

MORE GREAT

by

Melody Raines

Copyright © 2011 Melody Raines

All rights reserved

Edited by Jennifer Hunt, Gayle Norris and Brett Westervelt

Names have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture is taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION[®]. NIV[®]. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Some Scripture taken from THE MESSAGE. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Other Scripture taken from THE NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE[®], Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by Permission.

Some may call this a story of suffering. Others may call it a leap-of-faith adventure. But for me, it was a knee bender. Even now when I read it, God speaks humility and hope to me, and I bow again. I don't know what's going on in your life or what's to come. But I'm praying that God's grace in these pages will overwhelm you and you will bow with me. And I'm praying that you will be able to say what Martha said when her brother, Lazarus, was dead: "Yes, Lord, I believe" (John 11:27). Then, like Martha, watch what happens next.

Knees down,

Melody

To my parents,
my safety net

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
CHAPTER 1 HERE AM I.....	9
CHAPTER 2 CITY LIMITS.....	17
CHAPTER 3 THE FAST LANE.....	29
CHAPTER 4 SKYDIVING.....	43
CHAPTER 5 YOU ARE HERE	61
CHAPTER 6 NOT A GOD	70
CHAPTER 7 HOME.....	82
CHAPTER 8 I AM.....	91
CHAPTER 9 UNFAILING LOVE.....	107
CHAPTER 10 UNFOLDING GRACE	120
CHAPTER 11 LIFE WITH LEFTOVERS.....	131
CHAPTER 12 REDEEMER.....	154
CHAPTER 13 GREATER.....	163
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	172
MORE GREAT ORGANIZATIONS.....	175

INTRODUCTION

Instead of saying a blessing over our meal, Mrs. Fehmer wanted us to sing one. “Let’s sing ‘Mighty God!’” she requested. Because I was in Germany, I thought she meant Martin Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” I started singing it to clarify. I was wrong.

“Nein, nein, nein.” She stopped me and hummed a few notes of another hymn.

“Ja! Ja! Ja!” I recognized the tune. So we all sang in our preferred languages:

O Lord my God,
when I in awesome wonder
Consider all
the worlds thy hands have made,
I see the stars,
I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout
the universe displayed:

Then sings my soul,
my Savior God, to thee:
How great thou art!
How great thou art!
Then sings my soul,
my Savior God, to thee:
How great thou art!
How great thou art!

*Du großer Gott
Wenn ich die Welt betrachte
Die du geschaffen
Durch dein Allmachtswort
Wenn ich auf alle
Jene Wesen achte
Die du regierst
Und nährest fort und fort*

*Dann jauchzt mein Herz
Dir, großer Herrscher, zu
Wie groß bist du
Wie groß bist du
Dann jauchzt mein Herz
Dir, großer Herrscher, zu
Wie groß bist du
Wie groß bist du¹*

¹ “How Great Thou Art” Words: Stuart K. Hine. Words & Music © 1949 and 1953 by The Stuart Hine Trust. All rights in the U.S.A. except print rights administered by EMI CMG. U.S.A. print rights administered by Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL 60188. Used by permission. German translation by Manfred von Glehn, “Wie groß bist Du.”

Awesome wonder consumed us. Beautiful silence was our “Amen.”

Once we caught our breaths, the Fehmers told stories of how great God had been to them. Sounding like a Steven Spielberg movie, they began with the Third Reich.

As a 15-year-old, Mr. Fehmer escaped the 1945 Allied attacks on foot. He and his classmates walked from Berlin to Poland and then to Czechoslovakia. After the war, they walked back. With a little bribe for the Russians and a lot of help from strangers, the young Mr. Fehmer returned to his home—one of the few still standing. Except for his oldest brother, who had been drafted into the army, the whole family had survived.

A generation later, the Berlin Wall separated Mrs. Fehmer’s cousin from his fiancée. The Fehmers paid for this young man to rescue his fiancée through a tunnel. There was a mole. The young lovers were caught and imprisoned.

But the world was praying. Even in the Communist East, people prayed for the wall to fall. They gathered in Leipzig every Monday night for a ten-year prayer vigil. The Church on both sides of the wall prayed and waited for God to act.

He did. On November 9, 1989, God set the captives free. For the first time in decades, East Germans traveled without restrictions. They poured through the gates of the wall. Then they attacked it with hammers and chisels and tore it down.

Mr. Fehmer now owns a piece of the wall that stood only one kilometer from his home. Its inscription reads:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.²

² Luke 1:51-52

Mr. Fehmer read the verses in German and then loosely translated them: “God is a mighty God,” or “God is the Big Boss of the history.”

In her non-native English, Mrs. Fehmer added her thoughts about the fall of the wall. “It was a miracle. We prayed for this, but we don’t believe it.” And then she said it. She summed up their story and all of history in one sentence, “God was more great than we believed.”

More great. My soul sang “How Great Thou Art” with the Fehmers in Berlin that day, but I had no idea how much I would need a great God in the days ahead. The time comes when we have to decide if we believe all those songs we sing about God. This is my time. And He is more great than I believed.

CHAPTER 1

HERE AM I

It was the last Wednesday before finals. I rolled out of bed before sunrise and tried not to wake up my roommate. I had slept in an old sweater and my prayer pants—my old jeans with holes in the knees, so I only had to grab my shoes and my guitar. I tiptoed downstairs to finish getting dressed and then slipped out into the Texas dawn. The street lights seemed to be the only ones awake that early. I listened to the rhythm of my prayer pants swishing against my guitar as I walked to the Student Union.

The basement door was already unlocked when I got there. I met my coleader inside and we compared notes for our last prayer meeting of the year. We normally invited women only, but this week we invited everyone we had prayed for throughout the semester. We had prayed for a lot of people in the last four months, so we expected a big crowd.

They started trickling in a little before 7 a.m. When the room was about half full, I picked up my guitar and led us in some songs. I love watching people's expressions as they worship God, and on this early morning, I watched them sing their hearts out. By the time I finished the last song, nearly a hundred people were crammed into that room in the basement, and they were all standing there with their hands in the air. I stood in silence and stared at them in awe.

But a year later, I wasn't playing my guitar anymore. No one was asking me to lead music or a prayer group. I wasn't even showing up at church.

In my senior year of college, I was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and it looked like I was stuck being an invalid for the rest of my life. I was supposed to be graduating from Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and starting out on my own as a high school teacher. Instead I was back home with Mom and Dad and spending day after day in bed. I had dropped out of school, and my lifelong dream of being a teacher looked like a kite I couldn't hold onto anymore. I watched it fly away.

I lost my purpose. I lost my friends. I lost hope.

In my despair, I asked God to give me a reason to get out of bed and put one foot in front of the other. I needed a new dream, one that couldn't be limited by my health or my abilities. I asked for a dream that was bigger than I was, a dream that wouldn't die when I did.

God kept taking me back to that morning in the basement of the Student Union. He reminded me of how much I enjoyed watching people worship Him. And then He challenged me to dream of something bigger than a hundred people in a basement, something more like a countless multitude "from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."³ That was an enormous dream, a dream that wouldn't die when I did.

I peeked at this new dream every once in a while, but I didn't make it my own. I didn't pursue it. Before I could devote myself to a dream that big, my chronic fatigue

³ Revelation 7:9

subsided. As my health improved, I found that my old plan for my life was sufficient. I could teach and travel the world and take care of myself. And the more attainable my old dream was, the more it enticed me. Over time, as I grew stronger and more independent, I returned to my little dream that was all about me. I traded the unstoppable, undying dream for my original dream of teaching.

After two years of chronic fatigue, I graduated from Baylor and completed my student teaching assignment. I took a job teaching English and Latin at Coppell High School in a north Dallas suburb. And by this time, I didn't worship God much at all. I still read my Bible on the occasional Sunday I showed up in church, but otherwise I rarely talked to God. I didn't have much use for a God who made me suffer.

During my first winter break as a teacher, God introduced me to His perspective on suffering, but I snubbed Him. Before I got sick, I had attended a weekly Bible study led by a guy named Louie Giglio. Louie went on to start an organization called Passion, which was centered on Isaiah 26:8: "Yes, LORD, walking in the way of Your truth we wait eagerly for You, for Your name and renown are the desire of our souls."⁴ The annual Passion conference quickly became the-place-to-be for college students and young adults from all over the world. So when Passion came to Fort Worth, only an hour away from my home in Coppell, I convinced my younger sister, Ashley, that we should go. I wanted to go, not because I expected to meet God there, but because it was a popular thing to do. I figured I would reunite with old friends and enjoy some good music. Plus, good

⁴ This version of Isaiah 26:8 is a combination of the NIV and NASB translations.
<http://www.268generation.com>

Christians are supposed to go to good conferences. This was an easy way to keep up the illusion that I loved God.

In one of the conference sessions, John Piper, the speaker for the night, explained how our suffering brings glory to God. Piper urged us to beg God to let us suffer for His glory. Instead of listening to Piper, I notified God, *No way. I'm not doing that again.* To me, suffering meant loneliness and hopelessness, and I didn't want to go back there. I was still calloused from going there the first time. I wasn't about to say, *Yes, Lord, let me suffer for Your glory.*

I was only slightly more open to letting God direct areas of my life that didn't promise suffering. While Ashley and I were in Fort Worth for the conference, we tagged along with some friends who toured Southwestern Seminary, the alma mater of several of my mentors. Since my early high school years, I had considered going to seminary, and now that I was teaching, I felt like I needed to continue my education. Before I left the conference, I decided to apply to Southwestern—once again, not because I expected to meet God there, but because it seemed like a smart, practical thing to do.

