The Pursuit of Happyness Book Summary, by Chris Gardner

by Allen Cheng


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Full Summary of The Pursuit of Happyness

Overall Summary

Chris Gardner's memoir, The Pursuit of Happyness, tells the story of his pursuit to be successful and rise above the challenges he faced as a poor black child in Milwaukee. His mother had dreams that were taken away from her when she was unable to pay for college tuition. Her first two relationships with men left her with children. But it was her third relationship that caused the most damage; he hurt Chris and took advantage of him by leaving him fatherless.

The children all grow to hate Freddie and, in the instances where Bettye Jean tries to leave him, he finds a way of reporting her to the police. Gardner grows up with a deep fear of uncertainty but is also quick, curious and daring. He's an avid reader goaded on by his mother's sentiment that “the most dangerous place in the world is a public library” who vows to be better than Freddie or his abandoning father.

Gardner grew up during the 1960s and 70s, a time when he was able to witness the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement and Sexual Revolution. He also gained his first experiences with romance and sex, falling in love with Sherry Dyson from Virginia.

Gardner joins the Navy with plans of seeing the world, but he ends up stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. While there, Gardner learns medical skills and publishes articles in respected medical journals. He is then invited to San Francisco where he becomes an assistant for a heart surgeon, Robert Ellis. Gardner feels fulfilled professionally while missing something personally in his life so he resumes
contact with Sherry Dyson and they get married.

Gardner is too wild for marriage. He wants a more exciting life and seeks out other women to distract him from his marital problems. Gardner feels an instant bond with Christopher, as though he knew the boy in a previous lifetime.

Gardner left Sherry for Jackie, but they don't have much in common. Outside of the bedroom, Jackie wants Gardner to make more money and encourages him to quit his medical research career. He decides to take a job as a salesman instead, which he finds enjoyable because it's competitive. However, he doesn't find that there are many opportunities for advancement in sales.

One day, a young man is walking through a hospital parking lot and sees a red Ferrari. He asks the driver how he became so wealthy. The driver says that he is an investment banker. This inspires the young man to pursue his dream of becoming an investment banker as well. After several interviews with various firms, he gets hired by Dean Witter & Company, where he works hard for many years before eventually becoming wealthy himself.

Meanwhile, Gardner's relationship with Jackie is falling apart and now he must take care of Christopher by himself. They stay in shelters and cheap hotels, but eventually Gardner decides to leave Christopher at Reverend Cecil Williams' shelter for homeless children.

As Gardner's salary increases, he is able to find a stable home. He then moves on from his job at First Boston and finds work with Bear Stearns where he can manage his own investments.

Gardner did well in both San Francisco and New York, where he pioneered his own road. He concentrated on wealthy and famous African-American clients. Gardner then started his own brokerage firm, Gardner Rich & Company, in Chicago to practice conscious capitalism and philanthropy.

**Prologue: “Go Forward”**

The author starts his book by reflecting on two events that helped him survive and succeed.

A man named John Gardner saw a red Ferrari and decided to offer the space where his own car was parked in exchange for information. The man, who was a stockbroker, introduced him to some people in the business world.

He had a revelation when he was 16 years old. He watched college basketball with his mother and thought about how much money the players would make. His mother told him, "If you want to, one day you could make a million dollars." This opened up his mind to other careers besides sports or music for black men.

Gardner is grateful to his mother for being confident in him. However, he realizes that she didn't live out her dreams because of the way things turned out. Nevertheless, they both have a similar story and he's glad that their stories are intertwined.
Chapter 1: “Candy”

Gardner remembers a time he stayed at the Robinson's house with his sister, Ophelia. They had been adopted by different families, but Gardner and Ophelia were placed together in the same foster home. One day, a woman came to visit them who made candy and smelled good. She was actually their mother, whom they hadn't seen for quite some time.

