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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!

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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