Someone at Passion tried to recruit me to his seminary in another state. “No,” I told him, “I love my job. I'm not leaving.” Southwestern was forty miles from Coppell High School. I figured if I continued to teach in Coppell, it would take me ten years to finish school, but I'd be ten years older anyway. I might as well be ten years older with a degree. So the next fall, I started driving back and forth between Coppell and Fort Worth for years of night and summer classes.

Even as a seminary student, though, I didn't spend much time with God. I read my Bible every once in a while, but not daily like I did before I got sick. Other than using

it to complete homework assignments or to follow along in a sermon, I opened it only a few times a year. I bought a new Bible with cool devotionals to get me excited about reading it, but my heart was still full of bitterness and selfishness. I was holding onto my life with both hands, and that makes reading the Bible boring.

Four years into my seminary routine, Passion came back to the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex for the Passion Experience tour. Louie Giglio spoke and Chris Tomlin and David Crowder sang. We all sang. A Passion concert is not a typical concert. It's an experience, thus the Passion Experience tour. The lyrics are on screens and everyone sings along. It's like a big church service, a really good church service, except there's no invitation at the end.

On this night, I didn't need an invitation. God started talking to me before Louie did. It was the first time I heard Chris Tomlin sing "Take My Life." He took Francis Havergal's old hymn "Take My Life and Let It Be," changed the tune, and added his own refrain:

Here am I, all of me
Take my life, it's all for Thee⁵

Everyone else was singing around me. I couldn't sing. I liked my life. I wanted to keep it. I stood there silent through most of the song until I heard myself telling God the same thing I had said years earlier, *No, I love my job. I'm not leaving.* That's when I

⁵ "Take My Life" by Chris Tomlin, Louie Giglio Copyright © 2003 worshiptogether.com Songs (ASCAP) sixsteps Music (ASCAP) (adm. at EMICMGPublishing.com) All rights reserved. Used by permission.

realized I was worshiping my job. Mostly, I was worshiping me. While everyone else was singing, “Here am I, all of me/Take my life, it’s all for Thee,” I stood at a crossroad.

I loved teaching. It’s what I had wanted to do since the first grade. I loved Coppell, that posh little community north of Dallas. My plan was to stay there until I finished seminary and then move to Italy and teach there. That would make a great life. I didn’t want to give that up.

And what if giving up my life meant I had to give up more than my career plans? What if God made me suffer again? I stood there trying to decide if I could trust God. Did He really know what was best for me? Would He hurt me? Would He leave me? Was He worth it?

At the previous Passion conference, I had completely refused any plan for my life other than my own. This time it was as if God couldn’t wait any longer. He reached down and took hold of me. In his grasp, I let go of my life. How could I resist Him? I told God I was ready to be whoever He wanted me to be. I caught up with the rest of the crowd and sang the refrain on the last time through, “Here am I, all of me/Take my life, it’s all for Thee.”

When I got home from the concert, I started praying—about everything. I prayed for my parents and my sisters, my students, my church, my friends. I couldn’t stop praying. I prayed for all the missionaries I knew around the world. I prayed for the people on the next Passion Experience tour stop who were about to meet God the way I had. And I prayed, *Here am I, Lord. Make my “here” where you want me to be, and make my “I” who you want me to be.*

Now that I had let go of my life, I wanted to pray all the time, and I couldn't wait to read my Bible. I remembered that when I was at Baylor, Louie challenged us to read five Psalms a day for one month and to keep a praise journal where we wrote prayers of praise to God. I had done that twice, and those were two amazing months. In my new excitement, I read five Psalms and wrote down some praises in a journal I had left unfinished years earlier. I remembered that my pastor in high school had suggested reading one chapter of Proverbs every day. I had done that for six years before I let my Bible get dusty. I started doing it again. But Psalms and Proverbs weren't enough. I started reading through other books of the Bible too, big chunks at a time. I read, and I praised and I prayed. And I read, and I praised and I prayed. And in two weeks, I came to Proverbs 24.

God had been hinting that changes were coming. He wanted to do something big. Proverbs 24:27 implied that a few things needed to happen first, though: "Finish your outdoor work and make your fields ready; after that, build your house." The Holy Spirit interpreted it for me: "Finish what you've already started; after that, we'll move on to what's next." There was an order to this plan, and I had some unfinished business to take care of. God wanted to do something new, but first He wanted to prepare me. My fields were nowhere near ready. I had work to do. I had to finish seminary.

I pulled out my degree plan and saw that, as expected, I was only halfway through it. I got antsy. I knew the fastest way out of school was to quit teaching. I couldn't continue to take only night classes. I needed to go full time. For the next month, I went back and forth, telling God I would quit teaching, then begging Him to find

another way. But while I was trying to change God's mind, He was changing the desires of my heart. Teaching lost its gleam.

I enjoyed my job and my home and my life in posh Coppell. I was moving forward in my career and my plan and my dream. But God reminded me that there was a bigger dream: a countless multitude "from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."⁶ He had a much greater purpose for me. Teaching was such a tiny dream.

Two months after I started singing "Here am I, all of me/Take my life, it's all for Thee," I put down my plans and decided to trust God. I told my family I would resign from teaching so I could finish seminary. It was real now. My "here" was about to change.

⁶ Revelation 7:9

CHAPTER 2

CITY LIMITS

I had six more months before the end of the school year. While I was preparing to transition out of my teaching career, I took an I-35 and Beyond tour. During spring break, I drove south down I-35, straight through the middle of Texas and into central Mexico. On the way down, I stopped in Waco to see an old friend from my days at Baylor and then spent the night in Austin where one of my former students was in school.

Before I left Austin, I went searching for the apartment where my older sister, Jennifer, lived while she was a graduate student at The University of Texas. I remembered she lived somewhere behind The Magnolia Café on South Congress Avenue, so I moseyed up South Congress until I recognized Jennifer's street. There was the Magnolia and the small apartment complex hiding in the trees around back. Turning into Jennifer's former parking lot, I smiled at my memories of the old days— sleeping on Jennifer's couch for a week, eating pancakes at the Magnolia, exploring the UT campus. I counted up the years that had passed since I'd been there: seven. I sat there for a few more minutes. Eventually I returned to South Congress Avenue and drove toward the Capitol. *There are all those eclectic shops*, I noted. Halfway in the present and halfway in the past, I drove by the giant, red cowboy boot at Allen Boots, the lighted bunny rabbit at Uncommon Objects, and the large mural of rebellious celebrities at Lucy in Disguise. I

could almost taste the bohemian, hippy flavor of the Austin culture that used to intimidate this church girl from Baylor.

As I got closer to downtown, my nostalgia faded and I drove back into reality. I quit thinking about the past and turned my attention to the people around me. I saw the shoppers, the people at the bus stop and the homeless man sleeping on the sidewalk. I hadn't seen a homeless man in a while, not in my cozy, north Dallas suburb. When I saw this man, my heart melted. God started talking to me about the people of Austin. He reminded me that He loved them and He wanted them to know that. He hadn't forgotten them. As I watched the people on South Congress, God's heart for them overwhelmed me. He planted hope in me that He wanted to do something great in Austin. I felt like God had a huge plan for this city.

The hope was so strong, I didn't want to leave. I wanted to cruise up and down South Congress all day. I wanted to see what God would do. By the time I turned toward I-35, I had to find a place to park and pray.

Shine Your light in this place. Make me Your light in this place. Use Austin to show the world that Your hand is powerful. O God, this is the place to show Your power and glory. What will it take?

My forehead stuck to my steering wheel for half an hour while I prayed for God to shine His light in Austin. I finally got on I-35 and headed south, but I couldn't stop praying. Over the next hour, I prayed my way to a campsite on the San Marcos River.

I found a flat spot by the river and pitched my tent, my home for the next three days—three days of Beth Moore's *Believing God* Bible study and praying for Austin. As I studied between my tent and the river, Beth challenged me, "Beloved, God has a

ministry for you, and in Him you are completely competent to receive it and fulfill it. Will you believe God?”⁷ Would I believe God for Austin? Would I believe Him enough to go there and invest myself in that city? Everything I read in my Bible and in Beth Moore’s study that week nudged me to go. And at night, I poked my head out of my tent and compared the stars to the glimmers of light that were already in Austin. If God could light up the sky, He could light up a city.

At the end of those three days, I wanted to go back to Austin and stay there. I believed God had a ministry for me in Austin. But I couldn’t just pack up and move. I still had seminary and other commitments at home. And what if this was some sort of fling? It was a little weird to drive down the street and suddenly decide to move there. And what would I do when I got there? God and I had a lot more to discuss.

I didn’t know what was going on with my obsession with Austin, but I knew my next step was to finish seminary. When I decided to finish my degree at Southwestern, I assumed I would move there. Leaving posh Coppell and moving into seminary housing meant giving up all kinds of luxuries: lush landscaping, covered parking, a washer and dryer, clean carpet and most of my furniture. It took me awhile, but I eventually realized Jesus had sacrificed more than furniture for me, so I needed to get over it. I had to leave Coppell. I started praying for obedience without city limits. I wanted to get to the point where I was willing to live anywhere, including seminary housing.

