

*THE WORLD'S
BEST
SKYLINES*

**ZAHA
HADID'S**
MONUMENTAL LEGACY

IF WALLS COULD TALK
**MIAMI'S HIPPEST
ARTS DISTRICT**

**UNTAMED
TASMANIA**
THE LAST WILD ESCAPE

**THE MODERN
MINIMALIST**

THE MODERN MINIMALIST

Zen by the Bay

CHAPTER FIVE - HOME AT LAST

BY MIKE RAGSDALE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRETT BULTHUIS

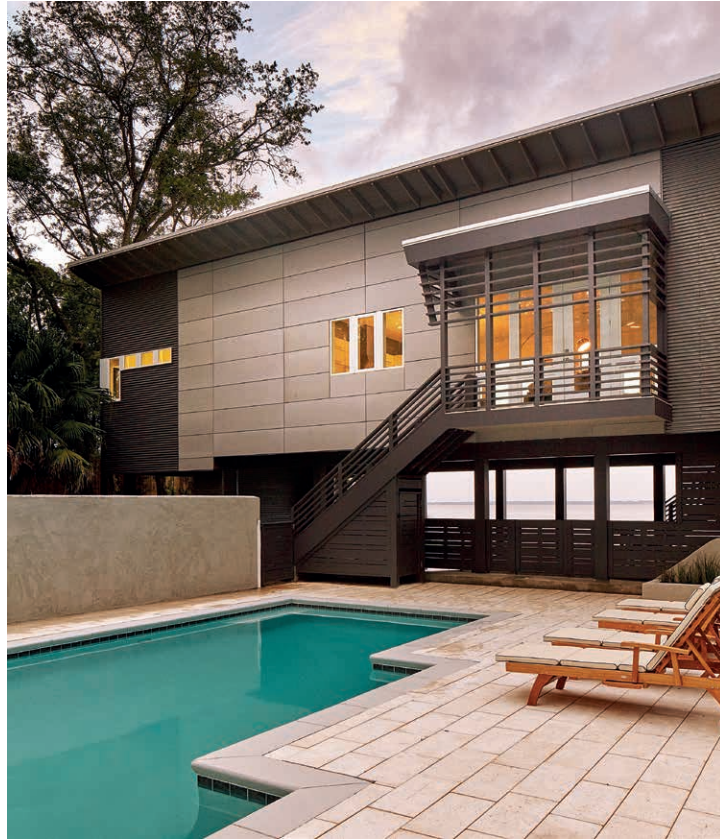
IN APRIL 2014, THE RAGSDALE FAMILY LOST THEIR HOME DURING A FLOOD IN SANTA ROSA BEACH, FLORIDA. THIS IS THE FINAL CHAPTER IN A FIVE-PART SERIES OF *VIE* ARTICLES ABOUT THE FAMILY'S REBUILDING PROCESS.

"How do you make God laugh? Tell him your plans."

In the days following the flood, we didn't really comprehend the gravity of our situation. We thought we'd hammer out a quick little renovation. We thought everything would be covered by insurance, as we had the best policies one could buy. We figured we'd return to a freshly painted home, perhaps with a few new pieces of furniture, in six to eight weeks. Who knew? Maybe this would be our chance to finally redo the master bedroom—something we'd always neglected.

As we sifted through the waterlogged garbage looking for anything salvageable, I opened a footlocker to find my dad's old revolver all covered in rust. That was the first time I cried. It wouldn't be the last. We never imagined the insurance companies would fight us, reimbursing just pennies on the dollar. We never imagined bulldozing our mold-infested home and starting completely over. We never imagined it would take us over two years to return to this special place. These would prove to be the hardest years of my life to date, jam-packed with surprises and stresses, changes and challenges.

Landscape by GreenEarth Landscape Services
Pool deck by Riviera Stoneworks of Foley, Alabama
Pool restoration by Cox Pools Sales and Service
Pool and patio Furniture by La Place USA Furniture Outlet
Landscape plan by Terra Firma Landscapes
Paver installation by Flamingo Hardscapes



Above:
Built by Hart Builders
Residential design by Rolan Studio – Modern Residential
Home automation by AVX – Audio Visual Excellence, Inc.
Paint by Sherwin-Williams of Santa Rosa Beach, Florida
Plumbing and gas by SSE Plumbing and Gas Contractors
Electrical by Xcell Electric Inc.
Doors and windows by Southern Windows and Doors
Insulation by Mid-America Insulation and Supply
Painting by Venez Painting
Home security by Planet Secure
3-D home tour by PerceptionsbyMayer
Gutters by Architectural Gutter Systems

Opposite:
Homeowners Mike and Angela Ragsdale
Custom reclaimed cypress table by Not Too Shabby Boutique
Art by Matt Lyons

WE NEVER IMAGINED IT WOULD TAKE US OVER TWO YEARS TO RETURN TO THIS SPECIAL PLACE.

