SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

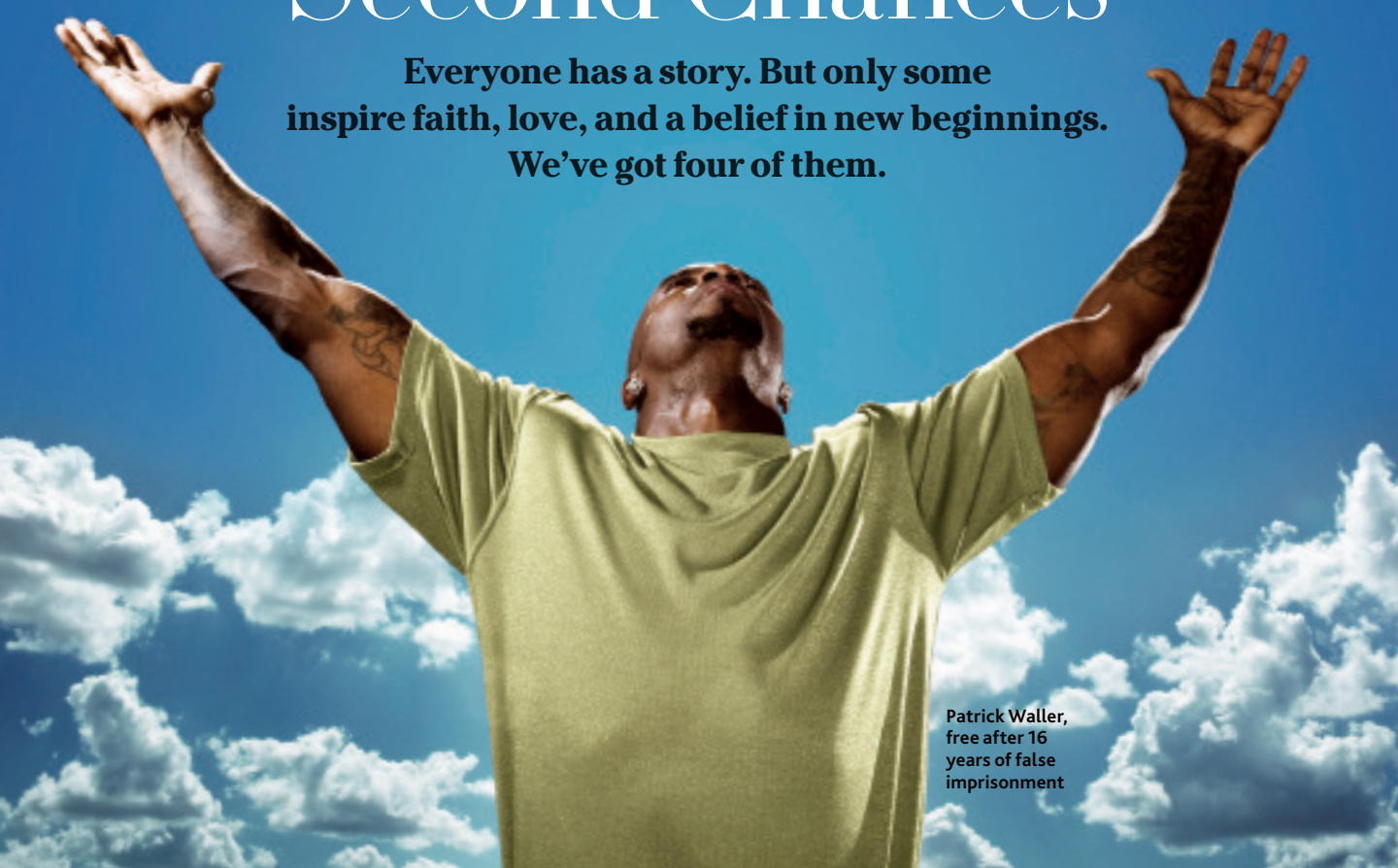
Spirit

SIMPLE USEFUL FUN

SEPTEMBER 2010

Life's Amazing Second Chances

Everyone has a story. But only some inspire faith, love, and a belief in new beginnings. We've got four of them.



Patrick Waller, free after 16 years of false imprisonment

Second Chances

They come in many forms: the return of a lost love; recovery from grave illness; sometimes just the grace of a lucky break. We're not talking about comebacks or second acts. Second chances carry meaning, promise, and deep inspiration. As elusive as they can seem, remarkable stories of personal renewal are everywhere you look. Just turn the page.

PHOTOGRAPHY, FROM LEFT, BY ANDY ANDERSON, BY DANIEL HSU, BY RYAN DONNELL, ILLUSTRATION BY FRANK STOCKTON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Innocent Man

When he was barely out of his teens, they put him away for a crime he didn't commit. Eighteen years later, at age 40, Patrick Waller is trying to find his way with just an uncertain grasp of the world—and a million dollars in his pocket.

BY BEN PAYNTER / PORTRAITS BY ANDY ANDERSON

Patrick Waller is running late, as usual. And, as usual, he doesn't seem to notice. It's about 2 a.m. when he pulls his limited-edition, black Escalade into his private parking spot in front of Whispers, the after-hours club he co-owns on the funkier side of Fort Worth, Texas. Waller was expected to arrive hours ago to lend this nightly party his celebrity. But instead of hurrying, he amps up the Caddy's monster sound system. As subwoofers thump and bumper-mounted monitors flash images from a rap video, he eases the rolling variety show to a stop, its custom rims still spinning like disco balls.

Wordlessly, Waller—in shades, despite the late hour—steps out of his ride. He's dripping so much bling it resembles costume jewelry. Actually, the bracelet *is* costume jewelry; a chunky wristband made of cubic zirconium. The day before, at a Dallas/Fort Worth-area mall, Waller paid about 85 bucks for it, to prove a point. "I'll probably wear it tonight and throw it away," he said. "But because I put it on, people will *think* that it is real."

It's like that with Whispers, too. The place is packed with about 100 revelers despite the fact that it is little more than a half-renovated Burger King with a wall of thundering speakers. Waller's been a millionaire less than six months, so he's still feeling out the club business. If he likes it, he may redo this place, or buy another. He's already proven to be that impulsive: In short time, Waller has become a one-man stimulus package, buying cars for family members, making personal loans to friends, launching almost too many small businesses for him to keep track of.

When a throng of club patrons saunter up to greet him, Waller mentions one of the reasons he's running late. "We got pulled over tonight," he says, chuckling. "The police officer thought he had a drug dealer on his hands." Everyone laughs uncomfortably. Hang out with Waller for only a few minutes and he'll tell you he's routinely mistaken for a pusher, a rapper, or an NFL star. He fosters it. "I don't feel like I have to tone myself down for anybody," he says, flashing fistfuls of jewel-encrusted rings. "I lived for years in an environment where I had to shy away. Now, if it makes me feel good, I should be able to live how I want—as long as it is legal, of course."