But when I found a better option, I jumped on it. An acquaintance was about to finish law school at Texas Wesleyan University in downtown Fort Worth. When he

⁷ Beth Moore, *Believing God—Member Book* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2004), 76.

graduated, he would leave his job as a dorm director, and he wanted me to replace him. A job like that would provide housing and enough funds for me to eat and pay tuition. Sounded like a perfect situation. Sounded like God was providing. But the hiring process kept getting delayed. Good thing, because God had a better plan.

I knew this dorm director through my friend Joyce. Joyce and I met when I was 17. She was the director of the Baptist Student Ministries (BSM) at Rice University in Houston. I lived in a nearby suburb and attended some of the BSM activities with a friend who was a student at Rice. Joyce and I became better friends when I got involved with the BSM at Baylor. I spent most of my free time there, and after my freshman year, I came home and helped Joyce plan summer events for the Houston-area BSM students. The next summer I served as a BSM student missionary at a children's home in Lubbock, Texas. The following year I served on the state committee for Go Now Missions, the Texas BSM student missions program. Not long after that, Joyce moved to the state BSM office in Dallas. She and I reunited a few years later when I started leading Go Now groups to teach English in Germany during the summers.

I had been to Germany twice and was preparing to lead a Go Now group to Central Asia when I decided to leave Coppell. Joyce called me in May. They needed a BSM director at Navarro College in Corsicana. She heard I had resigned from teaching, and she wanted to know if I would consider applying for the job. She needed an answer by the next day.

I knew Corsicana was south of Dallas on my way home to Houston, but I never stopped there. I didn't know a thing about the city, and I had no idea how far it was from the seminary in Fort Worth. But when Joyce asked me to consider going there, I refused

to do any research about the town. Instead, I prayed for obedience without city limits. I wanted to go wherever God wanted me, wherever He wanted my “Here am I.”

Within 24 hours, I told Joyce I would apply for the job. I sent her my resume the next morning and immediately did an Internet search on Corsicana. The banner across the top of the first website read, “Corsicana, The City With No Limits.” *Okay*, I assured myself, *this is the right place*. Then I mapped the route from Navarro College to the seminary: 90 miles. *Oh, no*. I had doubled my commute. *God, this doesn't make sense. I'm trying to finish seminary like You told me to. I hope You know what You're doing.*

God and I had already discussed my car. Between deciding to resign from teaching and actually doing it, I brought all kinds of financial concerns to God's attention. One was my 13-year-old Nissan Maxima. I told him I didn't want to quit my job because I was afraid the Maxima would die and I wouldn't have any money to replace it. He pointed out, “That's the problem. You're afraid.”

Oh.

“Trust Me.”

Okay.

He promised me my car would last until I finished school. I was free to cut my salary in half and double my commute.

Within two weeks of sending in my resume, I rode down to Navarro College with Joyce for my interview. It was a typical interview. Joe, one of the board members, asked who my mentors were. I told him Shawn Shannon, my BSM director at Baylor, as well as Dana Mathewson, my youth minister in Houston. Turns out Joe knew Dana, and Shawn was currently Joe's daughter's BSM director. Scored points with Joe.

Someone else asked me to describe my personal time with God. I told the group about my daily readings of Psalms, Proverbs and whatever else I was digging into at the time. Then I told them about a few nights earlier when I landed on my knees in the middle of my living room. I poured out to God, *Here it goes, God. I'm making my wants and wishes known. I want ...* I spewed out a list of everything I wanted but didn't have, including the 2.4 nearly perfect children, their extraordinary dad, and the house big enough to hold all of us. After a few minutes, I ran out of wants and ended my list. *But, God,* I added, *I'm not going to ask for any of that. Because You may give it to me. What I really want is whatever You want for me. What do You want for me, God?*

He must have been waiting on the edge of His seat for that question. He had an immediate answer. "Melody, I want you to want Me." I buried my face in the carpet and covered my head with my hands. I couldn't believe the Creator of the universe was inviting me to fall in love with Him.

I told the group in Corsicana a little more about my personal time with God, and the interview continued. I thought it went well. Joyce drove me back to Dallas and I waited to hear from the committee.

Two weeks later, I still hadn't heard anything from Corsicana. It was my last day at Coppell High School, my last day at my dream job. When I interviewed for that job, my five-year goals were to pay off my student loans and learn another language. I hadn't done either of those. It was time to quit making long-term plans.

God told me not to plan on coming back to teaching after I finished seminary. "Lock the door, and walk away," He said. So I did. I shoved most of my teacher stuff into the cabinet and left it for my replacement. Once I submitted my grades and returned all

the textbooks, the last item on my end-of-the-year checklist was to turn in my keys. I left my locked door propped open, took my keys down to the office and got cleared to leave. I came back to my room and packed up my personal items. The hall sounded quiet. I stood behind my desk for a long time and looked at the empty student desks in front of me. So many incredible people had sat in those desks. I wondered who they would become. I grabbed my final load and prayed over room C106 one last time. I turned off the light, picked up the doorstep a student had made me years earlier, and walked away. I heard the door close behind me. That dream was over.

I went home and unloaded all the stuff from my classroom, threw my bag in the backseat and hurried to the orientation for my Go Now trip to Central Asia. I had a bigger dream to live for.

Less than a week later, I landed halfway around the world with a team of college students in tow. I had given my last English and Latin finals on a Friday. By Wednesday I was speaking Russian.

When we arrived in the town where we would teach English for a month, our hosts briefed us on the differences between Americans and the locals. They stressed that the locals don't make eye contact with passersby, and they don't make as much noise as Americans do. They told us we should be quiet in public places and shouldn't talk much on the bus. They didn't tell us the buses played loud music.

On our first outing in the foreign city, we diligently avoided eye contact with anyone and quietly squeezed into the back of the bus. As soon as we merged into the flow of traffic, the bus's stereo system started blaring Bon Jovi's "It's My Life." I smiled in disbelief as we rattled down the road. *Is that You, God?* You'd think by the time I got on

a bus in Central Asia, I would've already settled this issue. No, I have to settle it every day. *It's not my life, is it, God? It's Yours. Here am I. Make my "here" where You want me to be, and make my "I" who You want me to be.*

Our first weekend in Central Asia, we stayed in the homes of students from the university where we taught English. I was placed with Anya, "the head of the class." "Head of the class" combined the American roles of valedictorian and class president. Anya played both roles well. Once I realized she was speaking better English than I was, I turned off my international English—the precisely enunciated English without any contractions, idioms, or slang. After the first night, I switched back to Texan.

At breakfast the first morning, Anya asked how I slept. I explained that I had jet lag. "I woke up at 4 a.m. and couldn't go back to sleep, so I read my Bible."

"You have a Bible?" she interrupted.

"Yeah, I do."

"May I see it?"

"Sure." I pulled out the Bible with the cool devotionals I had hoped would inspire me to read it. I tried to hand it to her.

"Do I have to wash my hands first?"

"No, you don't have to do anything first."

Her eyes widened as she held my Bible in her lap. She flipped through the pages and carefully handed it back. But she wanted to see it again that afternoon. She asked if she could read it while I napped. So while I prayed in my sleep, Anya read the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

When I got up, she had lots of questions. First, she wanted to know why God accepted Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's.⁸ *Oh, crud*, I said to myself. *We didn't discuss this in Systematic Theology 1 or 2.* I mumbled an answer, "I think it had to do with Cain's attitude." I quickly segued into how God gave the first sacrifice when He killed an animal to make coverings for Adam and Eve after they sinned. "This blood sacrifice foreshadowed the one God made when He gave His Son and provided a way for us to be saved from the punishment of our sins."

God had taken over the conversation by this point. Anya asked matter-of-factly, "How can you be saved?"

I reached over and flipped to Romans 10:9, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Anya didn't make any life changes that day, but I could see in her eyes that she was beginning to understand who Jesus was. And every time we ate, she let me pray beforehand. I prayed for her.

Before I returned home, I gave Anya a Bible in her own language. She was dumbfounded. "This is too good for words," she said as she fingered it. She couldn't believe I had given her such a treasure. I couldn't believe how much she treasured it.

While Anya and I stood in the airport, we said good-bye too many times. As I was about to pass through security, she grabbed my arm. With tears in her eyes, she begged me, "Please don't forget me."

⁸ Genesis 4

I hugged her and promised her, “I could never forget you.”

Days later I landed at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport and went back to Coppell. I lugged my bag in the door. There was all my stuff from my classroom, still waiting for a new home. I needed a new home, too.

I hadn’t heard from Corsicana yet, but I didn’t have any time to waste. After I recovered from the jet lag, I drove down and snooped around the neighborhoods near Navarro College. I was already there when Joyce called and offered me the job. I accepted.

The ministry assistant at the BSM gave me the address of a home with a garage apartment that had recently become available. It was a beautiful, white historic home with a white, wrought-iron fence. It took up half the block. Even the landscaping calmed me. A detached garage sat in the back. The owners were gone, so I left a note on their front door and went home and waited.