Over the last two years, our business has grown from zero employees to thirty. We visited five continents, and yet I feel like I wasted more time sitting on the couch piloting my laptop than in all my previous years combined. I used our under-construction house as a convenient excuse to defer my happiness.

“I’ll start YOLO Boarding again when we get into the new house.”

“I’ll go fishing when we get back home.”

“I’ll try yoga once we get settled into the new place.”

Truth be told, I largely wasted those two precious years, longing for the things we didn’t have rather than celebrating the things we did.

Throughout this nauseating roller-coaster ride, Cosmo and Dudley—our two fluffy little white dogs—seemed to take all of these sudden life changes in stride. In particular, Dudley was always irrepressibly happy.

I work from home, so I often need an external signal to indicate that it’s time to power down my laptop, at least for a while. That signal would usually consist of Angela asking me if I was ready for a glass of wine, to which my answer was almost always a resounding “YES.”

A bottomless well of raw happiness, the dogs would sense this sudden shift in our priorities and begin to bustle about. This is generally when I would host what became known in our household as “The Puppy Puppet Showtime,” starring Dudley.

It’s a rather embarrassing ritual—one that I never imagined divulging outside our immediate family—but, it’s necessary for this story. Anyway, the ritual began with me asking Dudley if it was, in fact, “The Puppy Puppet Showtime.”

We moved four times, bouncing from rental home to rental home, purging mementos and memories along the way. My son Carlton went off to college in Orlando. He was ready, even if I wasn’t. My oldest daughter, Jayne, moved to Paris and got engaged. My daughter Kelsey moved to New York, occasionally darting off to semisketchy places like Sierra Leone. Holly became a cheerleader and also proved to be a talented singer-songwriter, performing in local venues. All told, we spent a few nights in the emergency room, totaled a car, fielded a couple of late-night phone calls from police, blew up an engine, and took a couple of ambulance rides. You know, typical parental stuff.

We laughed at weddings and cried at funerals. I spent a night sleeping on our dock, laying flat on my back and gazing up at the cosmos. I began to doubt we’d ever return home. I once woke up alone in a cheap motel room in DeFuniak Springs, Florida, wondering if I should just keep driving north or turn around and go home. Thankfully, I went home. Angela and I learned the key to a successful marriage isn’t perfection—it’s persistence.



Unable to contain his enthusiasm for some limelight, Dudley would then catapult himself across the room and bounce into my lap, grinning from floppy ear to floppy ear with his pink tongue dangling halfway out of his mouth. I would prop him up on his hind legs and then dance his little paws around like a demented puppy puppeteer, all the while singing:

It’s the Puppy Puppet Showtime
It’s the best time of the day
It’s the Puppy Puppet Showtime
Hip hip, Hip hip Hooray!
It’s the Puppy Puppet Showtime
Hip Hip, Hip hip Hooray!
It’s the Puppy Puppet Showtime
Dudley’s favorite time of day!

The song got more and more off-Broadway as it went. (Hey, I said it was embarrassing.) However, this simple daily moment enabled me to draw strength from Dudley’s raw, enthusiastic innocence. Dudley was my happiness recharging station. Whatever problems I had wrestled with all day long were instantly diminished during this passing moment of completely silly, unapologetic joy.

At some point during all of our sudden life changes, I decided to speak with a counselor for the very first time in my life. I wanted to see if someone could teach me some practices designed to help calm my frenetic mind.

She told me that, unlike animals, humans are both blessed and cursed with memories. For example, zebras don’t give much thought to the past or the future. They live entirely in the moment. If a lion

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suddenly attacks a harem of zebras, the zebras will instinctively scatter. The lion will likely kill one or more of the zebra family members, and yet, less than an hour later, the surviving zebras won't give the traumatic matter another thought. "What lion?" they might say, if they could.