The truth is, Waller earned his windfall by being a casualty of the legal system. Before his exoneration by DNA evidence in the summer of 2008, he spent 16 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Fourteen months after his release, to make up for his wrongful incarceration, the state of Texas awarded Waller—and a dozen other wronged men—the most generous compensation package ever granted in this country: $80,000 for each year he had been imprisoned, plus an annuity of almost $80,000 for the rest of his life. That puts Waller's worth at about $2 million.

What he lost while he was gone, he's still trying to account for. Waller was 22 when he went to prison. He was married, with two toddlers and a newborn. By the time of his release, at age 38, his wife had left him and his kids had grown into young adults. The world around him has changed, too. It is filled with things he's never seen before, like the Internet, cell phones, and, well, Cadillac Escalades. So, this very early Sunday morning in mid June, he wants to live a little. "People say I have a lot of catching up to do, but I can't," he muses. "That time is gone." He pauses before testing out the latest in a series of personal catchphrases he's been coining to describe his imponderable journey. "I can't catch up," he says, "so I gotta catch in."

Or, as the case may be, cash in.

THAT PATRICK WALLER wound up in prison is proof of shoddy police work. That he and other men in similar situations stayed imprisoned despite exculpating evidence suggests how suspect things once were in Dallas County.

By his own admission, Waller was never an angel. "Don't get me wrong, I wasn't right by a long shot," he says, contemplating his still boyish features in the bathroom mirror of his modest two-bedroom apartment in the North Dallas suburb of Carrollton. Waller is starting his weekend early with an

errand-filled Friday. Ironically, Waller always envisioned himself as more cowboy than desperado. Raised by a single mother in the rural town of Magnolia, Arkansas, Waller became obsessed with the Clint Eastwood archetype at an early age. Because he aspired to be rugged in that country sort of way, he asked his grandfather to teach him to fish.

By the time he was 9, Waller and his mom had moved to Dallas, where work opportunities were better for her. Eventually, he learned to ride horses well enough to enter Dallas' Junior Black Rodeo, where he earned prizes in bronco breaking and bull riding. His passions became so complete that by the time he got to high school, class work was the last thing he aimed to lasso. Fearing that her son wouldn't graduate, Waller's mother convinced him to earn a GED and join the Army National Guard. He enlisted with plans to become a helicopter mechanic but wound up honorably discharged, for shin splints, just a year later. He returned home and drifted. Without a job, he turned to dealing crack and, on Dec. 16, 1990, was arrested for cocaine possession. He was given five days in jail and eight years probation.

It scared him straight. "I quit," Waller says. "I was done." By early 1992, he was married, had three kids, and worked as the manager of a Church's Chicken. That changed when his probation officer called on April 9th, requesting a visit. Hours later, Waller opened his door and found a squad of cops with their guns drawn. He was arrested and charged for one half of a two-man crime that involved the kidnapping of a couple from the streets of Dallas' touristy West End district. The assailants forced the victims to withdraw cash from an ATM, then took them to an abandoned house, where the woman was sexually assaulted. When a second couple neared the house, they too were abducted.

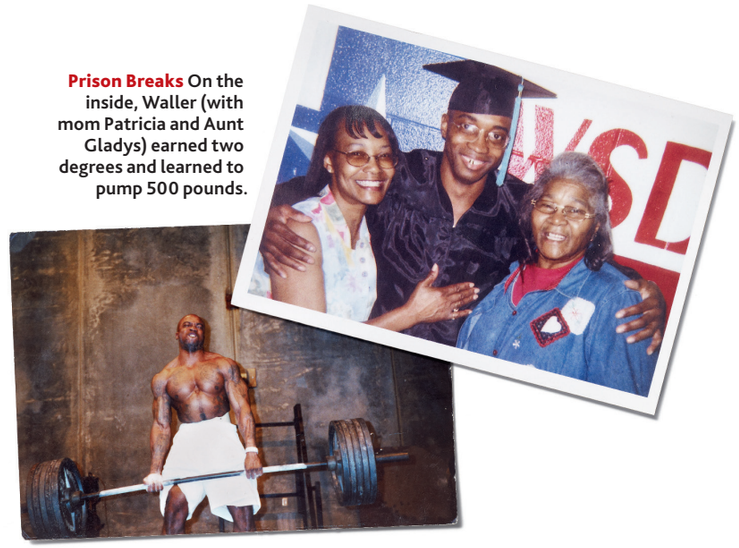
Waller had an alibi. Ever the showman, he'd been seen by a security guard at the time of the incident, blasting his stereo in a subdivision miles away. But things went wrong fast during the police line-up. The actual perpetrators weren't even among the gathered suspects. Waller was fingered by witnesses, and convicted in December 1992 of aggravated kidnapping and robbery. The sentence: life in prison.

To survive inside, he says he became two people: Sir Patrick Waller and Big Daddie Pat. Sir Patrick Waller is actually his birth name, the faux-regal title bestowed upon him by his mother, to make him feel rich despite their financial straits. Sir Patrick Waller went to the prison library every morning to study and write letters pleading with lawyers to take another look at his case. He would eventually earn two degrees—one in liberal arts, the other in applied sciences—and secure a Dallas defense attorney named Gary Udashen to represent him.

Big Daddie Pat is a marauder. Waller came up with the Hyde-like persona to intimidate other inmates. "When you walk into prison, people don't just give you respect," he says. "You have to earn it." Big Daddie Pat hit the gym every afternoon, ballooning from a 5'9", 160-pound featherweight to a 260-pound heavyweight of solid muscle. He got into 66 fights in his first two months at Ferguson Unit in Midway, Texas, 150 miles southeast of Dallas. By the time he was transferred to even tougher McConnell Prison, 260 miles further south, in Beeville, Texas, he had tattooed his name—BIGDADDIEPAT—across his triceps and back. He would get more than 20 tattoos in all, but made sure all of them could be concealed beneath a collared shirt, just in case Sir Patrick was let back into the world again.

No matter the big-house conditions, Waller was always busy. Inside a high-security facility, over-head lights and the din of shouts and slamming bars are a constant. Waller tuned it all out. "I focused on work and school, anything so you don't go crazy," he says.

By 2000, seven years into his life term, Waller had a new scientific ally. The state of Texas announced that, for the first time, their



Prison Breaks On the inside, Waller (with mom Patricia and Aunt Gladys) earned two degrees and learned to pump 500 pounds.