I drove down a week later to meet them. The landlady led me up the stairs to the deck around the back of the garage. She opened the door to a sea of pink—Barbie pink. She told me I could paint over it. There was an air conditioning unit in the window on the left and a heater in the wall on the right. She pointed out the large hump that ran lengthwise through the center of the entire apartment. “A seasonal hump,” she called it. I called it a godsend and told her I’d be back with the movers on Monday.

I moved into the garage apartment and started getting to know the students at Navarro. They helped me paint over the pink before classes began. When I had registered for my classes in Fort Worth, I didn’t have a job yet, and because my goal was to finish seminary within the next year, I signed up for 15 hours of coursework. I had classes late

at night and early in the morning, so I rented a room on campus. I lived in the basement of the women's dorm in Fort Worth three nights a week and in the garage apartment in Corsicana the other four nights.

With a heavy class load, a job, and a commute, I barely survived that fall. And culture shock hit me hard—not because I had recently returned from Central Asia, but because I had moved from a Dallas suburb to a small, rural town surrounded by cotton fields. On top of all that, my assistant wisely took a promotion, leaving me clueless as to how to run the BSM. I couldn't even find the mailbox. So I was relieved when God gave me a revelation. (Okay, maybe it wasn't from God, and maybe it wasn't a revelation.)

I holed up in my office one Saturday to start and finish a research paper. The culture shock was debilitating that day and I wasn't making any progress. All the books I had checked out from the library sat in neat stacks on my desk. I sat in the chair. And sat. And sat. After a few hours of sitting, I remembered something important about seminary: You can make a D. You only need a 60 to pass. I had high scores on all my tests, and as long as I did well on my final, I could pass without this paper. Yee haw! I threw all my books in my car and went home.

I made three A's, a D, and an F that semester. I never even started my independent study class. The seminary gave me an academic warning—one step up from probation. I had moved to Corsicana with a 4.0 GPA, and I failed.

I failed in school that semester, and I failed even more at the BSM. I wasn't investing myself in my students, and they noticed. The leadership team could barely stomach our weekly meetings. On Wednesdays I could hardly convince 30 people to eat our free lunches. Attendance at our Thursday night gatherings dropped into the single

digits. And to make matters worse, I managed to tick off several staff from our supporting churches. Things were bad, and getting worse, when I finally confessed, *I can't do this, God. I'm failing.*

CHAPTER 3

THE FAST LANE

I did a lot of things wrong at the BSM that first year. I acted like I was still a teacher instead of a campus minister. I assigned the leadership team weekly homework from a Bible study on missions. They weren't interested. I made them do it anyway. They resented me for it. I still made them do it. And the less they did their homework, the more irritated I became. It was a downward spiral. We weren't a team and we weren't leading anyone.

But at the beginning of the second semester, by the grace of God I managed to do two things right. Before classes started, I took a vanload of students to the Passion conference in Nashville. They had never seen 11,000 college students worshipping God together. They had never imagined such a thing. And the teaching challenged and changed them. When it was over, we stayed in town a few extra days and painted the gym at a nearby children's home. As we drove there, the students' spiritual gifts started bubbling out of them. One person was exhorting. One was teaching. Another was encouraging. Another proclaiming her faith. The Holy Spirit transformed our van into a tabernacle. No one wanted to open the door when we arrived at the children's home, but somehow we pulled ourselves out of the van and served the children and the people who worked with them. The whole experience was exactly what our group needed. We were excited about the kingdom of God and our roles in it.

The other thing I did right was take my students to World Mandate, a missions conference in Waco. One trip to World Mandate accomplished a hundred times more than that missions Bible study ever did. The Passion conference opened my students' minds to missions, and World Mandate pushed them out the door. They began to see God's heart for the nations and the incredible ways He works around the world. They met the ordinary people He was using to accomplish His purposes throughout the earth. That inspired them.

While we were at World Mandate, something weird happened. For two days, people all around me talked about and prayed for people around the world. I prayed for Austin. They prayed for people thousands of miles away. I prayed for people two hours down the road. I couldn't stop praying for them. The day after I came home from the conference, I couldn't eat. I wanted to be in Austin.

How do I get to Austin, God? I expected Him to reveal some grand career path or ministry opportunity, complete with a map to where I would live and a financial plan to sustain me. Instead He answered quickly and simply,

“I-35 South.”

Ha-ha, God. Seriously, how do I get to Austin?

“I-35 South.”

God?

“I-35 South.”

He didn't budge. All day He said only one thing, “I-35 South.”

I had been praying for immediate obedience, so late that afternoon, I jumped in the car, drove back to Waco, and turned left onto I-35 South. I didn't stop until I parked

at the hostel in Austin and rented a bed in the girls' bunkroom. The weekend crowd had left already. I didn't have much company. No one talked to me, so I didn't have to make up a reason for being there. The next morning I bought some juice because I still couldn't eat. I prayer-walked South Congress Avenue and the bars and clubs on Sixth Street and then drove up to Fort Worth for class. Even now I'm not sure why I spent that night in Austin, except maybe to start my fast.

I had never completed more than one-day fasts before, and I hadn't done many of those. I was such an inexperienced fast-er that I had planned to give up Kool-Aid® for Lent that year. When we returned from the Passion conference, my students made a pact to do a soda fast for one month. I had quit drinking sodas years earlier, so I didn't feel obligated to join their fast. Every Wednesday, however, we served Kool-Aid® at our free BSM lunches. Kool-Aid® was my weakness. The students finished their fast a week before Lent. I decided I would start mine after Mardi Gras. I forgot. Ash Wednesday brought a free lunch, and I drank the Kool-Aid®. I wasn't so good at fasting.

I had to learn quickly, though. My juice became a huge topic of discussion on my drive home from Austin. This wasn't going to be a wimpy Kool-Aid® fast. God was asking me to do a full-blown food fast for Austin. At first I tried to convince Him I should do a three-day fast. That was reasonable, especially for someone who couldn't remember not to drink the Kool-Aid®. Besides, I was already two days into it. He didn't go for it. This was the real deal. No food until Easter—six weeks away. Somewhere around Waco I finally agreed, *Austin's worth it*. South Congress alone was worth it. But throw in Sixth Street, the University of Texas, the Capitol. . . . Austin was worth my whole life.

Austin was worth every bite I didn't eat. Somehow I survived five Wednesdays of free BSM lunches (but drank lots of Kool-Aid®). People say day ten is the hardest day of a fast. Day twelve was harder—homemade lasagna and garlic bread. After day twelve, the hardest part of fasting was maintaining a social life. Friends invited me to lunch after church, so I sat there and drank milk. Two of my students got married, and I had to leave the reception before they cut the cake. One night my creative arts class from the seminary performed at a church banquet. I didn't want to be anti-social and sit at the table while everyone else stood in the long buffet line, so I joined the end of the line and chatted my way through. As I approached the food, I didn't know what to do next. God intervened. They ran out of food. The hosts were extremely apologetic as I bit back a grin and thanked God for His reverse fish-and-loaves miracle. I felt bad that no one got seconds, but I noticed God was taking my fast seriously enough to protect it.

And while I prayed and fasted about my “here,” God went to work on my “I.” I was so irritable that I couldn't hide my faults. Malnutrition magnified them. Hunger tends to bring out the worst in people, and I had some bad stuff in me: pride, impatience, selfishness, lack of trust. Like cream on milk, my flaws rose to the top for everyone to see. They were sour, and they embarrassed me. I wanted to get rid of them. So God started skimming them away.

Most of them had to do with my mouth. Teachers get paid to find people's mistakes, and I was exceptionally good at it. The problem was I didn't know how to turn off the criticism when it wasn't appropriate. As a teacher, my intentions were good. I corrected people to help them improve themselves. But most people didn't want me to help them. And most of the time, I didn't even know what I was talking about, so I

wasn't helping anyway. I corrected them because I thought too highly of myself. Pride was my real sin. If I really wanted to help people, I would have encouraged them.

My mom has never been a professional teacher, but like all great moms, she has taught me some huge life lessons. One summer day before I returned to Baylor for my senior year, she treated me to lunch. We sat in a back corner of the Spaghetti Warehouse undisturbed. It wasn't long before the conversation turned serious. She wanted to talk to me about marriage. Unfortunately, I didn't hear joy in her voice when she told me that. Tears fell down her face. She had been married for more than two decades, and I could hear painful wisdom coming my way.

“Melody, if you get married, you cannot criticize your husband.”

I looked away so I wouldn't have to watch her cry. I was too uncomfortable to respond. All summer I had prayed that I would listen to the “life-giving rebuke”⁹ when it came. It came. There it was on a back table in the Spaghetti Warehouse. I nodded my head and received it.

But I only received the rebuke; I didn't do anything about it. Ten years later I was still criticizing people (and still single). My mom probably thought she had admonished me in vain. However, as this fast for Austin began to detox my body, God began to detox my heart. In my daily readings of Proverbs, I came to Proverbs 18:21: “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” I wasn't eating food at the time, but I was eating death. And I was feeding it to everyone around me like a poisoned apple. My words had great power, but “with great power

⁹ “He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise” (Proverbs 15:31).

comes great responsibility.”¹⁰ I could use my words for good or for evil. My words would either kill people or heal them. My choice. I wanted to speak words of life. My critical spirit had to go.

