

PREFACE

Lying on the table, under the white felt blanket, my father was foremost on my mind. Today would have been his birthday; the first one since he passed. The last year and a half had taken its toll on my body, with a cancer diagnosis, several ensuing surgeries, and months of chemotherapy, not to mention the death of my father. In preparing for this post-cancer healing session, it had crossed my mind as to whether it was wise to book a session on this day, the date of his birth.

The Reiki practitioner stood over me to begin, so I closed my eyes. Enjoying the quiet peace of being cared for, I drifted inward with my thoughts.

My father's Dutch accent penetrated my mind instantly. His gravelly voice was so clear it startled me.

"Bernice, you have to write the book," he said. "You have to tell our story."

Hot tears welled immediately and rolled down the side of my face, wetting my hair. "No, Dad, I can't. I am too afraid. I can't write. I don't know how to write a book."

"You have to write the book, you must tell the story. People need to hear it."

As I kept insisting *No*, fear flooded through me like a foaming angry river that seemed to bounce around my insides, like the rocks on its bed. I knew what he meant. He meant write the story

of Paul and our family, a thought that had nudged me every so often for many years now, but one that I had pushed away.

Leaving that Reiki session after having been completely immersed in my fear, I made the decision to write. I reflected on how alone I had felt growing up and how I hid my brother Paul. I wanted to reach out to others who may be struggling in the same way. Reading a story such as this would have helped me feel not so isolated, and better able to navigate my feelings surrounding the whole situation.

Sometime before that, and a while after my father had passed, I found them. Hidden in a tattered shoebox amongst black and white photos, a marriage certificate, newspaper clippings, baptismal papers, death notices, and various other documents—I had found a stuffed 9.5 x 6.5-inch manila envelope on which my mother had written:

Sweet memories.
Paul Timmermans
& Bernice
& Ronald

Each line was written with a slightly changed scrawl using a different pen due to being added at the time of our births.

Opening the envelope and reaching inside, a collection of loose, yellowed pages in a variety of sizes appeared. Some were lined, others plain. Some were torn from a spiral-bound notepad, while others had a straight edge that clearly came from a gum-bound pad. Each page had a date penned in the upper right-hand corner, ranging from October 1958 to September 1966: the years my siblings and I were young.

All were written in Dutch in my mother's meticulous hand. Leafing through the pages and scanning the contents, I recognized an occasional word, but most were as foreign as the language. I could speak conversational Dutch, but I had never learned to read it. Carefully, I tucked the pages back into the envelope, making a mental note to find a translator.

It took some time, but I finally received the English copies of my mother's letters in December 2011, shortly after I started writing this book. They seemed like the perfect addition to *Paulie and Me*.