing many items for other people. So I made my way around from section to section and I did not see anything that would give me the answer as to why was Mr. Perez in our back yard. I even lifted up things, moved a few things and looked behind things. Still nothing stood out at me.

I remember Mr. Perez walking from the front of the shed, but I realized he never came from the shed, but from around the shed, so I walked around the shed and I saw a large old steal drum with a hand crank pump on top. (Check to see if there was pumps back in 1966-1967) so I went up and could smell that it was gas. I now became convinced that it was my dad who set Mr. Thomas's house on fire. I remember the police officer asking if we saw anyone with a gas can or light the fire because he said it was arisen that caused the fire. There was the gas, and the can sitting right next to it.

I ran inside and was angry at this point. I told my my brother Gary and he right off the bat said no stupid, dad would never do that. I said I will prove it and I grabbed his hand and dragged him to the back of the shed. I pointed to the drum and the gas can and said this is what the police were looking for, however as I was pointing, I noticed a beer can next to the drum. It was the same beer can that Mr. Perez that was under his house and in trash bags. I knew my dad drank hard liquor because he was always holding a bottle, but Mr. Perez drank Dixie beer which was in tin cans. I stopped talking for a moment, and said to Gary, this can belongs to Mr. Perez and maybe he was the one who lit the fire. My brother Gary said, what are talking about? Look I'm going back inside. Stop talking like a fool and dont ever accuse dad of anything again!

Now I became confused that day. Maybe it was dad or maybe it was Mr. Perez? So I now had to go back outside and get that can as the only proof that Mr. Perez was in our back yard and left the his beer can next to the drum of gas and maybe he lit the fire. By this time it was almost dark so I hurried to the back yard. As I was picking up the can, I suddenly noticed two shoes and they weren't my dad's shoes. There he was again, Mr Perez. I slowly looked up and said with a shaky voice, hi Mr. Perez, I was just picking up trash because my mom asked me to clean up around here. Mr. Perez said I'll take that can son. I said I got it, it's okay. He seem to know that I knew something, and grabbed my neck and said you little piece of shit, you know who burned down that n home, don't you. So you found the gas, you saw me bring the gas can here the other night, and now you know I did it! I said no, I don't know what you talking about. He next said you ain't gonna tell anyone when I get through with ya! He next grabbed me completely off the ground, and was

carrying me over to his house through a back gate.

All of the sudden, he dropped me to the ground as he went flying in another direction. He was hit by my dad as my dad next said don't ever touch my son and my dad grabbed him around the neck and yelled to me to go tell your mom to call the police, hurry son.

That night I told my father about all that happened and what I heard and also about the beer can and my father told the police what he knew and they arrested Mr. Perez.

My dad was vindicated in not burning down Mr. Thomas's house.

The court trail of Mr. Perez.

My testimony needed for conviction

Threats of killing me.

More drinking, more fights with mom

My mom ask my dad to leave. They got separated.

My Dad dies: I was at school that day: sitting on sofa, and all I could do was march straight to my room and play a song called bye bye miss American pie

walking up to my dad while in the coffin: touching his hands, mother crying:

mother takes on a third job:

Music seemed to just fill my mind at every stage of my life. The day my father died, a song came on the radio that night called This will be the day that I Die.

Failed school that year. I was catholic as a boy, and I guess the nuns had no idea what I was going through. This one particular nun seemed to have it in for me. She would not only twist my ear, made me kneel on rice, sit on a stool in the corner, knock my head and slap my hands with a stick. I cant tell you how many times I saw myself being dragged down the school hallway up to the main office where I had to sit and wait for my mother to come pick me up. I guess I was grieving over my dad, and Mr. Thomas, and now this old nun has it out for me. One day she made me stick my nose in a circle on the chalk board in front of the whole class while kneeling down on the floor. The students were laughing at me and all I could think about was how I was missing my friend, Mr. Thomas. But that day she pushed me just too far and so after she put me kneeling down and having to stick my nose in a circle on the chalk board, she maid the mistake of leaving to talk to another nun

across the hallway while the class was working on a school assignment. Being so full of anger, and being humiliated, I decided to make that day a day that Miss. ? Would remember! You see Miss ? Loved her fish aquarium. Took good care of it every day. Somedays she would spend a whole hour just to adjust the plants and rocks or clean the filter. Well that day after she walked out of the room and the class was working on there assignment, and with me just kneeling there with my nose in a circle, I got up and walked over to her desk, grabbed the liquid ink on her desk, and poured it all in her fish tank. The cloud filled the water like as if a small bomb went off inside the tank. I felt so vindictive and had a smile while being dragged all the way down the hall to the main office again. It was as if I was able to punish her for all the meanness she showed me.

Well that seemed to backfire on me, because not only did I get a spanking, punish for a month, but I failed that year which was third grade. I felt like I jumped from the pan into the fire and probably caused my mom more trouble than I was worth. My world was going so wrong and nothing seemed to make it better until one sunny morning, I heard some hammering going on outside. I said out loud, mom, what's that noise mom? She said I don't know son, go on out there and look. Oh what a happy sight I saw that day. There he was, Mr. Thomas and a few men, putting up wooden two by fours rebuilding his house. I ran over with every breath I had and gave him the biggest hug you can give. Yes it was a good day because Mr. Thomas's House was starting to be rebuilt! My greatest friend was back in my life! Funny thing is Mr. Thomas porch never looked better and even though his house looked like a bunch of wooden sticks all nailed together, at the end of the day, he still always managed to sit on his porch and of course I always found a way to run over and sit with him. To me, mr. Thomas was a smart man! Even while he was rebuilding his house, he would give me words of wisdom. There are many of smart men and women in the world, but wisdom is defined as using the intelligence you have to its fullest potential and that is what I came to know and appreciate about Mr. Thomas.

Things back at home were starting to change for the worse. My mother had to work three jobs by now just to keep the rent up and put food on the table for three growing boys. Plus she tried for a short time to leave me with the Catholic Church? That did not go to well for me because one of the priest their seemed to like taking naps with me everyday. He tried touching me while I slept, but I always turned to make it difficult and he would finally give up. Thank God for that.

My mother was taking all that had happen over the months pretty hard! One night I was not sleepy, so I snuck by the hallway and I could hear her talking over the phone with my father's aunt and I could tell that my mother was being blamed for my father's death after I heard my mom defending herself saying I did not drive him crazy to drink or do drugs. I was a good wife and I tried and tried to help him. After that, she hung up and just cried for

what seemed like eternity. Finally I could not stand it anymore, and I ran out to her and hugged her neck. She finally stopped crying and I told her I loved her mommy.

She felt a guilt that only she could feel but did not deserve to feel. Years later I learned that some of my dad's family tried to blame my mother and I never thought that was fair, because from what I saw, my mother was constantly being yelled at, took care

Family struggling to stay afloat. Mother had talked about moving away and starting a new life.

Our family packing up to move to Suburb Kenner, outside of New Orleans

Last day we are moving and Mr. Thomas gives me that old pop up toy box and a big box of records. A hug with tears.

The Move: New neighborhood, new friend, new school. New girl across the street

The End

First book: Picture of cover should be a shadow of a boy with headphones, looking at a color picture of a man sitting on steps with a boy as a background picture.

Second book: Teen with headphones looking out at?

Third book: Young man with headphones looking at his brother in the navy

Forth book: Man with headphones looking at???

Fifth book: Man with headphones looking at his son in a coffin, or a picture of Jeremy high school jacket

Sixth book: Man with headphones looking at