



THIRTIETH EDITION

# FOUNTAINS

2 0 1 9

A PCC STUDENT PUBLICATION

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## INTRODUCTION

A pearl is customarily the gift for a thirtieth anniversary, a significant fact as *Fountains* reaches the milestone of its thirtieth year of publication.

Pearls take from a few months to nearly thirty-five years to completely form. When an irritant slips into the tight confinement of a clam or oyster, the shell responds by secreting materials that coat the intruding irritant. The layers secreted by the shell gradually form the coveted treasure we recognize as a pearl. But even more astounding are the efforts of pearl divers to collect these undersea jewels. Divers endure dangerous waters and sometimes plunge 125 feet deep to claim the polished treasure we admire.

Our lives are full of pearls. We don't see them at first, but that's because pearls begin with an irritant, a trial, a conflict. Over time, the trials that fill our days—whether they are circumstances, people, or internal conflicts—begin to form something beautiful. We don't often find joy in the trials of our lives, but God transforms our pain-filled experiences and frustrations into something worthy and invaluable.

However, pearls do not simply drop into our laps. We must seek them out ourselves. We must lay hold of life. We must break the surface of our fears. Venturing beyond the things we know, we leave the shallows, tiptoeing to the edge of our comfort zones, recognizing that the adventure, the pain, and the uncertainty will be worth it in the end. We go places we haven't been. We navigate new horizons. But from these uncharted seas, we are ever moving forward, ever broadening the map of our lives, ever gleaning, and ever moving in new directions.



In this thirtieth edition of *Fountains*, we dive deeper. These selections reflect how God transforms even the most insignificant irritants into glossy, valuable pearls. While different plots and voices emerge within this collection of stories, one thread ties them together: the characters seek for something deeper, learning to brave new directions.

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Senior Editors

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hannah Edwards". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

HANNAH EDWARDS

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Grace Shaffer". The signature is cursive and elegant, with a large initial "G".

GRACE SHAFFER

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the 1990s, the number of people with a mental health problem has increased by 50% (Mental Health Foundation 2000). The prevalence of mental health problems has increased in all age groups, but the increase has been most marked in the young (Mental Health Foundation 2000).

There is a growing awareness of the need to address the mental health needs of young people. The Department of Health (2000) has set out a strategy for mental health care for young people, and the National Institute for Mental Health (2000) has published a report on the mental health of young people. The report highlights the need for a multi-agency approach to the care of young people with mental health problems, and the need for a focus on prevention and early intervention.

One of the key challenges in the care of young people with mental health problems is the need to provide a range of services that meet the needs of young people with different types of mental health problems. This includes the need for a range of services that provide support, advice, and information, as well as the need for a range of services that provide treatment and care. The National Institute for Mental Health (2000) has identified a number of key areas for research and development in the care of young people with mental health problems, including the need for a range of services that meet the needs of young people with different types of mental health problems.

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SECTION 1

# BREAKING THE SURFACE



the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are aged 65 and over has increased from 10.5 million to 13.5 million, and the number of people aged 75 and over has increased from 4.5 million to 6.5 million (Office for National Statistics 2000). The number of people aged 65 and over is projected to increase to 16.5 million by 2020, and the number of people aged 75 and over to 8.5 million (Office for National Statistics 2000). The increase in the number of people aged 65 and over is due to a combination of factors, including a decline in the birth rate, a decline in the death rate, and a decline in the rate of emigration.

The increase in the number of people aged 65 and over has led to a corresponding increase in the number of people who are dependent on others for their care. In 1990, there were 1.5 million people aged 65 and over who were dependent on others for their care, and this number is projected to increase to 2.5 million by 2020 (Office for National Statistics 2000). The increase in the number of people who are dependent on others for their care is due to a combination of factors, including a decline in the birth rate, a decline in the death rate, and a decline in the rate of emigration.

The increase in the number of people who are dependent on others for their care has led to a corresponding increase in the number of people who are living in care homes. In 1990, there were 1.5 million people aged 65 and over who were living in care homes, and this number is projected to increase to 2.5 million by 2020 (Office for National Statistics 2000). The increase in the number of people who are living in care homes is due to a combination of factors, including a decline in the birth rate, a decline in the death rate, and a decline in the rate of emigration.

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BY DEVON COUNTERMAN

# BURN AND BLOSSOM

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What comes after the fire?

**E**dgar's eyes slowly peeled open at the sound of the truck outside his open bedroom window. Every morning that dreadful truck drove past his slumbering home, the driver blaring down on his horn for no other reason than what Edgar thought must have been to wake him up. Of course, he never could be certain the driver wasn't just honking at something or somebody else, but he still took it as a personal insult. The problem probably could be avoided altogether if Edgar just kept his bedroom window closed. Instead, he left it cracked open every night for the cool breeze to flood his room. It was an illogical thing, but Edgar always said that seventy-two-year-olds were allowed to be as illogical as they pleased.

Edgar exhaled loudly and grunted as he slowly lifted himself out of bed. His bones sang a song, cracking and popping as he shoved his feet into two old slippers. The clock on his nightstand beeped loudly, signaling the new morning.

"Would you pipe down? The truck already woke me up! You should do your job you know—you could get fired for something like this," he said to the defenseless clock.

He shuffled slowly along the worn hardwood floor to the bathroom where he felt along the wall for the light switch. He grunted again as he found the switch, flicked it on, and winced at the warm light filling the room. He smiled at his craggy reflection in the bathroom mirror. As he embarked on his morning routine, he thought of the days when his reflection

seemed much more handsome. Unlike many of his friends, Edgar remembered, and he remembered well. He could still picture waking up as a kid in the blue morning light of Virginia, in a small home tucked away between rolling hills and winding streams. And of course, Edgar remembered asking his sweetheart Millie to marry him one fine June day.

Edgar hobbled downstairs and into the kitchen. After displaying his culinary skills, he plopped into his favorite seat with a bowl of oatmeal and looked out at the garden.

**THEY WERE THE  
TALK OF THE TOWN.**

It was a well-known fact that Millie and Edgar Wallace had cultivated the most beautiful garden in town. The local newspaper wrote articles about their lush oasis nestled next to their happy white home. As Millie would say, they were the talk of the town.

When Millie and Edgar began planting their garden years ago, they never imagined that it would turn out so spectacular. They would work on something new every day—except Sundays of course, because Sundays were for church, and *Edgar, dear, would you please tuck your shirt in?* Planting flowers, building fences and bird feeders, and weeding filled their days. And at night, when weather allowed, they'd sit in their garden under the warm glow of lights and lanterns, enjoying their little haven. To Edgar, the garden wasn't just made of dirt and grass. It was a daily reminder of Millie, who had passed away three years ago. Without Millie around, he still kept the tradition of working in their garden whenever he had time.

\*\*\*\*\*

Edgar woke up the next morning, not to the truck horn he had grown accustomed to, but to fire engine cries and the smell of smoke. He rose much faster than usual, not having time to hear his cracking bones or smirk at his old face in the mirror. Instead, he haphazardly wobbled downstairs, grabbing his

wife's ashes from the mantel along the way, and shuffled out the front door. Edgar stood in his robe and flannel pajamas, holding Millie's urn close to his chest. The firefighters weren't there because his house was on fire. They were there because his garden was on fire. Well, what was left of his garden.

Stinging tears blurred his vision. "What happened?" he asked.

He tried getting the attention of one of the firefighters, but they were busy putting out flames. They didn't seem like people, just yellow suits doing their duty. Edgar watched with dread as the hard streams of water from their hoses stripped away the flowers from the earth. Flames danced up the side of the white archway covered in ivy and around one of the fences. Edgar could do nothing but watch the fire and water consume his garden. Finally, the firefighters put out the last of the flames. After looking for the source of the fire, they came to him with apologetic faces.

"Listen, Mr. Wallace, I'm real sorry about your garden. I know it meant a lot to you, but it's been pretty dry this season. It looks like someone tossed their cigarette, and it just caught fire. You're lucky someone saw the smoke, or else it woulda taken your whole house down too, and you wouldn't be standin' here." The young firefighter made the mistake of thinking that Edgar would want to look on the bright side.

"As far as I'm concerned," Edgar began, "I've lost Millie again."

The day after the fire, Edgar's alarm clock sounded, not the delivery truck. But it didn't matter because he didn't plan to get up any time soon. He dreaded looking out the window to see the destroyed garden.

The daily reminder of Millie was gone, and he didn't have the strength to fix it. He went on with his daily routine, working a few days a week at the bank, going to the store and church, and visiting friends. But he refused to look at the garden.

**HE DIDN'T PLAN TO  
GET UP ANYTIME  
SOON.**



It wasn't until a few weeks later when Edgar was walking to his car that he unintentionally looked at his yard. It wasn't nearly as destroyed as it had been just a few weeks prior. Edgar had been oblivious to the fact that someone must have been stealthily fixing it for him. How long this had been happening was unknown to Edgar; but despite the kind gesture, he felt uneasy about a stranger working outside his house all day.

"I don't have a clue who it is, but I don't like it," Edgar said into the phone as his friend, Rand, listened. "Someone's probably out there, scoping the place out for ways to steal from me. I'm gonna be on the six o'clock news because some weirdo slashed my throat and buried me out there," Edgar said.

"Please, Edgar, it's probably just someone from the church helping, heaven knows why. If you want to know who it is, stick around tomorrow and look for someone," Rand said.

Edgar followed Rand's advice and peered out the kitchen window for any sign of activity. An hour of shifty eyes and jumping at every noise passed before he finally saw the culprit. Someone wearing a backward baseball cap and dirty jeans began shoveling outside. Edgar tottered out the door and moved to the edge of his deck, picking up the only form of defense nearby.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" Edgar yelled. This seemed to slightly startle the young man but not enough to make him scatter.

"Oh—uh, hi, Mr. Wallace," he said. The young man took a few steps toward Edgar. In defense, Edgar quickly held down the handle on the garden hose he was wielding and sprayed the boy.

"What are you doing, Mr. Wallace? I'm just here to help you," he said, shielding himself from the water. "My name is Travis, Travis Crosby! I live a few blocks over."

"How long've you been coming here, trespassing?" Edgar asked.

"For about two weeks or so. I saw what happened, and I know you can't exactly fix this up yourself."

“Why are you helping me anyway? What’s in it for you?” Edgar asked. Edgar seemed to be speaking in much harsher tones these days, despite his happy-go-lucky disposition.

“Well I—I don’t think it’s right that someone did this to you. I’m just tryin’ to make things right for you, Mr. Wallace,” Travis answered.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“It’s the summer, sir.”

“Well, what about your parents?”

“What *about* my parents?”

“Aren’t they concerned about you spending all your time with a mean old man?”

“Mr. Wallace, everyone knows you’re not a mean old man.”

“Yeah—well, I can have an imagination, can’t I?”

“Listen, I’ve already got a good start, and if we act quickly, you’ll have most of the summer to enjoy your garden, all right?”

Edgar sniffed loudly and thought for a moment. “I’ll go get my gloves.”

And so it went. Travis came to Edgar’s friendly white home and worked in the garden with Edgar, helping him restore his precious garden. Edgar talked most of the time, happy to tell stories of his youth, especially the ones about Millie. Travis didn’t share much, yet Edgar could

tell he was a friendly and thoughtful boy. Travis lived nearby and always admired the Wallace’s garden, like many people in town. Despite the difference in age, they got along well. As they worked, they even became friends.



Before long, the pair cleared up all the burnt wreckage and raked away the dead plants and grass. They tidied up the winding stone path that led through the garden to Millie's favorite part—the large white swing that hung between the two oak trees near the fountain. They repainted the fence and the archway and planted fresh flowers, bushes, and vegetables. After a few weeks of hard work, they were done and ready to celebrate their accomplishment.



Travis sat fiddling with his baseball hat at the patio table in the newly flourishing garden beneath the shade of the oak trees. Edgar hobbled out from the house and down the stone path, carrying a tray of food.

“Looks sharp, Travis!” Edgar beamed. “This garden is wonderful, and I couldn’t have done it without you. Millie would be proud, that’s for certain.”

Travis smiled weakly and cleared his throat. “Mr. Wallace, I have to tell you something.” Travis peered up to Edgar’s cheerful face then down to his tattered baseball cap once more.

“Well, what’s the matter, Travis? Everything all right?”

“When your garden burnt down, I felt awful—”

“Well, me too, Travis,” Edgar said with a chuckle. He settled into the chair and took a big gulp of lemonade. “Drink up. You deserve it after all your hard work,” Edgar said.

“Mr. Wallace, you don’t understand.” Travis seemed to finally have Edgar’s attention. Even the flowers and plants seemed to be leaning in to listen. Travis shoved his hand into his front pocket and pulled something out. Edgar squinted his eyes to see what exactly it was that Travis seemed to think was so serious. Travis put the object on the table between them and slid it toward Edgar. A box of cigarettes. “It was me, Mr. Wallace.”

Edgar stared at the box for a few silent moments before Travis started sputtering out apologies. “Mr. Wallace, I really am so sorry! It was an accident! I used to stand on the corner before school to wait for my friend, and that day, the day of the fire, I was—well, I was smoking, which I know is wrong, and I don’t do it anymore, but I was, and I threw it on the ground, and I guess the wind caught it. I didn’t even know what happened until later that day. I just knew it was my fault—”

“Wait a second,” Edgar interrupted. “You’re the reason that awful delivery truck was honking every morning! Goodness, I’ve been trying to figure that one out for weeks!”

“Well—yeah, I used to wave to the guy in the truck, and he’d honk back. But I don’t understand, Edgar, I ruined something that was so important to you. Aren’t you mad?”

Edgar took another long sip of lemonade and peered over the glass. Despite the fire that nearly ruined the entire garden, Edgar knew deep down that Millie would want him to forgive, and he knew how he should respond.

“Drink up, Travis,” Edgar said. “You deserve it.”





BY GRACE SHAFFER

# MÉTRO DE PARIS

---

“Tragedy might sell news, but she felt that the heartbreak in this world was sometimes too overwhelming to deliver in newspaper print.”

The sliding doors wheezed shut behind her as she darted into the métro, the autumn wind grasping at her heels. The twenty-five-year-old woman shuddered, feeling the métro roar underneath her feet as it prepared to leave the station. She clutched the bar handle overhead, focusing on steadying her shallow breath.

The silent Parisians around her separated into the seats or rooted themselves in the aisles, clutching the handles swinging overhead. They seemed unaffected by the surrounding bustle. Her heart pounded a little harder as the métro lurched away from the station.

Oriana Hancock tightened her grip, attempting to stabilize herself. With her free hand, she pulled out her notebook from her leather tote bag and began to mentally scratch out the list of names.

*I can't believe I thought I could be a great writer.*

She blotted out the last foreign address on her list. The fact seized her heart with a kind of panic that made her tired eyes dart for the nearest vacant seat on the métro.

“*Pardon moi,*” Oriana murmured as she inched her way through the aisle, careful not to bump into an elderly woman with a scarf knotted at her collar. She slipped into a slick gray chair next to the window.

As the métro screeched through the tunnels beneath Paris, cold shards of light flickered across the coffee-stained métro

map spread over Oriana's crossed knees. The crowd's silence only increased the clamor pounding inside her head. The tangled mess of red, green, and blue métro routes blurred before her eyes. Three days in Paris had not made her an expert on riding the métro. Dragging her finger across the map, she tried blazing a trail to her final destination through a maze of words that she could barely pronounce. *Belleville to Hôtel de Ville. Hôtel de Ville to Palais Royal—Musée du Louvre.*

Biting her lip, she remembered the moment she had first agreed to come to Paris.

"Hey, Hancock," her stout editor had said.

Oriana had looked up expectantly from her desk overflowing with crime stories. Maybe today would be the day that her editor assigned her a real story—a story not involving the horrors of the city.

"I'm gonna be honest. Your articles haven't been too . . . *impressive* lately," he had said slowly and deliberately.

Oriana had winced at the stringent quality of his voice, the hopefulness in her chest sinking like a glacier at his every word.

"I know I'm still new," Oriana had said meekly. "But wouldn't you agree that people need to read about something more than crime—" His face's pointed expression stopped her.

**TRAGEDY SELLS  
NEWS, YOU KNOW.**

"You're in the wrong business if you want to write about sentiment." He peeled his glasses off his worn face. "Paris is buzzing with news right now, especially with the attacks that happened a few days ago. Tragedy sells news, you know."

Oriana felt heat creep up her face.

She cast a glance at her desk brimming with notes on robberies, shootings, and murders occurring in the city. Tragedy might sell news, but she felt that the heartbreak in this world

was sometimes too overwhelming to deliver in newspaper print. What good did these stories do if the next day was filled with the same tragedies of this world?

"I'm sending you over to Paris to cover a follow-up story. Our correspondent journalist broke his leg, so he's out of commission for a few weeks." He took a sip of coffee. "You said you knew a little French?"

"A *little*," Oriana emphasized. "My mom was French Canadian, so I picked up a few phrases—but I'm really rusty."

He heaved a sigh. "Well, brush up. At any rate, you've dealt with stories like this before."

Oriana protested, "But I don't know if I can—"

"Look, Hancock, I like giving people second chances," her editor said slowly, deliberately. "But there comes a point when—"

Her editor sighed again. "Just—*impress me*."

*This is my last chance. And I've already blown it.*

Muscles tensing in frustration, Oriana blindly thrust the map into her bag and flung it on the vacant seat beside her, shifting her gaze to the window. She pressed her cool palm across her mouth, trying to stifle sobs. Hot tears threatened her eyes, and she tightly clenched her jaw to maintain her composure.

"Pardon, mademoiselle?"

Oriana looked up with a start. Her wild eyes met a pair that were a deep coffee brown; they were fierce, piercing eyes with a hint of sadness. Through her own tear-stained vision, she made out tousled brown hair, sharp cheek bones, and an angled jawline—features of a young man who she guessed was no more than twenty-four.

"*Est-ce votre?*" He pointed to her leather bag on the vacant seat beside her.

“**THIS IS MY LAST CHANCE.**”

“Oh.” She snatched her bag out of his way. “Go ahead, sit down! I mean—*asseyez-vous s’il vous plaît!*” Her French sounded clumsy and conspicuous.

“Thank you.” He nodded his thanks. “I’m Dorian.”

She smiled politely, having forgotten that some French people liked to respond in English. Though the young man smiled graciously, she noted that, when he eased himself into the seat, his shoulders slumped forward as though he carried the weight of the world. The young man clasped a bouquet of peonies, their petals curling slightly from lack of water.

He smiled thinly, running his fingers through his hair.

Oriana shot him a papery thin smile. “Pretty flowers—eh, *les fleurs belles*,” she commented.

He smiled wryly, rolling the bouquet in his fingers almost as though the bundle offered a sort of comfort to a dismal memory.

“Are you—here for—*vacances*?” Dorian asked politely.

“Work,” she replied. “I’m a journalist from New York. Who has time for a vacation?” She forced a laugh, but that looming deadline made her heart tighten.

“Ah! French girls want to go to New York. My girlfriend says, ‘We go there, or we don’t get married!’” Dorian’s face clouded. “She always talked of New York City.”

“Off to see her now?” Oriana asked, hoping that the lightness in her tone masked her envy. She envisioned this young man only a métro stop away from an intimate dinner with a loved one. A wave of homesickness swelled in her heart as she thought of her own mother cooking her favorite meal in their suburban home.

“*Non*. Well . . .” he paused, grasping for words. “Not anymore. She died.”

Oriana straightened, aware that she had struck a tender chord.

“She died—in the terrorist shooting.”

Oriana jolted in her seat as the métro suddenly hissed into the station. An exiting passenger opened the métro doors. Like a sleepless routine, the métro doors exhaled a group of people only to inhale another. Oriana prayed that Dorian—the one lead she had within her grasp—would not melt into the crowd. Much to Oriana’s relief, Dorian remained.

The métro continued down the track.

“I’m so sorry. Losing anyone close . . .” Her words caught in her throat as she fingered the chain of her mother’s wristwatch. “Losing anyone close is so difficult.”

Mental images of her mother standing next to their kitchen window flooded before her eyes. Her sunken eyes and thinning hairline haunted Oriana, reminding her of the cancer that plagued her mother’s frail body.

“I can’t just—leave you,” Oriana had whispered, clasping her mother’s wrinkled hand.

“Now, Oriana.” Her mother’s voice, though weak, was firm. “You’ve gotta go, my dear O.” She squeezed her daughter’s hand reassuringly.

“But Dad would have wanted me to stay—”

“Oriana, listen to me. If he were here—he would tell you the same thing.”

Unconvinced, Oriana shook her head. “No, it’s not right. It’d be selfish. They’re sending me away as a correspondent journalist—I should never have signed on for this job. The city is far enough of a commute. I can’t leave you.”

“Don’t worry, Oriana,” her mother said, straightening a stack of bills on the counter-top. “Mandy’s a fine nurse. She’ll take care of me.”

Oriana’s shoulders slumped.

“Honey, you’ve been waiting for this for so long.” Her mother touched her arm. “Whether in New York or France, you’ve got to keep your eyes open to bigger things. With you, people feel

safe to share their stories. Yes, there are lots of sad stories out there, but tragedy often reveals that people are a lot stronger than they believe.”

Oriana bent her head, her heart torn.

“What have I always told you?” Her mother’s cold, fragile hands cradled Oriana’s chin. “Everyone has a story of hope, darling. You’ve just got to find yours.”

Oriana sensed this man seated beside her had a story of hope that she simply had to coax out.

“My dad died in an accident too. He was coming back from his job when the train derailed . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“I’m—I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I miss him dearly, and he always encouraged my writing. I guess I coped by pursuing something he believed I could succeed in.” She paused. “How do you deal with your grief?”

He heaved a sigh that shook his whole frame. “I didn’t at first. I was there—I see all of it. So many people dead. I never be able to *unsee* it.” He shuddered. “We go that night to a restaurant, Le Carillon, her favorite.”

Dorian stared blankly ahead and fingered his bottom lip with his cracked thumb. Oriana observed the whole scene replay on his worn face.

