

≈ One ≈

“LIFE is God’s novel. Let Him write it.”
(Isaac Bashevis Singer)

Often times in life, we think we have it all figured out. As children – and I believe that this is especially true for little girls – many of us consciously or unconsciously draw a mental roadmap of our lives. Based upon our “then” realities, we make decisions for our pending adult lives, such as the type of profession we will pursue, in what area of the country we will live, the kind of house we’ll buy, the make and model of car that we’ll drive, the kind of person we will marry, how many children we’ll have. . .the list goes on and on. Funny how such underexposed, inexperienced minds can draw such paramount conclusions regarding a life that they’ve only just begun to live.

In all of our envisioned ambitions and aspirations, we never say we want to grow up to meet the man of our dreams, marry him, spend a few short years loving, living, and laughing with him, and then cap it all off by burying him in a black coffin so shiny that one’s reflection can be seen in the polished finish. That would be an insane outlook for any little girl to have. Who would want to lose the person dearest to her heart; to be widowed before the age of thirty? Who would yearn for such an existence? I

know I wouldn't. Yet it was a chapter in the novel God had written for me, and I was destined to follow the script.

Jimmy Lee Holmes was born on June 4, 1968 in Valdosta, Georgia. He was eighteen months my junior. His immediate family included a hardworking father, a dutiful mother, and four close-knit brothers (one being a fraternal twin). His extraordinary talent to sing was discovered very early in his youth. Jimmy personified the aphorism: *Young, Gifted, and Black*. Not only was he a standout in his high school chorus, but also in his church. Because of his exceptional vocal abilities, his name was well-known in Valdosta's Christian community, and his calendar never ran short of appointments. He loved God. He loved life. He loved his family. And he never met a stranger who remained a stranger for long. To know him was to love him.

My initial introduction to Jimmy came under circumstances that, in hindsight, can adequately be defined as amusing. Oddly I was only eighteen years old at the time, but I was engaged to another young man, and we were in the process of planning our December wedding when my then-fiancé introduced Jimmy to me as one of the young men who would serve as a groomsman in our bridal party. That part of my life's story almost always gets its share of raised eyebrows and hearty chuckles. The reaction is expected and understood. At times, I laugh about it myself. It proves that God really does have a sense of humor.

Needless to say, that wedding never took place. My first fiancé was also my first true love (not counting Melvin Williams of the legendary gospel group, The Williams Brothers, who I'd had a crush on since the age of fourteen

– but that’s another story ☺), so the ending of the engagement and subsequent severance of the relationship, though amicable, was a heartbreaking experience at the time. But God had a plan for my life that didn’t include me being married to my first love, thus He allowed a chain of events to happen so that the wedding would not take place.

A year later, my and Jimmy’s paths crossed again when two mutual friends of ours were tying the knot. The groom had asked him to be a groomsman, and the bride had requested that I serve as a bridesmaid; therefore, we both were set to be an active part of their wedding. At the ceremony, Jimmy and I exchanged pleasantries, but didn’t engage in any lengthy conversations, so I was quite surprised to receive a letter from him a few months later. By this time, Jimmy was living in Columbus, Georgia where he was enrolled in the nursing program at Meadows College of Business. The letter was very innocent and cordial, and it marked the beginning of a “pen pal” type relationship where we began communicating regularly by mail. In one of his early letters, Jimmy asked if he could adopt me as his god-sister being that he had grown up in a household full of boys. I agreed, and from that point, we began referring to each other as god-siblings. Needless to say, the relationship between us grew beyond the initial definition and eventually evolved into a courtship.

As I began to spend time with Jimmy during his frequent hometown visits, one of the first things I noticed about him was that everything he did, he did enthusiastically. Whether he was laughing, singing, playing, or praying; he did it all with fervor. I especially liked to see him worship. To observe Jimmy in worship

mode was quite an experience. He could crack jokes and cut up with the best of them, but when it was time to give God praise, he did it with the same passion as he did everything else in his life.