The author received a patchy impression of his mother's life as a Cinderella story, but without the fairy godmother and with an unhappy ending. Bettye Jean Gardner was raised in rural Louisiana during the Depression, where she was a star student at Rayville Colored High School despite enduring poverty and racism. Her ambition was to become an educator, but after her mother died, her father’s wife made sure that the money intended for college would be spent on their daughter instead. When Bettye Jean got pregnant by another man after moving to Milwaukee with her brothers, Thomas Turner swept her off her feet either romantically or by force. The child of this union is James Gardner and he is born on February 9th 1954.

Gardner's father was a figment of the vast unknown to him. He barely mentioned him and had no connection with his stepfather, who he described as "some ill-begotten cross between a pit bull and Godzilla.” His mother, Bettye Jean, was absent from his life because she tried to work while receiving welfare assistance.

Gardner developed a love of reading at an early age. He read The Sword and the Stone, which inspired him to believe that he would someday find his destiny.

Bettye Jean leaves prison and reunites with her children; however, Freddie also comes back into their lives.

Chapter 2: “The No-Daddy Blues”

Bettye Jean is a great mother to Gardner. She encourages his interest in reading and supports him throughout his life. Her husband, Freddie, was illiterate until he was thirty-three years old. He became violent and would often chase the family out of their house with his shotgun. He also taunted Gardner about not having a father because it made him feel like an outsider in society. At age eight, Gardner makes a long term plan that if he ever had children they would never go through what he did as a child without knowing who their father is or disappearing from their lives. Meanwhile, Freddie remains a challenge for Bettye Jean and her son; on one occasion she wakes up to find her husband unconscious on the floor with blood everywhere due to hitting her head against the wall while throwing things around the room in anger after arguing with Bettye Jean about something trivial. While they wait for help from paramedics, Gardner cleans up because “the idea that white paramedics will see all this blood everywhere and this dirty stove as well is too shameful to bear” so my job is to clean it up, prove we are decent people living here instead of savages.

Bettye Jean is saved by Freddie and says that he will never be allowed to return. However, the cycle of him leaving and returning continues, just like rain in a predictable pattern. Gardner develops an entrenched hatred of Freddie and contemplates several methods for killing him. Bettye Jean has her own
plan for killing Freddie but gets caught before she can execute it. She tries to burn the house down with him inside while all her children are outside so they won't get hurt too much from the fire, but Freddie wakes up at the last minute and stops it from happening. He uses this against her when she's tried on parole violation charges because he claims that she was trying to kill him as revenge for his previous actions against her family members and herself.

Chapter 3: “Where’s Momma?”

When Bettye Jean goes to prison, Gardner is sent to live with his uncle and aunt. This time, he is without Ophelia, who has been sent somewhere else for reasons that aren't clear. This experience is disorienting for him because he's living in a new environment with unfamiliar people and there are no explanations about what happened or why everyone moved around so much.

Gardner has trouble adjusting to Ella Mae's rules and notices that Uncle Willie was a little off since returning from the Korean War. He had shell shock. Uncle Willie would fantasize about all sorts of things, and the family had to bring him home from the Palmer House Hotel one time because he imagined he was living there.

Gardner is looking for a male role model in his life at this point and chooses Uncle Henry, the brother of his mother. He admires him most because he's dapper, having seen the world, and gives Gardner Miles Davis' music as well. When Uncle Henry drowns in a boating accident, Gardner is devastated but tries to act strong about it. However, when he sees Bettye Jean at Uncle Henry’s funeral service (after glimpsing her briefly before), he misses his mother again.

Chapter 4: “Bitches’ Brew (side a)”

When Bettye Jean is released from prison, she reunites with her children. One of them is Ophelia who had a baby while in jail. Gardner wonders how the pregnancy occurred and why his uncles won't help him or his mother out. He also has anger towards Freddie because he keeps leaving and coming back to be violent to everyone else in the house.

Although money is tight, Bettye Jean finds the funds to give Gardner trumpet lessons because she knows he wants to be a future Miles Davis. Gardner practices hard and also joins a gang. He often gets into fights with other people who don't agree with his views on life. When he's sent to jail for shoplifting, it's his mother's disappointed expression that corrects him and helps him focus more on music instead of fighting. She tells him that all her fights with Freddie are about Gardner and warns him not to get in trouble anymore by telling him how important school is for his future career as a musician.

