



We're Almost There
A Song for Life

Forrest J Fegert

Other Novels by
Forrest J. Fegert

Belly of The Beast

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the people who assisted me through the publication of this book; to those who have been helpful and supportive, talked things over, read, offered comments, and encouraged me to follow through on my vision to write this inspirational story of redemption and forgiveness. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Greg Davis, Ford Fegert, Elaine Hameister, Jennifer Elliott, Mark Prevot, John Selloriquuez, Dr. Bob Leitz, Matt Robinson, Brooks May, Peter Gabb, Carol Fegert, Kelly Haskew, and Dr. Susan Vigen.

Foreword

Forrest Fegert entrusted me with the exploration of a story he had been crafting for some months. Upon commencing this work, each passing page steadily pulled me deeper into a halcyon New Orleans. Writing as a native, Forrest has written a book that will endear itself to

readers of all ages.

The particularly attractive quality of this work is the unyielding optimism of a madly talented young man finding his way to adulthood. Able to overcome so much adversity, his inner resolve serves as a potent teacher to us all: using our gift to service humanity enhances our own humanity.

It is a distinct pleasure to witness the birth of Forrest Fegert's newest offering.

Dr. Greg Davis

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Prologue

This is more than a coming-of-age story. This is a tragic but inspiring story of forgiveness and redemption. Discover how a gifted boy, with only a trumpet as a friend, finds life through music. Travel the streets of New Orleans as he rides his bike through the Garden District while dreaming of having friends and a happy family. He passes under the canopies of the live oak trees and notices content families and groups of friends gathering to board the streetcar. He stops his bike near the corner of St. Charles and State Street as he watches the streetcar drive away with a rocking motion. The boy leans over and lays his forehead on his folded arms. He is yearning for a loving family and friends. Tears fall through the handlebars onto the sidewalk. He is too proud to cry in public but is overwhelmed with sadness. The boy sits up and wipes the tears from his cheeks as he collects his strength and rides off to save his family.

I

Joey Mastretti was a young boy who would move to any black or white square to save his king and queen from the ways of the world and make his family happy. His dad was at the far end of the chessboard cornered by depression and alcoholism; his mom was free to move but helpless to stop the possibility of checkmate. Joey had more than just a

dream—he had a plan to help save his king and queen, and it involved music. His story was about love, exceptional talent, tragedy, and valor.

Joey lived in an old and tired part of New Orleans not far from the French Quarter. A place where houses were wood, most with peeling paint and standing on uneven piers. On an early Sunday morning in 1970, crisp and clear with very little wind, Joey rode his bike a few short blocks down Esplanade Avenue, turning right on North Broad. After six corners, he turned left on to Canal Street, heading east for one mile before turning right on to St. Charles Avenue for his long ride south to Tulane Stadium. St. Charles Avenue was one of the great boulevards of the world, thickly lined with large live oak trees whose branches intersected to form a canopy, creating a tunnel effect similar to a vine-covered trellis over a pathway. The sun found places to beam through the overlapping branches, creating parallel rays of light that shone on the streetcars moving slowly down the boulevard while reflecting off the windows of fast-moving cars. Joey passed through the patches of light as he pedaled at a relaxed speed toward the stadium.

The Saints were playing their third home game of the season, and the crowds converged from every direction toward Tulane Stadium, particularly from the streetcars on St. Charles Avenue. The weather was balmy with a southern breeze fresh from the Gulf of Mexico across the river and into the city. The sun was high and clear. The white clouds showed grooves from the sun that created the appearance of small floating mountains. Game day was an outlet that helped the thirteen-year-old boy forget his problems at home and the seventh grade. All the fights between his parents seemed far away. He stared at the happy families with envy, but not in a hateful, jealous way. Joey Mastretti was a better person than that. He rode his bike from miles away to watch the large crowds and content families walk toward the stadium. He circled the stadium and sometimes made trips to the corner of St. Charles and Audubon Place to watch the families step down from the streetcars as they made their way west to the large open stadium and entered the East Gate. Groups of fans bunched up on corners as streetcars were pouring out more fans onto the sidewalks. Everyone walking from every direction, heading for one specific point. Everyone was positive with high hopes about the Saints' season.