Our official courtship period lasted for a little over a year. On April 3, 1988, in the wee hours of Easter Sunday morning, Jimmy was at my family's home in the small, rural town of Dixie, Georgia. He'd spent some time talking to my father in private, and when all was said and done, he and I sat together in the den of our home, and he slid on one knee, proposed, and presented me with an engagement ring. We were married in the fall, a few months after his college graduation. The running joke that Jimmy and I had was as birthday gifts, I was giving my dad a son-in-law, and he was giving his mom a daughter-in-law. We were married on October 15th which was my father's birthday and the day before Jimmy's mother's birthday.

After the wedding, I was immediately whisked off to Columbus to begin my new life as Mrs. Kendra Holmes. It was my first time ever living apart from my parents, siblings, and friends, but the adjustment, though intimidating, was made easy largely because of Jimmy. Having lived in Columbus for a little more than two years at that time, he already had a host of friends there, and I was embraced by them and accepted into their circle without hesitation. And just as Jimmy's gift of song had made him popular in his hometown as a teenager, it had done the same in Columbus. His was a household name in many of the worship centers in and around Georgia's third largest city.

There were times when the demand for Jimmy was so high that I felt like I was married to a man of celebrity

status. But he managed to remain grounded, and I don't think there was ever a time when he felt like a star. If he did, he never showed it. He worked hard every day at the medical facility where he was employed. I guess it would be more accurate to say 'every night' since he worked the shift that had him clocking in at 11:00 P.M. and clocking out at 7:00 A.M. for the first several months of our young marriage. Prior to becoming a husband, Jimmy had spent most of his time in Columbus sharing a two-bedroom apartment with one of his best friends and college roommate, Quintard. Becoming the sole provider for his new, and yet unemployed bride, and having to be responsible for 100% of the household expenses versus splitting them down the middle, was a big challenge, but he made it work on the modest salary of a medical assistant.

Some months, times were tough, but I never heard him complain. Not even in those times when he had to borrow from friends to tide us over until his next payday. He did what he had to do, and if he had any grievances about doing it, he thought enough not to voice them in front of me. Perhaps he didn't want me to feel like I was a burden to him. Maybe it was an ego thing, and he just didn't want me to know that he was concerned about his ability to provide for his new family. Or maybe he just wasn't a complainer. Whatever the driving force, Jimmy chose not to gripe.

It didn't take me long to draw the conclusion that while Columbus was a large city, there weren't many job opportunities there that suited my clerical background. I used to call it 'a big empty city' because there were no theme parks and little or no tourist attractions there as were in other metropolitan Georgia cities such as Atlanta

and Savannah. After about nine months of living there, I convinced Jimmy to move farther south, to the area where I was born: West Palm Beach, Florida. I had quite a number of family members (mostly relatives of my mother) who were still living in that area including uncles, aunts, and cousins. My cousin, Joycelyn, worked for the *Palm Beach Post* newspaper, and she helped to secure a position for me there working as a representative in the customer service department.

When we left Columbus, we missed spending time with our closest friends, Otis, Quintard, Joria, Sherrie, Rita, and a handful of others, but overall, Florida was a good move for us. I migrated there in advance of Jimmy so that I could make the start date of my new career opportunity and to give him the necessary time to make a proper exit from his job in Columbus. Once he joined me two weeks later, he quickly found work at a local mental health center. Until we could get on our feet, my Uncle Irvin, who is also my godfather, was kind enough to allow us to live with him in his spacious bachelor pad. A few months later, we were moving into our own apartment in Lake Park, a relatively small city in Palm Beach County.