Now a teenager, Gardner goes through puberty and experiences firsthand that the world is not all black. He starts going to an all-white school in East Milwaukee after he's bused there with some of his friends. During this time, he meets Father James Groppi who organizes marches for minority rights. These marches are important because they give him opportunities to meet girls, which is something he’s interested in as a teenager.

Gardner begins to think about his physical appearance and how it affects the girls he likes. He thinks that
because of the community's preference for lighter skin and "whiter" features, such as Smokey Robinson, he is less attractive than other men. However, when Gardner embraces Black Power, which celebrates black beauty and culture by growing a full afro, he realizes that his physical appearance has nothing to do with what makes him attractive or not.

Chapter 5: “Bitches Brew (side b)”

Feeling volatile and in need of money, Gardner breaks into a home-and-garden show to steal electronics. He decides to sell them to three suspicious men who live in his building. One of the men returns, initially pretending that he has some money for Gardner while pulling out a knife and raping him anally twice. The man then knocks him unconscious with a cinder block on his head.

Freddie's home life is violent. His father tries to kill him by dropping a refrigerator on him, but he survives. Freddie says that he loves violence and calls himself the Great White Hunter of the Ghetto because his favorite game is hunting animals in the ghetto.

In school, Gardner is restless and his coach makes him a linebacker instead of quarterback. He's much more passionate about his activism and band, The Realistic Band. They're in the style of James Brown. He also has some sexual experiences with various women he meets. However, he falls in love with Sherry Dyson when she buys a t-shirt at a military surplus store that says "Shot through the heart". She's from Richmond, Virginia and they start talking on the phone for hours every day until Gardner runs up $900 worth of phone bills cleaning bedpans to pay off his debt.

After high school, Gardner decides to join the navy because he wants to see the world. Once he joins, however, he realizes that it is not what his mother would have wanted for him and goes off in search of his own happiness. His mother sends him off with a smile that could launch 1000 ships.

Chapter 6: “The World Beyond”

When Gardner goes to naval boot camp, he has to be clean-shaven and disciplined. He graduates from bootcamp into Naval School, a medical training for the Navy. While there, he realizes that his desire to see the world will have to wait as he commits himself to life as a navy medic.

At the hospital, Gardner is trained by a woman named Charlotte Gannon. He takes advantage of the opportunity to learn as much as he can by asking questions. With his curiosity and intelligence, Gardner does very well at his job and earns the title "Doc," despite having no formal medical training. His competence helps him overcome any racial prejudice that patients may have against black doctors—a prejudice that he also has when he first arrives in New York City from Georgia:

Gardner, who is a doctor, goes to San Francisco to be the research assistant for heart surgeon Robert Ellis.

Chapter 7: “Pictures of a Life”

Gardner arrives in San Francisco, which he comes to regard as "the Paris of the Pacific," and lives with three friends at the YMCA.
Dr. Ellis, a renowned cardiothoracic surgeon, works with Gardner in his research lab that studies open heart surgery. He is impressed by Gardner's work and shows promise despite not having a medical degree. He learns from Dr. Ellis as well as Rip Jackson and Gary Campagna about the importance of being "the right touch" for heart surgery. By co-authoring papers with them, he trains interns from Ivy League schools in medicine on how to perform it correctly. Some of those students are receptive to his instruction while others look down upon him for not having formal education like they do. However, he trusts in himself and remembers Bettye Jean's lesson that "no one else can take away your legitimacy or give you legitimacy if you don’t claim it for yourself", so he doesn't let their judgement affect him too much. Given the experimental nature of this work, he imagines himself becoming a prime candidate for an Ivy League school after presenting results at conferences where other researchers present their findings.

Gardner can't seem to find a relationship, and gets frustrated. He calls Sherry Dyson, and they set a wedding date of June 18th, 1977.

After a wedding in Virginia, Sherry and Gardner moved to San Francisco, where they lived happily for three years. However, Gardner was never satisfied with the quiet life they had together and missed his wild days. The ideal home that he craved all of his childhood ended up being too rigid for him. As a result, he started drinking again and cheated on Sherry with an unstable woman.