Joey pedaled his bike, thinking about home and pining for his family to be that connected and jovial. Many times he fantasized about stepping off the bottom step of the streetcar hand in hand with his mom and dad. He could see them smiling and holding hands. He could also see himself looking up at them with a smile as he held his dad's hand. No more wedge or defeated spirit dividing his family.

Al Hirt's band played before the games and during time outs. Joey listened from the sound's edge and would have given anything to be in the stadium to hear every note. He admired Al Hirt's tone. Sometimes he could hear bits and pieces, but only on a humid day, or if the wind was right. Then he could hear almost every note. When he heard the game announcer and the crowd, he felt like a part of one of those cheerful families at the game. During the game, he would ride his bike around the Tulane campus, jumping curbs, sometimes popping wheelies, and feeling the excitement of game day. When the plane pulling a long banner circled low above the stadium, he always stopped and looked up. The young boy did this for every home game. The only thing between him and those families on game day was his dad's sickness. If it wasn't for that, everything would be different everywhere.

On the way home, he raced a streetcar down St. Charles Avenue. Joey thought he was flying when he jumped the curbs. After the third game, he raced Streetcar Number Thirty-Two. It made him proud to beat the large electric machine. Sometimes, he would pretend that the streetcars were huge green bugs. He loved the way they rocked back and forth with the sparks flying off the wires. He pedaled his bike quickly and looked back over his right shoulder at the conductor. The conductor stood in the middle of the front window swaying and rocking with the rhythm of the streetcar. They raced from Uptown neighborhood through the Garden District. When Streetcar Number Thirty-Two got a little ahead of him, he would catch back up as it slowed down to pick up waiting passengers. Sometimes he got emotionally consumed with the big race and followed the streetcars all the way to the corner of Canal Street and Bourbon Street. The streetcars always turned right on Canal Street, and Joey turned left. That corner was the finish line. He won the race more than half the time. Joey's path would cross Canal Street and down the French Quarter side through the Tremé neighborhood. That

made it better to hear the jazz coming from the French Quarter. Music was his best friend.

He leaned forward and rode swiftly down Canal Street. The postcards said Canal Street was the widest street in the world. It felt different from St. Charles Avenue. St. Charles appeared more crowded with massive sprawling live oak trees and mansions. Canal Street looked as if it was a mile wide with auto lanes, streetcar lanes, bus lanes, and a large straight line of palm trees. Joey turned and headed northwest for about three miles and then turned right on North Broad toward Lake Pontchartrain. After one mile, he intersected Esplanade Avenue, turned left, and in three blocks was home.

His house was white stucco with a high porch and red clay tile roof. Inside were hardwood floors and painted walls outlined in white trim. The ceiling trim and baseboards were maintained, but the walls showed patches where his dad had started numerous repair projects that he never completed. There were two big double doors on the front and back of the house connected by a long hallway. All the rooms were set off from the long hallway. His dad always said they designed it like that so the breeze could pass through the house. In the summer, he opened all windows and doors to let the air flow across the rooms. All the bedrooms, kitchen, and sitting area got a piece of the cool breeze. His family sofa had holes covered by an old blanket. The chairs were worn but usable, although the lack of stuffing needed to be ignored.

His mom described the house as a shotgun house, because you could stand on the front porch, fire a shotgun down the wide hall and out the back door, and not hit anything. This was a common design because of the heat in New Orleans. Almost all the houses had high porches; that was cooler and helped in case of street flooding. Most of the families on the boy's street spent much of their time on the front porch.