“I went to make sure the food was perfect. It had to be perfect that night because I was going to—going to—propose.” He swallowed hard.

Oriana didn’t attempt to fill the moment of silence.

Composing himself, Dorian continued, “I go to talk to the chef, and all of a sudden I—I hear it. It sounds like—like explosions. I got down. There are screams, and I—I know one of them was hers.”

Oriana’s heart sank as she looked at the young man. Everything in her heart longed to comfort him. No matter how

many gut-wrenching stories Oriana had heard in her journalism career, she still empathized with other people's pain. If only her words had the power to wrap around people and comfort them like one of her mother's knit blankets.

"People begin to run. But I—I can't see her. I hear the killers drive away in the car, calmly as if—as if they don't realize what they had done." Dorian's voice rose as he clenched his fists. "Ach!

It is—horrible." Shuddering, Dorian drew the bouquet closer. "I didn't know what to do. It was all such a nightmare—" He shifted in his seat, trying to regain his composure.



Oriana searched his face intently as she vainly tried to grasp comforting words. But he continued before she could say anything.

"I remember waking up the next week so—so bitter that life keeps going without her. It was all so dark. I—I almost didn't make it." He bit his lip as a glazed expression came over his face.

Oriana sensed the heavy ocean of his grief raging within him, and she waited a moment before asking timidly, "What did you do?"

He heaved a sigh. "It was . . . strange. I practice my English by reading American *journals*, as you say, newspapers. A couple months ago, I read an article about the attacks in America."

"Yes, 9/11. America just remembered fifteen years since the terrorist attack."

"*Oui*. It was about a man who lost his wife in the towers. And I—look, I have it here." He plunged his hand into his tweed coat and handed her a limp piece of paper neatly folded. She held it tightly, still captivated by Dorian's story.

"I could feel his pain," he said, motioning to the thin piece of paper in her hand. "I was familiar with it. It was how he dealt with the grief. He said that you have to *hope*, and you have to *live* so you can help others through grief. And you have to live, even if you feel—what's the word?—en-capable? *Oui*, incapable. I thought, if this man had lost his wife, and still lives—" Dorian stopped and smiled wanly. "Then so could I."

His face lit up with resolute bravery, a bravery that she yearned to paint with words.

"I thought that it was very—important to be alive." He pointed to the paper in her hand. "I think I found a purpose for being alive—to share hope."

Oriana unfolded the article and smoothed out the creases. She scanned the faded print and her eyes widened.

"I wrote this!" she gasped.

"Impossible!"

"But I did! See, that's my name." She pointed to the article's bottom left corner.

"Or-ee-ah-nah?" He paused. "*Que signifié?*—What does it mean?"

"Dawning—or sunrise." She brushed a strand of her coppery hair behind her ear.

Staring in disbelief at the worn article, Oriana whispered, "I didn't think I was making a difference."

"*Non!* The article saved me!"

In that moment, Oriana determined that she would write with a new voice—one sharing hope. She would start with him, Dorian—a man saved from grief by her very own words—and she *would* print it.

Oriana sat up in her seat. "Can I write about you in an article?"

Dorian furrowed his brow.

"You said it yourself: people need hope. People *need* to hear your story."



*“Peut-être—maybe.”* He motioned to her as the métro lurched to a halt with a piercing shrill of the brakes. “Come. This is my stop.”

Oriana followed Dorian as he weaved through the eddies of people, streaming in and out of the station. Dorian continued to talk about his girlfriend—how they met, what hobbies they shared, and how they had frequented the Le Carillon on a weekly basis. Even though his voice was tinted with the ache of missing her, his gait seemed lighter as he talked. Oriana guessed that just as happiness ties people together, so does grief.

Soon the bustling streets narrowed, and the old buildings began to swallow the late afternoon light, casting deep shadows on the sidewalks. Eventually, Oriana noticed that they had entered a more quaint district with red window frames and terra-cotta herb boxes nestling petite geranium plants—the neighborhood was like an iconic French postcard.

When they rounded a corner, Oriana felt her breath catch at the sight. She saw the limp bouquets of flowers first, then the paper notes and candles trailing the rain-soaked pavement. The Le Carillon restaurant was a crimson building with coal-black awnings. A heavy reverence hung in the air, and she breathed deeply the scent of damp paper, ink, wax, and rain.

A small crowd had formed around the restaurant. Locals spilled into the mosaic-tiled room, hoping to catch a glimpse of something inside.

“Today it opens again,” Dorian said.

Oriana’s heart pounded a little harder as she began absorbing every detail of the newly modeled restaurant. She suspected that the handwritten notes littering the sidewalk were from children, high schoolers, lovers, parents, and spouses who had penned their last love note, their last goodbye. A bright, butter-yellow tapestry covered the sidewalk, commemorating the names of the victims who had lost their lives.

Dorian walked solemnly through the crowds into the sea of bouquets and notes pinned against the yellow tapestry.

Kneeling, he laid down his drooping bouquet of peonies and began whispering in French.



Headlines and print swam before Oriana's mind as she scrambled in her bag for her notebook and pen. Her fingers trembled as she began to scribble notes in her notebook, her words preserving the paint-chipped restaurant, the handwritten goodbyes, and the young Parisian. She began to write the starting sentence: "Dorian Montfort took the métro to revisit Le Carillon two months after the attack."

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A few weeks later, Oriana found herself again in her gray cubicle, surrounded by the droll cacophony of fax machines, ringing phones, and the clattering keyboards.

Her eyes wandered to a headline of an article pinned on her cork board.

*So Dorian made the front page.* Oriana smiled to herself.

One cherished letter found its way tacked on her bulletin board with a bright postmark from her home's suburb stamped on the upper right hand corner of the envelope.

Gingerly, Oriana unpinned the letter and breathed a peaceful sigh as she traced her mother's looping handwriting:

*My dear Oriana,*

*Looks like you've truly found your voice.*

*So proud that your words are turning tragedies into victories, but most of all, proud to call you my daughter.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

A warmth flooded Oriana's face as she folded the card back into the envelope. She returned to organizing her desk, now overflowing with lemon-colored sticky notes. Oriana smiled at the reminders for the new stories assigned by her editor. Though stories of hope may be harder to uncover in a city filled with tragedy, Oriana determined that whatever it took, wherever she went, she would track down the stories with brighter tomorrows.

BY MEG LOW

# GRANDPA'S BIBLE

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This terza rima comes from memories of sitting on my grandfather's lap in his California condo at dawn. He had been a preacher for nearly forty years, and I remember looking down at his Bible and being astounded that anyone could have that many markings and notes in his Bible. I wrote this poem to show my grandfather's love for God's Word, reflected on his Bible's pages—a love I strive to cultivate as well.

Grandpa's Bible was just like him, I mused,  
Sitting in his lap as he read me Psalms.  
It smelled like coffee and worn leather shoes.

Clearly loved, its spine flushed against his palms.  
Then the Bible seemed like Grandmom to me—  
Full of pages, layers, and old as him.

Grandpa's Bible was his map, or maybe  
His soul's guiding compass on every side—  
Hidden beneath his fiery heartbeat.

But then I saw his strong hands side by side,  
Resting on his Bible, both page and skin  
Worn from daily use, always open wide.

Grandpa's Bible traced everywhere he'd been;  
It rested, true, lined, and loved—just like him.

BY JAMES PEACH

# THE DEADLY HABIT OF TIREDNESS

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Simply not sleeping couldn't be dangerous—could it?

**D**oes this sound familiar? Hitting your snooze button three times, stumbling around your room trying to keep your eyes open long enough to dress, and then marching out in search of caffeine before your first class. Most people encounter that situation occasionally, but a few of us live with it every single day. That's because we aren't sleeping enough.

The healthy amount of sleep for most people is ideally seven to eight hours, but not many of us could actually claim to sleep that much. According to the compilation of sleep research published by the Royal Society for Public Health, “1 in 3 adults are sleeping less than 7 hours per night.”<sup>1</sup> Not sleeping has been a problem for decades, and we as college students aren't alone in our habits. President Donald Trump brags about needing only four hours of sleep—a trait shared by previous leaders including Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Sure, we may feel miserable in the morning as we nod off in the middle of class, unable to read what the teacher just wrote on the blackboard, but we got those papers done! The teacher may not understand what on earth we had intended to write, but at least we turned those assignments in on time.

I'm guilty too, and my sleeping habits have been a problem for a while. Back in high school, you could find me up at two in the morning winding down from work—playing games, watching shows, or writing until I was unable to piece together

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1. Royal Society for Public Health, “Waking Up to the Health Benefits of Sleep,” June 15, 2016: 11, accessed November 11, 2017, <https://www.rsph.org.uk/resourceLibrary/waking-up-to-the-health-benefits-of-sleep.html>.

what I had just written. Sleep seemed like wasted time, time not spent doing the things I loved. Now, sleep is something I actively want but feel I can't have. I procrastinate too much and pay for it at three in the morning. Sleep is easy to cut out of my schedule—far easier to cut out than things I enjoy doing.

I'm not oblivious to the problems posed by cutting sleep from my schedule. There's the occasional time when I wake up in an empty classroom with drool on my desk. I've woken up after texting a friend at midnight about a nuclear reactor fire and telepaths, to her understandable concern. But those are tiny problems in the bigger picture.

One summer morning, my schedule caught up and trampled me. I was emptying empty trashcans, ramming into walls, and staring out into space. When I finally recognized that I was unable to tell if drinking rubbing alcohol was a good idea, I left and checked into the clinic. I wondered if anything was wrong with me. What could have made me so stupid? The nurse said the obvious: I was sleep deprived.

Sleep deprived? Yeah, of course I was sleep deprived. Wasn't everyone? We all joked about not getting enough sleep, but then we moved on with our days. I tried my best to be more active and chipper than the people who got more sleep than I did. To me, sleep deprivation wasn't serious, but whatever *this* was felt serious. Simply not sleeping couldn't be dangerous—could it?

Yet, not sleeping is incredibly dangerous. The sleep fact sheet from the Royal Society of Public Health says, "After about 17 hours our alertness sharply declines, to the point where our wakefulness is similar to the effects of a blood alcohol concentration of 0.05%. After 24 hours of not sleeping our alertness is equivalent to a blood alcohol concentration of 0.1%."<sup>2</sup>

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2. Royal Society for Public Health, "Waking Up to the Health Benefits of Sleep," 10.

**SLEEP SEEMED LIKE  
WASTED TIME.**

The legal limit to drive is 0.08% blood alcohol concentration. So, if you get too little sleep, you'll eventually end up about as alert as you would be if you're legally too drunk to drive. Being tired makes us unaware of our surroundings, unable to concentrate, and unable to make sound judgments. But those are just the mental effects.

Our bodies need sleep to keep a healthy immune system. In an article for *The Guardian*, Rachel Cooke talked to sleep researcher Matthew Walker about everything not sleeping does to your body. "Reduce sleep even for a single night," Cooke writes, "and your resilience is drastically reduced. If you are tired, you are more likely to catch a cold."<sup>3</sup> A cold is one thing, but not sleeping is also directly and clearly linked to depression, diabetes, Alzheimer's, heart attacks, and cancer—just to name a few issues.<sup>4</sup> Not sleeping isn't just a matter of tiredness; it's profoundly dangerous and not something to take lightly. Cooke makes the danger clear: "More than 20 large-scale epidemiological studies all report the same clear relationship: the shorter your sleep, the shorter your life."<sup>5</sup> It's not a debated point, or something you can avoid: not sleeping can kill you. It will impair you to the same level as being drunk, destroy your immune system, and end your life prematurely.

We need to sleep—I hope there's no question about that—but we don't sleep. We try to cheat on sleep or to find alternatives. They don't work. A study published in a 2003 issue of *Sleep* had a group of subjects go for fourteen nights on a consistent sleep schedule. The study found that "restriction of sleep to 6 [hours] or less per night produced cognitive performance deficits equivalent to up to 2 nights of total sleep deprivation."<sup>6</sup> Six hours of sleep isn't enough for most people, but those on six hours of sleep function like people awake for forty-eight

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3. Rachel Cooke, "Sleep Should Be Prescribed: What Those Late Nights Out Could Be Costing You," *The Observer*, accessed November 11, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/sep/24/why-lack-of-sleep-health-worst-enemy-matthew-walker-why-we-sleep>.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Royal Society for Public Health, "Waking Up to the Health Benefits of Sleep," 1.

consecutive hours. Routinely sleeping less, then, is as dangerous as not sleeping at all.

Now, the common alternative is to catch up on sleep on the weekends, paying back the debt you owe to sleep. But that just makes the problem worse. Meera Senthilingam for CNN writes that “the extra hours of sleep, but more importantly the later time of awakening, on weekends leads to confusion and displacement in the body when people return to their weekday routine.”<sup>7</sup> You can’t just binge on sleep, because it makes the time when you don’t get enough even worse. You’ll feel better on the weekends but worse during the week, and the damaging effects to your body won’t be solved.



As another alternative, we try spacing out sleep. Instead of sleeping for one large chunk of time, we nap during the day whenever we get a chance. We might say, “Sleep is sleep, no matter when we get it, right?” Dr. Jamie Zeitzer, a science professor at Stanford, confirms that not all sleep is equal. In an interview with Erin Beresini for *Outside*, Zeitzer explained that “you’ve got different sequences that occur during napping than those that occur during nighttime sleep.”<sup>8</sup> Napping is a different kind of sleep from normal sleep. Naps do help. They help boost up failing alertness and make us feel better, but the health issues and long-term problems caused by lack of sleep aren’t solved by napping. Naps solve small problems while pushing off the large, dangerous ones.

If not sleeping is dangerous and trying to cheat on sleep is ineffective, then should we drink so much caffeine that we

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7. Meera Senthilingam, “What Your Sleep Says about Your Health,” CNN, accessed November 11, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/03/health/sleep-health-nap-sleeping-in/index.html>.

8. Erin Beresini, “Should I Be Sleeping Less at Night and Taking More Naps?” *Outside Online*, accessed November 11, 2017, <https://www.outsideonline.com/1783526/should-i-be-sleeping-less-night-and-taking-more-naps>.



see everything in triplicate? Should we take sleep aids? No. There's only one solution: sleep. Sleep more; sleep better; sleep without distractions.

I know that's not what anyone wants to hear; it's not what I wanted to hear. Sleeping more means giving up time to do other things. But what's so wrong about that? We may not work as much, but sleeping well helps us work more effectively. When we prioritize sleep, we will be more awake to do things that matter to us.

So the question becomes this: "How much sleep do I need?" I've quoted the seven- to eight-hour figure several times, but it does vary from person to person. However, there is a simple test. In *The Guardian* article on sleep, Cooke says that "those who would sleep on if their alarm clock was turned off are simply not getting enough. Ditto those who need caffeine in the afternoon to stay awake."<sup>9</sup> It's risky to try this when you have morning classes, but going to bed as early as possible might help you to not sleep through those classes. It's worth it to not wake up irritable, and it will help prevent the long-term damage caused by not sleeping.

The solution might seem obvious; but if it's so obvious, why aren't we all sleeping? After being hit hard by sleep deprivation myself, I'm telling you all this as a preventative. I sleep so much better now, but only because my alarms aren't waking me up. If I kept on with my habits, I would be just as tired as before. And I'm not alone. Check around you during chapel, during morning classes, during prayer group. We're not fine. We would all be much happier, more productive, and healthier if we just slept. Trust me when I say that the deadly habit of tiredness is a habit that should be broken.

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9. Cooke, "Sleep Should Be Prescribed."

BY HANNAH EDWARDS

# IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

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Commencement Contest  
Winner, Nonfiction Narrative

“**S**he’s not going to die,” my father said in the beginning, but in the months that followed I often feared that he was wrong. The accumulation of broken hopes and the obscurity of the future compelled me to wrestle with God and His will night after night.

The blurred vision in my mother’s left eye had led to the discovery of a brain tumor that was damaging her optic nerve. Depending on its growth, the tumor, though benign, could render her blind, damage her brain, or even kill her. The tumor’s discovery shook her world, and it shattered mine. I was not strong like her.

“I need her,” I whispered to God often, swallowed by the darkness that hung dense about my room. “Jesus, I need her so much.”

*Let her go,* He whispered, but I just couldn’t.

Slowly, painstakingly, gently—He unfurled the fingers that clung so tightly to her. I battled with God, on hands and knees, until finally I surrendered and began to listen. He told me I needed only Him, and slowly I learned to believe Him. My heart and will yielded. He was enough.

But still I begged God to let her stay.

Up until that point, my life had been pretty picture perfect. I had lived in a world separate from tragedy. Other people faced trials like this one. Other people’s mothers experienced physical trials. But between my own family and harm’s way stood some invisible wall. Didn’t there? And now, when this struck my

family, it seemed a mistake, like something malignant had inadvertently slipped through God's fingers—like He'd forgotten to stop it from crashing down on our heads.

I could not fathom why God would allow this. My mother was completely surrendered to Him. What glory—what good—was there in inflicting suffering on one of His steadfast servants? My questions went unanswered, but I clung to the One who owes no explanation. He knew why. He had a reason. And He taught me to trust His heart and His will without knowing His reason. I knew Him, and that was enough.

Her brain surgery was in January. A question mark hung in the air that morning as she and my father left for the hospital. *I could lose her today*, I thought as I sat helplessly in the school library. I kept staring at the floor, the walls, the bookshelves. Studying was futile. I counted the agonizing moments until the surgery was done, and only then did I know God's choice: He chose to let her stay with me.

When I first saw her after the surgery, she sat on a bench in her thin hospital gown. Exhaustion was written on her face, but joy lit her tired eyes and a faint shadow of a smile played on her lips. Relief swept through me. I embraced her gently, afraid I might hurt her.

She wanted us to see the surgical incision. Carefully, she removed the hat she wore, exposing the side of her head where her once-long hair had been razed before the surgery. Now 21 staples bit into the flesh of her scalp like metal teeth, cold and hard, and encrusted with dried blood. The vicious image stunned me, wedging a nail deep in my heart.

In a moment, the layer of the world I had always known was ripped violently away, a veil stripped back to reveal how cold and ugly life could truly be. Sin's curse—mortal corruption—had

**IN THAT MOMENT,  
WITH EVERYTHING  
IN MY HEART,  
I HATED LIFE.**

attacked my mother's body with a fervor that terrified me. I came face-to-face with mortality. In the weeks that followed, each look at the shaved side of her head was a reminder to me of life's fragility and my inability to control anything.

Her recovery was grueling. Powerless to take it from her, I watched her bear her cross daily. I tried to shoulder the burden with her, but there was so little I could do to ease her pain. At last, life slowly began to move forward again like a rusty wheel churning on its axis, gradually picking up momentum. My mother could sit up without pain. She could walk without aid. She could pour herself a glass of cold water. Soon, she resumed her former, ordinary routine.

Life seemed suspended, teetering in a crevice beyond the realm of time. We held our breath. We waited for something to happen, a gun to fire, a spark to explode. Surely something bad would happen to choke the hope within our hearts. But as time passed, I began to believe a lie. I thought it was over.

Because the doctors had removed only a portion of the tumor due to excessive bleeding, my parents researched options. They consulted surgeons, endocrinologists, and radiologists. When no good options materialized, my mother decided to wait. To do nothing. And for a summer, everything was fine.

We pretended that the tumor was a thing of the past, but we all knew that it remained inside her head, that at any moment it could begin growing again and plunge our lives into pandemonium once more. But I prayed. We all prayed so hard.

*Please don't let the tumor grow, I begged God.*

In the fall, my brother and I commuted to Florida for our freshman year of college. Life plowed forward, and I settled into the groove of academic routine. And then one night, in the heat of midterm exams, I received a text message from home. An MRI had shown that the tumor was growing again. Action had to be taken. And this time, as the nightmare repeated itself, I was hundreds of miles away from my mother.

That was the night I broke. In my mind, the tumor was an evil sent to inflict grief on my family. My mother never saw her tumor in that light. Instead, she constantly looked up, her eyes fixed on something heavenward, something most people in this world never catch a glimpse of: a God of love. She would drink the cup He placed on the table before her, no matter what it held. She would do it because she sought His glory and not her own, never her own. She believed, with every ounce of her soul, that He was trustworthy. As I watched the steady and strong heartbeat of her faith pulsate, my own faith gradually grew.

The second surgery took a greater toll than the first one had. In this surgery, the doctors were more successful in removing the tumor. But this time she lost more than hair; she also permanently lost her senses of taste and smell. For four weeks my parents stayed in Pittsburgh near the hospital. Finally, they were allowed to go back home to Indiana. A few days later, my brother and I arrived home for Christmas break.

My mother appeared nearly the same as when I had last seen her. Although weaker physically, she was mentally and spiritually strong. During that first afternoon at home, she and I sat in the kitchen; I listened while she relived, in intricate detail, her four weeks at the hospital.

She spoke so calmly, weaving God's mercy and grace into every strand of memory. As I listened to her recount all she had experienced, the bitter bile of anger welled up inside me. I couldn't stand it. I was not strong like my mother. The storm of emotion boiling inside me reached an erupting crescendo.

In that moment, with everything in my heart, I hated life.

I wanted to be free, to leave this cursed world and go home to my Father. This life was too ugly. It hurt too much. When my tears slipped out after a futile struggle to restrain them,



my mother was perplexed. She didn't understand why I was crying or how I could hate life. For attacking her, for hurting her, for making her realize its own brokenness and fragility? But she didn't see it like that, and she tried to comfort me—*she* tried to comfort *me*.

I tucked myself away in my bedroom and sobbed for what seemed hours, but I reached no peace with God. Still miserable, I headed back downstairs to watch a traditional Christmas classic with my mother: *It's a Wonderful Life*. Ironically, I lost myself within the world of George Bailey, a man who had lost his love for living in spite of a life overflowing with blessings. Right there, God changed my heart. Because there I sat, on a cold winter night, nestled warm inside and celebrating Christmas. I was home with my family, curled up beside my mother, both of us living and breathing. And if that moment didn't last through tomorrow, if my mother left this world in the months or years to come, God would still be good.