SNAPSHOTS COURTESY OF PATRICK WALLER

Circle of Lifers

Once a month, Waller (front) and more than a dozen of Texas' DNA exonerees congregate in Dallas. The members of the support group, whose elder-leader is Charles Chatman, are extraordinarily close and committed to looking out for one another. Among them are:

1 Christopher Scott
CONVICTION: capital murder
TIME SERVED: 12 years
RELEASED: Oct. 2009

2 Steven Phillips
CONVICTION: aggravated sexual abuse; aggravated rape; indecency with a child; burglary; aggravated assault
TIME SERVED: 24 years
RELEASED: Sept. 2007

3 Johnnie Lindsey
CONVICTION: rape
TIME SERVED: 25 years
RELEASED: April 2008

4 Claude Simmons
CONVICTION: capital murder
TIME SERVED: 12 years
RELEASED: Oct. 2009

5 Entre Karage
CONVICTION: murder
TIME SERVED: 6 years
RELEASED: March 2005

6 Richard Miles
CONVICTION: murder; attempted murder
TIME SERVED: 15 years
RELEASED: Oct. 2009

7 Keith Turner
CONVICTION: aggravated sexual assault
TIME SERVED: 4 years
RELEASED: Oct. 1989

8 Wiley Fountain
CONVICTION: aggravated sexual assault
TIME SERVED: 16 years
RELEASED: Sept. 2002

judiciary would allow DNA evidence into post-conviction appeals. In Waller's case, the police had collected semen samples from the woman who'd been assaulted. "There was no question that a DNA test was going to prove him absolutely innocent or absolutely guilty," says his lawyer Udashen. Waller petitioned for a test in 2001 but was denied by the court and then-Dallas District Attorney Bill Hill. Udashen calls the move an overt attempt to protect the office's conviction rate. "That they denied a test under those circumstances just enraged me," Udashen says. A second request was again denied in 2005.

Today, Hill says he doesn't remember the Waller case—his office was too deluged with DNA-test requests for one instance to stick out. "We did the best we could," he says. "I can tell you no one in my office tried to do anything to keep an innocent man in jail."

Waller finally got his shot in 2007, after Dallas County elected its current DA, Craig Watkins. Watkins, Texas' first black district attorney, established a "conviction integrity unit" to work with the Innocence Project of Texas in overseeing post-conviction reviews involving DNA, police abuse, or prosecutorial misconduct. "It should be the responsibility of the DA not to prosecute but to protect the innocent," Watkins says now.

Freedom Fighters Waller, the one-time Guardsman, enlisted the Innocence Project's John Stickels to help with his court battle.

ARMY PORTRAIT COURTESY OF THE WALLER FAMILY; COURT PHOTO AP PHOTO/TONY GUTIERREZ

On July 3, 2008, Waller sat in a borrowed suit inside a Dallas courtroom as a judge cast his fate: "You are free to go." Waller raised both fists and shouted in triumph. Only after he breezed out of the courtroom did he grasp the precariousness of his situation.

When acknowledged criminals are paroled, they're eligible for assistance from the state, including access to public services that provide food, clothing, and shelter. They also are granted the guidance of a parole officer who, like it or not, helps to keep them on the straight and narrow. At the time of Waller's exoneration, such provisions were unavailable to men the courts deemed innocent. Waller's surprise financial restitution wouldn't come for more than a year after his release, so his initial reaction was stunned disbelief: *They just kicked me out of jail.*

HIS SAVIOR APPEARED in the parking lot outside the courthouse. There, a fellow exoneree named Charles Chatman handed Waller a box of canned goods and a suitcase full of second-hand clothes. Chatman's friend, James Giles—who, like Chatman, had been wrongfully imprisoned in the early '80s—slipped a hundred dollars into Waller's pocket. "Patrick likes to be flashy," says Chatman, "so I don't think he wore the clothes." Still, a message was sent: Welcome to the fold.

The 50-year-old Chatman is a sort of consigliere among the exonerated, helping newly released men transition into the 21st century. He adopted the role after his own release, in January 2008, and the difficult discovery—after almost 27 years of incarceration—that most of his family and friends were either dead or estranged to him. He says that a distant niece helped him figure out how to get a driver's license, register for healthcare, and find a landlord willing to rent to someone with no credit, no job history, and no apparent income. She also helped him keep his temper in check. "She seemed to have a better way of talking to people and explaining my situation," he acknowledges.

Chatman has since made it his mission to attend every exoneration hearing in Texas, inviting each freed prisoner (to date, all of

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PHOTOGRAPH "PRADA MARFA" BY DANIEL HSU, LICENSED UNDER CC ATTRIBUTION-SHAREALIKE 2.0 GENERIC

Crossroads

To map out her heart, a woman named Marilyn journeyed to the high country of Marfa, Texas. A chance encounter there not only sparked friendship and love, it changed the geography of her life forever.

BY JAMI ATTENBERG

I met Marilyn in Marfa, a small town in West Texas, on the

day Barack Obama was inaugurated as President of the United States. We sat in the same small theater along with a bunch of townspeople and watched the TV coverage projected onto a screen. But we did not actually introduce ourselves to each other, two single women on the road, until later that night at her hotel bar, one of only a few in town. She was a statuesque blonde in her mid-50s, lean but womanly, impeccably made up even as she dressed herself down in a denim jacket. I was 20 years younger, but men were knocking me over to talk to her, a real Texas rose.

I knew why I was there: I was on a cross-country book tour and had stopped in Marfa for a few days to visit the art galleries and museums it's known for and give a reading at the local bookstore before I headed off to Austin. But why was Marilyn in town?

As it turned out, a number of events had conspired to bring her to Marfa, where she was considering changing the course of her life. She was a rich man's wife ("I know I'm his arm candy," she said) and had recently discovered his infidelity via incriminating text messages on his Blackberry.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLISON V. SMITH

Also, for reasons unclear to me, she'd engaged in her first experience as a political volunteer. At the same time, her long-time country club friends were regularly circulating e-mails Marilyn described as "homophobic and racist," and she had become disillusioned with much of her social circle.

Her college-age son, whom she adored, had visited Marfa the year before and had raved about it to his mother. On her birthday she had gotten in her car and driven until here she was, holding glamorous court in a hotel bar in West Texas, on the precipice of a decision. Could she accept a new vision for herself? Was her disenchantment with so much of her life really just an opportunity?

Depending on who you are (for example, her husband), I was either the exact right or exact wrong woman for her to run into: I make a living writing books about women leaving men and being much happier for it. "Leave that man!" I told Marilyn. "Look at you. You're smart and funny and a knockout. You don't need him to be happy." If no one in her life would say this to her, then at least I could.

Two days later I gave my reading at the bookstore, and Marilyn showed up late.

"Where were you?" I asked.

She told me she had gone to another hotel bar a few towns over and met a man there who was also visiting Texas on vacation.

"Oh," she said to me, blushing, but not too hard, "I'm doing the walk of shame."