Unlike animals, many of us humans constantly second-guess our decisions. We replay mistakes in our minds over and over and over, hyper-analyzing our errors and omissions. We wish we had chosen a different path. We wallow in self-pity and regret. And when our minds are not preoccupied with the past, we long for a romanticized future that will probably never come to pass. Rarely do we actually live in the unique magic of this very moment. And this moment is the only thing we're guaranteed in life—nothing more and nothing less.

Tragically, just two weeks before we moved into our new home, Dudley was attacked by another dog. When I heard Angela screaming for help, I raced outside. The other dog had Dudley squarely in his mouth and was shaking him violently. We wrestled on the ground, with me futilely attempting to pry open the dog's trap-like jaws. At one point, the dog adjusted his grip on Dudley, and I could feel his teeth puncturing my fingers. What seemed like an eternity later, the dog simply let go. But it was too late. This was one of the lowest moments of our lives.



Inset:
Interior design by Cassidy Lyons Pickens of Lovelace Interiors and Joey LaSalle of Lovelace Interiors
Kitchen Work Station by The Galley
Plumbing fixtures by Ferguson

Kitchen appliances by Builder Specialties, Inc. (BSI)
Lighting by Beautiful Lights
Kitchen countertops by Caesarstone and Classic Design Stone
Kitchen island by MSI Stone and Classic Design Stone
Flooring and tile by Renovation Flooring
Glass platter by Fusion Art Glass



“WE HAVE EACH OTHER.
WE’RE GOING TO GET
THROUGH THIS. WE’RE
TOGETHER. WE’RE GOING
TO GET THROUGH THIS.”

As we lay on the ground together, bleeding and weeping, neighbors and first responders offered our family comfort and consolation. Despite the chaos swirling all around us, for a brief moment, Angela and I were the only two people in the world.

“He didn’t suffer,” I promised her. “We have each other. We’re going to get through this. We’re together. We’re going to get through this.”

As I sat in the emergency care room getting stitched up, I thought about Dudley and how his unwavering happiness had helped me get through so many dark moments. He’d never get the chance to run around in our new backyard. He’d never paddle with me again out across the bay. There would be no more chasing lizards in the pine straw, no more Puppy Puppet Showtime.

—
Mirrors throughout by
Seaview Glass and Mirror



Interior design by Cassidy
Lyons Pickens of Lovelace
Interiors and Joey LaSalle
of Lovelace Interiors
Lighting by Beautiful Lights
Custom cocktail table
and furniture by Not Too
Shabby Boutique
Floral design throughout by
Candace Abuvala of Roux 30a

I WAS SCARRED, YES,
BUT SOMEHOW,
WE'D SURVIVED.
SOMEHOW, I KNEW
WITH ABSOLUTE
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WE WERE GOING
TO BE OKAY.

Yet, as I reflected on Dudley's short and happy life, something pretty miraculous happened to me. For two years, I had felt as though a great beast had ripped into my world, clamping down on our family and shaking us around mercilessly. I can't explain it, but following Dudley's death, it seemed as though I'd been suddenly released from life's jaws. I was scarred, yes, but somehow, we'd survived. Somehow, I knew with absolute certainty that we were going to be okay.



Interior design by
Cassidy Lyons Pickens
of Lovelace Interiors
Custom master bed by Not
Too Shabby Boutique
Art by Allison Wickey
Window treatments
throughout by Concept
Blinds & Design
Lighting by Beautiful Lights

I CAN ONLY PAUSE TO LISTEN FOR VOICES FROM MY FUTURE SELF—REASSURANCES THAT WHATEVER PROBLEMS I FACE TODAY WILL INEVITABLY PASS.

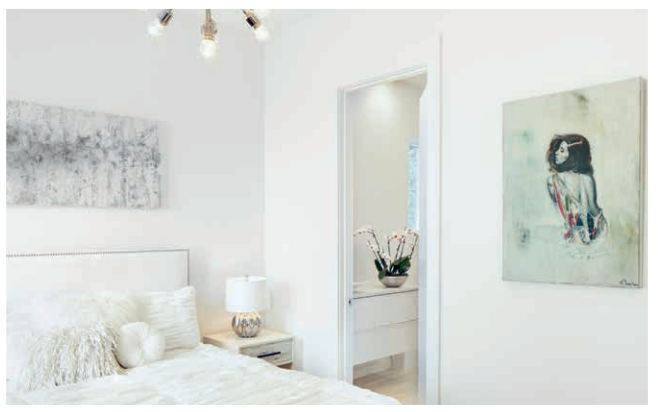
As I lay on the X-ray table, I muttered to myself: "What lion?"