**I WAS NOT STRONG  
LIKE MY MOTHER.**

That night, I found the light of hope again. I cupped it in my hands and pressed it close to my heart. Despite sorrow and suffering, life is a treasure. Life, with all its joy and heartache, is wonderful. Something good weaves itself into the ugliness, like the strand of light glancing off crushed glass to make beauty of what is broken. Whether tomorrow brings sorrow, or death, or the absence of my mother on this earth, there is always hope. This life is as bad as it gets for the Christian, and beyond it is heaven. And in heaven? Joy. Wrongs made right. Suffering gone. No more tears, for all of eternity. And Jesus, most of all.

And so today I live with joy.

BY VALERIE PRINCIPLE

# DINNER FOR NONE

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All she has to offer them for  
dinner was burnt chicken,  
collapsed homemade bread, and  
questionable gummy bear cookies.  
How would she feed her family?

**M**elanie Villano opened the oven and peered inside.  
*Was bread supposed to look like that?*

A tan lump rose and fell inside a metal loaf pan, taking big gasping breaths in through a ragged hole in its misshapen right side. Aside from its obvious birth defects and the battle scars it had sustained since entering the oven, the loaf of homemade wheat bread had a grainy appearance that made it look about as appetizing as a handful of sand. Melanie groaned and gently pushed the oven door closed.

The alarm on her cell phone began to beep, announcing that she had exactly six hours until her family arrived at her apartment for dinner. Turning off the alarm, she moved swiftly into the living room adjacent to her eat-in kitchen and scanned for any dirt, dust, or clutter.

But there was none. The small living room held only five immaculately clean things: an empty wooden television stand, a teal futon from Goodwill, an average-sized white bookcase (filled with the overflow of books from the large bookcase in Melanie's bedroom), Melanie's black Dell laptop that she used to store and edit her poetry, and—hanging over the futon—a large plastic frame that held a picture of Melanie's family.

Melanie didn't own enough for the room to be cluttered. She had lived in the apartment for only three days, hardly enough time for dirt and dust to settle on anything. She stepped closer to the framed picture and smiled at the people posed in front of Cinderella's castle at Disney World. A stocky man with bushy black hair, overly large eyebrows, and laughing eyes stood next to a petite woman with a serene smile. Standing in front of the couple on either side of Melanie were her two brothers. Brody, seventeen when this picture was taken, had his arm wrapped protectively around Melanie while eleven-year-old Luke, sporting his coolest sunglasses, had his arms crossed.

Melanie was startled out of her reverie when her phone beeped again. She rushed back to the kitchen as the phone's high-pitched beeping joined the oven's timer. She had set both alarms, just in case. She pulled the steaming bread out of the oven and set it on the stovetop to cool.

*Maybe, she thought, maybe it isn't so bad.* She leaned over the mound in the pan, watching it gasp through the foaming hole in its side. If the bread didn't collapse, she might still be able to slice and serve it with dinner tonight.

When her phone rang, Melanie answered, still eyeing the asthmatic loaf of bread.

"Hey, Mom! . . . Yes, of course you can still come! I'll be ready for you at four. Brody and Luke are coming too, right? . . . Awesome! See you then . . . What? . . . No, you don't need to bring anything. I've got it all under control. See you at four. Bye." She hung up and took a deep breath.

"Time for a pep talk, Melanie." She took a deep breath. "You can do this! You still have nearly five and a half hours until they get here. The house is clean, and all you have to do is make dinner and dessert and punch and—nope, that's it. Don't overdo it. Just a nice homey dinner."

She walked over to her pristine white refrigerator, the only new appliance in her apartment, and read the second line on the hand-written menu hanging on its shiny door.



“Soup and salad. Got it.” She opened the fridge and started to pull things out of the produce drawer.

Melanie set a head of fresh lettuce on the counter. Next, she bounced tomatoes onto the cutting board. Finally, she thumped a gnarly cucumber down next to them, and gingerly set a bag of individually wrapped mozzarella cheeses beside a clear plastic salad bowl.

“I’ll just chop this up, and the salad will be a success.” Melanie heard a dramatic puff of air and turned to the stovetop just in time to see her sandy bread give up the ghost. “It might make up for the bread.”

By noon, Melanie had prepared the salad and left it to chill on the top shelf of the fridge while the soup sat simmering on the stove. When she attempted to slice the bread, it crumbled onto the cutting board.

With a sigh, she began preparing the chicken to go into the oven.

“The chicken has been soaking for forty-eight hours by now, just like the recipe says,” she said aloud to herself, staring at the roast chicken recipe in her copy of her mom’s favorite Betty Crocker recipe book. “This *has* to be perfect.” She gingerly scooped her spices off the counter, where they had been arranged alphabetically by name, and, one by one, shook them onto the chicken that had been marinating in a mixture of buttermilk and minced garlic for nearly two days.

The chicken, swollen with milk, had become an olive tinge. Melanie had only seen that color one other time, on her brothers’ faces when they had become violently ill after eating the meatloaf that she had made last year for a home economics project.

*It was just a bad cow, she thought.*

**THIS HAS TO BE  
PERFECT.**

"Hmm," she said, "maybe I put too much garlic on it." The whole kitchen was beginning to smell like wet feet. Melanie sniffed the chicken and gagged. "Everything cooks out," she insisted, laying the chicken in a pan and placing it in the preheated oven.

The soup bubbled impatiently on the stovetop.

"Strange, I've never cooked soup this long; but I'll follow the recipe. I want everything perfect. Well—" She glanced over at her beaten-down corpse of a bread loaf. "Almost everything."

Melanie had only the dessert and the punch left to make. She pulled an unused recipe book off the shelf above the stove.

"Okaaaaaay," she said to herself, flipping through the pages. "Peanut butter? Too normal. Oatmeal raisin? Too grandma-ish. I need something *special*." She flipped to the back of the cookbook, finding a section called "Step It Up."

"Aha! Gumdrops cookies! I love it!" She plopped the book enthusiastically onto the counter and gathered her ingredients. Sugar, flour, baking soda, vanilla, eggs, salt.

"Gumdrops—where are the gumdrops? I must have some somewhere!"

Melanie opened the top drawer beside the stove and the smell of onions and powdered beef flavoring erupted from the drawer. Inside the drawer lay a considerable scattering of Taco Bell mild sauce packets, three spatulas with the tags still on them (she pulled one out to use for her cookies), a set of measuring cups that her old college roommate had sent her as an apartment-warming gift (they were still wrapped in plastic but she pulled those out to use, too), and a small leather-bound journal (she had journals stashed everywhere in the apartment in case she was struck with a sudden poetic thought).

Melanie laughed. "This is pathetic!"

“THE WHOLE KITCHEN  
WAS BEGINNING TO  
SMELL LIKE WET FEET.”

Fifteen packages of Ramen sat crammed into the tiny space, the strongest evidence of all that Melanie didn't cook.

She shoved the drawer closed, forcing herself not to smell the spices. She was tempted to cancel tonight's meal and opt for a peaceful night of Ramen and reading.

"No," she told herself, "Mom, Dad, Brody, and Luke are coming, and you already made soup, salad, and bread." She choked a bit as she thought of her sad attempt at baking.

"You are committed! Now, find those gumdrops and get started on dessert."

Melanie had no gumdrops. The only thing she found in the third and final drawer was a large bag of gummy bears.

"I must have eaten the gumdrops." She sighed. "Well, gummy bears should work."

Melanie pulled the last pan of gummy bear cookies out of the oven two hours before her family was supposed to arrive. On the oven rack below the one that she had used for her cookies, Melanie's chicken was beginning to smell dangerously smoky.

"Last time I didn't cook the meatloaf long enough. I am not letting anyone get food poisoning from this meal." She closed the oven door on the smoldering chicken.

Using potholders, Melanie laid the cookies on top of a sheet of wax paper on the counter. She grimaced as she looked at the oozing faces of the gummy bears peeking out of the doughy white cookies. She couldn't stand to cook them any longer. The bear's melting faces were haunting her.

Five minutes later, the air in the kitchen thickened; the chicken smelled as if it were blackening. She grabbed two potholders from a hook on the wall and snatched the pan from the oven. The smoke alarm began to pierce the air.

"Well, at least I know that works," she said as she turned off the oven. She turned every knob on the stovetop to "off" just to be sure. She used her potholders to wave the smoke away from the smoke detector.

*It's better to have cold soup than a flaming apartment,* she thought.

She glanced at the table and realized that she hadn't set it yet. She rummaged through the cupboard above the stove and pulled out a wadded-up tablecloth. Since she didn't have time to iron it, she attempted to smooth out the wrinkles with her hand.

Melanie then set the table—hoping the dishes would flatten out the crinkled tablecloth for her—and opened the fridge door to take out the salad, her one guaranteed success. A pattern of tiny snowflakes clung to the salad bowl, and the contents looked as if they had been picked from a heavily frosted field.

*Frozen salad!*

“Fine, be that way!” she said petulantly to the frosty greens, flinging the microwave door open. She thrust the salad bowl inside and set the microwave for four minutes. *That should be enough to defrost it.* She looked inside the fridge. All the other food was completely normal. *It must only freeze things on the top shelf,* she thought bitterly.

She set the bread platter, the smoking chicken, the salad—steaming and congealed at the bottom of the bowl—a plate full of the doughy cookies, and the rapidly cooling soup on the table, and then filled each glass with water. She was nearly ready. All she needed to do now was make the punch.

She pulled out a large plastic bowl and plopped a half-gallon carton of French vanilla ice cream into it. Then she poured a two-liter bottle of Sprite and a carton of grape juice into the bowl and stirred it.

*Perfect!* she thought, licking her finger and hefting the bowl into her arms. As she carried the sloshing bowl toward the table, the doorbell rang, and her foot snagged the rug beneath the dining table. She held back a scream as the bowl leapt from her arms and showered the table with purple foam. With a dramatic splash, the clod of ice cream landed in the soup pot and Melanie was left standing beside the wreckage as the doorbell tolled the death of her perfect dinner.

She forced herself to walk across the living room to the front door. The fire alarm beeped one last time as she opened the door to her family.

“Hi, Honey!” Melanie’s mom said, hugging her as she entered the apartment. “It smells like something’s burning!”

“No, no, Mom, nothing’s burning.”

Her dad ambled in. “Smells good, Honey. Is it time to eat?” His eyes twinkled as he peered around her, catching a glimpse of the table.

Her brothers walked into the kitchen, and Luke gasped.

“No meatloaf tonight. Right, Mel?” Brody taunted, suspiciously eyeing the black chicken that now dripped with Sprite and grape juice.

Melanie didn’t answer. She didn’t know how to answer.

The table looked like a crime scene. The bread had been battered, the salad heated into a congealed mass of brown leaves, the chicken torched to ash, and the gummy bears looked as if they had been dropped into a doughy puddle of face-eating acid. The soup had been the only edible item on the table, but now a giant chunk of melting ice cream floated in the middle of it, like an iceberg that had finally sunk her Titanic dinner. Adding to the carnage, foamy puddles of grape juice and Sprite pooled on the table. The punch bowl lay beside her mother’s plate, leaking punch from a crack in its side, over the edge of the table, and onto the rug.

Her family trailed in and stopped short. For a moment, no one spoke. The only sound was the ping of the punch splattering against the rug.

Melanie’s dad reached into the wreckage, rescued a glass, and took a long drink of water. “Water’s good!” he said, furtively glancing toward the apartment door.

“**NO, NO, MOM.  
NOTHING’S BURNING.**”

Brody stared sympathetically at the plate of molten gummy bear cookies while Luke snapped pictures of the disaster with his smartphone.

Melanie looked at her mom, who avoided her eyes.

“All right! I couldn’t do it! I can’t cook! I stink at it!” Melanie said. “I’m sorry. Now there’s nothing to eat. And, you guys came here for a perfect dinner.”

Melanie’s dad frowned and, without a word, strode out of the apartment door.



Melanie buried her face in her hands and tried to stop herself from crying. Luke pulled a dripping cookie off the table and took a bite, gagging as he tried to swallow the victimized gummy bears.

When Melanie’s dad reentered the apartment, she reluctantly looked up. She expected him to shake his head with disappointment, but instead he smiled widely, carrying a cooler and a large paper bag.

“Darling, you don’t have to be a good cook to be a great daughter,” he said as he looked for a safe place on the punch-covered table to set the paper bag. “We knew there might be—complications, so we brought your favorite: Taco Bell and

Mountain Dew!” He flipped off the lid of the plastic cooler and pulled out a can.

Melanie laughed as she looked from the table to her dad. She would rather have Taco Bell than her own cooking any day.

Her brothers quickly abandoned their attempt to find food in the wreckage on the table, reached into the bag that her dad held out, and flopped onto the futon to eat their tacos.

“I have lots of hot sauce in the kitchen,” Melanie said with a grin, accepting a taco from her dad and joining her brothers. Despite her cooking disaster, their simple meal ended up being a perfect dinner after all.

BY CARRIE COCHRAN

# SIX YEARS OF HAPPINESS

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God can take the saddest of  
hearts and make them  
happy again.

**H**is chest heaving from exertion, Samuel Keller sprinted to the top of the sand dune. The sand slid beneath his feet as he struggled to climb the last few feet to the top. When he finally reached the peak, he bowed over, hands on his knees, and gulped in the fresh salt air. A tear or two stained his face, mingling with the perspiration that had gathered on his cheeks. He brushed it all away angrily.

Still breathing heavily, Sam scowled and peered down to the sandy beach below. Through the remnants of the morning mist, he spotted a tiny figure shuffling down the beach—Miss Evelyn Connors.

The ocean breeze gently teased the tips of her short white curls and the end of her tattered shawl. To her left, the first sliver of sunlight peeked over the horizon, bathing the world in a soft shade of pink. Her bare, wrinkled feet left imprints in the wet sand behind her, marking her progress down the shoreline. She used the faint light of sunrise to maneuver around tide pools, heaps of seaweed, and jellyfish.

She kept her head down, searching the sand for treasures hidden just below its surface. Occasionally, she stopped and slowly stooped, fished something from the sand, and placed it in a little basket that she carried on her left arm.

Sam took another minute to catch his breath and observe Miss Evelyn's progress. *Ugh, she's out early today*, he thought. He



always tried to arrive at the beach when Miss Evelyn did, but she had gotten a head start this morning. He glanced at his watch and groaned: 5:58 a.m. was far too early for him to be up in the summer. He knew his friends were probably still lying in bed, enjoying a lazy morning. *Why can't I catch a break?* The only reason Sam was here was to earn money for camp. Because his mom couldn't afford to send him even if she wanted to, Sam had opted to participate in the special program that his church youth group offered. In exchange for camp credit, the teenagers could help elderly church members throughout the week. To his disappointment, Sam had ended up with Miss Evelyn, a widow who required help at six every weekday morning.

**5:58 A.M. WAS  
FAR TOO EARLY FOR  
HIM TO BE UP IN  
THE SUMMER.**

He sighed as he thought about the party he had chosen to skip last night to be up in time to help Miss Evelyn. Savannah had been there. That could have been his chance to impress her. Sweet, beautiful, too-good-for-him Savannah Kohl. But what would she ever want with a kid like him? Savannah deserved better.

A sharp cry from a passing seagull snapped Sam back to the present. Its screeching sounded eerily similar to his mother's yells as he had left the house that morning, and he shuddered. He quickly pushed the memory out of his mind and forced himself to focus on Miss Evelyn.

He casually jogged down the cool, grainy slope and meandered over to her. "Here, let me get that for you, Miss Evelyn." He swooped down and grabbed a large conch shell that Evelyn was struggling to reach. "I'll take the basket too."

"Thank you, Sam," she said, quickly handing him the heavy basket.

He carefully placed the conch inside the padded basket and perused the contents. The bottom was covered in a variety of

shells including horse conchs, button snails, and a variety of tritons and ceriths.

“Looks like you already have quite a few,” Sam said. He combed through the shells, picking out a couple to examine closer.

“Yes, there was a small storm last night. The best treasures always come after a storm.” Her eyes twinkled merrily as she smiled, making her wrinkles more pronounced. “Let’s get going before the tourists wake up and steal our bounty, shall we?”

They walked down the shoreline together—Miss Evelyn treading slowly and carefully, and Sam dutifully keeping pace with her. While they walked, Miss Evelyn commented on her devotions and the pastor’s sermons from the past week. Sam nodded respectfully as she talked, but he never had much to add. The conversation lulled periodically with discoveries of more seashells. Sam did his best

to help Miss Evelyn find shells, but most of the ones he found were broken or had a structural consistency resembling Swiss cheese. Miss Evelyn, however, had a knack for shell hunting.

Although her blue eyes were faded with age, they could still find the perfect shells nestling beneath the blanket of sand. She pointed out each shell to Sam, who bent down to get them for her. She seemed to know the name of every shell—even the ones that looked alike to Sam. As much as he hated the early mornings, he did enjoy asking her questions about the different shells and what sea creatures they came from.

This morning brought a particularly good crop of shells, and the basket was soon brimming with sandy treasures. They stopped their searching only when they neared the old pier.

Although most people ignored the old pier now, opting to use the new one because of its easy access from the boardwalk, Miss Evelyn always insisted on trekking to the timeworn pier to watch the sun rise into the sky. She delicately gathered the hem

**THE BEST TREASURES  
ALWAYS COME AFTER  
A STORM.**

of her flowy, ankle-length skirt and stepped up onto the weather-grayed planks. She strode confidently down the timeworn pier to a battered bench bolted into the last section of boards.

Sam followed her carefully, making sure no shells fell from the basket as he stepped onto the pier. Once safely on the landing, he paused to watch Miss Evelyn. She always looked so happy on that bench. She turned her furrowed face to the sun and breathed deeply of the salt air. They all seemed to fit together right then—the old woman, the worn bench, and the creaking pier.

Sam strolled to the bench and plopped down next to her. She turned and smiled at him, the rising sun highlighting her faded blue eyes and the wrinkles lining her tanned face. He smiled back and placed the basket next to the bench.

For a while, they sat in silence, enjoying the ocean air and the growing warmth of the rising sun. But Sam couldn't completely enjoy it. He kept thinking about his mom, about how she was increasingly irritated and impatient with him these days. How he could never seem to do anything right in her eyes. She was always snippy, but she had gotten worse since—since Dad left. He felt his eyes burn. *Why did Dad have to go and leave like that?*

He needed a distraction or he'd actually cry, and that wasn't cool. Hoping to keep his mind off his problems, he turned to the little woman seated next to him.

"Miss Evelyn?" He cleared his throat as she, blinking dreamily, turned toward him. "I was wondering—uh—why do you always come to this pier instead of the nice one?"

Her eyebrows rose in surprise, and she laughed. "Well, Sam, I have very nice memories of this pier," she declared, emphasizing her words with a nod.

"Like what?"

"Well," she paused and breathed deeply. "I was engaged on this pier."

"Really?" Sam's eyes widened as he looked around at the dingy pier in disbelief.

Miss Evelyn laughed again. “It was newer back then, and it was beautiful.”

“Oh, that’s cool, I guess.” He looked around them with fresh perspective, trying to picture the pier in its original state. Moments later, however, he found himself restlessly tapping the bench as his mind strayed back to his problems. Still needing a further distraction, he asked, “So—when did you get married?”

“Well now . . .” Miss Evelyn sighed and resituated herself more comfortably on the bench. “I guess that was about fifty-three years ago.” She smiled sweetly and closed her eyes.

“And you still come to the pier every day?”

Miss Evelyn opened her eyes and stared at the blue and gold horizon in front of them. Her smile was still there, but her eyes seemed sad, distant. She was silent for so long, Sam thought the conversation was over.

Then, almost to herself, she murmured, “This was our place . . .”

She looked so sad that Sam wasn’t sure what to say. Should he stop asking questions? But he couldn’t stop. He was curious now, not merely searching for random conversation. She had never mentioned her husband before. He turned toward her and opened and closed his mouth a couple times, unsure of whether to continue.

She glanced over at him and chuckled lightheartedly. The temporary darkness seemed to evaporate from her mood. “Is there something else you want to ask me?” she teased.

Sam spoke carefully, afraid to upset her. “Could you—maybe—tell me about him?”

Miss Evelyn smiled sweetly and nodded. “I’d love to,” she said softly. “I met Roy fifty-four years ago on this beach. I was eighteen then. My father had me come out every morning to collect shells for our shop, just like I do now. Even then I loved it. Well, one morning, I was walking along the beach singing to myself. All of a sudden, this handsome man in a sailor’s uniform

walked up to me and offered to carry my basket. It was Roy.” She grinned girlishly, dissipating the wrinkles around her mouth. “He had come into port the night before and couldn’t sleep. He’d woken up early that day and decided to take a walk. He told me later that he heard my singing and fell in love with my voice before he even saw me.” She laughed and placed her vein-lined hand over her heart. “He was such a flatterer!”

Sam had never seen Miss Evelyn in such high spirits. How long had it been since she’d talked about her husband? Her joy was contagious, and Sam found himself smiling along with her. He didn’t usually enjoy their conversations this much, but today the fellowship came as a welcome reprieve from his troublesome thoughts.



She leaned over and winked conspiratorially. “But he was so handsome in his uniform and so polite. I couldn’t resist! That first day we walked all the way down to this pier and talked for the longest time.”

“So what happened? Did he ask you out?” Sam leaned forward, uncharacteristically eager to hear the rest.

Miss Evelyn laughed again, more heartily than before. Her eyes twinkled merrily in the sun, and her white curls bobbed as she gaily threw her head back.

“Yes, Sam,” she replied breathlessly, “he asked me out—and, eventually, to marry him. We fell in love on our long walks down the beach. It can be terribly romantic in the mornings with the right person.” She winked at him again. “Keep that in mind when you get a little older.”

Sam’s cheeks reddened a shade, but he tried to keep a straight face. “Uh—right.” He tried to ignore the image of cute Savannah that popped into his mind and cleared his throat. “So what happened after that?”

