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***“The great hope for society
is individual character.”***

William Ellery Channing

Marley Rides is dedicated to
Catie, Rhys, Julia, and Constant.
For their unconditional love and encouragement—
a reminder to live another day.

Marley Up!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	7	Boston Globetrotters	76
1. THE FINE ART OF PARENTING		Good Night Moon	80
Dreamscape.....	10	Initiations.....	81
A Glint in Mama’s Eye	13	Paranoia.	84
Parental Intentions	15	Pre-surgery Playtime	85
Ignorance Is Bliss	16	Your Wish Is Granted	87
The Birth of a Star	17	Learning Curves.....	88
Making the Move	19	A Coordinated Effort.....	89
No Worries!	21	Post-Op	91
There Are No Accidents	22	Exploring Within.....	92
Rich Memories of Marley	24	Travel Day.....	94
		Return Home	95
		Poetry in Motion	98
2. MARLEY UP!		5. NETWORKING	
Speech! Speech!	26	Community Work.....	100
Grade School Speech	29	Past, Present, & Future.....	102
Cowboy Troubles.....	31	Head, Heart, Hands, & Health	106
Unconditional Love	32	Testing the Ropes	108
Passing the Test.....	33	Joseph Juggles.....	111
Holiday Update.....	34	Learning with Legos	113
Pleasures and Pitfalls.....	38	Life’s a Circus.....	115
Growing Pains	41	Just Say No!	118
The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.....	45	Dancing Lessons	120
3. A CRASH COURSE IN MEDICINE		Ding! Round Two	121
High Pressure Parenting	48	Introducing “The Fenstemmers”	125
Fluid Facts.	50	Hairless in Ashland	127
Receiving the News.....	51	Space Syrup.....	128
Marley’s Network Letter #1	56	The Middleman	130
Lung Cancer 101	62	Marley’s Inspiration	132
Faith in Doctors.....	63	6. THE MEDICAL KINGDOM	
Updating Information	64	How Bad Is Bad?.....	134
Preparation	66	Mind Mush	137
Declaring Peace.....	68	Macrobiotics VS Marley.....	139
4. FAITH IN FRIENDS		Marley and Diet.....	141
Friends in High Places.....	70	The Boston Massacre.....	142
A Well-known Mystery.....	72	My Story	144
Boston Bound	74		

MARLEY RIDES

Operation Removal	146	Seeing Is Believing.....	238
Lungless in Boston	148	The Oregon Country Fair.....	239
Healing.....	150		
Life's a Blur	151	10. BETWEEN A ROCK	
Under the Surface.....	154	& A HARD PLACE	
News and Other Illusions.	157	Summer's End	244
		Keeping It Together	249
7. KNEEDS		Hip Hop	251
Catch Up	160	Radiating Personalities.	254
The Moment of Truth	164	Back to Normal.....	257
A Brave New Marley	168	Marley's View on Cancer.....	259
The Effectiveness of Prayer	169	Won't You Be My Neighbor?....	261
Giving Thanks.....	171	Food Fight!.....	263
The Bright Side of Sad.....	173	The Bedtime Ritual	265
Christmas Cheer	176		
A New Year Begins	179	11. LOSING PATIENTS	
Who Cares?.....	180	Living with Cancer.....	274
Day by Day.....	182	Society's Blindness	275
Clueless in America.....	186	Misunderstandings.	276
Post Portland.....	187	Alive and Kickin'	280
		Talk About Dying	282
8. CEREMONY		Sticking Our Necks Out.....	286
Creativity:		Frustration.....	288
A Breakthrough Cure?.....	190	I Did It My Way.....	291
Portland Preparation.....	192	Two New Tumors	292
Manifest the Best.....	194	Who's in Charge?.....	294
Bionic Boy.....	195	Decision Made!.....	297
A Parent's Nightmare	199	Yet Another Tumor	298
Cause for Celebration.....	201	Suicide Watch.....	299
Marley's Meltdown	202		
Marley's Monster Bash.....	208	12. HOPE	
A Monster Success	210	Radiation.....	304
Every Day Is Earth Day.....	212	Happy but Tired.....	307
		Fighting Fire with Fire	310
9. LIFE'S A BEACH		Oregon Country Fair	
Back in the Ring: Round 5.....	218	Revisited.....	313
Paradise	219	Third Neck Tumor.....	317
Return from Maui.	220	A Dog Story	319
Make a Wish	225	Reunions.	321
Healing.....	229	The Marley Filter.....	324
The Birth of the Coyotes.....	230	A Powerful Gift	325
Summer Plans	232	Breathing Easy	329
Therapy Sucks.....	233	Changing the World.....	332
Playtime	236	Grasping at Straws.....	334