"Good for you!" I said. I couldn't have been any happier if I myself had met a man in a hotel bar and was doing the walk of shame.

Time went on. I left town, and so did Marilyn. We became Facebook friends. She would send me lovely, beautifully written e-mails about her life, and how she had left her husband and moved to a new town. Things were working out for her. Our e-mails eventually dropped off, but I had nothing to worry about. She had found her way, and maybe, in a small way, it was because of me. What more could a novelist ask for?

A year later I was in Chicago, on tour for a new book, standing in a bookstore a few minutes before my reading was to begin. A man walked through the door and straight up to me. He was handsome, in his 50s. He looked not unlike Sam Shepard.

"Do you know Marilyn?" he said.

"Of course I know Marilyn," I said.

"I met her a year ago in Texas," he said.

"You're the walk of shame!" I said.

"I am," he said blushing, but not too hard.

He and Marilyn had fallen for each other and were having a long-distance relationship; he lived in Chicago, she in Texas. He said she had spoken about me and I'd made a real impression on her. He was there to buy her a copy of my book and have me sign it for her. It was to be her Valentine's Day present.

I can't lie: This gave me a big head. I mean, mostly it thrilled and warmed me. But it also made me feel like I had magical advice-giving powers. Maybe I could make happy endings happen in real life.

I carried on with touring, once again driving cross-country, this time east to west. I told Marilyn's story wherever I could. "This is why I tour," I would explain to anyone who would listen. "Because of the people I meet and the connections I make." With each re-telling, my influence on Marilyn grew bigger, even as I acted more humbly. "It was nothing I wouldn't say to or do for one of my girlfriends in New York."

Finally, in Los Angeles, after I gave a reading in a Chinatown bar, two attractive young men in their early 20s approached me.

"You know my mother," one of them said. "Marilyn."

I gave him a huge hug. How could the story possibly get better?

And then he introduced me to his boyfriend.

If I were writing this as a piece of fiction, this would be the passage where everything clicked into place.

Why had Marilyn had an awakening? Because sometime, probably in the past few years, her son had come out to her, and this had likely influenced her in some way. Why had her country club friends' e-mails offended her so? Because her son was gay. Why was she in Marfa? Because he had told her that he loved it there.

I had allowed myself to believe the story began with me, when, in fact, the story had begun long before I decided to get drunk alone in a bar in West Texas on inauguration night. Marilyn's story—her past, her choices, her actions, her embrace of all of the new possibilities in her life—were her own. I was not the author of it.

"Isn't Marfa amazing?" Marilyn's son said to me, smiling.

"It's magic," I said.

Jami Attenberg is the author of three books of fiction, Instant Love *(2006),* The Kept Man *(2007), and, most recently,* The Melting Season.

To Infinity and Beyond!

There's a fine but important line between a comeback and a second chance. Comebacks are the domain of bell-bottoms and Howie Mandell. Second chances involve deep inspiration, and often a return from trying circumstance. Here are a few of recent history's memorable rebirths.

Nelson Mandela
Is there a more indelibly joyous image than the one of Nelson Mandela striding to freedom on Feb. 11, 1990, after 27 years of imprisonment in apartheid-era South Africa? That Mandela, his country's first black president, has embodied the ideal of unity, not bitterness, in his post-incarceration years, sums up his extraordinary character and leadership.

Lance Armstrong
His last, wobbly go-round in the Tour de France suggests that even legit second-chancers are susceptible to the lure of ill-advised comebacks. But cyclist Lance Armstrong's feat of seven consecutive Tour de France wins after a grueling battle with testicular cancer stands as one of the greatest sports stories of all time.

Steve Jobs
It's true that the iGuru has recently wrestled with pancreatic cancer. And there's no diminishing the gravity of that. But the digital and entertainment worlds we enjoy today were radically transformed for the better when Steve Jobs, the force behind Pixar and deposed founder of Apple Computers, was restored as Apple's CEO in 1997. Where's the inspiration in that, you ask? Think of a life in which you're still jogging with a Discman slung around your neck—and Woody and Buzz Lightyear never took flight.

Tina Turner
It is still impossible to fathom that the riveting dynamo who, in the '60s, delivered ferocious anthems of empowerment and love like "Proud Mary" and "River Deep, Mountain High" would become the victim of horrific domestic violence. Miraculously, Tina Turner found her remarkable voice again—and her rightful status as the ultimate soul survivor—a decade later.

ILLUSTRATION BY KATIE RIDLEY

Unsinkable

My Uncle Sam Ceccola first beat lymphoma 18 years ago. Then he beat skin cancer. And brain cancer. And lung cancer. And prostate cancer. And he's still fighting.

BY MIKE DARLING / PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN DONNELL

Not long after my Uncle Sam learned for the fourth time that

he might have only months to live, he went home and put his 1967 Ford Mustang up for sale. The car was in pristine condition, a baby blue convertible, fully restored, powered by a burly 289-horsepower V8, the stuff of red-blooded, all-American fantasies. He'd purchased it used, when it was nothing but a relic destined for the scrap yard, and spent nearly three years rummaging for spare parts, carefully applying new coats of paint, until it was primed for the showroom. At classic car conventions, he posted signs on the perimeter of his floor space: "UNLESS YOU ARE IN THE NUDE! PLEASE DO NOT LEAN ON THIS CAR! BUCKLES, BUTTONS AND ZIPPERS SCRATCH."

Everyone close to Sam knew about this prolonged labor of love, and so the suddenness of his eBay auction registered as a shock to those not present in the oncology ward of Philadelphia's Abington Memorial Hospital earlier that week in 2003, when the doctor gravely informed Sam that his lymphoma had returned, yet again, and the news was grim. He'd already fought off three recurrences of the cancer, but this time things had progressed to Stage IV—the worst possible diagnosis. What scared him was not the idea of death—he'd come to peace with that possibility long ago, when the cancer first appeared in 1992. Rather, it was the thought of his wife, Joan, sitting at home, waging her own private battle with fibromyalgia. *What will Joan do without me?* he wondered. He vowed to do everything he still could to make life easier for her.

Warning Sign
Don't mess with Sam's health—or car.

So the Mustang had to go. "I knew I was on death row," he says. "And I couldn't bear the thought of Joan dealing with the kids fighting over that car if I didn't happen to make it."

Of course, with Sam the doctors were always prepared for unexpected turns. He routinely defied their textbook conclusions, a medical outlier unlike any patient most of them had ever seen. In addition to Mantle Cell Lymphoma, a rare and often lethal form of cancer, he had by this time also fought into remission prostate and lung cancer. The doctors had simply stopped calculating his odds of survival—*Why bother?* they figured—and Sam never asked. Especially this time. "If he had," says Robert Maxwell, Sam's longtime oncologist at Abington, "I might have given him a 1-in-10 chance."