My father is the overseer of several churches, and one of them is in Palm Beach, so I didn't have to hunt for a house of worship. In Columbus, Jimmy and I had attended Church of God by Faith, the organization in which he had been raised. In Florida, there was a COGBF that Jimmy began attending, but I opted to connect with the Revival Church in the area where many of my Florida relatives attended and where I already had a relationship with the pastor, Bishop A.A. Barber. I'd always wanted to attend the same church as my husband, but our decision to link with

separate churches was never a sore spot in our marriage. We both respected each other's wishes to choose where we wanted to worship. The Word of God was being taught at both, so there was no division in our spiritual foundation because of it. To my delight, though, a few months after we settled in Florida, Jimmy made the decision to join me under the Revival Church covering. The day he walked to the altar to connect to my church was a joyous one for both of us.

Almost immediately after relocating to Florida, Jimmy and I confirmed that we were expecting our first child. Signs of pregnancy had been looming for awhile, but I was ten weeks in before a medical physician in Florida verified our suspicions. We were both excited and nervous. Admittedly, Jimmy carried most of the excitement while I was a bundle of nerves. We'd talked about having a family prior to getting married, but once the wheels had been set in motion, I second-guessed our decision not to wait a few years. What kinds of parents would we be? At ages 21 and 22, we were little more than children ourselves. Would we be able to provide our baby with all that he or she would need to be a happy, healthy, well-rounded child? The questions were unending, but none of those things seemed to bother Jimmy at all. So instead of continuing to plague myself with worry, I threw caution to the wind, latched on to my husband's energy, and held on for the ride.

Maybe that was my rehearsal, because drawing from his strength was an art form I would come to perfect. Even now, it's hard to fathom that a man so full of life at the pending birth of his first child, would be at death's door just days after the birth of his second.

≈ TWO ≈

“I am a LIVING testimony, I thank the Lord I’m still alive.”
(The Williams Brothers – “Living Testimony”)

I vividly remember that night at South Georgia Medical Center when my husband announced that he had full blown AIDS. By this time, we had uprooted again. After living in Florida for about two years, Jimmy wanted to move back to his birth city of Valdosta where we would both be closer to our immediate families, and where Brittney, our firstborn daughter, could be closer to her grandparents. Just as with our Florida move, we found out very shortly after relocating to Valdosta that I was expecting. It would be girl number two. I’d just given birth to her – our baby daughter, Crystal – a few days before Jimmy relayed the tragic news that SGMC had given.

My dad and I had come to the hospital to visit with Jimmy, and he informed both of us at the same time. He later apologized to me, saying that perhaps this was information that he should have told me in private, but I was grateful that he didn’t do it that way. Having my father there was a tremendous help. Not that he said anything in particular, or did anything specific. Just his presence and the presence of the Spirit of God within him, I believe, was a silent source of internal strength for me.

It had been raining for that entire January day, so the night was cold and dreary; a perfect setting for the reality that was about to unfold. My mother had tried to convince me to stay home and wait until the next day to visit the hospital. Crystal had been born only three weeks earlier, and Mama said I had no business going out in such inclement weather so soon after childbirth. But Jimmy had already been in the hospital for three days, and that particular day, he'd called me and asked me to come see him. There was a sense of urgency in his voice, and I couldn't refuse. So I bundled up, left the girls with their grandma, and caught a ride to South Georgia Medical Center with my dad, who had been a constant figure at the hospital since his son-in-law's admittance.

When I walked into Jimmy's assigned room that evening and caught my first glimpse of him, I fought hard to keep the dread that was in my heart from reflecting on my face. It wasn't a pretty picture. Not in the least. Jimmy looked as though he had lost a substantial amount of weight in the brief lapse of time since he'd been rushed to the hospital. His eyes appeared larger and whiter than normal, his cheeks were sunken, and his voice was very strained due to an infection in his throat, but his smile was broad when I walked in the room. When I leaned across the bed railing to hug him, he felt breakable. But he held me so tight that I assume embracing me wasn't a painful experience.