Gardner and Sherry were going to get married, but Gardner decided he would not become a doctor because the medical field was changing. He told Sherry about this decision, which upset her since she wanted him to be a doctor. The couple started drifting apart and Gardner cheated on Sherry with Jackie, who had an open sexual lifestyle.

Chapter 8: “Turned Out (an intro)”

Jackie and Gardner were very sexually active. They had sex like there was no tomorrow, and nineteen days later Jackie got pregnant. Gardner promised to never abandon the baby, so he moved in with her. However, they weren't compatible outside of the bedroom because she taunted him about his potential as a father without ever having had one himself. He bonded with Christopher from the moment he held him for the first time: "When I cradled him in my arms for the very first time, it felt like we knew each other from a previous lifetime."

Jackie and Gardner's son is born, which gives him a sense of responsibility. He decides to get a better-paying job as a sales representative for medical equipment. Although he has never done this before, he excels at it because of the competition involved. In the process, he discovers his biological father in Monroe, Louisiana from whom he learns that there are many illegitimate children like himself who have been raised by their mother and her family. This helps him let go of what might have been with his own father while providing some closure about where he came from and giving him confidence to tackle other challenges in life.

Chapter 9: “Turned Out (advanced)”

Gardner's relationship with Jackie is becoming tense because he needs more money. He tries to figure out
how to advance from his $30,000 salary at Van Waters and Rogers, but his manager humiliate him in front of buyers. A month later, Gardner has a meeting with Bob Bridges that changed everything. Bridges was a stockbroker who made $80,000 per month.

Although Gardner is inexperienced in all matters concerning Wall Street, he's confident that his experience and skills will help him succeed as a stockbroker.

Bob Bridges offers to introduce Gardner to some branch managers at brokerage firms in San Francisco. When he goes for interviews with larger firms like Merrill Lynch, he gets a rush simply being in the environment; it's just like when he first heard Miles Davis and saw how his music could change everyone's mood.

However, Gardner is rejected because he's not from a prestigious school. He doesn't have a certain pedigree that many people in the business world look for when hiring employees. However, after meeting someone who gives him a chance to work at E.F. Hutton, Gardner leaves his sales job and starts working there. Unfortunately, this man gets fired soon after he hires Gardner; as such, Gardner has no job to go back to and doubts himself even more than before since his girlfriend also thinks less of him now that he has nothing going for him professionally or personally.

After a fight, Jackie tries to leave and Gardner pulls her back by the hands. He lets go of her when she falls into some rosebushes. She goes off to get two police officers and they arrest Gardner for domestic violence based on unpaid parking tickets that he cannot afford.

After being released from jail, Gardner realizes that he and Jackie can't be together. He hopes to find a solution for their relationship but discovers that she and Christopher have left him.

Chapter 10: “California Dreamin’”

Gardner is a young man who gets lost on his way to an interview at Dean Witter. He goes to the wrong building, and when he realizes his mistake, he turns around and sees a woman in distress. He ends up getting hired by Mr. Albanese even though Gardner shows up for the interview wearing jeans and paint-speckled sneakers because he was unable to access other clothing that day.

After some time, Gardner finds a cheap rooming house in Oakland and takes BART into the Financial District. He applies what he's learned about himself to his work as a stockbroker, reinforcing his belief that “no matter what I had in my pocket or how much money my suit cost, nobody could prevent me from acting like a winner”.

Gardner was a successful stockbroker because he found his own niche. He was able to find success by doing things differently from the other brokers and focusing on research. Many of these other brokers were racist, so Gardner decided to focus on working with clients over the phone rather than face-to-face.

Because of the pressures they face, Gardner and his son Christopher end up staying in a hotel that's frequented by prostitutes. The prostitutes feel sorry for them and give them some money so they can afford to stay there. Sometimes, they sleep at the office as well.
Eventually, Gardner was able to stay at the shelter for homeless people founded by Glide Memorial Church's pastor. The rules of the hostel dictate that they cannot stay there at night, but Gardner maintains his positive focus: "If I kept my focus on what I could control, worry and fear were kept at bay."