As I sit here today in our ridiculously gorgeous new home, I look south out the window to where our old home once sat. I see myself pecking away on my laptop exactly 781 nights ago. I see myself consumed with whatever trivial worries occupied my thoughts that night, mere hours before the water would seep into our lives.

I wish I could warn myself to get up and get packed. I wish I could remember to get Dad's pistol. I wish I could tell myself it will all be okay—that we'll survive the tumultuous days ahead—that somehow, one day, it will all seem worthwhile. However, my past self is too consumed with his mundane problems to hear any wisdom whispered across the bay breeze. I can only pause to listen for voices from my future self—reassurances that whatever problems I face today will inevitably pass and be replaced with all new challenges. Such is the ebb and flow of life, as terrible and wonderful as it can be. Happiness isn't the destination: it's how you choose to travel.



Custom bathroom cabinets and carpentry by Zimerman Enterprises
Shower glass and bathroom mirrors by Seaview Glass and Mirror
Plumbing fixtures by Ferguson
Countertops by Caesarstone and Classic Design Stone
Custom closets by Alpha Closets & Murphy Beds Inc.
Flooring and tile by Renovation Flooring
Infrared Sauna by Finnleo Sauna and Steam



IT'S DUDLEY'S SMILE,
HIS FINAL GIFT TO ME,
AND IT'S A GIFT I WILL
CARRY AND TREASURE
FOR ALL MY DAYS.

The day before we moved into our new home, I got the stitches removed from my finger. The doctor wrapped it up tightly but told me I could take off the bandage the next day. After a long day of moving-related commotion, Angela and I sat out on our new deck to watch the sun gently descend across Choctawhatchee Bay. It was the moment we'd been fantasizing about for two long years.

"I want to see it," said Angela.

"What?"

"I want to see your finger," she said. "Is it gross? Did it hurt when they took the stitches out?"

"It was a little tender," I admitted.

"I want to see it." (Angela has a peculiar penchant for all things gross and disgusting.)

I gently unwrapped the bandage and looked down at my new scar. I smiled. I held my finger up to show Angela.

"It's shaped like a smile," I said.

"Of course it is," she replied, tears welling up in her eyes.

It's Dudley's smile, his final gift to me, and it's a gift I will carry and treasure for all my days. ▀



Above left:
Art by Mary Hong (left)
and Matt Lyons (right)



Mike and Angela with Cosmo
Photo by Lisa Burwell

EPILOGUE:

We would never have returned home without the help of so many generous friends and partners. Angela and I would like to express our sincere thanks to Kristi and Thom of Hart Builders; Ed of Rolan Studio; Cassidy of Lovelace Interiors; Joey of Lovelace Interiors; Marisol and Tony of Not Too Shabby Boutique; Shannon and Judy at Ferguson; Mike of Renovation Flooring; Will and Katie of Beautiful Lights; Tania of Classic Design Stone; Maggie of Caesarstone; Stan and Chris of AVX Audio Video Excellence; Joseph at Seaview Glass and Mirror; Charley, Justin, and Matt at GreenEarth Landscape Services; Chris and Sam at Cox Pools Sales and Service; Ralph at Riviera Stoneworks; Maria and Hendrik at La Place USA Furniture Outlet; Ashley of Terra Firma Landscapes; Joe of PerceptionsbyMayer; Linda of The Galley; Andres of Venez Painting; Jason of Sherwin-Williams; Shannon and Joel of RAVE; Ken at Planet Secure; Mason at Builder Specialties (BSI); Suzanne at Concept Blinds and Design; Amy at Alpha Closets & Murphy Beds; Rodney of Mid-America Insulation; Wellington at Zimerman Enterprises, Inc.; Albert at Flamingo Hardscapes; Leron at Southern Windows and Doors; Kyle at SSE Plumbing and Gas; Gratton at Xcell Electric; Eric at Architectural Gutter Systems; artists Matt Lyons, Allison Wickey, and Mary Hong; Gillian at Fusion Art Glass; and Lisa and the entire wonderful team at *VIE* magazine for sharing our family's story.