"Well, we got married a year later, and he was sent back on duty shortly after that." Her voice became quieter, slower, sadder. "For the first couple years, he would be home for about six months at a time. Then he'd have to go back on duty for several months. It was terribly hard on me." She swallowed. "I kept working at my father's shop that whole time, just to keep myself busy. The walks were so lonely without Roy."

"Soon after our marriage, rumors started spreading about the war. They said that our troops would be sent over to help, but I didn't want to believe it."

"Which war?"

It felt like an eternity to Sam before she answered. When she finally replied, her voice was almost a whisper: "Vietnam."

Sam leaned forward, clutching the rough edge of the bench. He longed to ask her what had happened, but respect for her obvious emotional state held him silent.

Miss Evelyn sniffed and pulled a tissue from her pearl-buttoned sleeve. She gently dabbed at her watery eyes. "Excuse me," she said.

"No, no," Sam said quickly, "you don't have to tell me any more if you don't want to. I didn't mean to upset you!"

"No, it's all right, Sam." She sighed, her breath shaky. "It's good for me to talk about him. He should be remembered. He was a wonderful man."

Sam nodded but watched her nervously as he mentally kicked himself. *Good job, Sam. Why do you have to mess everything up? You made her cry.*

Despite Sam's concern, Miss Evelyn recovered and continued her story. "I still remember the horrible day when the president announced that our troops were being sent to Vietnam. Let me

**I HAD TO HAVE ONE  
LAST LOOK.**

see—that was around 1965, and Roy received his notice in 1966. They cut his furlough short. I remember being so angry that he had to leave.” She closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. “I begged him not to go, but of course he had no choice. We said our goodbyes a few days later, and he left for the ship. But I had to have one last look. I ran all the way to this pier and stood right there.” She pointed to the end of the dock with a shaking hand. “I stood there and watched until the ship completely disappeared . . .”

Sam’s stomach clenched inside him. His windpipe suddenly felt constricted, and his eyes burned. Her sorrow was potent—and it crushed him. Their proximity to the place of her sadness made the feeling more powerful. He pictured a young Miss Evelyn standing at the end of the pier, shoulders hunched and tears streaming down her face, crying for her husband to come back. *She loved him so much . . .*

Miss Evelyn cleared her throat quietly, quickly regaining her composure. “That’s when I began ending every walk on this pier. I would sit here every day and watch the ships coming in to port, just hoping, praying, that one of them was Roy’s. Shortly after he left, I found out that I was pregnant with Valerie. My mother made me stop taking my walks. I was upset, but I could hardly bend over to reach the shells anyways.” She chuckled and shook her head. “I was so stubborn!”

She fell silent for a few moments, staring at the gray-blue waters of the Atlantic. Sam looked up and saw that her eyes were watering again. When she spoke, her voice sounded tight.

“And then, one day in late 1968, an officer knocked on my door. I knew before he said a word that something awful had happened—I could see it on his face. He told me that Roy’s ship had been attacked and that he was missing in action. He claimed that they were still looking, but he didn’t leave me with much hope. I kept coming to the pier every day, even though I knew he wasn’t coming home. The war eventually ended, but no news came. I finally had to accept the truth.”

Sam didn't know what to say. In that moment, his heart ached for this poor woman. It was so unfair that someone like Miss Evelyn had to go through so much at such a young age. How was she still so happy when she had spent so much of her life living alone? Despite the sun, Sam felt cold all over, and goosebumps tingled on his skin.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Evelyn," he whispered. He hesitantly reached out a hand, and she grasped it firmly in her wrinkled one.

"It's okay, Sam," she said quietly. She looked at him, her watery eyes meeting his own. "I miss him terribly, but I still have the memories we shared together. Whenever I walk alone, I remember the conversations and laughs we shared along the beach. It makes me happy to think of him back then—so full of life and love! He gave me more love and happiness in those six years than many women receive their entire lives. It was short, but it was enough." She squeezed his hand and smiled. "Please don't feel sorry for me. I have a wonderful daughter and my Jesus. They've kept me plenty of company all these years. I have so much to be thankful for."

**HIS HEART ACHED  
FOR THIS POOR  
WOMAN.**

Sam still didn't understand how she could be so happy, but he nodded and smiled. "Of course, Miss Evelyn. Thank you for telling me your story."

Miss Evelyn gave his hand one more squeeze. "It's getting late; we should get going." She stood slowly and began walking carefully toward the sand.

Sam grabbed the basket and followed her without a word.

They were silent on the way back. Miss Evelyn spent much of the walk staring at the waves while Sam mulled over her story, trying to understand how she could be so happy when she had been deprived of the man she loved so much.

When they reached the beach entrance, Sam helped Miss Evelyn safely to her car and watched her drive off alone. He



stared after her for a long time. He tried to understand, but it just wasn't fair. Someone like Miss Evelyn didn't deserve to go through something that terrible; yet, she was somehow able to still trust God and live happily. Sam never would have guessed what sadness lay in her past if she had not specifically told him. *How could she hold it all in?*

Sam kicked the sand at his feet and turned to stare at the endless ocean before him. He had never understood why the worst things seemed to happen to the best people, or why they often had the happiest spirits. His life, though far from perfect, was nothing compared to the nightmare she must have endured.

He studied the waves, searching for hidden answers in their depths. Finally, he slowly pieced together the mixed feelings darting within his soul. Life wasn't about what you had; it was about what you chose to enjoy. *I guess you learn to be more thankful for what you have after you've lost so much. And people like Miss Evelyn—maybe they're here to prove that you really can be happy all the time, even when life isn't fair.*

As he turned toward home, Sam heaved a deep, freeing sigh and let his worries be carried out with the tide. If happiness was a choice, then he would make the same choice as Miss Evelyn.

BY ABI SCHENDEL-CONWAY

# PHILIPPIANS 4:8

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“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”  
—Philippians 4:8

I think of all I have to do today.  
I think on what is mean, selfish, and vain.  
I think on needs and not blessings. My way  
Ahead begins to look dreary and plain.

I think my friends support less than they should.  
In trials, I see more test than there is grace.  
I see where I once fell, not where I stood.  
I think I have nothing for which to praise.

With one spiraling thought, my day is through.  
A thought untrue, unjust, impure, ugly,  
And of a bad report. There's no virtue,  
And there's no praise, but I thought on freely.

Quickly, I lost the joy contentment brings,  
Because I let myself think on those things.

SECTION 2

# LEAVING THE SHALLOWS

2

the 1990s, the number of people in the UK with a long-term condition has increased by 50% (Department of Health 2000). The prevalence of long-term conditions is expected to increase further as the population ages (Department of Health 2000).

Long-term conditions are those that are chronic, recurrent or persistent, and may be life threatening or disabling. They include conditions such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, mental health problems, osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, stroke, and chronic kidney disease. Long-term conditions are often managed by a range of health professionals, including general practitioners, nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, and dietitians.

Long-term conditions are often managed by a range of health professionals, including general practitioners, nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, and dietitians. The management of long-term conditions often involves a combination of medication, lifestyle changes, and self-management. Self-management is the process by which people with long-term conditions learn to manage their condition and take control of their health.

Self-management is the process by which people with long-term conditions learn to manage their condition and take control of their health. Self-management involves learning about the condition, understanding the symptoms, and knowing when to seek help. Self-management also involves taking medication, making lifestyle changes, and monitoring the condition.

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BY SARAH BRYANT

# A TIME TO RAIN

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When life brings rain, you  
have to bring an umbrella.

**H**arrison held the umbrella between his knees. He sat on a stone wall, high enough from the ground that his feet dangled a little, but low enough that he could sit without too much difficulty. He'd had to help Mabel, though. His wife wasn't as strong as she used to be.

He held back a sigh. Of all days for the skies to open with rain, why did it have to be today? He wanted to wait as long as possible before taking Mabel to the nursing home—even if that meant he had to drive in the rain.

"I still don't understand why you brought the umbrella, Harrison," she said now.

He couldn't answer her just yet, opting for a helpless shrug. Harrison's old eyes patiently perused his surroundings. She was right: the sky didn't look like rain. Maybe the weatherman was wrong.

Here and there, clouds brushed across the soft blue sky. In the distance, trees slanted up the sloping mountains of Tennessee. Each tree seemed to boast different shades of the same color—each one more vibrant than the last—as if a careful painter had taken up his brush and painstakingly dyed his canvas in splashes of burgundies, mustards, and browns.

*Autumn is still beautiful this year*, he thought, perhaps a little in spite of himself. Sometimes it was hard for him to believe that the world could still be beautiful when his own world was changing into something he had never expected.

Harrison tugged at his sleeve to glimpse his watch.

*Almost five.*

A sigh escaped his lips as his mind began to wander to the day he had first seen Mabel.

It had been nearly five o'clock when Harrison Smith strolled up the church steps that Sunday evening. His being a "transplant" from the war—from places so distant, so foreign, to his roots in Tennessee—was now becoming something of a joke he'd tell to anyone who'd ask.

Pausing before the heavy oak doors, Harrison took a moment to adjust the lapels on his navy blazer. The suit was a size too big, but it was the best he could find. Civilian clothes felt strange, but Harrison was growing accustomed to wearing them again. Maybe.

He straightened his tie again before opening the door.

He heard the music first, and for a moment, he stood there and just listened. The music coming from the piano seemed effortless, and he found himself humming along. It had been so long since he'd heard any hymns.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound . . .*

Behind him, the door clicked shut, and suddenly he couldn't hear the music anymore. For in that moment of guileless enchantment, he glimpsed a beautiful profile barely peering over the top of the piano.

Straightening, he glanced around, found an empty seat near the back, and sat down. He waited a moment before looking back up again at the pianist—at her.

She took his breath away, but she seemed unaffected by the moment.

He shook his head. *I've been at war too long.*

Opening his Bible, Harrison's gaze wandered down to the worn, wrinkled pages and found Ecclesiastes 3 staring back.

*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.*

Inhaling sharply, he blinked and tried to regain his bearings.

*It was God.*

Who else could make him turn—he knew it was not happenstance—to his favorite Bible passage?

Harrison quickly closed his Bible and set it on the pew. Folding and unfolding his hands between his knees, he took in the colorful stained glass in the windows, the rows of pews as they slowly filled with the chattering individuals who had just walked through the doors, and the modest chandeliers overhead.

Trying to distract himself, he opened the worn hymnal and leafed through the pages, only he couldn't see the words.

All he could see was . . . *her*.

Following the sermon, the line to shake the pastor's hand crawled—at least it seemed to crawl to Harrison. Members attempted to engage him in conversation—and he managed to register some of their words—but Harrison's eyes were focused on the enchanting pianist standing next to the pastor.

At last, it was Harrison's turn. He held out his hand to the young woman, but her father's hand intercepted. Harrison's heart sank. She ducked her head demurely.

"Thank you for coming." The pastor's voice was quiet but cordial. "Are you new in town?"

Forcing himself to meet the pastor's eyes, Harrison smiled. "Yes, sir. Harrison Smith."

The pastor's smile reached his kind eyes. "Well, Mr. Smith, I don't believe I'm the only one who hopes to see more of you here at Fellowship."

If Harrison had not been a soldier—trained to detect even the smallest of movements—he probably would not have caught the tiniest nudge the petite pianist gave her father.

In warfare, the smallest movement could mean the loss of a life. But outside of warfare, the smallest movement could mean the birth of hope inside a quickly beating heart.

Whenever scattered moments of that day crossed Harrison's

mind, he took a moment to thank God. For him, it was a beginning, and the beginning of something beautiful is what all people should thank God for.

*A time to love.*

Harrison's memories faded as, grunting a little, he shifted until he found a way to sit that was less uncomfortable. Stone was too unforgiving on weary bones. They hadn't sat like this on the stone wall for a long time. But he'd wanted to sit here today, and he wondered if she still remembered all the evenings they'd spent sitting side by side on this wall, watching as people passed by on the sidewalks.

He watched her now. The eyes staring at the sky right now were the same eyes he'd met and held for the past fifty years.

**SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL  
THEN, AND SHE WAS  
BEAUTIFUL NOW.**

Soft lines caressed her face, defining her eyes and forehead. It wasn't that long ago—*was it?*—that her skin was smooth and clear and her eyes bright with the hope of youth. She was beautiful then, and she was beautiful now. Every wrinkle told a story—some happy, some sad—but it was *their* story, and it was told on his face, too.

*The house will feel so empty when I drive back.*

Mabel burrowed deeper inside her shawl. He noted the bones in her elbows prodding through the crocheted fabric and wished there were something more he could do.

Logic reminded him that he was only taking her to the nursing home because he didn't know how much longer he could take care of her. But his heart didn't want to believe it.

"There's not a cloud in the sky," Mabel continued.

She spoke as if the conversation had never lulled—as if Harrison had never been caught up in wistful reverie.

"Not now," he said, shrugging. "But the weatherman said it was going to rain today."



"You've always been ridiculous," she gently teased, rolling her eyes.

She watched the five o'clock traffic begin. Or end. One could never be sure when people called a time in which every car became stationary "rush hour."

Harrison held back a sigh.

Long after their honeymoon, the birth of their son, and the building of their home on First Street in a small town in Tennessee, something had changed within Mabel. It had been a gradual change, slow and unexpected, but a change that Harrison could never have prepared himself for.

It began with small things.

"Harrison, have you seen my car keys?"

"Harrison, I want to read the morning paper, and I can't find my reading glasses!"

"But, Harrison, I can't go anywhere without my lipstick. Help me look for it."

Nearly three Julys ago, Mabel had given him a scare that he knew he wouldn't soon forget.

For Harrison, late afternoon meant taking a nap. And that day, the twenty-sixth of July, hadn't been any different. Leaving Mabel sitting in an easy chair in the living room, he walked back to their bedroom to lie down.

An hour passed.

Harrison groggily woke to a silent house. Grunting, he sat up in bed and threw the blanket off his legs. His bare feet hit the cold floor.

"Need some socks," Harrison mumbled to himself, his voice a low rumble.

He opened the top right drawer—navy socks, striped socks, khaki socks, church socks. But not his oversized, stretched-out, ragged-looking white socks that boasted a loose thread at the top and a hole in one heel.

Harrison left the bedroom and shuffled down the hallway.

“Mabel?” he called, entering the living room. “Mabel?”

Only family portraits stared back.

Eyebrows knit together, Harrison sniffed. *What an awful smell.*

The smell grew stronger as he walked into the kitchen and saw cereal bowls and coffee cups along with the dirty dishes from lunch stacked beside the sink. A plaid dishrag lay on the floor, and the china cabinet had been left open.

Harrison scratched his head, incredulous that Mabel’s kitchen had evolved into such a disastrous state.

Glancing toward the oven, he noticed wisps of smoke seeping through the cracks. Harrison rushed to open the oven door, revealing a burnt-to-the-crisp casserole.

“Well, there goes dinner,” he sighed. He grabbed the oven mitt sitting on the counter and took the dish out, setting it on the stove to cool.

“Mabel?” he called out again, this time louder, his voice urgent.

He searched the house at least three times—leaving no door unopened and growing more concerned with each place he did not find her—before finally giving up and fumbling with the phone to dial 911.

“Please! Help me find my wife!” he urged, his voice sounding panicked compared to the calm, reassuring tones from the other end of the line.

“We’ll find her,” the dispatcher tried to soothe him and asked for his address.

Hanging up the phone, Harrison walked to the window and looked out, his eyes flitting from the mountains in the distance to the cars zipping past his house. *Where was she?*

It wasn’t long before the flashing lights of a police car pulled into the driveway. A wiry policeman helped a petite woman out

of the backseat. Mabel appeared calm but confused, her hands clutching a handbag.

*Why had she wandered away?*

Harrison felt a tear roll down his cheek as he realized just how long his wife hadn't behaved like herself. How had he never put two and two together? For months now, Mabel had been losing things and forgetting what Harrison had told her not long after he had said it. He had noticed these changes surface from time to time but had decided it was only age. After all, he could forget things, too.

But that day had been the first time she had wandered away. Before, he had always found her outside, staring at the horizon. She had never *left* him.

Two years later, even her appetite had become one more thing that she lost.

Every morning, like Harrison had always done, he rose before the sun to prepare a breakfast of scrambled eggs, grits, and buttered toast. And every morning, maintaining a steady conversation, he cleaned his plate while Mabel left hers mostly untouched.

From time to time, she responded to his attempts at conversation. Her fork, held between slender, graceful fingers, stirred together the eggs and grits and occasionally lifted a small bite to her mouth. A napkin promptly followed, although there was never a morsel left at the corners of her mouth.

She hardly ate anything anymore, and Harrison knew what that meant: it was time for him to face reality.

He called the doctor and made an appointment for Mabel. After hearing the test results, Harrison began paying closer attention to the pamphlets that came in the mail on a daily basis.

*A time to lose.*

Now, sitting on that stone wall, Harrison thought that he had made the right decision. Knowing Mabel would be taken care of put his mind at peace. He knew it was only a matter of

time before Alzheimer's completely controlled every aspect of her life, and there wasn't anything he could do to save her.

But did she *have* to go?

He'd already hoisted her bags into the trunk, but he still wasn't ready to unpack her things in a room that would never feel as homey and comfortable as their own house. He didn't want to stoop to kiss her cheek one more time, draw away, and, closing the door behind him, shuffle down the sterile white hallway and into his car.

He didn't want to cry.

The small brick house on First Street would be so lonely after today.

“  
**THE SMALL BRICK  
HOUSE ON FIRST STREET  
WOULD BE SO LONELY.**  
”

*Did she know?* Harrison surreptitiously cut his eyes at Mabel.

Her eyes were fastened on the clouds that were approaching. Then her eyes darted to the mountains, resplendent with colorful leaves. Her face was as innocent, as trusting, as a child's.

*No, she didn't know.*

Harrison scooted closer, and, to his surprise, Mabel looked at him and smiled. He grinned back, and for a moment he was a young soldier again, falling in love with the church pianist for the first time. He savored the feeling of Mabel beside him, sitting close, the shawl around her shoulders drooping down her arm to touch the wrinkled, soft skin of his.

*No, he decided, I can't let her go alone.*

He cleared his throat. “Mabel,” he began, then stopped just as abruptly, staring at the ground.

“Yes?”

“Would you—” he paused, suddenly self-conscious of the raspy emotion in his voice. “Would you ever miss me? If we weren't together all the time?”

Her cool, soft fingers covered his. She squeezed his fingers,

and he turned his hand so his palm met hers. He held onto her hand so tight he was scared he'd hurt her. But he didn't let go.

"Harrison," she said seriously, "I would be in a sad fix without you."

He smiled, and they sat in silence for a long time, quieter and more at peace than the impatient drivers within the still vehicles.

When the first raindrop hit his hair, Harrison shivered. He undid the clasp around the umbrella and shook it out, opening the rainbow of colors, raising it above their heads. The rain came faster, falling like pellets, but neither of them moved from their seat on the stone wall.

*Sometimes, Harrison thought, life calls for a time to rain, but it's up to you to bring the umbrella.*



BY JAMES PEACH

# THE ONE WHO LISTENED

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Because there are times when I am powerless to help someone through trials, I look to God to give His peace to help that person and to use me to show His love. I have learned that sometimes it is best to listen and pray before speaking. This poem grew from a memory of one of those times.

My vision blurred, I moved without a thought.  
I couldn't think of something else, for you  
Were straining, crying, hurt, alone. I fought  
To work against the tears, but it was too  
Much then. Could anything I say bring peace?  
It's not as if I knew your pains and aches.  
My words were not enough; so I released  
My stress, my care, my fear to Him who makes  
The foolish wise. I stole away, and asked  
For help—but not for me. A kind request  
To heaven's Lord. I left the throne at last  
With peace. I knew to listen, let you rest.

And now, I write, reflect, recall that choice.  
God gave you peace by speaking through my voice.

BY GRACE SHAFFER

# YOSEMITE SNAPSHOTS

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I learned how to adjust to life's  
inevitable change.

**T**he valley of Yosemite National Park reminds me of a massive bowl with granite walls that were shaped, molded, and pieced together by centuries of persistent ice and wind. Never have I been to a place where simple changing seasons and passing time chiseled more beauty into the landscape.

At the very name of Yosemite, my heart feels the tug of the mountains where the sunbeams drench the feathery pines, the rivers persevere through shallow rocky beds, and the air smells of all seasons—new as spring, warm as summer, alluring as autumn, refreshing as winter. Growing up, my family and I vacationed in Yosemite every summer. But college interrupted the steady rhythm of our lives and forced us to change our annual tradition.

During the stifling dog days of summer between my freshman and sophomore years of college, my family and I heard the mountains calling us back. This time, we took my best friend Johanna to experience Yosemite's charm. In the six years of our long-distance friendship, it was our first vacation together; and I was thrilled that Johanna had a chance to taste a little bit of my childhood.

As we drove to Yosemite, I thought about how I had changed in the two years since I last visited Yosemite, while other things hadn't changed. It made me feel as if I were bridging two different worlds. At college, I felt young; but at home, I was old. I found myself simultaneously bright-eyed and optimistic, but still burdened by all the emotions that came with going back

and forth between college and home. I found myself unable to pin down in words everything that had happened in between.

Half an hour away from our final destination, we drove through a tunnel bored through the heart of a mountain. At the end of the tunnel, a postcard-perfect vista of Yosemite emerged



before us. Johanna gasped at the sight; the rush of excitement and wonder and awe that flooded her face reminded me of how I had felt the first time I saw it.

Tunnel View framed the astounding beauty that Yosemite is known for. Centuries of ice and wind had carved granite structures that would have impressed even the architects of the Notre Dame Cathedral. El Capitan and Half Dome—these defined the landscape while wispy cirrus clouds swirled around them and marbled the cobalt sky.

“Remember the first time we drove through, you fell asleep, Grace?” teased my mom from the front passenger seat.

“Yes,” I said sheepishly, chuckling at the memory. Even after seven years, my mom continued to remind me of the first time my family had driven through Yosemite. The lengthy car ride



had lulled me to sleep, and I had missed out on the astounding lookout view. I shook my head wryly at the memory.