As always, Sam's attitude was steadfast. *OK*, he thought, *I have a problem. Now what do I need to do to fix it?* The doctors recommended a stem cell transplant—an expensive and controversial course of treatment.

When a world-wide search for a compatible stem cell donor yielded nothing, his doctors ordered an autologous transplant. In other words, Sam would become his own donor. An aggressive round of radiation therapy wiped out his bone marrow prior to the procedure, cleansing his body of the cancer cells, and paralyzing his immune system. "For weeks after that," he says, "a common cold could have killed me."

As the injected stem cells raced to repair his devastated immune system, Sam's condition worsened. His bones ached, and he grew nauseous, sapped of his strength. The hospital kept him quarantined from other patients, and restricted his visitors. He wore a surgical mask at all times. Slowly, the cells took hold. His stamina improved. Soon, he was taking walks outside—with the mask, at first, and then without. After the longest and most painful recovery he had ever endured, he went back home to Joan with reason again to hope. After weeks in the hospital contemplating the certainty of death, Sam Ceccola was still alive—more than alive, in fact. He was going to get better. Again.

ON A WARM Thursday night in mid-July, my Uncle Sam, a little shy of his 67th birthday, relaxes on the patio of Tonelli's Pizza and Pub, a popular restaurant in the quiet Philadelphia suburb of Horsham.

"May 22, 1992," he says, digging into a steaming plate of eggplant Parmesan. "There are certain dates in life that you never forget. And the day you're told that you have five years to live—that's one."

Less than a mile down the road sit the offices of *The Intelligencer*, a local newspaper that, late last year, briefly made Sam into something of a local celebrity when it ran a front-page profile under the headline, "Meet a medical mystery...or a miracle."

It pains me to admit that I had never fully understood Sam's plight until the morning I opened an e-mail attachment from my father. It was a copy of that article, and it told the remarkable story of his recovery to that point. Sam is an uncle by proxy—my father's closest childhood friend, the man who introduced my parents nearly 40 years ago. In an eerie, almost unbelievable coincidence, the introduction occurred in the oncology ward of Abington Hospital, where Sam's son was being treated for a Wilms tumor.

My mother was one of the nurses on duty, and, in another twist, Dr. Maxwell turned out to be the oncologist. Cancer, of all things, brought everyone together.

Until this assignment came up, Sam and I had not seen each other in roughly eight years. On my way to the restaurant, I remembered him as a stout Italian man with a wooly mustache, a thick, salt-and-pepper mop of hair, and a pleasant but matter-of-fact demeanor befitting his long career as a computer education specialist at Unisys. Now, I found myself sitting across from him at a cheap Italian joint, eyeing the many red spots on his forearms, the 30 pounds of extra weight he carries (he blames the Prednisone, one of the cancer drugs), and the graying hair (now buzzed into an efficient, no-nonsense flat-top, one of his few concessions to the rigors of radiation therapy), asking what it felt like when his doctor told him he had only a handful of years left to live.

"The rest of the day was a fog," he says. "I spent a lot of time going for walks in the middle of the night so no one could see me crying my eyes out." As if the guilt of abandoning Joan wasn't enough, he had one other wish he'd yet to fulfill: He wanted to see his children Jeff and Jennifer married. While Sam had all the respect in the world for his doctors, it was on this point, he decided, that he would prove them wrong. He would take every pill, submit to every exam. He would be there, if he could help it. The rest was in God's hands.

"The big thing I have learned is that attitude means a lot," he says. "I'm not going to sit and dwell on my cancer. Who knows why I have it. Maybe it's the smoking I used to do but quit 36 years ago, maybe it's the machine shop I used to work in. Hell, maybe I ate too much broccoli—frankly, nobody knows. The bottom line is this: If the doctors tell me something is wrong, my attitude is and will always be, 'OK, we have this problem. What do we do to fix it?' They told me I had five years to live. *Bullshit!* I have no intention of dying young. Cancer will not change my life. As long as I can help it, I'll continue living the way I have been, without any changes."


Still Walking Tall
Sam, Joan, and Jessie have not lost their stride.

Just Do It, Again

How do we best seize second-chance opportunities? The same way we accomplish any other changes in our lives—with a lot of hard work, says forensic psychologist Dr. Marisa Mauro.

Check Yourself
"When contemplating a major change, first look within yourself; identify and grasp your strengths and interests. Then build from there."

Act Accordingly
"If your real self, the person who objectively you are, is different from your ideal self, you're going to experience discomfort. Effectively grasping second chances starts with changing behavior. Get your behavior in line with your ideal self and your thoughts and feelings will follow."

Write It Down
"Second chances are often born of moments of personal clarity linked to major life incidents. These clarity moments can be very strong initially, but then quite elusive. Journal during these times of clarity, and regularly assess whether you're keeping to the course you've determined to set for yourself."

And Stick To It
"The best predictor of someone's future is his or her past, so change requires an extraordinary amount of work, which you alone are responsible for. But it's worth it."

He did just that. And on a bright, sunny morning six years after the first diagnosis, well past the date his doctors had once projected, Sam Ceccola found himself standing in the middle of Valley Forge Park, just outside the entryway to George Washington Memorial Chapel, waiting for his cue. A moment later, as the organ began to whir, he proudly took his daughter Jennifer's arm and escorted her to the altar. Six years later, he raised a toast to Jeff and his bride.

SINCE THE STEM CELL transplant in 2003, Sam has had no recurrences of the lymphoma—a fact that both thrills and confounds Dr. Maxwell, who at 77 is now semi-retired but keeps part-time office hours for a handful of patients. "These are the kinds of stories that keep me going," Maxwell says. "Sam looks as good now as I've seen him in years."

While the lymphoma seems to have been tempered, if not defeated, Sam has dealt with a seemingly unending blitz of additional health problems. In 2007, he successfully underwent surgery to remove a malignant brain tumor. The following year, his dermatologist spotted melanoma on his back, resulting in more surgery, and bringing his total number of cancers to five—a staggering figure. Again, Maxwell and his team caught both before it was too late. Another time Sam went in for a routine eosinophil count—a measure of the cells that protect the body against allergic reactions. The lower the count, the cleaner the blood. "A normal result is between zero and two," he says. "Mine was somewhere around 27."

The radiation treatments for the lymphoma burned up his salivary glands and damaged his jaw, resulting in more than $50,000 worth of dental bills. He's suffered several attacks of BOOP, a rare pneumonia that severely inflames the lungs. Last year, he was diagnosed with MDS—myelodysplastic syndrome—often a precursor to leukemia. Four months ago, doctors treated him for a recurrence of melanoma. And in July, Maxwell found polyps in his bladder. Thankfully, they tested benign, giving Sam a rare reprieve.