Other words had to go too. One of my personality traits that made my classroom so interesting was my humor, but it was a mean, sarcastic humor. When a student couldn't stay in his seat, I asked him in front of the whole class, “What's wrong with you? You got hemorrhoids?” I thought I was being funny, but really I was being mean. During my fast, Proverbs 26:18-19 convicted me: “Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, ‘I was only joking!’” I was shooting deadly arrows at people and justifying my behavior with “just kidding.”

With the conviction about sarcasm came the conviction about teasing. For most of my life, I thought teasing was a sign of affection. It was a welcome, like an initiation. As God detoxed my heart, though, He revealed how backwards this idea was. Teasing wasn't an initiation. It was hazing. It wasn't a welcome either. It was a wall. There's nothing positive about making fun of someone's shortcomings. Why would I want to impress people with my wit by hurting someone else?¹¹ Exalting myself by bringing someone else down was a symptom of my pride. There it was again.

The conviction about teasing didn't stop there. It got worse. I saw how teasing people was actually criticizing their Maker. I was really saying, “Bad job, God. You

¹⁰ Stan Lee wrote this line for the narrator at the end of Spider-Man's *Amazing Fantasy #15* in August 1962. The original line read, “with great power there must also come—great responsibility!” Later issues and the 2002 movie adapted the quote to this wording.

¹¹ “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Ephesians 4:29).

messed up on this one.” When I realized Satan had deceived me into criticizing God, I was heartbroken. The teasing had to stop.

This fast was changing not only what I put into my mouth, but more importantly, what came out of it. I started praying for discretion to filter my words. As a result, I said less, and I regretted less. I wish I had prayed for discretion years earlier.

As I grew more silent during this fast, I heard what people were saying about me. Their words hurt, not because people had a poor perception of me, but because they had an accurate perception of me. The evil in my heart had come to the surface. People saw it and heard it, and in a small town, people talk. Reports of my failures, especially with the leadership team, made it to the state office. Joyce was patient—until someone told her I wasn’t eating and had lost weight. She immediately came down to discover both claims were true, but she didn’t know the whole truth. I told her everything about Austin and the fast. She told me to get some protein drinks.

I continued to pray for God to reveal Himself in Austin and begged Him to get me there. When Easter finally came, I celebrated with my church. My friends, who had watched me drink my lunch multiple times, watched me break my fast with communion. It was a humbling experience, like God had cleansed me and was pleased with my sacrifice. It felt like eating joy. I contemplated doing another six-week fast in the future. But at the moment, all that joy made me want to eat! I jumped in the car and drove to Austin, where I ate everything I had dreamed of eating for the last six weeks.

While I was in Austin, I met God on Town Lake. I sat on the pier outside the hostel and read Isaiah. In Isaiah 58, God rebukes the Israelites for their false fasting and

describes His idea of fasting. He says true fasting is not “exploit[ing] all your workers.”¹² All the times I had mistreated my new assistant ran through my mind. I hadn’t shown her respect, much less kindness. I moved on to the next verse where God clarifies that true fasting does not end “in quarreling and strife and in striking each other.”¹³ I was still smarting from my come-to-Jesus meeting with a student. He had called me out for whacking him with his baseball cap when he hadn’t done that dreaded homework from our missions Bible study. I had whacked him pretty hard. Only four verses into Isaiah 58, I started questioning whether I had actually fasted for the last six weeks. *Maybe I just starved myself*, I reasoned. By verse six, I knew I had messed up. God says true fasting is freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, and being available to your own family.¹⁴ *I missed it*, I realized. *I haven’t fasted at all.*

The last part of that list hurt the most. Had I been available to my own family? Not really. Sometimes I went weeks without talking to them. I had let my responsibilities at work and school consume me. I didn’t have time for other people, not even the ones I loved most—or pretended to love. As I sat on the pier that day, God gently disciplined me in His way that brings both humility and hope, “I’m not giving you a family until you learn to love the one you already have. Now let’s get started.”

So there at the end of Lent, I started a true fast. I called it my family fast. Family fast was a terrible name for it, but that’s what I called it. I didn’t fast from my family. I

¹² Isaiah 58:3

¹³ Isaiah 58:4

¹⁴ Isaiah 58:6-7

did the opposite. For the next six months, I did everything I could do to make myself available to them and love them. At first I didn't know how to do this. My only action plan was to call my parents and my sisters every week. It wasn't much of a plan, but for someone who hadn't made her family a priority, this was a significant step.

Jennifer, my older sister, made it a little easier for me. She was between jobs, so she lived with my parents in Houston for the first month. I could call one number and talk to three people. Dad, of course, didn't say much. He's not much of a talker, and neither am I, so our conversations were usually short and to the point. After a minute or two, he'd hand the phone to Mom. Mom, Jennifer and my younger sister, Ashley, are the reason Dad and I don't talk much. Somebody has to listen. So when I called my parents' house, I spent the first two minutes going through the script with Dad, "Hey! What's goin' on? Glad you called. Love you. Here's your mom." Then I spent the next half hour listening. Sometimes I spent an hour listening, especially if Jennifer and Mom were in opposite ends of the house and didn't know the other one had already told me all the same stories, which were usually about Dad. And when I hung up, I called Ashley for another half hour of listening. She and her husband lived with his parents in Tyler, Texas, and they had lots of pets, so there was always something entertaining in the background. Or I'd catch her at work, and she'd interrupt her story to make an announcement to all the Dillard's customers.

One afternoon I called Ashley to wish her a happy birthday. She was at work. I asked how her day was going. Not well. I knew her marriage had been rocky from the beginning, and living with her in-laws added extra stress. More than once she fled the house with only the clothes on her back. One time my mom called me from Tyler and

asked if she and Ashley could come to Corsicana to borrow a few weeks worth of my clothes. Ashley was going to stay with her in Houston for a while. Ashley fled to Houston another time or two, but she always went back to her husband. This time she said she was leaving him for good.

I told her she could stay with me, but she found a place in Tyler. I told her to call if she needed anything. Two weeks later she called and asked if I was available the next day. At first I told her I wasn't because I was in Dallas helping GoNow debrief their student missionaries, but then I remembered I had told her to call if she needed anything. I told her I was available after lunch. She wanted me to come to Tyler and help her move her couch. Move her couch? Was she serious? Surely there was someone stronger in Tyler. Obviously she needed something more than a strong back, so I drove two hours to her new apartment. We got the couch and the rest of her belongings down the stairs then up the stairs. I was learning to love my family.

The family fast intensified in the following weeks. Jennifer had moved to New Hampshire for her new job, and my dad took a job at a church in rural Alabama. Mom was only a year away from early retirement and decided to stay in Houston that year and fly to Alabama for the weekends. Not only did this mean their marriage would have extra strain on it, but my goodness, now I had to make an extra phone call every week—and find something to talk about with Dad. Now everyone in my family was separated.

Mom and Dad sold their house in Houston. Dad moved to Alabama and Mom moved into her car. For the next month, she spent a week with her friends south of Houston and then a week with her friends north of Houston, then another week south and

another week north. She finally rented an apartment in the middle. Our phone calls were rather interesting during those days.

The same weekend my dad moved to Alabama and my mom moved into her car, my mom's side of the family moved out of New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina hit. Their houses were full of water, and it took months to make them livable again. I had been down there at the beginning of my family fast and treasured my time to love that part of my family. Now they needed my love more than ever.

Only days after Katrina hit my mom's family, my dad's family took a blow. His cousin Michal had been diagnosed with breast cancer earlier in the month, and the week Katrina landed in the gulf, Michal's brother, Jonathan, lost his wife to breast cancer. For two years we had watched Nancy survive. I thought surely she would overcome. But somehow, even in her sedated state, she indicated she was going to die. When Jonathan's mom sent the e-mail saying he wouldn't leave Nancy's side, fearful she would slip away at any moment, I wept. The doctor said it might take a week or it might take a day or two. She died the next day. I got the news only an hour before I piled my BSM students into cars and led them to a conference in Fort Worth. It was a long, silent drive as I wondered how I would have said goodbye if I were dying of cancer. I mourned for the family I would leave behind.

I had only one more month in my family fast, and I hoped it would be easier than that last week of August. I was retaking the class I failed a year earlier. I had three weeks to write a 20-page paper and prepare a two-hour presentation. The seminary's library had very little on my topic, so I gladly drove down to Austin to do my research at UT. A week before everything was due, I reserved my weekend to sit at my kitchen table and

write. Ashley didn't know that. She called as I pulled in the driveway after church that Sunday. She wanted to know if she and her boyfriend could come by.

“Uh, sure.”

“Good! We're halfway there. See you in 45 minutes.”

“Hey, Ashley,” I said as I reminded myself to love my family, “I don't have any electricity.” Hurricane Rita had hit the Texas coast the day before. My apartment only got two drops of rain, but the transformer on my corner blew. The electric company was swamped with customers who lost power from the hurricane, so I was a low priority. I had to wait—in the Texas heat. Ashley and Trevor came anyway. They didn't stay long—probably because they were melting, but while they were there, I noticed something different about Ashley. She was absolutely beautiful. I had never seen her look that beautiful. I kept wondering if she really looked that beautiful or if this was a symptom of loving her more. I had to make myself stop staring at her. Before long, Ashley and Trevor went back to Tyler and I went to the BSM to borrow electricity and work on my paper.