“Well, at least you’re awake now, Grace,” Johanna comforted.

*Awake.* My eyes brightened. Yes, there was something about the mountains that seemed to revitalize and to awaken something inside me. The beauty of nature seemed to awaken my senses to become fully alive, and maybe that’s part of the reason why I kept returning to Yosemite. Its changes happen slower than ours. Yosemite developed over centuries—but our lives often change in moments. The scene flickered out of sight, and it was only then that I realized I needed to pay more attention to life’s quickly changing scenes.

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One morning, Johanna and I woke up early. Grabbing some coffee and a few home-baked scones, we made our way to the river which flowed through the campsite.

Perched on an exposed tree root that jutted out from the riverbank, we listened to the birds’ notes floating from among the redwoods while white beams of morning sunlight filtered through the trees. Sitting there beside my best friend with the ice-blue sky hanging brilliantly overhead and Half Dome’s tear-stained face peeking behind the skyline of trees—I paused for a pocket in time. This place that I held so close to my heart hadn’t remained unaffected by the ebb of change that was so eager to claim every aspect of our lives—it simply handled change well. Its beauty and grandeur came from accepting change, not from resisting it.

We sat and talked, and soon our conversation drifted to change. It felt as though that was the headline of every conversation those days. I had just returned from a life-altering year of college, while Johanna, a senior in high school, was still indecisive about what future she wanted. We talked about how life lately felt like a blend of knocking on doors and desperately waiting for prayers to be answered. For the both of us, life hung in the balance of choices, crossroads, and commitments. Deep



down, I know we both wished the days could be as consistent as the river that flowed effortlessly below us. We cupped our ceramic mugs of coffee closer and tried to coax the remaining warmth into our palms, just as we tried to untangle the knots of our futures. We tried to make sense of it all, to find *something* to grasp onto.

“We *are* blessed, though,” Johanna finally said. She took a deep breath of the crisp air and peered at the tips of the trees as if she were trying to take a snapshot of the moment to store away in her memory.



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Of all the corners of Yosemite that I wanted to show Johanna, Happy Isles was at the top of the list. I'm still not sure whether Happy Isles was named after the trilling river or the way people felt when they visited this little corner of Yosemite. I wanted to explore the gleeful river that flooded the forest with its ongoing song, and the little place at the end of a path that had always provided the perfect picnic spot.

To get there, we balanced lawn chairs under our arms and slung bags stuffed with cold cuts and jars of iced tea over our shoulders. As we ambled down the familiar path to the river, its chattering became louder.

Soon, we reached the river's edge. Before my mom could even say a word of warning or instruction, I was in the water, squealing and gasping with delight at the crisp coolness of it all. Small nebulas of sand flecked with fool's gold swirled in the shallow crystal water as I wiggled my toes.

No matter how scorching the day was, the river water was winter; it was a memory of the seasons of ice found up in the highlands; it was a memoir of alpine places I had not yet explored, where the air was thin and the breeze whittled the mountain into jagged edges of stone. The exhilarating coolness of the water

made me eager to climb up to the waterfall upstream, where water tumbled recklessly over the edge.

Looking toward the roar of the falls, my eyes eagerly soaked in the glory of the scene. The river surged over the polished granite boulders; the dogwoods and the daisies bobbed in the breeze, and the sunbeams sparkled in the river. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to be back.

Without wasting any time, Johanna and I picked our way over the rocks, slippery with moss and algae. We began to scramble over boulders; the eddying water pirouetted around our ankles as the river restlessly moved on.

“Wanna go up to the mouth of the waterfall?” My eyes twinkled with a certain mischievousness that often characterized my spontaneous whims.

I watched with amusement as Johanna carefully tiptoed toward the middle of the river. It was painfully clear that city life hadn’t trained her on how to effectively hike across a river. Her face contorted as she plotted her steps, tapping her foot on a rock to make sure it was stable. As she took another step against the tide, she flailed her arms slightly to regain her balance. But as she walked, her legs gained confidence. She moved rock to rock with more and more grace.

This reminded me of my own balancing act. The changes in my life were making me learn to adjust as I walked. Like Johanna learned to navigate a river of water, I learned to navigate a flood of people making their way to classes, or rush hour traffic, or all kinds of new social settings.

“How does this not hurt you?” Johanna asked, pointing to my bare feet.

I shrugged, throwing a sideways grin. “Mom has always called me a mountain goat.”

Clambering over the little white crests, I quickly mapped out a route to the next rock. We scuttled over the boulders, collecting bruises and scrapes that I would be hesitant to show

my mom later that afternoon. Swiftly, we seized a stone here, grasped a handhold there, carefully probing rocks with our feet to make sure they could hold our weight. Johanna offered her suggestions when we were out of breath and it seemed as though we had climbed into a corner where the next step looked too daunting to risk or the river looked too fierce to cross.

Looking back on that afternoon, I realize how my life feels very much like climbing at times, mapping out changing routes into unknown futures, struggling against the relentless flow of time. But then I remember that day when Johanna and I reached the crest of an unruly boulder and felt the spray of the waterfall plunging into a pool of indigo water below. And if I handled the changes I was confronting at that time, I could face anything.

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Growing up, I stayed with my parents in a little camp made up of rows of wooden cabins. Built in the 1890s, Curry Village consisted of burlap tents and small cabins with sparse utilities. In its heyday, it served as the less expensive lodgings that welcomed visitors to Yosemite Valley. Now, the rows stood almost abandoned, buried by seasons of fallen pine needles and crumbling granite.

As I walked through the camp that day, I stared in disbelief at this abandoned village, a grim reminder of the damage that change can do. The wooden cabins with their chipped shingles and sagging roofs looked somber, half-alive, and forgotten by the rest of the world. As I plodded along, I felt as if I were walking through a ghost town.

But one reminder of the past remained: the boulder I had always loved to play on as a little girl still stood austere behind the cabins.

The boulder stood nearly twelve feet high with a gentle slope, covered in a carpet of moss and lichen. Heaving myself up the granite slab, I felt my way for the same footholds, the same little chinks in the granite to place my fingers, following the same climbing route I had blazed as a seven-year-old.

Standing on top of the boulder, memories came tumbling back one by one. I suddenly remembered all the afternoons spent as a wiry tomboy who couldn't get enough of the outdoors, all the bruised knees and dust engrained on my palms. All the braided pigtails and scraped knuckles, all the memories of a girl who embraced the challenge of climbing up waterfalls and dusty boulders flooded my mind.

I looked up and saw Johanna standing by primly, tracing the ground with her foot, unaware of the epiphanies flashing through my mind. Johanna reflected so much of the person I had become—a girl who preferred the indoors, a girl who chose a book or a writing corner over the loudest party, a girl facing bigger challenges than simply scrambling up a boulder.

**MEMORIES CAME  
TUMBLING BACK ONE  
BY ONE.**

It was an odd little feeling to stand there on the ledge of a now-small challenge while staring at my present self reflected in my best friend. Now, as a college student, I had bigger aspirations than simply mounting this piece of granite. Now, climbing up waterfalls or boulders didn't prove to be the most uncertain challenge in my life. Now, I was standing at the edge of the future with no chance of turning back.

As I go through life, I sometimes catch a whiff of a warm, pine-scented breeze. For a moment, Yosemite floods my memory. I think of all the waterfall hikes and boulder climbs from that summer—all the tackled challenges of change that have made me more open, more accepting of the adventures that the future holds.

BY MIKE HUNLEY

# LIFE'S PUZZLE

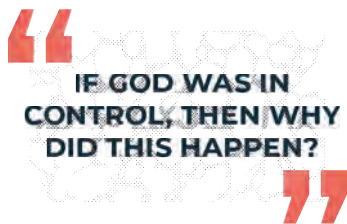
Life is full of scattered pieces,  
but the completed puzzle makes  
the picture beautiful.

Every day is another piece that we have to fit into the final picture God made for us, and each piece is essential. But suddenly a single event can seem to tear up all the pieces that were previously laid down so that the whole picture is jumbled. That happened to me at age fourteen.

In one horrific moment, I lost two of my brothers in a car accident. This one piece of my life broke my peaceful puzzle. Each piece had fit so perfectly before, but this was the tornado breaking down my defenses, shattering my security, and ripping apart my fragile emotions. Each day was more difficult than the last. In adjusting to reality, I fought anguish and turmoil. Most weekends I took my snowboard and hit the slopes. I'd be on the mountain for hours thinking, praying, and trying to find the place where this piece fit into my life's puzzle. *How was this supposed to help me?*

For the first time in my life, I knew I was not in control. Like all second-generation Christians, I grew up hearing about Christ's love and how God was always the One in control. So that brought up the question: if God was in control, then why did this happen? My mindset was squarely focused on myself.

I paced around the house, trying to figure out why God had supposedly abandoned my family. I thought that because God's plan wasn't my own, one of us had to be wrong. And arrogant as I was, I assumed it was God who was in the wrong. I spent the



first year confused. I pushed myself to excel on my own and to not need God. As a result, my walk with God struggled severely. I went through my daily life, walking through the motions of spirituality. I buckled down in academics and sports, trying to take the focus off my problems and fix what I *did* have control over.

I tried to bury my pain by shoveling friends, sports, and anything else I could find into the dark pit that I just didn't want to acknowledge. Going through the motions with God worked rather well, and no one seemed to question my spirituality. But every piece I tried to shove into this puzzle seemed dark, colorless, and devoid of any semblance of happiness.

My parents spoke at my brothers' funeral. My mom said that she had told God that He could have all of us. She took comfort in the fact that God had taken her children to give her the opportunity to give the gospel to my relatives, a chance she wouldn't have had otherwise. I knew that my brothers were in heaven, but why would I want them there? It was so much better when they were here with me, right? Looking back, I can see how selfish that desire actually was. Powerless, I wallowed in self-pity, refusing to allow God to place that puzzle piece which I deemed unworthy.

We prayed as a family every morning, giving glory to God and showing Him the reverence He deserved. I didn't see it the way they did, though, and I watched my family pull through without me. To me, it seemed as if they wanted to forget what had happened, and I didn't. *I couldn't forget.* I wanted to keep my brothers with me.

I read the Bible, prayed fervently, and talked with my pastor and others in my church, but it didn't seem as if I were getting anywhere. It seemed as if I were playing hide-and-seek with God, and He always moved just as I was getting close. The Bible says in Hebrews 13:5b, "For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Even though I read this verse many times, I refused to accept His plan. Wasn't there some other way to accomplish the goal without resorting to this? My anger swelled,



breaking over the dam I had created out of my own insecurities in either bursts of rage or frustration.

I built walls around my heart. I locked out the people who cared about me the most—not because they didn’t want to help, but because every time someone “wanted to talk about it” or asked how I was doing, it felt fake. It felt as if those questions became simply a social convention. Every time people asked, I felt that if I actually opened up, they would step back and leave me alone with the pain. So instead of taking that risk, I found it easier to push it aside and pretend.

Even almost a year after the accident, I still pushed God away. A happy exterior and a pain-filled center replaced my normally perky attitude.

That fall, as winter descended on northern Michigan, my friends forced me to attend a camp with them. As the first anniversary of the accident approached, I was in a particularly foul mood. While everyone else enjoyed themselves, I sulked. I *acted* as though I were having fun, but my heart was locked shut, even with the amazing preaching. I learned that by exaggerating how well I was doing, people would leave me alone. It was hard, and I struggled with my own reality.

That changed when my youth pastor got up to preach.

I don’t remember the name of the sermon or even the main points, but I remember what I learned. Though he didn’t use specifics, he told a story about an accident—my brothers’ accident. He said that even though we are faced with agonizing trials and challenges, God always has a plan. It isn’t our place to question how an omniscient God does things.

The emotions welling up inside me finally burst. I realized that life wasn’t mine to fix. I had given God my eternity but had kept my present for myself. I had no peace about the accident because I had never shown the faith required to receive the peace that passes understanding. I couldn’t comprehend “submit yourselves therefore to God” and allow Him to take control of my future while thinking I could do whatever I wanted. This was

when I finally realized that getting saved wasn't about receiving eternal life. Getting saved was about receiving *Jesus*. In return, He received everything, including my family and me.

After that service, I turned myself around—well, maybe I should say *God* turned me around. Life once again had its joy. I finally understood. Holding onto my bitterness wasn't keeping my brothers in the family. *I* was in the wrong, and I had learned the importance of admitting when I'm wrong. I realized that the puzzle of life isn't about putting in individual pieces to create a picture, but rather putting in the pieces to recreate what God had already planned.

Sure, life still has its struggles and pieces that refuse to be coaxed into place. There are still times when my emotions break down, and I lose sight of my Savior. To this day, every time something happens to me that I have a hard time dealing with, it's always nice to strap on my boots and take a ride down the mountain. But now, I don't *need* to snowboard down a mountain to have peace. Now, I acknowledge my heavenly Father, who calms me no matter how many times my emotions plunge over the cliff.

Each day still fits into the puzzle. But now, it isn't *my* hand trying to find the right piece. God's hands move each piece to create a picture so beautifully complex that anyone who sees it also sees how amazing He is.



BY DEVON COUNTERMAN

# UNCONFINED

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Karl didn't move—he couldn't.

**K**arl Hensler lay on the warm pavement under the blue June sky. He gazed at the clouds crawling by above him and thought about God. His shirt, now stained red, grew damper and darker as blood seeped from his body and crept out onto the pavement beneath him. His single cycling shoe looked out of place next to his other foot, adorned in a lone sock. Karl simply focused on the sky and kept thinking. The bicycle he was riding moments earlier now rested in a mangled heap of twisted metal on the side of the road. A 2009 Jeep sat with blinking lights in the middle of the intersection, harboring a driver stunned into silence. Karl didn't move—he couldn't. Instead, he just lay there.

The last day of June 2015 began as the perfect morning for a bike ride. At twenty-eight years old, Karl had been toiling away at early morning shifts at McDonald's for weeks that summer. He spent the remainder of his free time doing odd jobs at his parents' house and finishing summer coursework for the Word of Life Bible Institute. Finally, he had twenty-four free hours to do whatever he wanted; so, Karl went for his last bike ride.

After a large breakfast, he walked outside to the garage to choose which bicycle he'd take. That day, he'd train for hill climbing by taking the fourteen-mile round trip over the mountain from his home in Warrensburg, through Bolton Landing, and back home again. He chose to take the bike he'd just recently equipped to train for hill climbing—now with an elevated seat, allowing Karl to sit in a higher position. He mounted his bicycle, adjusted his helmet, and embarked on his trek through the windy, wooded roads of upstate New York.

Karl later reflected, “It’s all either up or downhill wherever you go on those roads. When I had the time, I’d spend hours up there riding on the hills, mostly because I liked it, but also because the traffic was literally so light you’d never see a car around.”

Karl’s training went well, and in no time, he looped around to his house. On a whim, he decided to take the route over the mountains again instead of returning home.

“I wanted to take advantage of the nice weather and the day off,” Karl explained. “Where normally I would have stopped, I decided to keep going.” Karl followed the road, picking up speed as he traveled downhill on Horicon Avenue. The sun peeked through the clouds, sending its light dancing across the pavement.



“I was bebopping along, looking up ahead of me. I noticed that a car was starting to pull out of a driveway. I noticed it kept backing out, so I sat up on my bike so that more of my torso would catch the wind, and it would slow me down. I hit the brakes a little bit, but not a ton because I figured I had plenty of time to get around the car.”

Karl moved toward the yellow line, giving the driver ample time to see him and stop. “My plan was to go either around the front or the back of the car by the yellow line. I just thought in

my head that there was no way I was going to hit the car.” Yet as Karl continued down the hill, he quickly realized his mistake.

“All of a sudden, the car was right in front of me, and I had nowhere to go. I remember that very, very well. I thought to myself, ‘Wow this is going to hurt.’ I was aware of the potential for what was about to happen.”

Karl calmly tapped his brakes, slowing down as much as he could. In a second’s time, Karl looked down at his speedometer. He was traveling at 32.6 miles per hour.

“I was awake for everything,” Karl recollected.

Karl’s torso hit the hood of the car at upper chest height, as his head and neck folded forward. His body contorted into the fender like a rag doll, and he ricocheted through the air, landing on his back in the middle of the road.

What followed was pain.

Karl stared at the sky, fully awake, struggling to keep his eyes open, while cringing in pain. He clenched his chest, fighting for breath. He didn’t know how long he writhed on the pavement before he saw a man cautiously approach him.

“Are you okay?” the man asked, hovering over him.

Karl fought to speak, yet the words he formed were whispered and stifled. Karl desperately tried to tell the man not to worry. He was fine. “I really thought my biggest need at that point was for someone to call my parents to pick me up and take me home.” He didn’t realize the extent of his injuries or the fact that he was bleeding out on the pavement.

Moments later, the man called an ambulance, despite Karl’s wishes. “That’s when the thought occurred to me that I might die.” While most people would fear this fate, Karl had peace about whatever would happen to him that day. He was equally as ready to face death as he was to live with his injuries. “I wasn’t afraid. I was pretty excited about the possibility of seeing God in those moments.”

His eyes lazily drifted closed and back open, and he slowly

noticed the people appearing around him. His gaze found a police officer consoling the young driver of the Jeep. The driver of the vehicle, Marissa Hall, was beside herself, looking at Karl's bruised and bloody body sprawled on the pavement. She had been leaving a friend's house that morning when Karl appeared on his bicycle. Karl would later learn that, in a moment of panic, she unintentionally pushed the gas pedal instead of the brake—a mistake that would bring her guilt and an irrational fear of driving on Horicon Avenue for years to come.

"I felt really bad that she was upset. The worst-case scenario was that I'd die, so it wasn't a big deal.

I didn't want her to think that she had ruined my life. It was an honest mistake that anybody could have made."

**“THE WORST-CASE  
SCENARIO WAS THAT  
I'D DIE, SO IT WASN'T A  
BIG DEAL.”**

Karl still fought to keep his eyes open, constantly unsure of what was happening around him. An ambulance arrived and meticulously placed Karl on a stretcher, despite his protest. Like a child who had a bad school day, he just wanted his mother to pick him up and take him home. But Karl wouldn't be going home any time soon.

The ambulance left the scene and drove toward Glens Falls Hospital. The EMS crew cut Karl's clothes from his body and started an IV with medication for his pain as well as a blood transfusion. Karl's condition deteriorated as the moments ticked by. As they urgently raced over the twisting road through the mountains, the ambulance slammed into an unforeseen bump. Karl, fastened to the gurney, rose into the air for a tranquil moment and slammed down onto his back. Despite the haziness from the medication, debilitating pain surged through his body, competing with the initial pain from the accident.

The flashing of lights and sounding of sirens alerted Karl that he was close to the hospital. He emerged from the mouth of the ambulance into the emergency room where doctors were waiting.

“Where’s Dr. Allana?” Karl asked. “I want to see Dr. Allana.”

Karl was no stranger to doctors and hospitals. A separate biking accident in 2007 left him in coma for six months, followed by extensive mental and physical rehabilitation. Dr. Allana was a friend, well aware of Karl’s history, but away from Glens Falls at the time. The staff assured him he’d be in good hands and wheeled him into the ICU to assess his injuries. “I remember them leaning over me, asking me to move my toes, to move my legs. As they were saying that, I couldn’t see my feet or my legs, so I was mentally trying to do it. I thought I was moving.” But Karl wasn’t moving—he couldn’t.

It started to rain that afternoon, washing away any trace of Karl’s blood from the pavement on Horicon Avenue. But the eradication of evidence from the scene of the accident did little to change the reality of Karl’s world.

“The doctors said that I was paralyzed from the upper chest down and that I’d never walk again. But this is the honest truth—my first thought, as I lay there on my back, was ‘Wow, that kind of stinks.’ I was okay with it. Obviously I wasn’t looking forward to it, but it wasn’t the end for me.” Karl would come to learn that his positivity would be crucial in the upcoming months.

During his stay at Glens Falls Hospital and Albany Medical Center, Karl underwent emergency surgery for the trauma to his heart and spine. Fluid buildup in his lungs forced the doctors to put tubes in his chest to drain them. They administered several blood transfusions and fixed his thrashed aorta. Two broken shoulder blades, six broken ribs, and a punctured lung took time and rest to heal properly. He underwent hours of surgery to repair six crushed vertebrae and remove the bone fragments in his spinal cord. He battled an infection and suffered terribly vivid hallucinations from the pain medication. His time at Sunny View Rehabilitation Center left him feeling like a prisoner, attending therapy six days a week for three to four hours a day. There, he relied on his faith in God to give him not only physical strength but also the mental strength he needed to recover.

That was two years ago.

Karl wheeled over uneven lumps and trees roots on the grassy ground. His arms pumped along, strong and stable. He rolled to the edge of the lake, watching his nieces run and play. Karl was now thirty years old, preparing to leave for Taiwan to teach English for two years. This was just another opportunity he had since his accident. The two years since that day gave Karl time to see his life in a new perspective. Every detail, the what-ifs and circumstances from June 30, fell into place in a magnificent plan Karl never could have foreseen.

Karl thought about how things could be different. What if he had gone home instead of taking the bike route again? What if Marissa hit her breaks? What if he didn't switch the seat on his bicycle—would he even be alive? And he thought of the people. The nurses and doctors still recollected his uncommon positivity. The stranger who called the ambulance—the previous owner of a company that manufactured parts for spinal cord repair work—had called the doctors at Albany Med to set Karl up with what he needed. The people he met along the way who prayed for him in countries he'd never even been to. He thought of the opportunities God bestowed—the mission trips to South Africa and Ireland and the upcoming trip to Taiwan. He had done more confined to a wheelchair than he had when his legs could work.

“I feel closer to God now than I did before. I think He's using me in ways He hasn't been able to,” Karl reflected. And despite everything, Karl lives with peace. “I am a better person today because of the way God worked through my accident. I wouldn't have changed a thing.”