People ask him all the time for the secret. How does he keep going? What does he know that they don't? He tells them the same thing he has said for years: "I have this problem. What do I do to fix it?" He does not discount the power of genetics, the extraordinary resilience that may lie within his strong, Sicilian bloodline. His father, Sam Sr., is 94 and still lives on his own. His Aunt Conchetta just turned 101. "I can only pray," he says, "that I've inherited some of those genes."

Above all, he trusts "the man/woman upstairs" and his doctors. He hardly goes a day without reminding himself of the debt he owes to Robert Maxwell, the eagle-eyed oncologist who tracked down so many of the cancers in their earliest stages, before they ever had a chance to spread. "We've become friendly over the years," Sam says. "And I always joke that he can't retire. I won't let him! I know where he lives!"

Next year, Sam will celebrate his 45th wedding anniversary with Joan. They've looked into Mediterranean cruises. He longs to revisit the Colosseum and the Sistine Chapel. Until then, he plans to enjoy his time at home, relaxing in the sunroom with his dog, Jessie, still limping along at age 14. Fittingly, Sam just can't bring himself to put her down.

He still tends to his own yard, mows his father's grass a couple times a month, despite how exhausted it can leave him. "It might take me two or three times as long as it used to when I'm trimming the bushes," he says, "but I still get out there and do it."

He has another ritual, too—one that is more personal. A few days a week, he slips into a pair of baggy swim trunks and wanders out to the pool behind his house. Sometimes he carries a tall glass of iced tea—Crystal Light, sweetened. He eases into the water, warms up with a couple of gentle laps. Then he slides into the floating recliner, leans back, and drifts into the middle of the pool, depositing the iced tea into the mesh cup holder next to his arm. For an hour or two, he'll stay just like that, embracing the warmth, drifting in and out of consciousness. It is one of those rare times that he seems completely at peace with his lot, when the fog lifts and he sees his problems clearly. And in that moment, he has found exactly what he needs to do to fix them.

Mike Darling is a senior editor at Spirit. *His Uncle Sam welcomes your words of encouragement at sam@pungysplace.com.*

If history taught one history teacher anything, it's patience—and a faith that love's sweetest gifts will come 'round again.

ILLUSTRATION BY FRANK STOCKTON

FICTION BY ANTHONY DOERR

He's in 13C. She's in 13B. He's moving west to take a job teaching

history to seventh graders. She's heading home from a nursing conference. He's gangly, earnest, and scared. She has brick-red hair and eyes like almonds.

After takeoff she produces two oranges from a purple handbag and offers him one. He tears off the peel into a hundred tiny pieces. When he looks over, she has somehow unzipped her orange and her peel sits on the tray table in a single, mesmerizing spiral.

"How did you—?"

"You're cute," she says.

She eats it as if it were an apple: huge bites. Threads of juice spill down her chin. The flight attendant brings napkins. The cabin lights dim. She leans across him to look out the window at stars and he smells cloves, ocean wind, orange blossoms.

Her name is Annie. She's 29 years old, a hospice nurse. Her voice is a quiet, serene thing, a voice like a pool of sweet, underground water. A voice he wants to listen to in the dark.

They talk for the entire two-and-a-half hour flight. Movies, dogs, neurochemistry. The afterlife. He says, "OK, I don't believe it's all harps and angels up there. But I believe there's something. A kind of light."

She says, "Nope, it's nothingness. You're here and then you're not. The mind is the brain and the soul is the beating heart. Life is biology. And you only get one crack at it."

His mother would call that blasphemy. But by the time the wheels touch tarmac he's in love.

He tells himself he'll ask for her phone number in the aisle. He doesn't. He tells himself he'll ask for it at baggage claim. She didn't check a bag.

HE TEACHES PYRAMIDS, plagues, the Sumerians, the Caesars. The seventh graders sit stonefaced.

A smirking boy in denim raises his hand, the girl beside him tugging at his cuff, shaking her head. "No offense, Teach," the boy says, "but how old are you?"

"Twenty-two." The class giggles.

He looks for Annie at stoplights, pizza places, hardware stores. Every few weeks he sees her in dreams: they share scrambled eggs in a diner or drive off a cliff with a carful of sheepdogs. At some point during each dream she leans across his lap and whispers, "Why wait?" and he wakes with a thrill, his heart booming, and for a few minutes his little apartment throbs with possibility.

A YEAR PASSES. Heat waves plow into the city. His air conditioner gives out. He lies half-dressed on his bed all night and sweats into the mattress.

His mother calls from Ohio; she wants to know if he's dating. He bites back tears.

"Oh," she says. "Don't fret. God has a plan."

On the drive to school the houses around him seem like mirages, the neighborhoods like cardboard, the people like shadows. Body odor floats above the rows of seventh graders; fumes rise visibly off of their heads, as if they have been showering in gasoline.

He tries to look into his students' eyes: Gill with his recurring broken arms, Jennifer with her perfect handwriting, Carl who gets teased for wearing a compass on his belt.

"History," he declares, "is a study of people's choices. Someone makes a choice and after that all other possibilities become impossibilities."

Then he sobs. The students gape. He thinks: I'm the one who needs the compass. I'm the one who needs a history lesson.

TWO DAYS LATER he sees Annie in Karlovec's Grocery. He looks up from the asparagus and there she is: giggling with a girl in a produce apron, her long fingers on the girl's forearm.

The floor ripples; he feels as though his spine is being shaken like a sapling. The produce girl says something back to Annie; they laugh harder. Annie's cheeks are sprayed with freckles. Her hair is the color of sunset. There are no rings on any of her fingers.

He thinks: *The mind is the brain and the soul is the beating heart. Life is biology. And you only get one crack at it.*

He walks away from his cart. His feet hardly seem to touch the floor.

"Annie," he says.

She looks up with those almond-shaped eyes, each one an island. He holds up two round, perfect oranges.

SHE REMEMBERS HIM. She lives 16 blocks away. *All this time*, he thinks. *So close*.

"You're still cute," she says. Her voice thrills him. They get coffee. Then dinner. They go to a movie. Then 12 more movies. They get married.

IN THE YEARS TO COME their daughter asks to hear their story a thousand times. The chances! The coincidences! 13B and 13C! That she would have two oranges! That he would round the corner at that exact moment in Karlovec's Grocery!

He says it's fate. Annie says it's chance. He says God had a plan. She says choices are like tree branches, 10,000 different paths to the leaves.

Their daughter turns 5, 6, 7. She makes drawings of rainbows; she builds domino runs on the living room floor.

He does not always understand why or how Annie loves him back. He reads Pliny and Plutarch, prefers lonesomeness to parties, walking to dancing. And yet even when he and Annie argue he feels some deep gratitude surging inside him. Him! She chose him!