Joey was sometimes sad that neighbors always ignored or even ridiculed his family. His mom and dad knew why. When he was at home, he let his trumpet be his friend to fill the void. He started by playing through the scales, but always finished with something from Louis Armstrong, one of his dad's musical heroes.

Joey's dad's name was Johnny Mastretti. He was Italian with good looks and resembled Tony Curtis; his son inherited the same good looks.

The dad had been out of work for several months. He drank heavy to escape interaction with people and conflict. He was not free. The people that hated him were not free. The hate they carried in their hearts controlled who they were. They had lost the power to choose. They did not take the choice to be strong. Hearts full of hate and resentment weighed them down. Joey knew that. His dad was letting the haters win. He was drinking beer when Joey arrived home from the game.

The screen door slammed shut as Joey entered the house from the high porch.

“Joey, who won the game?” Joey’s dad yelled as he grabbed another Dixie Beer from the refrigerator.

Before answering, Joey worried about his condition, but he knew to be accommodating. His dad’s mood was always on edge. Teetering between calm and mean aggression.

“Joey, Joey, is that you?” his dad asked.

“Yes, Dad.”

“Who won the game?”

“The Cardinals.”

“Those damn Saints! Break your heart every time!”

“I’m going to my room.”

“Joey, go get your horn and play something for me. I love to hear you play.”

Joey would never dare to say no, and the compliment meant a lot to Joey. He hung on every compliment and criticism from his dad. He thought about how careful he would be with his kids. Joey knew the wrong words from a parent went straight to the heart. He also understood that many of the kids that failed and turned to a bad lifestyle were really smart and just needed positive encouragement. Just needed and wanted someone to tell them they loved them, and how great they could be. In Joey’s opinion, everyone on earth had a sweet spot. He also knew that sweet spot was vulnerable to criticism and could be soured. Even could shrivel up and then be gone forever. Even with his dad’s state of mind, a compliment always shone through the dark clouds.

He grabbed his trumpet and headed for the sitting room to play for his dad. Joey felt the light Gulf breeze from the south pass through the house. The corners of the faded stained lace curtains flipped with the

wind.

“What are you going to play?” his dad asked.

“What about Louis Armstrong’s “West End Blues”? Do you want me to sing or just play my horn?”

“Don’t sing; just play, I’m going to close my eyes and listen,” his dad replied in a drowsy, relaxed way. He leaned his head back against the old green chair and closed his eyes.

Joey blew to clear his trumpet and then started playing. The sound was so mesmerizing that all ears should have heard it. As he played, he thought about how content his family could be. There was one blank piece to complete his beautiful jigsaw puzzle—his dad. That piece was missing. He looked at his dad’s closed eyes as he played. Joey loved what he saw. The tender side of his dad. Drinking often changed his dad, turned him into someone Joey didn’t recognize. Joey’s dad wanted to stop drinking but couldn’t. Joey was only thirteen but knew that many well-intentioned people could not beat that sickness, and families suffered. There was heavy collateral damage—many souls wounded for life. Down deep, Joey knew he might not ever win. He was not going to give up on his dad. He knew his dad’s sickness did not totally defeat his dad. If not cured, this disease was going to cause death. The death he feared most. The death of his family.

All that bike riding had made the boy hungry. His mom, Clare, cooked his favorite, red beans and rice with hot sausage. His mom was strong and always in a happy, contented mood. Beautiful, strong, and filled with inner peace. When his dad wasn’t drinking, the household was jovial. That’s what she loved most. She was attractive with an engaging smile. She was an especially loving person that kept their family going. She was a hard worker who supported the family. Always there when his dad was between jobs. The mom never complained; she left for work every morning by 6:00 a.m. and always forced a smile.

Joey especially looked forward to Sunday dinner with his mom and dad. One out of three was a happy occasion. The odds were acceptable to Joey. That one good Sunday meant so much to his mom. Everything in the world was perfect that day. “Joey and Johnny, your red beans are ready,” Mom said happily. She always made the best of their times together, no matter his dad’s mood. She prayed every day for her family.