BY MEG LOW

# RETURNING HOME

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Commencement Contest  
Winner, Fiction Narrative

I couldn't tell who that woman in the mirror was.

Her skin was like ice, her smile suicide, and her eyes . . . I couldn't meet them.

She untied the bow on her silk blouse, paused, then retied it. She shifted from foot to foot, like a child waiting to have her picture taken. She looked like my mom, a little, in the creeping crow's feet at the corner of her eyes and the Roman nose.

But . . . I didn't recognize her.

Shaking my head, I left the bathroom and passed through the master bedroom. Clothes overflowed out of the laundry hamper, two self-help books lay face-down on the nightstand, and an empty carton of Chinese take-out rested on the dresser. Coming into the combined kitchen and dining area, the disarray continued: Starbucks cups overflowed from the waste bin, and dishes piled in the sink. I knew I needed to clean up, but the office had me working overtime yet again. Since I'd been promoted to assistant director of human resources, time had been tight.

Money hadn't, though. I looked out the window of my condo and smiled at my new Mercedes. There were perks to working for Orbis, the largest biomedical tech company in California. The car was one of them. This \$700,000 condo was another. But time, friends, family . . . well, there were sacrifices in any field, or so I told myself.

At least I had gotten tonight off and could make it to the Wednesday evening service. I'd been struggling to make it to church, even on Sundays, which was kind of a problem,

considering I taught a junior high girls' class.

*Things will get better*, I started to tell myself, then stopped. Who was I even kidding? I wasn't in college anymore, with midterms to charge through with the shining promise of spring break on Cabo. I wasn't a secretary anymore, getting dumped and swearing the next guy I dated would be the one to stay and fix me. I wasn't even old enough to start dreaming about retirement. When were things possibly going to slow down?

My Linked-In profile said I was young, successful, active in my church, and fulfilled.

But no . . . I was thirty-five, alone, playing the part, and empty.

I sank to the floor, my back against the bar. *God, where did I go wrong?*

I asked, but I knew. I closed my eyes and suddenly I was sixteen again, at church camp, telling everyone I was going to be a missionary.

They read my name from a straight-cut decision card from the pulpit. I had been so sure that's what I was going to do. I'd felt the conviction, the call. I'd felt it.

Then I'd gone home.

Mom and Dad were Sunday-morning Christians, Friday-night partiers, and a thousand angry words and silent glares in between.

"That's great you want to go to Bible college, honey." My dad's eyes barely flickered from the TV. "Go ahead and apply. But finish your application for the University of California. I'd like to keep you in Irvine for a little while yet."

With my GPA, I'd gotten into both schools, but my heart was fixed on Modesto Baptist Bible Institute. I wanted to go there.

**I'D FELT THE  
CONVICTION, THE  
CALL. I'D FELT IT.**

“And you will. But I’m not paying a dime for something unaccredited, sweetheart. It’s your choice, but try a semester at UCI. Next semester, you can always drop out. The mission field isn’t going anywhere.”

So, I tried a semester at UCI. Then another. I got good grades. I fell in love. I joined the party scene. I was told I had



great potential. I tried anything to erase the taste of regret. I got my heart broken. I learned that people are terribly selfish creatures. I learned that life is out to hurt you over and over again, to grind you beneath its iron heel until there’s only dust left—

And I blinked and I was graduating, with a job lined up from a former internship, and my parents were oh-so-proud of me.

In the pictures, one can still see young, potential-filled me: shoulders squared, honors ribbons draped around my neck, and me smiling because of emotion, not because I was happy.

I’ve never been happy.

I stood and staggered into the kitchen. I wasn't hungry, but tradition dictated I eat something beside a kale smoothie for the day. Another cup of coffee, maybe?

I had just opened the cabinet when my phone began to buzz in my back pocket.

It was Stephanie, my best friend and the church secretary.

I picked up. "Hello?"

"Hey, Valerie." Loud Celtic music blasted in the background, and I heard a muffled laugh. "Traffic was *rough*, but I got Mrs. Mayweather; looks like we'll be there in twenty."

"What?"

"I just got Pauline Mayweather from the airport. That missionary to . . . where? Belize? I really knew . . . I'm sorry—" more laughter, "—anyway see you soon."

My heart sank, and I glanced at the calendar on my granite countertops. Sure enough, I'd scribbled something down for tonight, and forgot. Last week, Stephanie had asked me to host dinner for the newest missionary our church had started supporting.

"Steph . . ." What did I even have in my house? Special K? Leftover take-out? I could give her cash for Red Robin, or something.

"My battery is nearly dead! We'll see you in a bit!" *Click*.

I set my phone on the counter with decided care and leaned my wrists against it.

House was a mess? Yep.

No food to serve? Check.

Spiritual crisis? Still going on.

Well, I hadn't become the woman I was with a frail heart. I took a breath and sprang into action.

Somehow, when the blonde curls, white pearls, and kitten heels that were Stephanie Rockefeller came bouncing into my

entryway without knocking, my home had some semblance of composure. Tacos sizzled on the stove, the floor was vacuumed, and a linen tablecloth had been set at my small, rarely-used dining table.

I smiled at her from the breakfast bar, mashing together some avocados.

“Valerie Solon—the woman, the myth, the legend—I don’t know how you do it.” Stephanie kicked off her shoes and collapsed on my tufted sofa. She ran her hand beneath the cushion until she found the remote, then clicked on the TV.

“Turn that off,” I commanded, laughing. “Dinner’s almost done.”

“This tennis match simply cannot wait, Scrooge!”

“Scrooge?” Stephanie’s husband, Tommy, all the Barbie she was with half the bloneness, came through the door. “Baby, it’s not even September yet.” He began to help an elderly woman up the step at my door.

“Yeah, yeah.” Stephanie turned off my TV and sat up. “Oh, Valerie, this is Mrs. Mayweather.”

“I told you, Mrs. Rockefeller, please call me Pauline.” Aided by a lacquered wood cane, an aged woman made her way across my tile entryway. Her bright white hair was swept up into a ballerina bun, accentuating her big, age-spotted ears even more than the dangly green earrings. She had humorous blue eyes, a nose like a lumpy potato, and a Mona Lisa smile. She wore a cable-knit sweater despite the seventy-degree weather.

Pauline grinned at me. “Hello, young lady.”

I hadn’t been called a young lady in years. But at nearly four decades my senior, I supposed that this lady could call whomever she wanted “young.”

“Welcome. I’m Valerie Solon. Nice to meet you.”

“Pleasure!”

The four of us sat down to eat, enjoying the hastily prepared

tacos, the conversation, and the company. After we'd finished, Stephanie and Tommy conveniently dismissed themselves from dish duty in favor of the tennis match. I began to stack the dishes on my arm, actions reminiscent of my waitressing job in college.

"Here, let me help," said Pauline, grabbing the nearly empty ceramic pot of refried beans.

I smiled my thanks and led the way out of the dining area.

In the kitchen, Pauline positioned herself at the sink and began to fill it with hot, soapy water. She carefully removed her wedding band and placed it beside her on the quartz countertop.

"Is your husband still in Belize?"

Pauline selected a plate and ran it beneath the faucet. "No," she said, the corners of her mouth turning faintly upward. Her eyes were suddenly golden and far away. "He went home last month to be with his heavenly Father."

"Oh," I replied, her meaning hitting me like a brick in the chest. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. We served a good many years together, and I'll see him soon when my work here is finished too."

"Oh, don't talk like that." I covered the leftover salsa and placed it in the fridge.

She just smiled. "Have you ever been to Belize?"

"No." I rearranged a couple of Tupperware containers in the fridge. "I always wanted to go, though. Not to Belize . . . Anywhere, I guess."

"To visit?"

"For missions."

"Why haven't you?"

I shrugged, scooping the leftover guacamole into the trash. "Life called."

"That's a dangerous call to follow," murmured Pauline.

I turned around and found her studying me, wiping her

hands with a kitchen towel. Despite myself, I shrank against the pantry door.

“Were you called to missions?”

I turned my chin down in rebellion, holding up the shields I'd learned to raise when conviction struck my heart, shields forged in an attempt at achieving some semblance of peace: God would have made sure I would have made it to Modesto Baptist. God needed people to serve Him in every profession. I should do what I was good at, what made sense.

But when I looked into her sincere eyes, my defenses melted. I couldn't lie to this woman. “Maybe, a long time ago. It's too late now to matter.”

**“EXCUSES BLOOMED  
LIKE FIREWORKS IN  
MY MIND.”**

“It's never too late,” she said gently.

“I don't know, Pauline.”

Pauline spoke slowly and deliberately. “I know you're a busy woman. But we're hosting a missions trip for your church's teenagers this winter. I think you should come.”

Excuses bloomed like fireworks in my mind. “I'll think about it.”

“Do so.”

After the three left, I sat for a long time in my kitchen, alone.

“I've wasted so many years, God . . .”

*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

“I've fallen so far.”

*Render your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful.*

“I want to feel peace. I want to be in Your will.”

*Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.*



Hope glowed, warm, small, in the cavity of my chest. It was little, but it was something. Perhaps, I hadn't messed up my life too much after all.

Perhaps, I could get back on the right track.

Beach, California.

This mirror was cracked and reflected a dirt-stained woman in a faded t-shirt. Her hair was up, clean but windblown, and not a smudge of makeup attempted to hide the wild laugh-lines crisscrossing her face.

This woman, I could meet her eyes.

This woman was happy and at peace with the knowledge of standing right where God had intended her to be all along.

This woman was me.



SECTION 3

# DIVING DEEPER

3



BY CHRISTIAN ISTRE

# LIKE A FLOWER

My memories are like  
delicate flowers.

If memories were tangible like flowers, I'd pluck each petal to relive each faded memory.

Losing someone to death is like living with a void. I have all these memories that evoke wistfulness; and the memories get tangled up to give me a sunken gut and a lump in my throat. *How can I love—miss—someone I don't even remember meeting?*

“**HOW CAN I  
LOVE—MISS—SOMEONE  
I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER  
MEETING?**”

I've asked myself that question since I was little. I have willed my mind to pull up memories of him. *What did his laugh sound like? What did he smell like? How did I feel when he picked me up and wrapped me up in his arms?*

Trying to allay my questions, people kept telling me how much he loved me. “He always called you his baby girl.”

“When you were little, you screamed bloody murder when your dad went across the street to visit with friends without you,” my nana told me. “You didn't stop screaming until he came back to get you.”

If my dad and I were so close, why can't I remember him?

But I do remember a five-year-old me occasionally nudging my mom to wrestle with me. She'd play-fight, but something about play-fighting with her was different. I didn't realize until I was a little older that my *dad* and I used to wrestle—it was our thing. Every time I look at the old photograph of my dad lying on his back, holding me up at arm's length, and me half-giggling

as I tried to squirm away from his grip—I can picture it moving like a clip. I try to pluck that day from my memory, and just as I think I have the full memory of that day—us lying on the bed with him holding me up in the air—the memory is severed. It’s lost in the void.

\*\*\*\*\*

On November 19, 1999, my dad left late for work. He sped past leisurely drivers, swerving around them to make it on time. I can picture him in his faded red ’92 Mustang, cruising down West Park Avenue with bass booming from his back speakers. He made a sharp pass and lost control of the wheel. His car collided into a tree and bent into the shape of a “C.”

“**PERHAPS, THEY GAVE  
ME ALL THEY COULD  
WITHOUT OPENING OLD  
WOUNDS.**”

Even eighteen years later, I was still scared to ask anyone anything about him. I didn’t want to open healed wounds. But each time someone mentioned his name, I got more and more curious. What was he like? Was I like him? How was I like him? I didn’t press for any more information than what his friends and family gave me.

“You’d know if Stephen was working because you’d hear his laugh from across Walmart,” my grandfather Poppy told me.

“When he was little, he had a big crush on this curly-haired girl named Suzy,” Nana told me.

“You have your daddy’s smile. He had a lazy eye when he smiled, too,” my cousin told me.

Perhaps, they gave me all they could without opening old wounds.

Growing up, I never considered myself as mourning or as grieving. How can you grieve the death of someone you don’t remember? To mourn or to grieve, you must earn it. My grandparents, my mom, and his friends earned the right to mourn. They had the memories and adventures to prove their

right to mourn. I had fragments of blurred memories that bordered dreams. If it weren't for the old photographs of him in the dusty albums, I couldn't tell you if he had straight or curly hair, blue or brown eyes—if he were short or tall, fat or small, ugly or handsome.

The dead are remembered for their kindness, positive spirit, and inability to have ever committed a sin worth mentioning. I didn't care about the trite condolences that lingered after the death of a loved one. People who didn't know that my dad died tended to either tiptoe around the subject or tilt their head to the side with wide, sad eyes and say things like, "Oh . . . I'm so sorry"—then stand there awkwardly staring at me.

Maybe I didn't get a full portrayal of who he was because of his faults.

But people are more than what you see. Their faults make them *real*.

When I was twelve, I started to learn about drugs—the bad stuff like LSD and PCP—the stuff that would seriously mess you up. I was at the age to ask absurd questions like "Have you ever tried it?" Or better, "Was my dad a pothead?" My mom cringed. I had struck truth. I wasn't happy that my dad dabbled with drugs (even if it wasn't LSD or PCP); neither was I happy when she told me how it strained their relationship. People talked about his charm and his distinct laugh. But his faults—that's what made him *real*.

But, I guess, everyone is a good person after they're dead.

Now, I know that I had romanticized the idea of him. To me, no dad was as perfect as mine. My dad was just under six feet tall with short, curly brown hair, warm brown eyes, a Van Dyke-styled goatee, and three tattoos that marked his olive complexion. He had wanted a family, protected me, and centered his life around me. I was the second most important girl in his life (after Mom, of course). But I didn't have the memories of him that they had.

Memories are fascinating sensations sparked at unpremeditated times. You can't always time when they will be triggered or prevent them from emerging. You can only embrace the memory for that fleeting moment.

My fleeting memory was a word.

*Flower*—my “da-da” called me. A word. I couldn't describe his voice or tell you where we were when he called me by that name, but I remember the word.

I mentioned it once to my mom. She “mhmed” to validate that it was a true memory. But I still doubted. Perhaps, she pitied me for not having personal memories of my dad. After all, who would

tell me otherwise? I held the memory, or dream, or whatever it might have been close—but not close enough to be real. That memory was a fracture in my life.

One day, I gathered enough courage to call Nana to ask about my dad. Not minding hearing a story retold, I grabbed my ink pen and absentmindedly doodled.

“The day before his accident he called you his ‘little flower.’”

My pen stopped. My heart dropped. Tears began to brim. Through blurry eyes, I looked fixedly at the page in my journal—in the right corner and down the side of the page I had drawn flowers. I must have been subconsciously obsessed with flowers. I drew them everywhere.

Before that day, I had never thought of the word or name of “flower” as genuinely sentimental. I thought flowers were pretty, but I wanted them to mean something more than a maybe-memory or dream. I wanted something *real*.

Without realizing, Nana had given me something *real*. I never told her that I had thought I remembered him calling me “flower”—that made it even more special. She



shared the intimate parts of his last days, the days that I remember most.

Nothing is more beautiful than a memory that is your own.

At the time, I didn't know the end was near after he called me "flower." As a child, I didn't think a day would come without him. I didn't think to memorize the sound of his hearty laugh or realize that I'd never remember it. All I knew was that he was one of my favorite people to be around; and though that feeling is faint, I have a distinct feeling of amity.

Sometimes, I wonder if I am like my dad. From the short stories people tell me about him, Dad was *cool*. He was the guy in the friend group who would suggest jumping off the bridge or the guy with the easy-going smile that girls swoon over. He wasn't like me—a wallflower who'd rather curl up with a book and a cup of tea or the person scared of adventure. But every once in a while, someone will pipe up and tell me, "Wow! Was that you laughing? I heard you from all the way across the store."

*Thanks.*

Those times remind me that I am still like my dad—still "his little flower."



“His little flower”—those words are more than a faded memory. Those are the threads that tie me to a person I wish I could have known. They bring me back to when I was a foot or two high with bouncing blonde curls and the energy to keep up with my “da-da.” They are a reminder that I was one of the few who knew him intimately—we had that special father and daughter bond. Though my memories are not vivid, those three words—my little flower—offer peace and solidify that those fragments of memories are just as precious as vivid ones, if not more precious.

Memories are like delicate flowers that time can distort, but my memory of being “his little flower” will hold true to me even when I am old and feeble. Those three words opened buried and disregarded wounds, but they reminded me that he loved me and everyone else around him. Those words—that memory—tie us together. I am “his little flower.” If memories were as tangible as flowers, I’d let them grow; because having grown, I cherish those healing words that undid and mended a wound unseen.



BY KATHRYN STEPHENSON

# THE FOOL'S WHEAT FIELD

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Sometimes we have to work to  
find God's purpose for putting  
us where we are.

“I just don’t know if I can handle it, Mommy.” My hands were shaking as I clutched the phone to my ear. “Everything’s going wrong—maybe I should just take a semester off!”

I heard a heavy sigh on the other side of the phone. “Honey, I know you’re exhausted and things aren’t going quite right, but tell me about something that has been going well.”

“Nothing’s going well!” I blurted. “I can’t seem to do anything right and everything seems like it’s turning against me!”

I heard another sigh come through the receiver, then a chuckle.

“This reminds me of a younger Kathryn who wasn’t quite happy with her situation,” she said. I could hear her smile through the phone. “You’ll be all right, Kathryn,” she comforted. “Just remember your fool’s wheat field.” Then she said a quick “I love you” before saying goodbye.

I had forgotten about my field until Mom reminded me of it, and I knew exactly the moment in my life that she was referring to—back to the time when we lived in an old house by the harbor.

Our little farmhouse sat tucked so deeply in the wheat fields of the Kitsap County forests that to find it you had to know exactly where you were going. To eight of us rambunctious little dwellers—split between the older “biggers” and younger

“littles”—and our parents, our house wasn’t nearly big enough nor sturdy enough. But we were often absent from its confinement, instead enjoying every luxury the out-of-doors could offer in our rainy Pacific Northwest homeland.

Living on this hidden forest farm was a child’s paradise. The sturdy pines towered over us as we searched the woods for blackberries and salmonberries to shove into our mouths. And in the clearing, wild grasses grew full in the field beyond the fence.

**“FOOL’S WHEAT,”  
I DECLARED.**

This was *my* fool’s wheat field. I had nicknamed it after discovering a glittering gold rock in the yard. Proudly, I presented the rock to my siblings and announced my glorious wealth.

“Fool’s gold,” my older brother scoffed, pushing me away with his finger on my forehead.

My dreams of a lifetime supply of rainbow mini marshmallows—and maybe a pony—were instantly crushed.

The next day my little sister toddled up to me waving a tufted stalk from the field. She squealed, “Kass’in! Look! We’re growing wheat!”

I looked at the stalk and puffed my chest out.

“Fool’s wheat,” I declared. Then I pushed her away by the forehead like my brother had. Unfortunately, I had haughtily turned my head and missed, poking her in the eye instead. But my point had been made. I strutted away, proud to have taken my place as the snarky older sibling.

I often think back to that field, and its memory makes my heart swell with joy. But I also think of what I found in that field, despite the loss I felt as it transformed with the seasons.

I remember my field in the best time of year—when spring had just overtaken it.

Because the “biggers”—the three eldest boys—persistently forgot to mow the field, the wild grasses grew long and luscious. We “littles” would wait impatiently for the weather to grow warmer and breezier, and the grasses taller and greener. About the middle of April, the stalks would finally reach the perfect length for adventures.

“Mommy, can I go now?” I pleaded, already halfway out of my chair with a mouth full of food. She chuckled at my nearly completed lunch, then nodded her approval. With tuna still smudged across my face, I lurched off my chair and grabbed my brother’s shirt collar.

“Let’s go play house!” I commanded, and with little choice in the matter, he complied. We scurried past the gate and practically dove head first into the weblike tufts of long wild grasses. We ventured as far as we could—my messy braids getting caught on every stalk we trudged past—until we found the perfect spot. Then we set to work.

We patted down the wild grasses in a nice, neat circle, then pulled the surrounding stalks down over our heads and tied them together, forming a little grass hut. By dinnertime, we had a village of huts connected by a labyrinth of passageways. We roamed our domain until the setting sun filtered through the grass roofs like a stained-glass window, turning our faces green and yellow. I felt as though everything in the world were perfect and wished for nothing more than for life to remain as it was.

But on mowing day in the middle of June, I sat in the arms of one of my trees and said farewell to my field of grasses. When all that remained was the giant heap of green clippings at the far end, I sifted my fingers through the prickly pile. Although I wished I could glue each blade back to its stalk and roam my grassy kingdom once more, I soon discovered new adventures in the empty field.

On summer mornings, I woke up early and sneaked out to my field where the dew was still fresh, sparkling like tiny diamonds. While the “biggers” slept their summer away and the

“littles” had to stay in their cribs, I would venture out all alone, with only my trusty black labrador by my side.

“Come on, Blazer! I’ll race you to the blackberry bushes! We’ve got a lot of explorin’ to do!”

We searched for treasure, usually finding only loose socks, lost cups, and an occasional shoe. But that didn’t matter. I ran across my field as if running were an adventure in itself. Though I missed making grassy tunnels in the spring, these summer adventures thrilled my imagination.

Summer adventures soon ended though, and the “biggers” returned to their schoolwork, allowing the field to grow long again. This time, however, the field quickly grew dry, brown, and crinkly; the ground lay cold and lifeless beneath its stalks. The field wasn’t colorful anymore. It didn’t sing or glow with dew. My field was changing, and I began to fear the day when its death would come.

As I strolled through my fading kingdom, I breathed in the cool breeze which carried the distinct smells from every corner of our little farm. From the lush berry bushes on the west end, the aroma of bulging blackberries wafted through the air. While the faraway scent of sludging sap from pine trees blew in from the east, a south wind brought the fresh smell of homemade bread, gently beckoning me back toward the house even before I heard Mom ring the supper bell.