I sat in a chair at his bedside and made myself as comfortable as my trepidation would allow. My father occupied the chair that rested against the wall at the foot of Jimmy's bed. After formalities and a little small talk between Jimmy and Daddy, Jimmy cut straight to the

chase. I can hear his words as clearly today as I heard them in January of 1993. He reached for my hand through a gap in the railings of his bed, and then looked toward my dad. "Bishop," he said, "I just want both of you to know that the results of the last of the tests came back today, and the doctors say that I have AIDS."

Did the earth stop rotating on its axis at that moment, or did it just seem as though time came to a complete standstill? I didn't even know he was being tested for the virus that causes AIDS. I was aware that several tests were being performed, but I'd never asked for the details. Jimmy squeezed my hand as much as his limited strength would allow. It felt like he was bracing himself for either my reaction or the reaction of my father. Perhaps he was preparing for both.

My dad was a champion. All of my family members were, really. I remember Jimmy telling me much later that one of his biggest fears was that my family, who had embraced him from day one of our relationship, would completely shun him. He'd always called my dad "Bishop" in honor of his ecclesiastical position, and he referred to my mom as "Mother." With this new and devastating revelation, Jimmy was afraid that my father would no longer want to be his pastor, and my mother would no longer want to be his second mom. He was even concerned that my siblings would turn against him. After all, even though it was done unknowingly, he had placed my life and the lives of our daughters in dire jeopardy. At this point, the girls and I had not yet been tested. We could have, and by all accounts, *should* have, been infected as well.

On the day of his announcement, I don't think my father even flinched. The only reaction I recall is seeing him stand from his seat and walk to the side of Jimmy's bed, placing his hand on my husband's arm. Then I heard him say, "Let's pray."

I felt somewhat numb, but not overwhelmed and not panicky. When I think back over it (which I often do) the whole ordeal seems to have been some sort of out of body experience for me. The initial peace with which I was endowed was definitely a *God* thing. It seems almost uncanny now. From the initial revelation, there was never a time when I contemplated leaving Jimmy, and there was never an instant when I worried about my own status or the status of our children. From the moment of Jimmy's announcement, my total concern was his health.

When the doctor came in the room later that evening, he didn't even try to hide his hopelessness. It was like he'd walked into an ICU chamber where the patient was being kept alive only by artificial means, and he was about to request permission to pull the plug. By this time my father had left the hospital to give Jimmy and me some much-needed alone time. When Jimmy's physician went over all of the stats and findings with me, most of it sounded like medical gibberish to my ears. But the end part, I fully understood. When the doctor concluded his spiel by saying that Jimmy could live as little as three days or as long as three weeks, it almost felt like a plug had indeed been pulled. If I had been standing, I probably would have had to sit down at that moment.

Ever since the day that my own test results were revealed, I have known that I am a living testimony. Not just me, but my daughters as well. Jimmy and I had never

practiced what is known as “safer sex.” We had been married for four and a half years, and every sexual encounter we’d had during that time had been unprotected. For four and a half years I had been repeatedly exposed to a virus that could have killed me. It was only by the grace of God!

The day that I had to go to the doctor to be tested is still vivid in my memory bank. There were no infectious disease clinics in Valdosta at the time, but there was a doctor of internal medicine there. He was a pleasant gentleman who spoke with a foreign accent, and the staff that worked with him was professional and personable. I remember silently sitting in the waiting room amongst so many others who were apparently dealing with some sort of ailment. I prayed for them, I prayed for myself, and I prayed for the bedridden husband that I had to leave in the care of his mother while I got tested for a disease that had the potential to wipe out my entire household.