Joey was careful to avoid making his dad angry. Dinner went without incident, and they talked about everyone's favorite subject, music.

Joey understood why his mom stayed and put up with his dad's drinking and mood changes. He knew they were the same soul, and he thought they needed each other to face the world. Joey understood the pressure the world put on his mom and dad for being a mixed-race couple. He felt it every day at school. He did not belong. Joey cried on the inside. He was alone and isolated at school. Just a trumpet for a friend. He knew his dad was not as strong and was hiding behind a bottle. His mom felt guilty about the relationship and blamed herself for his drinking. Joey didn't blame his dad for falling in love with mom. He knew she was the most beautiful person in the world, inside and out. Joey's mom was African-American, and people said the cruelest, mean things to his dad. It was hard for them to sit on the porch and enjoy the weather with their neighbors; someone would drive by and yell ugly things about his mom and dad. Joey couldn't understand why people didn't judge other people for what was inside. He thought all the pressure had consumed his dad—that he had been beaten down and given up the fight.

It was 1970 and his dad thought the country was past that. He told his son that he was a racist before the war, but it changed him for the better in that area. He told his son everyone bleeds red when they are fighting for America. A black friend of his was killed in the battle for which he won his Purple Heart and Silver Star medals. Joey hoped adversity and troubling times could make him a better wiser person. He tried to think about that when he got picked on at school. This was a dark time for Joey. It was very hard for him to fit in, but he always counted on his mom for a kind, encouraging word. His mom was the best person in his life. Joey wanted to make her proud.

II

His biggest hero, other than his mom and dad, was his junior high music teacher, Mr. Elsinson. He constantly encouraged Joey and would not let any of the other kids pick on him. He complimented Joey in front of the class, and a boy yelled out, "He should be good in music; look what color his mom is." Joey laughed it off on the outside, but it hurt on the

inside. Mr. Elsinson sensed that and harshly reprimanded the student. Mr. Elsinson then said in a stern, aggressive voice, “The reason he can play the trumpet that well is talent and a unique gift. There has never been a great musician that judged another musician by his race. Music is color-blind, especially to great musicians that love music. Part of being great is to understand chord progression of all types of music, from all over the world. I don’t ever want to hear another racist comment in this class.”

Joey’s mom and dad were great musicians; he knew that was what helped his dad become color-blind—that and the war. It was sad to Joey how many people wanted and expected his dad to judge his mom by her color and not her heart. His dad lost a lot of friends and even some relatives when he married, which is one reason Joey worked so hard at music. Joey hoped to validate their marriage. If he was great at music and made his dad proud, some of the pressure would be lifted.

Joey liked everything about his music class, even the room. It was a large oval-shaped room with hardwood floors built in the twenties. Mr. Elsinson knew Louis Armstrong and told the class Louis Armstrong played music in that very room. The better he got at the trumpet, the more Joey was accepted by his schoolmates. Mr. Elsinson gave Joey free private music lessons after school. He felt lucky to have a student with that much talent. Joey was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Joey’s mom and dad met playing music in the French Quarter. His dad was a great saxophone player, and his mom was a blues singer from Clarksdale, Mississippi, a town in the Mississippi Delta known for blues. As a girl she had worked at the Fair Deal Grocery store on the corner of Issaquena and Fourth Street. She told Joey that the blues started on that corner. Every Saturday night the locals would dress up to meet on that corner to sing the blues. They sang away their sorrows and problems. His dad didn’t play anymore; he was too beat down and defeated to play. The anger in the world blinded his dad. He couldn’t see past it. Joey understood, but hoped his dad would play again.