13. GRAVE HUMOR & TIDAL WAVES

The Guestbook	338
Grave Humor	340
Knee Deep in Trouble.....	341
Keen New Knee Trick	343
Mobile Man	345
Conversations with Marley	349
Just Say Yes!	351
A State of Grace.....	353
Wilderness Report.....	356
Eighteen and I Like It!	358
Life in the Fast Lane.....	366

14. THE LITTLE THINGS

Tumors–R–Us	372
Communication	376
Medical Inventions.....	377
An Invitation to Stay Alive.....	379
Still Alive!	380
In the News.....	382
Brian’s Mom.....	387
The Marley Effect	388
The Flip Side of Hope	389
Invisible Arms.....	394
When it Rains, It Pours.....	397

15. THE HOME STRETCH

Rites of Passage	400
The Party’s Over	407
Roller Coaster Racing.....	409
The Last Wild Ride	413
Wake Up Call	414
Preparing for the End.....	416
The Beginning of the End.....	420
Water World	422
Words Unsaid	426

16. NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The Final Switch	430
The Girls Grow Up	432
Uncle Jay’s Alert.....	436
Decision Road.....	437
Visitors.	439
Newman Reports	442

Grand Central.....	444
Brianna.....	446
Coyote’s Call.....	447
Honoring the Fighter.....	448
Axey’s Good-bye.....	449
Benny Boy.....	451
Reality Check	452
Selene Beanie	455
Home Alone	457
A Brief Hello and Good-bye ...	461
Sunday, Sunday, Sunday!.....	462
The Last Breath	466

17. MARLEY RIDES

A New Chapter	470
The Marley Man Rides.....	473
Down by the River.....	474
Day Two – Post Departure.....	479
Marley’s Donation Update.....	452
Decorations	483
Day Three – Post Departure.....	485
Celebrating Loss.....	488
Reflections	491
Day Four – Post Departure	492
Solo Time.....	494

18. THE FINE ART OF GRIEVING

My Angel	496
The Fenstemmers, Part II	499
Lessons of Grief.....	501
Life with a Purpose	502
Memorial Invitation.	503
The Memorial	504
In Retrospect.....	507
Remembering to Breathe.....	510
Coyotes:	
An Endangered Species?.....	511
Tracking Loss	514
Life Is But a Dream.....	516
New Year’s Resolution	517
Gestation.....	519
Blast Off!	520
My Marley Miracle	522
The Fenstemmers, Part III.....	524

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*“I may be going to hell in a bucket,
but at least I’m enjoying the ride.”*

—The Grateful Dead

PROLOGUE

ONCE THERE WAS A BOY
by Selene Foster

Once, in the beginning, when I had just moved to Ashland, Marley and I had a talk outside during a party, sitting on the top of the monkey bars in the back yard. He knew he had cancer and he wanted money and things to do. He didn't want answers from me, or even suggestions; he wanted to be heard. A year later, I sat with his sister Catie around a campfire at a family reunion. We had learned Marley's cancer had metastasized, and there was very little anyone could do. I had no solutions. Catie had nothing to be comforted by. She sobbed in the firelight and it made me feel better. In the face of indecision, indirection, the lack of answers, one must do the only thing one can do: the obvious.

Once I sat on the top of a high hill with Marley and talked about how beautiful the land was. Once he told me how many times he had given roses to girls at school and had them given back. Once he held my hand through my father's funeral. It was never his words that made me love him, although he once told me I don't take enough risks—and that has changed me forever. It was his willingness to live without answers, or even attempts at answers, that changed me.

He was an ass half the time, but he knew that what I needed was impartial and unobstructed love, and that this could be imparted with the smallest of gestures. He would reach out the instant before I gave up trying to help him. The night before he died, he made the smallest of movements to kiss my cheek, just enough to make it okay for me.

There is no making sense of who he was. There is no explaining the impulse we all had: To do anything for him. Our daily experience of living with the knowledge that he would die did not arrest our own needs. His indignation was fierce. He demanded attention. He made friends with the dirty, smelly guy on the corner. He saved us all from certain normalcy.

INTRODUCTION

Passing the Torch

This tale chronicles the adventures of Marley’s 18-year visit to Earth. It begins with the letters I wrote to my son before he was born. The rest of this book is based on e-mails written to “Marley’s Network”—those who joined this family before you. Also included are new letters written to you as my narrative and stories written by friends and family. I call these submissions “The Butterfly Effect” as an example that all we do, as individuals, influences everything else.

I feel it is of vital importance to recount what our family learned about communication, cancer, doctors, fear, and the cowboy way of living and dying—information you may need now or when you encounter sickness and death.

Everyone dies, even extraordinary people. Yet very few families seem to share their stories, thereby leaving the rest of us without their valuable knowledge. I offer to you here the stories provided by Marley’s life and death.



“Message in a Bottle”
An ongoing art project by Jay Little

Photo: Jay Little