Sometimes, even after their daughter is 16, with a life of her own, even after she no longer asks to hear the story of how her parents fell in love, he'll look over at Annie as she stands in the kitchen, dressed in tight jeans and a black sweatshirt, her red hair cropped above her neck, frying peppers in a dented saucepan, and his body will crackle with longing. How, he wants to know, did I get so lucky?

THEY'VE BEEN MARRIED 24 years when Annie learns she has extensive-stage small-cell lung cancer. Inoperable. He weeps; she does not.

Coworkers from the hospice come by one after the other. Annie signs up for a volunteer group that uses the Internet to count migrating songbirds. She positions feeders all around the backyard: tube feeders and platform feeders and cedar feeders. The garage fills with sacks of birdseed.

She sits every morning in a nylon lawn chair in a parka in the early desert light with an open guidebook in her lap. "Waxwing," she murmurs. "Finch. The big guy's a flicker." Her face hollows out.

One Wednesday near the end he brings out two oranges and they sit side-by-side. It takes him several minutes to peel his. When he looks over she is dangling the long, unbroken spiral of her peel from two fingers, grinning at him.

They laugh. She balances the peeled orange on her palm like a little sun. The birds flutter. Distant traffic hums. He says, "Do you still think there's nothing, Annie?"

She doesn't reply for a long time. She closes her eyes and eats her orange, section by section, absorbed. "I am so glad," she finally says, "that I chose you."

ELEVEN MONTHS after he buries Annie, their daughter gives birth to a girl. At 2 a.m. he watches a nurse bathe the infant through the nursery window: a wrinkled and warped thing, her eyes shaped like almonds.

What decisions will this child make and what vectors are already set? What thoughts will she have and what secrets?

A priest walks past in shiny dress shoes, whispering into a little black telephone. A balloon trailing behind him says, GOD BLESS THIS CHILD.

In her hospital bed his daughter's orange hair is fanned across her pillow like flames. "I did it, Dad." The nurse brings in the baby. "She's asleep," she says.

Soon his daughter is asleep, too. He stands at the window and looks out over the hospital parking lot. The Milky Way is a soft ribbon overhead. The whole maternity wing falls into a soft hush. His gaze seems to push deeper and deeper into the black, like passing through successive layers of tissue, each thinner than the last—it's a feeling like falling.

In the morning he'll stand up in front of his seventh graders. "History is memory," he'll say. "It's knowing the names of the birds who come fluttering into your backyard. It's knowing that the clouds coming over the desert today are the same clouds that came over it a thousand years ago. It's knowing that the eyes of the ones who have gone before us will someday reappear as the eyes of our children."

He stands at the window a while longer. The stars shine. A sweet, lacy odor fills his nose, as if someone has just peeled an orange.

Anthony Doerr's second volume of stories, Memory Wall, *was released in July.*

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them men) to join his ad hoc support group in Dallas. "These are my brothers," Chatman says. "I feel closer to them than my own family. I tell them there ain't nothing you been through or are feeling that one of us doesn't understand."

Nationally, since 2000, 189 innocent men have been set free thanks to DNA testing; more than 40 of those exonerations have occurred in Texas, and 20 of *those* within Dallas County. Average time served: 13 years. For many of the Texas exonerees, whose feelings of wariness about the legal system and society linger, Chatman is just about the only authority figure left to respect. "We police each other," Chatman says generously, noting that check-up calls among the group are a daily routine. Together, the exonerated have established their own post-release code: Smoke and drink only in moderation. Don't go back to the old neighborhood where you got in trouble. Most importantly, surround yourself only with people who understand your circumstance.

Waller immediately learned why there were rules. Just hours after his release, he was detained at a gas station by a policeman who thought he looked suspicious. Cuffed and sitting on the curb, Waller became paralyzed with anxiety. "I didn't do anything to get sent away the first time," he remembers. "I was nervous they wouldn't need anything just to send me back." After that run-in, he found himself being hyper-vigilant, sitting with his back to walls at restaurants and plotting escape routes. Other problems kicked in. He borrowed a friend's car and crashed it immediately because he was unaccustomed to driving. The outside world, Waller found, was just too big and fast-moving for him.

To ease his transition, Waller spent a week riding horses and fishing at his aunt's farm in Arkansas. When he returned to Dallas, he used a stipend he'd received from his compensation attorney to move into Chatman's apartment complex in middle-class Carrollton. He went to hearings, helped exonerees negotiate the morass of the DMV, and even made house calls on men who'd gone on benders. He became an honorific coach for the University of Texas, Arlington, basketball team. "Not to glorify my fight," he said in his pep talk, "[but] I wanted to show you that if [I] can stand up to what seems like an unbeatable opponent, I know you guys can surely face one that is capable of being defeated."

Waller's most sage decision was to join a monthly exonerees-only focus group run by Jaimie Page, an assistant professor of social work at UT Arlington. Page is the founder of the Exoneree Project, which, for the past two years, has charted the challenges and progress of Chatman's crew and helped address their enduring set of problems—among them, post traumatic stress disorder, and drug and alcohol addiction.

Add to that list of afflictions the very thing that increasing numbers of Americans most yearn for: celebrity. "These guys couldn't disappear if they wanted to because their stories have been splashed across the news," Page says. She is referring to the media blitz that accompanied the September 2009 passing, in Texas, of the Tim Cole Act, which established a statewide panel to review wrongful convictions and granted the historically high cash awards to Waller and his fellow exonerees. Page says that many of the men she studies are already paranoid about being sent back to prison. They're now even more paranoid about the motives of everyone they interact with—beyond each other. Chatman, for instance, vacated his apartment and moved to a house farther out in the 'burbs, where his visitors are so few that he hasn't yet bothered to remove the tags from his sofas. He doesn't leave home unless it's with his wife or another member of Page's Exoneree Project. "Everybody has their hand out," he says. "Everybody has a problem."

Living low key isn't a stretch for many of these men—after decades behind bars they're expert at it and, age-wise, on their way to senior status. But at 40, Waller is nearly two decades junior to some of his peers. In fact, he's the youngest of all the Texas DNA exonerees. And that is the root of his struggle. He was little more than a teen when he was sent away. Now he's in a man's world, with a long life ahead of him and the peculiar burden of working with more, not less. More money. More notoriety. And more questions, like *How will I handle it?*

BACK IN FRONT of his bathroom mirror, Waller spends an hour shaving his head and admiring his shirtless, ultra-jacked physique. He's not being vain as much as indulgent. In prison, he never imagined he'd again have time to pamper himself in this way. He meticulously irons and slips into a sleeveless shirt and jean shorts, applies lotion to his formidable arms, and slides into a pair of shiny new Nikes. The ceremonial draping of the bling follows—a black diamond-studded wristwatch with matching oversized rings and earrings—and is finished off with a spritz of Burberry cologne. Since the money arrived six months ago, he's had to deal with warring urges to remain the ever-principled person he clung to while locked up or yield to the extravagant player he could

easily become. “You always said you’d be a millionaire before 40,” he says jokingly to his own reflection. “It didn’t go as planned, but you made it.”