There were only seven days left to finish my paper and presentation and only three days left of my family fast. I kept making my phone calls and felt they had more purpose now that everyone was separated and grieving on so many levels. I went to bed on September 26 grateful that no more tragedies had struck in the last month, but aware that I still had one more day left.

Dad called at 7 a.m. Dad called. Dad never called unless it was urgent, and at 7 a.m. it had to be urgent. He asked if I had checked my e-mail.

“No, not yet,” I answered, thinking that was a strange question for 7 a.m.

Dad took a big breath and slowly let it out. “Dana died last night.”

Dana died? Dana was my youth minister, my mentor I had mentioned in my BSM interview. He was also married to my dad’s cousin Jennifer. He died from injuries in a head-on collision. The family took another blow. I packed everything I needed to work on my paper and flew to Knoxville. Dana and Jennifer had moved there to pastor a church when I graduated from high school. Ashley and Trevor drove all night to go to the funeral. Dad drove up from Alabama with his family from Florida. Mom and our Jennifer had to miss it. Jonathan was there, though, and it was encouraging to stand behind him and his boys as they worshiped God only a month after Nancy died.

It looked like a thousand people showed up for the funeral, and when Dana’s friend asked how many of us thought we were Dana’s favorite, a thousand hands went up. That’s the kind of person Dana was. His death got me thinking about how far I’d strayed from the example he set for me. Ministry, like fasting, was about loving people, and I had blown it big time. If that were my funeral, there wouldn’t be many people there, and none of them would think they were my favorite, especially not after my last year of self-absorption.

A few weeks after Dana’s funeral, we had a memorial service at my church in Houston where he had been the youth minister. We gathered in the room where they held Lifesource, the youth service Dana had named almost 20 years earlier. Three hundred of us used to listen to Dana preach on Wednesday nights. On this day, about a hundred returned to honor him. I had the privilege of sharing my memories of Dana. I told some funny stories and talked about what he had taught me. Not long before he went to Knoxville, he handed me a piece of paper with a quote typed on it: “A man has begun to

understand the meaning of life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he may never sit.” I closed my talk with that quote. “We are Dana’s memorial,” I told my friends. “We are his shade trees.”

We cried together in Houston that day, and I went back to Corsicana to plant trees.

CHAPTER 4

SKYDIVING

A few Fridays later, I sprawled out on the BSM couch and read a book by a 26-year-old divorcee,¹⁵ hoping it would help me understand Ashley’s situation more. I thought the book was about divorce, but it was actually about grace—grace when we’ve really messed up, grace that remains no matter how many times we mess up. Grace overwhelmed me on the couch that day, and I wept. I had messed up so much in Corsicana. I thought I had killed the BSM. It was a thriving ministry before I got there. I suffocated it. But God didn’t hold any of my failures against me. In fact, His love reached deeper than my failures. At the end of this second fast, He again brought me humility and hope, “The gates of hell cannot prevail against My Church.¹⁶ What makes you think you can?” He was right. I couldn’t kill the BSM. The BSM, my education, my family, all of that was in His hands, not mine. I couldn’t take credit for success in those areas or for failure. God was in charge, not me. If no one walked through the doors of the BSM, that was His problem. And less than a year later when so many people were crammed into the building that the air conditioner couldn’t keep up, that was His problem too.

¹⁵ Cameron Conant, *With or Without You: A Spiritual Journey Through Love and Divorce* (Orlando, FL: Relevant Media Group, 2005).

¹⁶ “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18).

My second year at the BSM was bound to be better than the first. I quit trying to do things in my own strength, and God started making changes. The school's maintenance crew showed up at our Wednesday lunches, and they brought something I hadn't heard in a long time: laughter. Their laughter was contagious, and it made people want to come back. Our attendance doubled.

I found a new book for the leadership team, one written specifically for twentysomethings. It was more of a discussion guide than a Bible study, and it suited their learning style better. Now they not only prepared for our weekly meetings, but they also actively led the BSM. Finally, we were a team, and we were leading people.

Some of our leadership team went to Dallas with me to hear our Passion friends Louie Giglio and Chris Tomlin on their Indescribable tour. God's presence wowed us, and so did His provision. Right there on our row sat two guys from our school. They looked familiar to me, but I couldn't place them. The students knew them and started talking to them. Before we left that night, they decided to go to Nashville with us for the next Passion conference and to be in our newly formed band. Okay, they *were* our newly formed band. Jeremy played acoustic guitar and Andrew played drums. Put them together with last year's band—Rusty, who played acoustic guitar and sang really well—and we had some great music.

And then there was Dustin. Dustin had been a Christian for a long time, but something happened that fall and God got a hold of him. Dustin wanted to seek God more actively, so when he drove by the BSM one day, he turned around and came inside. He told us his story and said he wanted to play bass for us. *Voila!* Soulfire was born, and they were pretty good. Nightlight, our Thursday night gathering, never sounded better.

God brought other people to the BSM on Thursday nights too. Our attendance tripled. Good things were happening in the BSM.

When December came, I sat down to write my annual Christmas letter with a positive attitude about the BSM and my time in Corsicana. After I wrote my letter, I compiled my recommended reading list that I included each year. Making this year's list turned into quite an ordeal.

This particular year, the list had some interesting books by musicians like Rich Mullins, David Crowder and Chris Tomlin. Before I wrote my little blurb about Chris Tomlin's book *The Way I Was Made*, I flipped through it to remind myself why I had recommended it so many times. I ended up reading the whole thing again. Singing Chris's song "Take My Life" was what prompted me to move to Corsicana in the first place. Two years later, reading his book a second time left me with my face planted in the carpet in my bedroom, right there at the end of what my landlady had described as the seasonal hump. Chris talked about dropping our backup plans and taking risks, following God's lead even if we can't guarantee the outcome. While I was reading, God whispered to me, "Jump out of the plane, Melody."

This wasn't the first time God told me to jump out of the plane. In the middle of my family fast, I had gone camping again. I pitched my tent at the same campground where I stayed a year earlier on my I-35 and Beyond tour. I remembered from my previous visit that there was a skydiving school nearby. At the entrance of the airfield, a plane had nose-dived into the ground. The sign next to it read, "There's no such thing as a perfectly good plane." Not a great way to encourage business, but certainly memorable. For a year, I thought about that skydiving school and convinced myself I should jump.

On my way to the airfield this year, I told myself I would jump only if the price was a certain amount or less. I paid twice that. My tandem instructor was a tree of a man, a giant redwood. The Tree picked out a fluorescent pink jumpsuit for me, tied me into a harness vest and gave me some instructions. “Before we jump, fold your arms in front of you. I’ll say, ‘One, two, arch!’ When I say, ‘arch!’ jump forward and arch your back. Let me see you arch.” I folded my arms in front of me and arched backward on my tiptoes until I almost fell over. “Good,” he continued. “When I tap you on the shoulder, put your arms out. When I tap you on the shoulder again, put your arms in. Got it?”

“Arms in. One, two, arch. Arms out. Arms in. Got it.” I expected more instructions, but that was it. The Tree put a branch on my shoulder and led me and the pink jumpsuit to a rickety plane.

People say the plane ride is the scariest part of skydiving. I wasn’t scared. I was irritated with myself for spending so much money. I had about ten minutes to mourn my mistake while we climbed into the clouds. As I straddled the bench with The Tree, I didn’t beg God to rescue me from my circumstances. I begged Him to have mercy on my bank account. *I should have saved that money for my upcoming Germany trip*, I admitted, wallowing in buyer’s remorse.

While I confessed my financial foolishness, The Tree hooked me into his harness. “I’m not going anywhere you’re not going, and you’re not going anywhere I’m not going,” he promised.

That’s when it hit me. *I’m going out that door. With a tree on my back!* I got a little nervous. All I knew about jumping out of a plane was, “Arms in. One, two, arch.

Arms out. Arms in.” I didn’t even have a parachute. *God, please don’t let this harness break*, I prayed.

Someone opened the door. The chatter stopped. People started moving around. And before I could stop him, the guy squatting next to the door fell into the sky. Now I was scared. The next guy fell. And the next. I stopped breathing. Another one and another one. I turned to JELL-O®.

Arms in. One, two, arch. Arms out. Arms in, I rehearsed.

Arms in. One, two, arch. Arms out. Arms in.

As The Tree scooted us to the door, he yelled over the roar of the engines to assure me, “This is the most thrilling thing you’ll ever do!” Was he serious? I thumbed through my memories, noting life events that easily topped this one. Walking through the Dalai Lama’s palace in Tibet. Fulfilling my lifelong dream of being a teacher. And what about life events I still hoped for? My wedding day. The birth of my children. *That’s it!* I realized as we squatted at the door. *That’s why men jump out of planes!* And then I looked down.

“One! Two! Arch!”

I didn’t arch. I nearly passed out. I hung limp in the harness as we accelerated toward the earth. Just as I was about to give up the ghost, I thought, *Open your eyes, Melody! You’re missing it!* About the time I opened them, The Tree tapped me on the shoulder and I put my arms out. I was flying.