His mom was strong and sang every day. She sang like an angel. Joey and his mom ran through the scales together. She sang the notes while he played his horn. She was special; she never missed a note and was always pitch-perfect. Joey’s mom understood music and the

emotions it could deliver. She grew up singing in a church and even now could almost make you see God. That wall between people and God became very thin and perforated when his mom sang. Joey and his mom wrote music together and came up with some great songs, but he thought she was also beat down by all the criticisms of the mixed marriage and would not sing in public. He would never let that happen to him. No matter how much people tried to beat him down, he would never lose confidence or hide in a bottle. Never!

His mom and dad had played at all the great clubs in New Orleans: the Al Hirt Club, Dixieland Hall, Preservation Hall, Pete Fountain Club, and the Blue Room at the Roosevelt Hotel. That was before Joey was born, but Mr. Elsinson told Joey how great they were and how beautiful his mom was. They were on the radio and very popular. Fans could not see his mom's race on the radio.

Joey understood how important it was to hear positive words and not surrender your dreams. He was sad that his parents had given up on music because of negative people. His parents' compliments gave him something to hang on to when things got tough at home or school. Joey felt sorry for the kids in the world who just hear negatives and got beat down to the point of hopelessness. Joey's friend in class got no positive feedback at home. His parents even told him he was stupid and would never amount to anything, because he had a severe lisp and was hard to understand. The kids made fun of him, and he cried. Joey pulled the boy to the side and told him that he had the most beautiful voice he had ever heard. That meant a lot to the boy, but more to Joey. He learned something important that day.

It was hard for Joey to talk about being teased at school. It hurt him to hold it in, but it hurt more to talk about it. He just wanted it to go away, not be part of his life. He recognized the hurt and dealt with it but would never let the world bring him down, change his values, or stop him from loving his parents. He never gave up on people, the world, or his parents. Some of the kids at school told him that his mom and dad didn't love him, or they wouldn't have brought someone that was not black or white into this world. He saw what racism did to people, how it had worn down his mom and dad. Joey knew both white and black people were guilty of racism. Sometimes they made him feel like he

didn't belong. He was forever reminded that his mom was black, his dad was white, and he was neither.

He could see with complete clarity how to cure racism. People just need to quit using the words black and white. Why do people have to say my dad married a black woman? Why can't they just say my dad married a beautiful woman named Clare and forget black and white? Why can't all my dad's friends and relatives rejoice in the marriage of two beautiful, talented people and forget the words black and white? That is all it would take to stop racism and bring more happiness to the world. That simple change would change everything everywhere. That was what Joey contemplated.

Mr. Elsinson would always tell the class to practice hard, be prepared. "The more you practice, the less nervous you will be." He pulled Joey aside and told him that again, personally face-to-face, as though to warn him or prepare him for some upcoming concert.

"I need you to work hard on your scales, breathing, and tone. I'm trying to line up something very special for you. Your talent is exceptional, and I want people to hear you at your best," Mr. Elsinson said.

"What people?" Joey asked.

"You'll find out soon."

Joey was not scared to play in front of a crowd. That was what he wanted. His mom and dad wouldn't allow him play in the French Quarter. He knew he could make a lot of money playing on the corner for tourists. He needed to make money for his family; maybe his dad could find some treatment for his sickness. Christmas was only three months away, and he would have loved to buy his mom a new dress for church. It was so tempting for Joey to go against his parents' wishes and play in the French Quarter.

Mr. Elsinson asked to see him after class. He wondered, "Is this the big moment? Does he have a big gig booked?"

"How would you like to play at the Milne Boys Home, the same place Louis Armstrong played? When he was your age, he was sent to the Home for Colored Waifs. That's when he was given his first trumpet; really, it was a cornet. I knew his first instructor, Peter Davis. The Home for Colored Waifs later merged with the Milne. He played at the Milne

several times with the greats to raise money for the home. I wish you could have played with Bunk Johnson, Buddy Petit, Kid Ory, and one of Louis' mentors, Joe "King" Oliver. They would have appreciated your talent. Try to think of Louis Armstrong and feel his spirit when you play at the Milne. By the way, I've invited the conductor of the New Orleans Symphony to the boys home. I want him to hear you."