Waller shares this apartment with his second wife Almeda, and her two sons, Chancellor, 5, and Bryson, 3. The couple met at a dance club a month or so after his release. She was celebrating her 29th birthday. That night, rather than judge him, Almeda treated Waller with the respect he badly needed. “‘Your incarceration doesn’t matter to me,’” he recalls her saying. “‘What matters to me is the person you are now.’”

Far from determined to play the field, Waller was eager to meet a woman before he landed his payout. When Almeda said yes to his marriage proposal a few months into their courtship, she did it without a clear sense of his imminent windfall.

It’s the most tired of tropes: Money can’t buy happiness. But for every lotto winner, lost-fortune heir, and now deep-pocketed exoneree, it’s a lesson that has to be learned firsthand. When Waller finally received his seven-figure restitution, his macking id was released, and he boldly decided to rewrite Chatman’s code: Rather than run from fame, he would embrace it. He printed business cards with a new job title, DNA EXONEREE, and secured two cell numbers—one to field calls from the people he respects, the other to screen out the inevitable assault of scam artists and hangers-on.

Waller didn’t have much of a plan for managing his pot of gold, so he followed his impulses. He paid off his mother’s $90,000 mortgage. He bought his brother a cherry 1972 Monte Carlo. His mother received an Escalade, his wife a Cadillac sedan. And he cut small loans to friends.

His subsequent business investments have been just as spontaneously considered. Under the banner Sir Patrick Waller Enterprises LLC, he has followed the lead of friends into many high-flying ventures, from reselling luxury automobiles bought at repo auctions to the ultimate cliché: starting his own hip-hop label.

Reel Deal
As a young boy, Waller already knew the thrill of the catch.

SNAPSHOT COURTESY OF THE WALLER FAMILY

Inevitably, this indiscriminate spending has created tension. Waller and his brother have squabbled over unpaid loans. And because he laid out cash for so many things, he has yet to establish a superior credit rating—something he’ll need to buy the new home he and Almeda dream of. Jaimie Page, the Exoneree Project founder, has cautioned Waller to slow down. At the same time, she sanctions his assertiveness and independence. “If he were missing meetings because he was isolating, I’d be worried,” she says. “But he’s out there living life.”

Sometimes, Waller says, he sits up late at night mulling whether he is headed in the right direction. He’s not unaware of the tricky terrain he’s trying to navigate, which makes the sniping of local bloggers—those appalled by the payout to the exonerees—the source of some anguish. “IT’S SO SAD THAT PEOPLE WILL DO AND SAY ANYTHING THEY THINK WILL HURT SOMEONE. TRYING TO TAKE SOMEONE’S HAPPINESS AWAY IS A SAD WAY TO EXIST,” he wrote anonymously on a message board last year.

No one is closer to Waller than Almeda, and she has her own theories about his sometimes rash, sometimes brassy behavior. Prisons, aren’t always equipped to help men mature emotionally. “Mentally, he’s the same age as when he went in,” she says. As a result, she has learned to view her husband’s Escalade as a “toy” and his penchant for flashiness as a necessary phase in his flight to self-worth. Waller, she thinks, is simply growing up on fast-forward, cramming as many experiences as he can into each moment. Besides, underlying the largesse and risk-taking is one of the things that most attracts her to Waller.

“What I like about him is that he dreams big,” she says. “Being young and black, that’s not a trait some of us have. We tend to settle. Patrick doesn’t.” As a hedge, while Waller parades his bling and impetuously explores his options, Almeda clips coupons, shops at the dollar store, and pushes home cooking over din-

ing out. She's even enrolled in beauty school to pull her share of the bills. In holding to these earthbound values, she is reminding him of who he was trying to be when he first got out of prison. It's a slow process, but it seems to be working: This fall, with tuition support from the Tim Cole Act, Waller intends to pursue a degree in criminal justice at UT, Arlington, with the hope of becoming a criminal defense attorney.

Almeda is feeling the changes, too. In the sunrise hours after he made his strutting entrance at Whispers, Waller decides to stay up and start the day with his wife, and then his stepkids. "Things are busier than when I was locked up," he says. "But that just means taking time for the things that *really* mean something."

IN APRIL 2009, Craig Watkins' criminal investigation unit successfully matched the DNA evidence from Waller's alleged crime to another man named Byron Bell. Bell quickly gave up his accomplice, Lemondo Simmons. Neither Bell nor Simmons can be prosecuted because of statute of limitations, but Waller isn't bitter. "It's like another page," he says, not bothering to complete the sentence. Instead, he talks about his latest dream; to buy a lake house far enough from the city to ensure that visitors are there for the right reasons.

Chatman and his crew will likely be the first invitees. Waller was the first person to lobby for them to keep meeting with Page, even though her initial research grant has expired. Although he's slow to admit it, these exonerees have become his closest friends. "We all get and give a little from each other," he says, which is about as emotional as Waller allows himself to get.

Kneeling at the edge of a pond near his apartment, in the early Sunday-morning light, he takes the wraps off his most meaningful investment to date: a new tackle box filled with bobbers and hooks. Today, he's teaching Chancellor and Bryson how to fish, and they look on in awe as he preps a new pair of kids' fishing poles. "This is in case they catch something," he says a bit too optimistically, setting down a new pair of hook-extracting pliers.

Though still dragging from the long night at Whispers, Waller wouldn't dream of sleeping through this. He tells his boys that his grandfather taught him how to bait a hook only once—if he didn't pay attention the first time, the lesson would be forever lost. Waller, a new believer in second chances, intends to do things differently. He baits both lines and picks up the larger of the two poles, preparing a demonstration in how to cast. He brings the pole back behind his head, flicks it forward and—SNAP!—breaks it in half.

"Oh, that's sad," he says softly. "I promise to buy you another one."

At one time or another in the past six months, Waller has sought refuge and a sense of self in cars, money, jewelry, and entitlement. But here, as Bryson spins happily in circles, he has ditched the Bluetooth headset and flashy jewels, and focuses instead on the ripples of the pond. When Chancellor manages his first majestically arcing cast, Waller erupts. "Ah ha! He's gonna get it! And he ain't gonna forget it," he says, this time testing out a catchphrase for his emergent parenting style.

It's not a bad life philosophy, either. For the rest of the morning, Waller will watch the clouds float by and enjoy being with the boys—even if they go home emptyhanded. These are the little things that Waller is learning to value most. With practice, he might even accept that he's already made the catch of his life.

Ben Paynter is a Kansas City, Missouri-based journalist who writes for Wired *and* Details*, among other publications.*