When it was my turn to be seen, I was taken in a room where a very pleasant attending nurse talked to me while she drew my blood. I think the casual chatter was supposed to be a way to keep me from focusing on what might have been, but it wasn’t necessary. I’d already talked to God, and regardless of how much friendly conversation the nurse and I had, the outcome of the test was in His hands. I wasn’t scared, and I wasn’t nervous. Not because I had such a high level of confidence or faith that I was well, but because all I could seem to think about at the time was the need to get back home to see about Jimmy. This was taking place only a few days after his hospital release. The countdown was on according to doctors, and I didn’t want to be missing in action if the situation took a sudden

turn for the worse, because I knew that Jimmy would need me. He'd be asking for me as he always did. When I left the doctor's office that day, I was given a date to return for my results and to pick up more meds that had been prescribed for Jimmy.

I can't quite recall the length of the wait, but I believe it was somewhere in the neighborhood of three days. As I was preparing to make my way back to the doctor's office on the assigned return date, my devoted mother-in-law arrived at our home so that she could sit with Jimmy while I was away. Her eyes were glossed with concern, and they appeared to be apologizing to me. I don't know if she had surmised that I was infected too, and her eyes were putting in her unspoken apology in advance, or if she were just carrying a certain amount of guilt about the whole situation. Good parents sometimes tend to feel like failures when their children place others in harm's way. They have the tendency to feel that they must have botched the art of parenthood when the offspring they raised cause injury, pain, or damage to others.

I still had no heightened worries regarding my health as I drove back to the doctor's office, but I do remember praying en route. I told God that if He made everything okay, I would give Him the credit all the days of my life. My spirit was very calm, and no anxieties about my status accompanied me into the waiting room. As a matter of fact, at some point I literally forgot the main purpose for my being there. My mind began focusing exclusively on the fact that I had to pick up Jimmy's filled prescriptions.

At the appointed time, the nurse beckoned me to follow her into the back, and she immediately took me into a private room and closed the door behind us. She had

several medicine bottles in her hand that she robotically placed in a bag. While she completed her task, I heard her say something to me, but her words didn't readily register. I remember looking at her, pointing at the white bag in her hands, and asking, "Are those for Jimmy?" She gave me a look that can only be described as perplexed, and then asked, "Did you hear what I just said?" I suppose I looked just as mystified to her as she did to me. When I didn't answer her question, she repeated what she'd apparently said earlier.

"I said your test came back negative. You're not HIV positive."

The proper thing to do at the moment was probably to turn a few cartwheels, jump up and down, clap my hands, shout hallelujah...or at least, breathe a sigh of relief. But I did none of that. I nodded, thanked her, and then repeated my earlier question. "Are those for Jimmy?"

To this day, I have no idea of what was going through the nurse's mind. Maybe she thought I was in shock. Maybe she thought the trauma of what I'd gone through in recent days had thrown off my ability to comprehend. Who knows what she assumed? Whatever she thought, she had good reason to think it, but I don't believe I was shocked or traumatized at that point. I was very aware of my surroundings and circumstances, but my focus remained on getting home to give Jimmy the meds that could possibly ease his discomfort. I was too anxious about him to be overly concerned about myself.

However, at some point after I got in my car and began my drive back home, reality hit me like a ton of bricks. I was negative, and as long as I tested negative, that meant

my babies were negative too. *We were okay. We weren't infected.* As I navigated my car back to Woodgate (the name of the community where my family lived) I began whispering, "Lord, I thank you" over and over again. I knew who deserved the praise.

When I got home, I rushed in the house, thanked Mama (my mother-in-law) for sitting in for me, and found my way to Jimmy's bedside. Mama made no attempts to leave. Instead she stood in the middle of the bedroom floor, looking at me like I was from some other planet as I began talking to Jimmy and rattling off to him the instructions that the nurse had given regarding the prescriptions. In the middle of my ramble, he mumbled something. At this time, mumbling was about all he could do. He had what had been diagnosed as "Thrush," a yeast infection of the mucus membrane lining the mouth and tongue. The condition is common among babies, but not adults unless they have a weakened immune system. Within a couple of days of him being released from the hospital, Thrush, in the form of white lesions, had overtaken his mouth, and the simple act of parting his lips was painful, so Jimmy barely opened his mouth whenever he spoke.