"I would like to play for those kids. Many of them have had it tough at home. Is that what you wanted me to get ready for?" Joey answered.

"No, that is just a warm-up to bigger things."

"Now I'm nervous. What do I play?"

"Whatever you want, but I want you to show your range and tone. Work on holding those high notes."

"What is the date?"

"November twentieth."

"Perfect! That gives me four weeks to prepare. Can I go there early and play for the kids?"

"Great idea. I will arrange that for this weekend."

III

It was the big day, Joey's first scheduled concert outside of school. His mom and dad couldn't go. His mom had to work, and his dad was hungover and down. He decided to be professional and wore his white shirt, black pants, and thin black clip-on necktie. He wanted this to be special for the kids. Everyone in New Orleans knew Louis Armstrong spent time at the Milne Boys Home, and Joey almost got sent there after one of his dad's episodes. He could really relate to those other kids.

He took off on his bike at 8:00 a.m. sharp, enjoying perfect weather for a special day. He headed down Esplanade, a street lined with overhanging oaks that were over a hundred and thirty years old. The morning was cool, and the sunlight passed through the trees, creating rays of warmth across Joey's left shoulder. He turned right on Carrollton toward City Park. He noticed people on their porches and in their yards, all up early working outside on a perfect morning in New Orleans. He smiled and looked at their faces. Joey waved at people by lifting his fingers off the handlebars. A few people waved back and directed a smile his way. This morning could not have started out any better for Joey.

City Park was so different than the high energy of Carrollton Avenue. After two miles, two turns, and one offset angle across an open lot, he was on Franklin Avenue approaching the boys home from the south. He felt important with his trumpet, dress shirt, and tie waving in the wind behind his neck.

The boys home was an expansive two-story white building with eight large pillars lining the front porch. The building was majestic. Equal to any plantation. Joey walked up the front steps holding his trumpet case and felt a little anxious. He meekly called through the double screen door.

“Anybody there?” Joey asked.

Then a nun answered the door and said, “Hi, you must be Joey Mastretti. I am Sister Ann. Mr. Elsinson has told me all about you. The boys are finishing breakfast and really looking forward to hearing you play.”

“I hope they like it and get interested in music.”

“What songs do you have in mind?”

“I think I’ll play some blues, spirituals, and jazz. Where do you want me to play?”

“Why don’t you plan on playing in the recreation room? After you finish playing, you are welcome to spend some time with the boys. They range from five to sixteen years of age, and some have seen some tough times. Come with me. I’ll take you there. Are you going to need a chair?”

“No, I need to practice playing standing up. That will help with my breathing and wind.”

“I’ll have the boys sit on the tile floor. We have thirty-four kids here this Saturday.”

Joey could hear the boys putting their dishes down in the kitchen. Breakfast was over, and they would be in this room soon. He shone his silver trumpet; blew to clear the horn and started running up and down the scales faster and faster, higher and higher. When they heard him start playing, the room filled in seconds. The sound of the trumpet carried throughout the building. Joey knew he impressed them when he ran through the scales. Sister Ann had a look of amazement and excitement on her face. She was a beautiful middle-aged lady with the smoothest skin. Sister Ann was happy for the boys, and something

positive was happening for their home.

Joey reflected on how every person had a talent, something he or she could be good at, and maybe one kid's sweet spot was music. Hopefully, he would be the one that triggered that interest and change their world. After his first song, there was silence. They were stunned at his abilities, then clapped and cheered. Sister Ann said, "That was so emotional! I really felt it in my heart." She had tears forming in the corners of her eyes, and she wiped them away with a slightly embarrassed look. Joey felt he really touched her and the boys. He played and sang for an hour and then sat down with the boys to answer questions. Maybe he could learn something about them or even himself.

End of this sample Kindle book.

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