Gardner has a unique experience of both sides of the California dream. He lives in a small house with his young son, but it is located in an area that was once a ghetto. When he can afford to rent or buy an apartment, he chooses one that has been neglected and used as storage space by its owner. Gardner's life improves when he no longer needs to live on the streets with his son.

**Chapter 11: “Roses in the Ghetto”**

Gardner is happy to have a roof over his head, but he and his son are still cautious about money. For example, they only share one plate of food at the diner. Once Christopher learns how to use the potty, he's able to attend day care with other children in their neighborhood.

Gardner is focused on fatherhood and his career. He acknowledges that he has not been able to have a romantic or sexual relationship with anyone because of the way Jackie treated him when Christopher was born.

In his work, he learns a principle: to find what the customer wants and provide it. He also learns that he has an aptitude for volatility when they talk about stocks. When the market is falling most stock brokers want to sell, but Gardner decides to stay calm knowing that it will go up again. His strength lies in his ability to build relationships with customers based on trust rather than just making money. He doesn't feel like he's riding a wave of success; instead, there's something bigger coming ahead of him.

**Chapter 12: “Sphere of Influence”**

Gardner leaves Dean Witter for Bear Stearns, a rival brokerage firm run by people who are poor, smart and have a deep desire to become wealthy.

As Gardner becomes more successful at his new firm, he and Christopher move back to San Francisco's Hayes Valley. They enjoy a comfortable lifestyle as the neighborhood is affluent.

The author learns the importance of networking from his boss, Marshall Geller. He then cold-calls some people in Texas who have a lot of money and are known to be racists. He does well for them, but he continues to hear racist jokes from J.R., one of those millionaires. When J.R visits Bear Stearns' offices, he is surprised that Gardner is black because they do not do business with blacks there.

He was inspired and saw the light. It wasn't a white thing or black thing, it was green. He continued his relationship with Gardner and made $200,000 per year from him.

Gardner then moves to New York City, where he starts working for a stockbroker. He's also been having an affair with Jackie in Los Angeles, and she has given birth to his daughter Jacintha. Gardner decides that the best way to make money is by managing money for people like Oprah Winfrey, but also on behalf of black institutions and entrepreneurs. By 1987, he has so much business that he sets up his own...
brokerage company in Chicago called Gardner Rich & Company. He gets financial assistance from WJ Kennedy III who runs North Carolina Medical Life Insurance Company (the largest minority-owned insurance company). His vision extends beyond just making money; it involves giving back to society through "conscious capitalism", which means sharing profits with the public sector.

Gardner returns to Milwaukee and his mother's home. He has two children who grow up in Chicago with him, as well as a large family of relatives. His business is successful and he works hard to nurture one of his clients, the National Education Association. Gardner also travels around the world to many different places.

**Epilogue: “Blessed Beyond the Dreams of a Thousand Men”**

Gardner has travelled to South Africa twice. He wanted to meet Nelson Mandela, so he agreed to go there as long as he could arrange a private meeting with him.

Gardner was moved by his first meeting with Nelson Mandela. He recalls that Mandela called him "son" and told him, “welcome home” when he met the anti-apartheid leader for the first time. This experience helped Gardner get over his childhood issues with his father. In this passage from "The Call of South Africa," Gardner recounts how he witnessed a vote count in an election where Mandela’s ally, Thabo Mbeki, won.

Gardner is nervous about meeting Mandela, so he buys a shirt like the one that Mandela wears. However, when they meet, Gardner tells him of his plans to use capital to help people in South Africa: “I am going to use everything I have learned as a stockbroker for twenty-five years and apply it toward making a difference in the world through capitalism”. He takes a picture with Mandela before leaving. Afterwards he meets Reverend Cecil Williams who will help him create more affordable housing for San Francisco's working class: “It was truly about coming full circle. It’s not business; it’s personal”.

In 2005, Gardner spoke to the National Education Association about how mentors can change a young person's life.

Gardner misses Bettye Jean, who died ten years before. She was the first to give him a chance in his career as an author. He credits her for being the one to make it possible for him to live his dream of writing books and sharing them with others.

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