At first, I didn't understand what he'd said. I bent closer and asked him to repeat himself. When he did so, I deciphered the words, "What did they say about your test?"

No wonder Mama was looking at me like I was an alien. I'd come into the house from such an important doctor visit and had not even thought to share the outcome. When I told Jimmy that my test had returned negative, he instantly broke down and began weeping heavily. I could barely hear his mumbles of "Thank you, Jesus," because my mother-in-law had broken out into an absolute praise fest

in the center of our bedroom floor. Her hands were raised, and she leapt in place, all while shouting, "Hallelujah" and "Glory to God." Her praises were unrestrained, like she was in the middle of a Sunday morning worship service.

I was a living testimony, and I knew it. I was just as happy and grateful as they were that God had provided a miracle, but I'd already had my private time of praise with Him on the ride home, so I let them have that moment. While Jimmy and Mama glorified God for the miracle He had wrought, I began measuring the doses of medication that the labels on the bottles instructed to administer. I was fine. Our daughters were fine. Jimmy, on the other hand, was lying in our bed looking like skin-covered skeletal remains, and I needed God to perform just one more miracle.

Even today, I often wonder why the Lord didn't allow Jimmy's earthly body to be healed so that he could testify of God's greatness and omnipotence. Maybe it wasn't Jimmy's charge to be the broadcaster of this message. Perhaps it is mine. But while God didn't chose to rid Jimmy's body of the infection, it is clear to me that Brittney, Crystal, and I were not the only living testimonies in the equation.

With each passing day beyond the maximum three weeks that he was given to live, Jimmy became a billboard of God's favor. As I watched my husband regain his weight, reclaim his voice, and recoup his full strength in a matter of weeks, I knew that God was doing something phenomenal. The doctors' appointments continued throughout the extended time that God afforded him, but during most of that time, his T cell count did not increase, yet his health remained intact. According to doctors, he

was a walking dead man. There was no medical explanation to why he was still living. And not only living, but enjoying a full, active existence.

Because of strings pulled by one of his childhood friends who worked in an infectious disease clinic in Atlanta, Jimmy became a beneficiary of the Ryan White CARE Act and got linked to a specialist where he was able to receive more expert care. Almost every time we would make the drive from Valdosta to Atlanta to see his new physician, she would give the same report. He was doing well, but she didn't know why. The results of his exams clearly said he should have been dead, or at best, so feeble that he would not be able to do much of anything for himself. He was neither. By that time, he had his full strength and was doing everything he had done prior to being admitted to South Georgia Medical Center. Each time Jimmy and I would visit the clinic in Atlanta, we were given a new prognosis. Sometimes it was one month; sometimes three months; sometimes six. There were a couple of times when the doctor just laughed, closed Jimmy's chart, and said, "He'll probably outlive me." At the end of one visit, she shrugged her shoulders and quipped, "Well, I must be doing something right, Mr. Holmes. You're still here."

It wasn't the doctor's doing. I knew it. Jimmy knew it. And the baffled lines etched on the doctor's face indicated that she knew it too.

One of metropolitan Atlanta's most refined and respected bishops often says: "Our jobs are our **resource**, but our God is **the** source." In other words, the jobs may provide the money that we need to take care of our daily

living expenses, but without God, the jobs wouldn't exist. So it's still all about Him.

Today, when I think of Jimmy and how he was brought back from the brink of death, I have to apply that same line of thinking. "The doctor was his *resource*, but God was *the* source." Certainly having a specialist helped. Although we were told from the beginning that the stage of Jimmy's progression was too advanced for medication to do much of anything other than ease the discomfort of his transition, having a specialized medical professional allowed us to be better informed of the entire process. We were grateful for all of the doctors. Even so, I know that had it not been for God, the doctors would not have even been in place to assist us. God was *the* source.