We flew awhile before he tapped me on the shoulder again. I put my arms in and he opened our chute. He let me hold the handles and spin us around a few times. That made me dizzy. We flew a few more minutes before the ground approached. Fifteen

seconds before touchdown, he finally told me how to land. “Put your feet up.” I lifted my legs straight in front of me. “Okay, when I say ‘stand,’ stand up and take a few steps. Stand!” The Tree landed us and I put my feet down.

As he disconnected me and gathered the parachute behind him, The Tree explained, “If you buy a second jump today, you’ll get a fifty-dollar discount. You’ll have a year to use it.”

“I’ll take it!” I was thrilled.

After that adventure, I went back to my tent by the river and tried to calm down, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it. As I spent the next few days camping and praying about my upcoming trip to Germany, God kept urging me, “Jump out of the plane, Melody.”

The purpose for the Germany trip was to do the research for my thesis. My plan was to hang out by the Berlin Wall and interview people about their experiences before and after the wall fell. Karen, one of my seminary roommates, agreed to go with me and help with the interviews. But nothing was coming together. I had no idea where we were staying, no clue how we were going to do interviews, no contacts in Berlin, nothing. It looked like I had wasted a lot of money on plane tickets. But God kept telling me, “Just jump out of the plane, Melody.” I had literally just jumped out of a plane and everything turned out alright. I even bought a second jump. Now I had to trust God with my figurative jump.

Karen and I went to Germany, but my great idea for my thesis fell apart. For starters, neither one of us spoke German. Anyone we interviewed had to speak English, and the majority of English speakers from former East Germany were educated after the

wall fell. Most of the people we talked to were college students, and they barely remembered life with the wall. Again, great idea, but it didn't work. No thesis.

The trip wasn't a complete bust, though. Before we ever left Texas, God started showing us His character. First, He showed us He was our provider. A mix up with my BSM salary agreement ended with a large check in my name. It paid for both of us to go to Germany and replaced my barely-working laptop. And in the days before we got on the plane, I found several hundred dollars in old checks I had never deposited, plus another several hundred in Euros I had never exchanged from previous trips. My ability to lose money and find it later was a savings system that worked well for me. All that provision came before we left Texas. Once we arrived in Germany, God continued to show us He was our provider, our protector, our navigator, our way-maker and our luggage finder. Karen and I learned a lot and saw God work miracles to get us around Germany and back to Texas. We also met some great people, like the Fehmers, who said about the fall of the wall, "God was more great than we believed." God showed us He was God, "the Big Boss of the history," as Mr. Fehmer called Him. And He was so much better at being God than we were.

On one leg of our trip, I visited the Nikolai church in Leipzig where East Germans held a ten-year, weekly prayer vigil for the wall to come down. Karen didn't feel well that Sunday morning, so I was on my own, and I didn't know the tram system was under construction. No matter which tram I got on, it went the wrong way. I finally started walking. By the time I got to the church, the service was almost over. But the sign by the door said they had a second service—for university students.

Franzesca sat behind me. At first she asked if I knew where the restroom was. But when she saw my helpless, I-don't-understand look, she asked if I spoke English. We chatted a little, and as we walked to a café after the service, she asked if I was a believer. I told her I was. She said she wasn't, so I asked why she had come to the church that morning. She explained it was her first time there. "I want a position," she told me. "I want to know if I believe or don't. I am looking for the answer." I was beginning to see why God wanted me at the second service instead of the first.

The next day Karen and I went to class with Franzisca and had lunch with her and her friends at The University of Leipzig. We spent most of the afternoon together. And before we left Leipzig, I gave Franzisca a German Bible and told her, "I think God brought me all the way from Texas to tell you He's the answer you've been looking for. He loves you very much." She thought I might be right.

Maybe I was. Maybe Franzisca is why we went to Germany. Maybe we went to meet the Fehmers and all our other new friends. Maybe we went so Karen and I could learn to trust God. I didn't get my thesis written, but I was glad I had jumped out of the plane like God told me to.

A few months later, as I wrote my Christmas letter, God told me to jump out of the plane again. He asked me to trust Him and agree to whatever He had planned for me, whatever was coming next. I knew something was coming. That's why I had to finish seminary, to "finish [my] outdoor work and get [my] fields ready." I planned to graduate in six months. No plans after that. Most people get a new job after they graduate from seminary. I already had the job people get when they graduate from seminary. Was I supposed to keep it? The typical first-time Texas BSM director signs a contract to serve

at his first school for three years. My contract had a loophole. I had committed to serve at Navarro for only two years. I would finish my contract and finish seminary at the same time. What was coming next? It didn't matter. God wanted me to say yes regardless.

Chris Tomlin wrote about the “Yes, Lord” life of Isaiah 26:8, Passion’s theme verse. I knew when I agreed to quit teaching and leave Coppell I wasn’t giving God my full yes. I was only giving Him the *y*. Now, on the floor there next to the hump, He wanted the *es*. To most people, *es* may look like two little letters. But to a Latin teacher, *es* means “you are.” Did I believe God was who He said He was? The Great I AM?¹⁷ Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace?¹⁸ In order to give God my complete yes, I had to believe He was everything I needed. I squeaked out an *es* on the hump.

On New Year’s Day, I drove a vanload of students to Nashville for the Passion conference, again giving God my yes to whatever He would tell me while I was there. During an afternoon break, I plopped down on a couch in the conference center. It wasn’t long before a gentleman in his 70s settled into the chair next to me. He ran the command post at the arena, and his name was Fig Newton. He showed me his ID tag to prove it. Fig had led an interesting life building restaurants and working as a locksmith. Along the way, he invented a device that revolutionized the lock industry. His invention made him famous in his trade, so he became a trouble shooter and ended up designing lock systems

¹⁷ “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14).

¹⁸ “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

in Iraq. And here he was running the command post at the conference center and chatting with me.

Fig had me on the edge of my seat when he went back to the beginning of his story. Before he built restaurants or revolutionized the lock industry, he tested parachutes for the Air Force. Fig Newton jumped out of planes for a living. I sat there stunned. When I could finally talk, I asked how many times he jumped. He said he lost count after the first 2,500 jumps. All day long for years, he jumped out of planes. Jump. Get another chute. Climb in the air. Jump. Get another chute. Climb in the air. Jump.

I had to tell him. “Mr. Newton, before I came here, I felt like God was telling me to ‘jump out of the plane.’ I don’t know what that means yet, but I feel like I need to take a big risk.”

I told him about graduating and wondering about my job. In that simple, now-why-didn’t-I-think-of-that wisdom, he asked me, “If you could do one thing 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for the rest of your life, what would you do?”

“Write.” I didn’t even think about it. The answer jumped out of my mouth.

“Do that.” The parachute tester told me to write. It sounded so safe when he said it.

About that time, my students found me and joined me on the couch. I introduced them to Fig, who soon went back to work, leaving me to wonder if I had just spoken with an angel.

The end of a Passion conference is a special time, a commissioning of sorts. This one was no different. The last thing we did together was sing the chorus of “Our God

Reigns.”¹⁹ When the people on stage stopped singing, the rest of us kept going. Eighteen thousand people stood with their hands in the air proclaiming that our God reigns. God seemed pleased with our sacrifice of praise, and He came down and inhabited that place with us.

The pastors at my church frequently talk about the difference between God’s omnipresence and His manifest presence. God is certainly present everywhere, but sometimes He makes His presence more noticeable. He draws near and we “feel” His presence. It’s in God’s manifest presence that I hear Him whispering to me.²⁰ I’ve often felt His presence at Passion events or World Mandate missions conferences in Waco. At World Mandate the year before, He whispered “Austin.” He whispered “Austin” again throughout this Passion conference, and His whisper got a little clearer in the middle of “Our God Reigns.” If I really believed He reigned, I could jump out of the plane and move to Austin.

After the Passion conference, my students and I started our trek back to Corsicana. For 13 hours, I drove. And I drove. And I drove. And as I followed the dotted line down the interstate, I came up with a strategy for living in Austin.

First, I would clean out my savings account and cash in part of my IRA to pay off my school loan. Then I’d have to sell my car because I wouldn’t be able to afford gas or

¹⁹ “Our God Reigns” by John Thatcher, Martin Smith, Stewart Smith, Stuart Garrard, Tim Jupp Copyright © 2005 Curious? Music UK (PRS) (adm. in the US and Canada at EMICMGPublishing.com) All rights reserved.

²⁰ “The Lord said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by. Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper’ (I Kings 19:11-12).

insurance. The money I made from selling my car would buy me a ton of peanut butter and jelly and bus tickets. I figured my parents would pay my phone bill so they could keep in touch with me. All I needed to do now was upgrade my tent and my sleeping bag so I could live comfortably under a bridge. Surely a homeless shelter would let me plug my computer into their wall so I could write. I might even make a few hundred bucks a month writing articles. *Yes! I can do this! I can move to Austin!* I figured out as we crossed the Texas state line.

That was my strategy. No joke. Gone were the days of the house and the kids and their extraordinary dad. All I wanted was a bigger tent.

When I got home, I called my parents and told them I was quitting my job so I could move to Austin. They didn't sound surprised. I called Joyce and quit my job. She wasn't surprised either. I was still praying for immediate obedience, so I had to resign immediately, but I had to stay in Corsicana one more semester.