As fall faded, the dead, soggy, and black winter clawed its way in. Despite my protests, the cold, lonely rains arrived, and the swamp along the fence began to seep farther and farther into my fool’s wheat field. Lying in the grass had lost its pleasantness, and the pungent, soggy smell of withering grass kept me indoors. Peering through the window, I mourned my fool’s wheat field, and I watched the drizzling sleet pelt the ground.

“Ugh! The field is so ugly in winter!” I wailed to my mom sitting on the sofa, as she busily folded a mountain of laundry. I slumped down beside her. “I hate winter!”

“How can you say that, Kathryn? There’s always something to enjoy in every season,” she replied. “What are some beautiful things about the field in wintertime?”

“There aren’t any!” I said, tossing my hands in the air. “It’s all ugly! It’s muddy and cold and wet and slimy and dark and *ugly*!”

“That may be true, but remember, there’s always something beautiful in every season that life brings us—even winter.” Mom winked at me.

She paused her folding to check on the pot of chicken soup simmering on the stove. Meanwhile, I went back to the window and gazed into the gloom. I didn’t believe Mom. What could possibly be pleasant about that pile of wet, mushy grass? There were no birds (except our chickens hiding from the rain), no flowers, and practically no sun. My fool’s wheat field was nothing more than gray, bent-over stalks sticking out of the gnarled dirt. Mist hung in the air, and crumpled leaves swirled in the wind. But something else was mixed into the air—something wet and light.

**GOD PLACES  
BEAUTY EVEN IN THE  
GLOOMIEST OF PLACES.**

*Something white.*

My eyes grew big.

“Snow,” I whispered, my breath fogging the window. I jumped up and ran to the kitchen. “Mommy, it’s snowing!”

I bounced around the sink where Mom was chopping carrots. “I’m gonna go outside and play in the field!” I bounded toward the back door.

“But, Kathryn,” she interrupted with a chuckle. “I thought you said the field was ugly!”

I stopped to look back at her, pondering for a moment. “It’s all right! The snow will make it pretty again!”

After slipping my feet into my rubber boots and jamming

my arms into my jacket sleeves, I leapt out the squeaky back door to the field—my beautiful fool's wheat field. I stood silently as flecks of snow filled the shadowy darkness. I had finally found beauty in the ugliness. Though the seasons may have changed, my field remained beautiful.

Life soon called me away from my field, forcing me to say goodbye to springtime grassy tunnels, summer bonfires, fall scents, and glittering winter snow. A new season of life began, and another after that. I once again found myself wondering where the beauty is now that life's gnarled hardships have cast a heavy cloud over me.

And yet, even in the midst all my worries and anxieties, I think back to my fool's wheat field and am reminded that there is beauty—beauty too deep to see until I've searched and squinted, beauty too gentle to notice unless I've pressed my face into the cold, foggy window pane and stared past the ugliness. God places beauty even in the gloomiest of places. The snow may fall lightly, but the field is still there, transforming the ugliness with a layer of clean, white brilliance.



BY JAMES PEACH

# SILVER HILLS

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A fitted sheet of powder drapes  
Over hills and houses  
And leaves the landscape silent  
As snowflakes tumble down.

The flurries take to ballet  
And flit within the gusts.  
They dance above the hilltops  
And through the valleys spin;  
They alight upon my cheek.  
They bow to their audience—  
Awestruck into silence—  
And flitter around the stage.

I stand amid the dancers,  
Ambling 'cross the snowy stage,  
And I'm lost in matchless peace  
Their muted motions bring me.

There is no living soul in sight,  
And there's no other place to be.  
So I stare into the distance  
And cast my worries away  
Into the silver horizon  
Where earth and sky unite.

BY JENNETH DYCK

# THE FAMILY UNDERGROUND

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Family reunions can get intense.  
But has yours ever had to go  
underground?

L ights in the dark void hovered five feet off the ground, rotating in long, haphazard arcs. Like small, drunken lighthouses, the lights sliced the night, one of them haunting an old shed. The holder of the flashlight tromped around and pivoted his weight as if he had nothing better to do than to stand alone in the sea of darkness.

The soft thuds of our sneakered feet were too quiet to alert our hunters. We weaved in and out of trees, our powers of invisibility only compromised when we broke into an occasional pool of house lights. Hidden holes and dangerously strung clotheslines along the darkened path determined to slow us down, yet we pushed on in a subdued rush.

**“WE HAD STARTED THE  
GAME AT SUNDOWN.  
IT WAS ONE IN THE  
MORNING NOW.”**

We had started the game at sundown. It was one in the morning now.

As my cousins and I tore blindly through the darkness, we knew we were in huge trouble—bigger than we ever had been before. If the searchlights caught us in its glaring eye, imprisonment, insults, and possibly torture awaited us.

Five of us huddled together, creeping through the yard like a band of Navy SEAL wannabes. Darkness had swallowed up Micah, the oldest cousin, some time ago, and without his leading, I had to take control of the young clan.



From the corner of our eyes, a beam of a flashlight flared like the strike of a match, threatening to reveal us. I shoved one of my cousins running in front of me as light spun over our heads. I held my breath, expecting to hear voices raise an alarm, but the silence remained.

“Move, move, move!” I heard myself chanting in a strained hiss. Esther, the second oldest, took the lead and herded the younger cousins forward, melting into the night.

I remained in the back of the pack with Esther’s younger sister Anna as we approached the abandoned school bus. If we could just duck behind it, we would maintain momentary cover and avoid the open yard. But then, the flashlight flared a second time, now bobbing in our direction.

“Anna!” I hissed, changing my direction and heading toward the bus instead of around it. “They’re coming! Dive, *dive*.”

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If I were to represent our family reunion in Harvey, North Dakota, with a single image, I wouldn’t use one of the twenty photographs we took on Uncle Paul’s porch in the chilling rain. The ones that took an hour to coordinate—where Michael coughed, Jack cried, Micah grimaced as he ignored his mother’s request to “take off that hat.”

I wouldn’t even use the classic family photos of all twenty-four of us cousins, adoptees, and future “cousin-in-law” lined up by age—or the one where we attempted to reenact an old photo of all of us in a poorly constructed human pyramid.

No, instead, I think of that terrible, poorly exposed photo of our family packed into a dirty bus, with sweat dripping into our eyes and grime smearing through our hair. Not a single one of us felt comfortable. We were hot, exhausted, and covered in ticks. But it didn’t matter.

I didn’t care. None of us cared.

We called it Underground Church, a classic camp game that some of us played in high school. Because so many versions of the game existed, we spent all that day restructuring the rules to fit our needs. Three cousins posed as the secret police, and the rest acted as Christians trying to organize an underground church meeting. One cop secretly sympathized with the church, however, and always gave us the location of the meeting place as we played. Christians could be captured and rescued over and over until they were either all assembled in the makeshift church or all captured.

**“WE UNDERSTOOD  
OUR GOAL: FIND THE  
FAMILY AND GET  
TO SAFETY.”**

\*\*\*\*\*

Anna and I dove to the ground like professional stuntmen, rolling under the bus and flattening ourselves against the prickly grass. Flashlights loomed from the other side of the large, black tire by my head, and coarse dirt ground into my cheek. Despite the warm night, I wrapped my dark jacket around my body as if I were a burrito—a burrito with a pounding heart and gasping lungs. For a moment, only the buzz of cicadas filled the night. The blood rushed in my ears. The country air wafted over my nostrils—pure, empty, calm.

I heard footsteps and clenched my jaw, willing our hunters to neglect the underside of the school bus. With skin so pale and eyes so white, I knew I would light up like a candle if the flashlight caught me in its beam. While I kept my eyes shut, I pretended I could melt into the grass and disappear. I tried to calm my breathing and relax my muscles to mimic nature’s quelling stillness, hoping my attempt at “inner peace” would be enough to convince my hunters that I was just a black rock.

Finally, the footsteps moved on, and I let out a sigh. I looked to Anna, her face peering out from the frame of her bushy brown hair. Neither of us had anything to say to one another. We understood our goal: find the family and get to safety. The

EMERGENCY DOOR



two of us rolled out of the other end of the bus and stood before tearing off into the night.

If I had time to think while running across Harvey, I might have wondered, “What brought us all here? How could a family as large as ours—with as many differences as there are grandchildren—come together for one week of family reunion?” The official answer: to celebrate my grandma’s eightieth birthday. The real answer? We missed each other.

And at that point, I hoped that family bond would help us win this eternal game of biblical manhunt.

That night, as Anna and I tried to make our way to the shadowy tree line on the edge of my uncle’s church parking lot, we heard a twig snap from behind us. We froze. Looking over my shoulder, I saw a bear of a man rising out of the tall grass and weeds. The massive shadow pooled and billowed into the form of our Uncle Brian.

“You two,” he whispered, beckoning us toward him. “Follow me. I’ve made a path we can use.”

We jumped up and slipped through the grass, crawling along behind our uncle as the foliage brushed our shoulders. With Uncle Brian being a real-life police officer from the heart of Chicago, I couldn’t help wondering if this game felt like an enjoyable exercise for him as he made his way through the underbrush. Anna and I dutifully followed him while I ignored the idea of ticks and spiders. The stakes were stacked too high at the moment.

We followed our uncle along the circumference of the large yard, dropping into a pattern as lights played over the area. Crawl, flatten. Crawl, flatten. The secret grass trail ejected us only a few hundred feet from our goal of the shady tree line, and we closed the risky distance in a run, plunging through the pool of darkness.

As we settled in the shadows, Uncle Brian nestled into the grass and shrubs. He still reminded me of a great black bear

as I watched the tall grass practically hug his burly frame and enclose him in an indistinct blackness. We waited, watching the searchlights and hoping the others weren't captured.

I caught sight of a white figure dash across the lit parking lot. His lanky body dodged around parked cars and flattened against truck beds. His bare muscular arms shone from his own sweat under the streetlights. Had to be Micah.

He took a moment to scan the tree line before fixing his eyes on our dark shapes and running toward us. He skidded to the grass beside me. Since I had seen him last, Micah had given up the idea of sweating in his T-shirt. Instead, he'd taken it off and tied it around his head, leaving only a drenched white undershirt on his back. I guessed the costume change was more of a convenience issue than a fashion statement—it was definitely not an attempt to blend in with the dark.

"So we're meeting here, then?" he asked us, his thick Tennessee accent pronounced even in a whisper. "I was wondering where y'all were since the parking lot's so bright."

"Yeah, we thought it safer. Once everyone is here, we'll run to the church."

I remembered that it was my brother Connor who had chosen the underground church to be in the center of the parking lot—the brightest place within half a mile. It wasn't his fault, though. His communist comrades kept discovering all his other locations—the junkyard, the side of the garage, the wood pile—and he had run out of options. After all, we had been playing this for several hours.

"Okay, that's smart," said Micah. "Now that I know where y'all are, I've got some more Christians that I'm going to bring over here. I'll be back."

And then he was gone. Like a ninja, he leapt from the ground and took off across the lot and back into the inky shadows. From where I lay in my puddle of sweat and grass, I watched the pickup truck parked in front of the garage on the far side of the

yard. Micah's shadow moved around it for a moment before the scene changed.

At once, half a dozen silent, black shapes simmered into view from the bed of the truck and slowly boiled over the edges, little bodies crawling over the lip of the truck like black spiders. Micah herded them along as they raced back over the lit parking lot, skidding to a stop in the shadows. Uncle Brian did a quick count, hissing out our names to see if we were all there—Daniel, Jared, Anna, Micah, Jenneth, Alyssa, Ben, Cynthia. He came up short.

David—our Soviet secret police officer who preferred to sound like Colonel Klink from *Hogan's Heroes* than a Russian—found us on his patrol of the perimeter. He was by far the best and most obnoxious Nazi to ever play with us. All night, when he would discover our hiding places, he shined his strobing flashlight into our eyes and smiled with a wide boyish grin.

"Vaaat are you dewwwing 'ere?" he had asked in his chilling mimic of Klink. David loved playing the villain too much. His wide Joker smile shone gleefully in the glow of his flashlight as he paraded down the line of family members he had so triumphantly captured.

So much for family unity.

With forty-one of us cousins, uncles, aunts, and Grandma Dyck at the reunion, I knew we were about as assorted as a box of Lindt

chocolates: James, the oldest and soon to be married; Micah, who always wore a snapback hat on his head and had a hopelessly cracked iPhone in his pocket; Kelly, the Texan who attended Maranatha Baptist College; Esther and Anna, the two Canadians; Alyssa, the most mature thirteen-year-old girl I've ever had the privilege to know—the list went on. While all of us were vastly different, we were still able to come together for a single week in our lives to spend quality family time together—even if that



meant running around like fugitives in the night or flying off old-fashioned merry-go-rounds or building sand castles on the lakeshore or accidentally hooking power lines with our fishing hooks.

While playing the game, I knew we were far from comfortable, burrowing into bushes and hiding behind houses as David stomped by shouting “*Achtung!*” in his German accent. But the ticks, scrapes, and dirt-coated bodies never mattered. We were together. Finally. After years and years of attempted reunions, the Dyck family tramped around the little town of Harvey as one big unit, all our differences irrelevant for one blissful week.



BY SEAN O'LOONEY

# FATHER TO THE FATHERLESS

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“A father of the fatherless, and  
a judge of the widows, is God in  
his holy habitation.”

—Psalm 68:5

He was a child in a house of violence;  
He was born into a life of defiance,  
Stripped of love from the very beginning.  
His infant cry left heartstrings ringing;  
Raised in anger, he slept in defeat.  
Toying with danger, he walked in deceit.

He lived each day by the might of his arm;  
Respect was matched only by levels of harm.  
Honor was never won, but strictly taken—  
And he would have his honor, let none be mistaken.  
A child of hate that was bred in despair;  
A heart of defeat, with his back beat bare.

Yet in that heart full of hate,  
The Father built his love's gate.  
And from the ashes of his despair,  
The Father's confidence was fashioned there.  
From a temper like the winds of winter,  
A depth of patience his heart would enter—  
From thorns of rage, the rose of meekness.  
He found strength in his hour of weakness.  
The love of his Lord had much to offer,  
Especially to a child without a father.



Looking around, you'd see no possessions,  
Yet great was his treasure for he'd changed his affection  
From all that he lacked in his world of despair  
And washed his life in Christ's loving care.  
The help that King David had spoken of  
Was truly that of his Father above.

Truly hath King David spoken  
The words of help for the beaten and broken.  
For, though fatherless his childhood may be,  
Great were the wings of the Almighty.



BY ABI SCHENDEL-CONWAY

# THE DAY THE MAIL DIDN'T COME

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"I hadn't realized that my life was so connected to a face I hadn't seen—that the thread of my story was tied in a messy knot to someone I had never even spoken to."

Opening the daily office mail was a simple pleasure and privilege. Although I was just a seven-year-old spectator in the office, when a towering adult handed me the jagged stack of mail, I took the responsibility seriously.

The office was a small, rectangular Morton building with blue-gray siding and a fading burgundy awning. The front door was in the southeast corner of the building, accompanied by a metal mailbox with the numbers "625" tilting off the side. Inside the office, two hand-me-down cubicles sat in a row, both facing the front door. The back desk was where work actually was done. The front desk, which we still call Grandpa's desk even though he's been gone for years, rarely had work cross its surface. A clunky computer with a large brooding screen sat in the middle of the desk, surrounded by old magazines and books. I thought that it was the perfect place to open the mail.

"Be careful. There are checks in those envelopes," my grandma, Mom, or Dad would tell me. Because checks went to the bank, the bank was where we got out our money, and our money bought mac and cheese, I purposed to be careful and not lose a single check.

I perched in the stained and squeaky office chair that was missing a bolt and tried not to wobble to one side or the other. The gray letter opener, with its red advertisement fading off in flakes, felt large and clunky in my hands. I hooked the tip of

the letter opener in the corner of the mail, and with one swift motion, I sliced the opener through like a joust. It made a satisfying and slick slicing sound that was lost on everyone else in the office but me. Through experience (and scolding), I learned to slice away from and not toward myself.

After pulling out the checks, I tossed the empty envelopes into the trash can with a pleasing *thwap*.

“Make sure you get everything out of the envelope,” an adult at the desk behind me said.

Hurriedly, I grabbed the last envelope out of the trash can and double-checked it. *Nope—there’s nothing in there*. I went through the stack of envelopes piece by piece until the scratched desk surface could be seen again.

The pieces of mail came day after day and year after year. Familiar and new names rotated through the dented mailbox, and as a little girl, I was able to connect to these people through their envelopes. The return stamps belonged to the mayor, the state senator, the lady that lived in the trailer park, and a family friend—they all crossed through my small fingers. I connected to people that I would never know anything more about than their handwriting.

Piece by piece, my dad handed over the office work to me, and as an older teen I began to manage the office. I had bigger responsibilities, but the charm of opening mail never went away.

Every day, Dad and I left for lunch at noon, or a few minutes before, if we were at a good stopping place. We locked the front door and placed our neat invoices and statements in the mailbox, expecting to have them replaced with envelopes full of checks when we got back.

Over the noon hour, the mail lady came in her white boxy car, took away our invoices, and replaced them with checks. I never saw her, but I trusted that she would come during the noon hour, every day without fail.

Opening the mail was the first activity on my afternoon schedule—mostly because it was simple and eased me into the responsibilities I wanted to avoid, like scheduling.

One warm Friday after lunch, I checked the mailbox, but the mail wasn't there. "That's weird," I said.

"What is?" Dad asked, fumbling for his keys in front of the gray door.

"The mail's not here yet. It always is by now." I stepped behind him and waited for him to open the door.

"Hmm. They must've gotten behind," he said as he held open the door for me.

"Guess so." I sat in my office chair and woke up my computer with an impatient jiggle of the mouse. We went to work, and I grumbled about having to start the afternoon with scheduling instead of opening the mail.

At 2 p.m., I stepped out the door and checked the mailbox again. The metal cavern still held only the invoices that I had put in there that morning.

I checked again at 3 p.m. She still had not come. I strolled back inside the office.



“Still not there?” Dad asked, leaning out of his high-backed office chair.

“No. I don’t understand. It’s always here by now.” I plopped into my chair and toyed with the fraying armrests.

At 5 p.m., I shut down my computer and drew the blinds, still wondering what could have happened to the mail lady.

I propped my elbows on the edge of my cubicle wall and opened my phone.

“I’m almost ready to go,” Dad said from his office, where I heard the clicking of his computer being shut down.

“You’re fine. I’m just on Facebook.”

I scrolled mindlessly down the feed. Dramatic statuses. Pointless advertisements. Recipes I’d never make. Fatal accident involving mail truck on Church Street.

My finger froze, and the screen stopped rolling. I opened the article and read what little information was available on the *Times Republican’s* Facebook page. A mail carrier had been killed on Church Street by a minivan early this afternoon. I knew it had to be my mail lady.

But it didn’t make sense—every part of the story seemed so nonthreatening. Church Street was a quiet street with flower boxes, flags, and Presbyterian churches. And minivans weren’t supposed to kill people—they were only supposed to transport the most innocent lives. And it was a warm Friday afternoon—accidents weren’t supposed to happen on the most joyful afternoon of the week.

I showed Dad the article, and his face fell. “I know right where that is. I just drove past there this morning,” he said quietly.

I felt my heart drop, and I realized that, while I had fretted about my missing mail, my mail lady had been dying.

On Monday afternoon, I checked the mailbox. The mail was there—it was a huge pile since it contained both Friday’s mail

and Monday's. I was surprised that they had found someone to fill her place so quickly. The motto about no wind, rain, or snow being enough to stop the mail carriers swam through my mind. Maybe it was true that a death couldn't stop them either.

I sat down in my office chair and set the stack in front of me. It was a jagged stack with large and small, white and blue and gray envelopes. I picked up the first piece and tucked the knife of the letter



**WHY DID LIFE  
TEAR THINGS FROM  
US?**



opener into the corner. My hands felt gritty. I turned the piece over in my hands and felt the dust and dirt of Church Street on it. I picked up the next piece and saw the outline of a large shoe's tread. I imagined the heel of that shoe lifting off the pavement as the owner crouched on his toes to check on the victim. I could see the owner of the shoe, an EMT, look into the crunched mail truck with despair. I could see the sole of the shoe shake as sorrow dripped down his spine.

I slapped the envelope on the desk. I didn't want the mail anymore. I didn't care about the thousands of dollars in those envelopes. For the first time in my life, I didn't want to open the mail.

Mrs. Anderson hadn't known when she mailed her check the week before what it would cost. The Johnsons had no idea that their bright blue envelope would end up lying in the road. No one could have known. But I was sure that if they had, they wouldn't have sent them.

My shaky fingers shuffled through the envelopes as though they were a deck of cards. If there had been a shoe print, what more could there be? I braced myself to see droplets of blood, but I didn't see any—I just felt them.

I picked up an envelope and sliced the letter opener through in a slick motion. The teeth of the letter opener made a high-pitched tearing sound that bounced off the office walls. Tearing.

Ripping. Slicing. Why did life tear things from us? I thought of the mail lady's family that would no longer see her coming home in her navy blue uniform, smelling of cardboard boxes and glossy magazine covers.

My tears began to drip onto the dusty envelopes and turned into light brown splotches. I prayed for her family. I prayed for her husband and her three small kids that I had been told were grieving for her.

One by one, I dropped the envelopes into the trash can.

*Thwap.*

*Thwap.*

The envelopes made a sickening echo as they settled into the trash can.

I wished I had taken my lunch break just a few minutes later one day, just so I could have seen what she looked like. I wished I had taken her a cold water bottle on the hot days. I wished I had left her cookies at Christmas. She had driven into my parking lot every day. She knew my last name because it was printed on the sign above the door and on the envelopes, but I didn't know hers. I didn't know her personally, but she had connected me to so many people for so many years.

**“ SHE HAD  
CONNECTED ME TO SO  
MANY PEOPLE FOR SO  
MANY YEARS. ”**

I hadn't realized that my life was so connected to a face I hadn't seen—that the thread of my story was tied in a messy knot to someone I had never even spoken to. I hadn't known that our lives could touch other lives through the simplest things, such as the mail. I held the envelopes that the mail lady had held days earlier, and I thought about how short life was, how easy it was to overlook someone, and how I could change.

BY SARAH BRYANT

# GUIDE ME HOME

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"Sometimes we anticipate moments, spend them like quarters in a vending machine, and afterward wonder if we had wasted them."

**M**ost Southerners rarely look out the windows during winter to see a world of bewitching white. And in my town, snow falls either in delicate flurries or not at all. If we're lucky, every few years a light blanket of snow covers the earth, just enough to make a small snowman.

I can probably count on one hand how many times I've seen snow in Cameron. When the weatherman calls for snow, several inches may cover other parts of South Carolina, but my town usually gets only a feathery dusting—if that.

As a child, that dusting never satisfied me. I wanted actual snow to crunch beneath my feet. I mean, it got really cold anyway—we might as well see some snow to make the chill in the air worthwhile.

If I could change anything in my town, I wouldn't think twice about making it snow a little heavier around Christmastime.

When I first came to college, my Northern friends always talked about winters where they came from. I thought those winters sounded like an enchanting hassle. I couldn't believe that they started shoveling snow as early as October—the same month that my town couldn't decide between warm and cool weather.

Most times, I laughed while my friends belabored how disappointed they were when they found out I hardly ever saw snow. But then my laugh faded once I remembered the year I had worn a short sleeve shirt to Christmas dinner. That didn't seem



right. The South had got it wrong somehow—everyone should wear sweaters and scarves on Christmas, not short sleeves and flip-flops. But my town doesn't even bother dreaming of a white Christmas—we know it won't likely happen. The South gets its snow in the fall—when downy cotton blooms across the fields.

For the longest time, I wanted my town to change, to be different from the way I had always known it. It wasn't even the town's fault. I just wanted to see some snow.

I wanted to open the front door one day, feel the rush of cold air against my cheeks, and wade through knee-deep snow just to get the morning paper. Honestly, sometimes I see the angst of fighting through compacted snow as an adventure I will never experience unless I leave my small town.

I've seen what it looks like to spend winters in New York. I can picture people standing in front of the enormous Christmas tree by Rockefeller Center and hoping their dreams come true. I can imagine the people, with their chins burrowed into their scarves, lacing up their ice skates before they link hands as the cold pinches their flushed cheeks and noses. And the snow always falls softly, steadily.

Even one Christmas in New York seems more impressive than a lifetime of winters in my small town.

After all, up North, they have snow.

I don't know why, but something about snow charms my soul. I want to catch it, breathe it, and experience it in a rush before it vanishes.

But snow also reminds me of how moments accumulate, stacking one on top of the other, slowly, gently, but gaining height nonetheless. Moments from each day flake and fall into my mind in fragments starting to fade.

Sometimes, they're moments that I'm scared to forget.

When I was growing up, I always looked forward to visiting my great-grandmother each year at Christmas. Every time

I hugged her, I wanted to know whether I had finally gotten taller than she was. She always played this game with me and my cousins. We all laughed about it, knowing it wouldn't take us long to catch up to her small, four-foot-eleven frame.

"Oh! You're getting so tall!" she'd say with a spunky smile on her face. "By this time next year, you'll be long past me!"

I used to stare up at her, impatient for the day that I was taller than she was.

By the time I had grown up, we'd also started going to her house to visit her for Christmas because she couldn't make it out into the cold anymore. I remember stooping to hug her as she sat on her couch, bundled up in an afghan layered over a fleece blanket and a scarf tied over her soft, white hair.

We didn't see her much. Sometimes life gets in the way of visiting with people who are worth dropping everything for.

Now I just wish I could hug her again.

Now, years later, when I look at photographs of my great-grandmother, I realize how much I want to tell her that I know her game wasn't just about height. Each year, she was always a little more excited to see how much we'd grown up since we saw her last.

Her past excitement now motivates me to never stop growing, to enjoy life.



I can't remember a Christmas morning when my dad didn't take out his Nikon camera to take candid pictures of us kids opening our gifts. My siblings and I never liked having our pictures taken that early in the morning, but we always enjoyed looking at them later.

It took me so long to realize that those messy, awkward photographs preserve memories.

Come to think of it, I wish I had a photograph of Granddaddy sitting beside Tata on our couch. My grandparents used to drive

**“AS TIME GOES ON,  
I NOTICE CHANGE A  
LITTLE MORE.”**

to our house on Christmas morning. For as long as I can remember, they always came to see us, sit on our couch, and look at the pile of presents on the floor—not to mention the strewn wrapping paper that Daddy furiously packed into a trash bag.

“Well, what did Santa bring for you this year?” Granddaddy used to ask, even though he knew that we didn't believe in Santa. It was more of a joke between him and us.

One by one, we'd pick our favorite gift to show him and Tata. Undoubtedly, they'd mention how much gifts had changed since they were kids. But for the longest time, those comments flew over my head. I never realized how good we had it—or how good *they* had it.

Yet as time goes on, I notice change a little more. As we grow older, we slowly refuse to leave the stress at work. We worry about the changing world. But most of all, we forget to appreciate the people around us. We figure they'll somehow always be here for us to say, “I love you” and to hold close and to show them how much we value them.

But they won't be here forever.

For the past three years, however, Granddaddy's seat remains empty; and last year, not even Tata showed up on Christmas

morning. Her hip had been bothering her so much that she couldn't have walked up our front porch steps—especially not with that old, rickety railing we have that's close to falling apart (I guess that's what we get for living in a house that's over eighty years old).

Their absence made Christmas morning seem strange—similar to the feeling you get when something is missing but you can't quite put your finger on it.

Now it seems shallow for me to have taken them for granted all those years. It had never been about showing my grandparents what I'd gotten for Christmas—it was always about spending Christmas morning with them, eating Mama's coffee cake, and laughing together.

Sometimes we anticipate moments, spend them like quarters in a vending machine, and afterward wonder if we have wasted them. It's only in hindsight that we realize that the moments have all evaporated, melted, just like the snow when the weather warms again.

Snow will always be fleeting.

Maybe that's why I'm enchanted by snow.

Something as fleeting as snow needs to be cherished even more.

\*\*\*\*\*

Last Christmas, my town welcomed five inches of snow.

This bizarre, unusual change closed schools, shut down roads, and put work on hold. No one knew what to do—except enjoy the snow while it lasted.

We fell onto the white earth and made snow angels. We laughed at the snow mounding in the wheelbarrow, onto the wood pile, and on the trampoline. We built a family of snowmen. We gawked at the frozen creek in the woods behind the house.

I've never seen a more perfect snowfall, so pure, and so soft—and perfect for packing between gloves for a snowball fight.

But after the first day or two, our excitement faded.

“I can’t believe the snow hasn’t melted yet.”

“It’s still here?”

“It’s never lasted this long—this is so weird.”

By the time the snow melted, I realized something: I may have been happy to watch the snow fall, but I was just as relieved to see it melt so we could go on with our ordinary lives.

For me, seeing snow every few years makes it even more special. A snow-covered earth is beautiful, but I don’t have to live somewhere with snow to make me happy.

I’ve lived in my small town since I was two. Now that I’m older, I am loath to encourage change the way I used to. It’s okay if things stay this way for a while longer.

I love the two long roads that meet in the middle of Cameron, South Carolina. I even love the yellow blinking light that hangs in the center of that small intersection. And

**“IT’S OKAY IF THINGS  
STAY THIS WAY FOR A  
WHILE LONGER.”**

I hope they never tear down the old, rustic building that sits on one corner. That’s where, on the patio outside, the town barber starts selling Christmas trees the day after Thanksgiving.

But one of the best parts of my town, to me, is the little gas station. Here, the patriarchs of the town converge at a round table in a corner by the front windows and drink coffee, discuss politics, and solve all the world’s problems. Most of them wear farming hats, khaki pants, and golfing polos—in the winter, they might add a fleece jacket to ward off the chilly air.

My granddaddy used to be one of the regulars.

Now they tell my family, “We sure do miss George.”

Small towns seldom change from the way things used to be. But when something is added, taken away, or just plain *different*, people notice—and they will talk about it for the next twenty years.

Over the years, I have watched the sign for the gas station change, noticed the updates in the barber shop, and heard how farmers were starting to use the latest technology.

But I hope they never stop remembering Granddaddy.

Past that gas station and the barber shop and the railroad tracks is my house, the same house where Tata grew up. I remember Tata telling us that people used to call this white, two-story house “Grand Central Station.” Back in the day, everybody loved to visit this house—and, rumor has it, the reason was my great-grandmother’s magnetic, fun-loving personality. Even now, my house is still a kind of “Grand Central Station”—maybe that personality runs in the family.

**“PEOPLE USED TO CALL THIS WHITE, TWO-STORY HOUSE ‘GRAND CENTRAL STATION.’”**

I hear it every time Tata and Mama get together and laugh about old times.

And that’s when I realize I couldn’t leave this house for long—not without counting down the days to walk through the front door again.

I especially love coming home from college for Christmas.

A Christmas flag hangs from the mailbox, making me think of all the letters Mama and Daddy had sent my way while I stayed swamped in schoolwork. The familiar handwriting on those envelopes always brought me as much joy as the notes written inside.

Before I open the front door, I take a deep breath, and then I smile. My dachshund Sadie, her tail whipping from side to side in excitement, scratches impatiently at the window. I don’t even open the door all the way before Sadie jumps on my legs, demanding my attention.

“Hey, Sadie!” I exclaim with as much enthusiasm as I can muster, having spent nine hours cramped inside a car.

I quickly scoop up Sadie, feeling her soft, silky fur beneath

my fingertips. She nearly squirms out of my arms as she pushes her nose against my cheek, making me laugh.

Holding Sadie close, I look up at the smiling faces watching my reunion with my dog.

The room smells of that spicy Christmas candle Mama saves for this time of year. In the corner of the room stands our Christmas tree, decorated with ornaments dating back to my childhood, my parents' marriage, and Mama's childhood. Sometimes when I look at our tree, I think about how much history hangs from those branches.

And suddenly, it doesn't matter that I don't see snow every winter.

The fields filled with downy cotton are my snow.

This is my home.



BY GAGE CROWDER

# A PASTOR AND HIS PEOPLE

---

Give love to those in need, and  
you will receive love in turn.

**T**he alarm on my phone began ringing at 5:30 in the morning, but I hadn't been asleep. I had lain awake all night, listening to the noises that I had not been so acutely aware of before my diagnosis—the sibilants of shifting sheets, the *cracks* and *clicks* of a settling old house. And I had spent most of the night watching the gradual rise and fall of the blankets as Rachel rhythmically breathed in the cool, crisp Alabama air.

That's what a cancer diagnosis does to you—it makes you more aware of life. After the doctor walks into the room, life turns into a war—a war against nullity, against yourself. All your senses are heightened. A twig snaps, and you're on guard against a wasted moment. Yes, there is a mean streak in the cancer patient, but it is not a mean streak against others: it is against an apathetic life.

And that's why I didn't sleep.

Two days had passed since Dr. Hull gave me the diagnosis. I went to the hospital a few days prior for some phantom back pains, and I came out with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. To my family and me, it was an earth-shattering diagnosis, to say the least. That's what eleven years of ministry got me: a death sentence, cancer.

That was Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving; and now, it was Friday, the first day of treatments.

I looked at the clock—5:32 a.m.



"Are you awake, Art?" Rachel asked, her voice scratchy like a coal miner's.

"Yes, I am."

It wasn't quite dawn, but it was that time of morning in which the sun crept slowly up to the horizon, blending the black sky of night with the light blue of early morning and giving the room a soft gray hue.

"Well, we'd better get up. It won't be long until your parents get here."

We sat up, removing the big knit quilt and exposing ourselves to the chilly atmosphere of the house. I turned on the lamp beside my bed and unfolded the metal origami of my glasses and slid them onto my face.

"Don't you think we should pray before we get ready?" asked Rachel.

"I suppose so," I replied. My toes touched the hardwood floor, and I recoiled momentarily at the prospect of planting both feet on the icy oak. But Rachel was by my side at once.

"Here you go, darling," she said, placing a pillow down for my knees to rest on.

"Thank you very much," I said, gently caressing her arm.

We shared a smile in the dim light. Her hair was pulled back, and her face bare and natural. For a moment, I wondered at her—at the crystal blue of her bloodshot eyes, at the perfectly placed imperfections on her porcelain skin, and at the sleepy grin she forced. And as I admired, I saw the first glistening tear making its way down her face.

"Oh, Art, I—" She threw her arms around my neck and buried her head into my chest, sobbing.

"I know, Rachel. I know." That was all I could think to say.

**IT WAS AN  
EARTH-SHATTERING  
DIAGNOSIS TO SAY  
THE LEAST.**

“Would you pray?” she asked me.

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Please, try,” she sobbed.

“Oh, God, have mercy.” After those words, prayer turned from audible words to a collective whimper as the sun gradually brightened the dim room.

Rising from our lamentations, we cleaned up and prepared for the long day. A glance at the clock informed us that it was almost 7:00, and my parents soon arrived at the door.

“Good morning, Arty, how do you feel?” Dad asked. He had a strange look on his face. However, given the context in which the question was asked, perhaps it wasn’t that strange.

Dad was a tall, thin man with a full head of snow-white hair, which sat perfectly in place. But today, standing in the living room, Dad appeared to have shrunk under the weight of sorrow, an unnatural sorrow that forces a man to face his son’s mortality before his own. Mom, short and round, stood close by, smiling and clutching Dad’s arm in one hand and a handkerchief in the other as though they were the only two things left in the world with validity.



“Tell us, sweetie,” Mom added, giving me a reassuring smile and a nod that indicated she wanted an honest response.

“I’m confused—and I’m—scared. It’s a long road ahead, and I just want my church to know it’s—it’s okay to be hurting. I know they are hurting. But I want them to know that we believe God is still God, and He is still good.” I said this because I wanted to believe it. There is a kind of certainty about verbally affirming—something that solidifies it in your heart. But the tears came again through my broken speech.

“They’ll know soon enough,” she whispered. I smiled at her sincerity.

“Dr. Hull wanted us at the office for the chemo preparation no later than eight,” Rachel chimed in from the kitchen.

Dr. Hull was the most gifted oncologist in the southeastern United States. He was my shot at survival—or so I thought.

“Would you like some coffee before we leave, Mel? Gene?” Rachel asked.

“That would be great,” Mom answered.

We all gathered around the table. It was a short but nice time of fellowship. Our hearts were warmed by light conversation, and our hands and stomachs were warmed by coffee, steam rising from the four mugs like smoke from smoldering fires.

While we sat and talked and laughed, the clock struck 7:30. It was time to start a new journey. This journey would begin with a half-hour ride from the house to the clinic.

We gathered my luggage and loaded it into the car. The walks back and forth from the house to the vehicle were cold and quiet—the exact opposite of the conversation around the table.

“Let’s pray before we leave,” Dad said.

“Why don’t you go ahead and do it, Gene,” Rachel quickly suggested.

"All right, I will." He cleared his throat. "Our Father and our God, bless our new journey and bless your servant Art Wilson. Encourage his heart on this ride to a temporary home. Amen."

"Amen," I said and began to pull out of the driveway.

As I drove down the street, we grew quiet, the anguish settling in. I knew there was no going back. I wanted more than anything to turn around, to crawl back into bed, to live—to *end the anguish*. But when the truck eased to a stop at the first stop sign, I couldn't believe what I saw.

"Look, Art," Rachel said calmly, joyfully pointing out of the passenger-side window.

There, on the right, at Tucker's gas station, stood a group of people from my church, happily waving white poster boards with red hearts painted onto them. Shocked, I jerked the wheel into the gas station parking lot, parked, and ran as fast as I could to the little group.

"What is this?" I asked in bewilderment, hot tears streaming down my cheeks.

"We want you to know that we love you, Pastor," James said.

"We love you, and we are behind you all the way," Rosanne cried out.

"We love you, Pastor," Josh, the assistant pastor at the church, said, placing a strong hand on my shoulder. I collapsed, sobbing, onto his chest.

"I'm so afraid," I whimpered, disregarding all the feigned toughness that I had shielded myself with for the last couple days.

"I know. But we are here. And God is here," he replied, squeezing me tightly. I could feel the weakened bones strain under the great pressure. It was bittersweet. "You should get going, though. You can't be late. We will be with you, supporting you the entire way."

"Thank you so much," I choked as the crowd followed me back to the car.

As I drove over the hill, I couldn't do anything but stare, gaping at the sight before me. It wasn't just a small support group at a gas station. Down the mountain from Somerville Street to the interstate, there were little white dots—hundreds probably. People lined for miles and miles in the frigid Alabama air, holding white signs with painted red hearts. *My people.*

When our truck coasted past each group, they followed behind, waving their signs in the air, yelling their love and support, mile after mile.

As the faces came into focus, stories and memories came back like a flood of refreshing water. There was Jason Jones—I had led him to Christ in my office five years prior. We had walked his entire Christian life together. There was Julia Martin—I had helped restore and reconcile her and her husband, and now they were the most faithful family in the entire church. There were Johnny and April—I had watched these two kids grow up in the church, and now I often watched as they strolled into the church together, arm in arm and heart to heart.

Their support was a soul-detoxing tea of love.

“What is all of this?” I asked through sobs of wonder and of joy, trying to remain on the road.

“This is your flock, Art,” Rachel answered. “They’re here for you because you were here for them. When they needed you most, you came running. Now, when you need them most, they’ve come running.”

The ride was like a dream. *That’s what eleven years of ministry got me*, I thought as face after face smiled at the car in assurance of love.

I spent the rest of the car ride in prayer—prayer for forgiveness and prayer for courage.

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But that was the Friday after Thanksgiving; the Sunday after New Year’s was, yet again, a new journey. Only this time, it was a joyous one. I left my clinic room today. I said goodbye to the

nurses who helped me and to the balcony which served so many days and nights as a platform of prayer.

The last of the posters, signed and dated by all who attended the rally months before, were packed away to be preserved as a memorial to the kindness of God.

“You know, Art,” Dr. Hull said to me as I took one last glance over the room, “Acute leukemia is not something many people get to walk away from. That little stunt your flock pulled may very well have saved your life.”

And I do believe he was right. Fearing a loss of motivation to live in the hospital, Dr. Hull often reminded me that the battle over cancer was a fifty-fifty battle—50 percent care and 50 percent attitude. Just as often, I assured him that I had the motivation by showing him the posters.

In the hallway leading to the outside of the clinic, the nurses lined the corridor, as they often did, cheering and clapping for a healthy recovery. The thoughtful gesture made my exit out of the clinic a pleasant one.

Outside, Rachel met me with a hug and tears of joy. Mom and Dad quickly ushered me off to the car to spend an evening in prayer and celebration at the house I hadn’t stepped foot into for months.

We pulled away from the clinic, cheers still echoing behind the car. My new journey had begun. I was now a survivor.

The car ride was a merry and light-hearted one. We sang, we laughed, and we cried together. I hadn’t experienced that in months, since human contact was almost nonexistent. In order to beat the cancer down, I needed high doses of chemo: one four-hour cycle in the morning and one in the afternoon. Because of this routine, my immune system was nearly gone. My room was sterilized four times a day. My hair was all gone after the third day of treatments, and I had lost forty pounds. It was humiliating and humbling, but it felt good to feel human again. It’s funny isn’t it, that even the man of God must have his faith

tested, that the man of God must fail, that a man of God is only a man after all?

When we turned off the interstate, my heart leaped.

“Take another look, Art,” Rachel said, turning to me with a smile.

My eyes darted from one side of the road to the other, where once again miles of white signs with red hearts lined the highway.



BY HANNAH EDWARDS

# DOORS

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Commencement Contest  
Winner, Extemporaneous Essay

**B**ehind it breathed rooms full of comfort, the affection of family, and the intangible barrier of security. Beyond it lay a green lawn, climbing trees, and dirty bare feet after long summer days of play, a swimming pool, and an ever-new adventure.

It was the first door in my memory.

For sixteen years, I went in and out of that door to home. Its black coat frazzled and flaked away until my mother painted it a reviving green, and the door remained the mediator between the familiar and the ever-changing abyss of life.

But what I remember most is how, when I clasped the cool gold door handle and pulled, the wind pulled back, countering my effort and resisting my will—as if nature challenged my desire to join in its pleasant world. I pulled harder, because I knew what I wanted.

**“SMALL, BAREFOOT,  
AND HUNGRY FOR LIFE,  
I YANKED HARD.”**

Doors were easy, back in those days.

They were all that stood between me and rounds of nighttime hide-and-go-seek tag, neighborhood playmates, and brand new adventures. Small, barefoot, and hungry for life, I yanked hard. The wind surrendered.

Back then, I knew what waited on the other side.

The doors I face now have no windows, no peep-holes, and no friendly green paint. I can guess at the landscape beyond. I can hope for flowerbeds and cloudless blue sky. I can imagine



that hopeful things wait beyond every door. But ultimately, I don't really know what waits on the other side of the doors I find myself pulling at. Even though I grasp and yank, sometimes doubt and fear weaken my zest. Because what if I'm wrong, and this door leads to pain? What if desert lies on the other side? What if the journey beyond it is lonely and harsh?

That's the thing about doors, I suppose. You never quite know where they lead. You can take only one at a time, and perhaps you'll never be able to backtrack.

Like that first door?

I walked out of it one day, and I never went back. I couldn't. Life veered, time surged forward, tomorrow came, and that door was gone.

Since then, I have gone in and out of countless doors. Wooden doors. Glass doors. Metal doors. Broken doors. And as time flows, I have learned that it's all right not to know what waits on the other side of the doors I walk through—because my Father does. The One who loves me, the One who did not spare His Son for me, who walked through the doors of humanity, crucifixion, and sacrifice for me—He sees the doors I pull at. He knows which ones are good.

So I pull a little harder, and I don't do it because I trust in what's on the other side. I do it because I know my Father's heart, and I know He will not let me breach a doorway that is not good. I know Him, and that is enough.

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