The next day was January 8, which meant I read Psalms 36-40. Right in the middle of Psalm 37, I found verses 25-26: "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed." I had to clarify. *Really, God? I won't have to beg for bread? I won't have to live in a tent?* I asked. *I'll even have money to give away? And I'll be a blessing to others? But, God, are these verses really true? I mean, sometimes I do see Christians begging for bread.* God didn't get angry that I questioned the reliability of His Word. Instead He showed me more of it. Psalm 37:19 says, "In times of disaster they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty." And God took me back to verses I had read the day before, Psalm 33:18-19: "But the

eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.” He took me all the way back to the story of Joseph, whose brothers sold him into slavery. Through that evil deed, God sent Joseph ahead to Egypt so he could prepare for the famine and provide for God’s people.²¹ God seemed to be telling me I would find His abundance even in famine. I almost believed Him.

I believed I wouldn’t have to live in a tent, but I fretted over how I would pay the bills. One minute I begged God for a Joseph who would prepare and provide for me. The next, I pestered Him, *How am I going to eat, God? I can’t go more than six weeks without food.*

And He would say something like, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.”²² For months we had the same conversation:

How am I going to eat?

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.”

Sometimes I argued, *But I know You, God. You’ve already cut my salary in half once. You’ll cut it in half again and again until I have no salary at all. Then how am I going to eat?*

²¹ Genesis 45:4-11

²² Psalm 81:10

He must have recognized that I wasn't getting it because He eventually gave me a different answer, "Melody, life isn't about whether you eat or drink or whatever you do; it's about the glory of God."²³

Oh. Yeah. Good point.

I heard Him that time. God wasn't moving me to Austin to eat or drink or earn a paycheck. He was moving me there for His glory. I chewed on that answer for a few weeks, and then I asked Him to let me write for His glory. But what I meant was, *Let me get paid to write for Your glory. Please.*

I went back to pestering Him, *How am I going to eat?*

He gave up trying to reason with me, and He gave me His final answer, "I love you."

Huh?

"I love you."

That's not what I asked, God. I asked how I'm going to eat.

"I love you."

Yeah, but how am I going to eat?

"I love you."

I still didn't get it.

²³ "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink. ... Is not life more important than food? ... Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? ... So do not worry saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:25-27, 31-33). "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

I had quit eating out a long time ago. Long before I decided to quit my job at the BSM, I got the feeling I needed to start saving money for something. My first thought was that I needed to buy another car. God had promised me the old Maxima would last until I finished school, and graduation was around the corner. I'd better get ready. But I wasn't sure the money was for a car. I knew only that I needed to save money for some big expense that was coming. It didn't seem like a burdened expense, though, more like a reward, like a vacation, like something I really wanted but had to prepare for. So I quit eating out. I figured if I paid myself for every day that I didn't eat out, in a year, I'd save more than a month's salary.

Exactly a year after I quit eating out, I got my last paycheck. I had saved as much as I had hoped. And Uncle Sam added a huge contribution. In a moment of ignorance and math anxiety (two of my common conditions), I agreed to withhold too much money for my taxes. This mistake proved to be yet another savings system that worked well for me. My tax return that year also equaled more than a month's salary. I could move to Austin and eat for two months. God was providing.

But I was still scared. What about after those two months?

I needed God, and I needed Him bad. I had told my students I was leaving. There was no turning back. God had hooked me into His harness and we were awaiting our turn to jump out of the plane. I was terrified. And everyone kept asking what I would do in Austin. I didn't have any answers.

So as I drove back to Corsicana after my seminary classes one day, I passed up the road to Corsicana and drove to Waco. I went to Baylor, looking for God in the places

I had found Him before: a swing and a window. God had met me there when I was in college. Surely He would meet me there again.

Afternoon classes were about to start as I approached Old Main, the original Baylor building. My Latin classes used to meet on the third floor. For two hours every Monday, Wednesday and Friday one semester, I sat in a window next to my classroom and translated Cicero. I liked to get ahead in that class, though, because as soon as I finished my homework, I could pray. Sometimes I got a whole day ahead so I could spend the entire two hours praying. I couldn't wait to get to the window each morning. God lived there.

Ten years later, I sat back down in the window sill, pulled my feet up into the corner and leaned my right shoulder against the pane like I used to. From the ground below, I probably looked like I had nestled into a favorite hammock.

I'm back, God.

I didn't have anything else to say. It was God's turn to talk. He reviewed the prayers I had prayed the last time I sat in the window. Prayers for my friends. Prayers about my future. He had answered so many of them, though not like I had expected. People I thought would still be in my life weren't. Strangers had taken their places. And I had gone to other places, like Corsicana. And I was headed to Austin. While I sat there in the window, God reminded me of his faithfulness. And He reminded me of the confidence I had as a college student, that I-can-change-the-world attitude and the courage to try, the belief that I could fly.

“You can still fly, Melody. Just jump out of the plane.”

It's going to be okay, right God? You've got me, don't You? 'Cause I don't have a parachute.

I sat in the window for half an hour and then walked over to Waco Hall. The swing out front had a fresh coat of paint and a new flowerbed around it. It was now an even better place to enjoy the sunshine. I reclaimed my spot. God reminded me that I was always welcome there on the swing. I could come back any time. That's why I came in the first place, to know He was there. I needed to know He wouldn't leave me. He assured me He wouldn't. And as I hung suspended in the swing, He assured me He wouldn't drop me.

Classes ended and students drifted out of the buildings. I followed them back to my car as I hummed "Danny Boy" with the bells.

Easter was coming soon and I decided to commemorate Good Friday by jumping out of a real plane. I drove down I-35 South and pitched my tent next to the San Marcos River again. Then I headed to the airfield, redeemed my voucher for my second jump, and put on the familiar pink jumpsuit. Because I had paid for it a year earlier, I didn't have the benefit of worrying about the cost of this jump. I had nothing to distract me during the plane ride. As I watched the trees get smaller and smaller and felt the air get colder and colder, my tandem instructor commented on how quiet I was. I explained that I was terrified. I yelled over the roar of the engine, "When I'm nervous, I talk—really fast. When I'm terrified, I'm silent." That's all I could say. I went silent again. My instructor hooked me into his harness and scooted me to the door. I turned to JELL-O[®] again. I knew not to look down this time, so I looked up into the clouds as I squatted with

my arms folded across my chest and my face jutting into the wind. I listened for the count. “One, two. . .” I arched and we back flipped out the door.

The back flip countered the initial sinking feeling, and I remembered to open my eyes earlier this time. I was flying again, and it was beautiful again. When we landed, my instructor commented one more time about my silence, “Most people scream or yell or something. You didn’t say anything.”

“I was terrified,” I reminded him.

I returned the pink jumpsuit and went back to my tent in my usual spot on the river. *God, jumping out of planes is scary.*

“But you did it. And you’re still alive. Don’t worry. I’ve got you.”

CHAPTER 5

YOU ARE HERE

I spent the next few days praying that God would let me write for His glory. Actually I was giving Him ideas of how I could get paid to write for His glory. He was patient, and then He drew me a map. It was one of those you-are-here maps you find at the mall or an amusement park. Mine was a complete world map, and the big, red arrow pointed to Austin, Texas. But instead of “You are here,” it said, “Here am I”—a simple statement that He would be there and that He was answering my prayers to make my “here” where He wanted me to be and my “I” who He wanted me to be.

I felt like I needed to know where I would live in Austin. Was that on the map?

I found two girls online who needed roommates. They didn’t seem to mind that I had no job and no guarantee that I could pay the rent. I made arrangements to meet both of them the next weekend.

I continued looking for a roommate on another website. A post at the top of the page read, “I need a CHRISTIAN female roommate.” This girl was going to teach English in another country for a year, and she wanted someone to live in her room while she was gone. Sounded like a missionary to me. I immediately e-mailed her, “I’m a CHRISTIAN female, and I need a roommate.” She e-mailed back and told me she was going to teach English in the Dominican Republic from August to August. I told her I had been an English teacher, and we e-mailed back and forth about all the things we had in

common. I really liked this girl. She agreed to meet me at her church that next Sunday. Once we made our arrangements, I realized I hadn't looked up her address on the map. I had no idea where she lived. It was okay, though. Location wasn't a factor. For this move, I focused on relationship, relationship, relationship.

The next weekend, I drove down I-35 South and claimed another bunk at the hostel. The first potential roommate on my list found someone before I got to Austin, so I went to meet the second girl. She scored low on the relationship, relationship, relationship scale, but before I left her apartment, I asked if there was a used bookstore nearby. For the last month, I had been purging my library. God had given me a mild version of His sell-all-you-have-and-give-the-money-to-the-poor directive.²⁴ At first I sold my books at the BSM. My assistant collected the money and donated it to Go Now Missions. When people quit buying, I started taking loads to used bookstores. I took a load with me to Austin, and right before I turned into the parking lot of the bookstore near this girl's apartment, I saw a music school.

A day earlier I had been talking to God about the children of Austin. I got this crazy notion that I should lead a children's choir at my church when I got there. That did not make any sense. Yes, I grew up in church children's choirs, but I had no experience leading one. I sat there confused for a while until God clarified. Not a children's choir, but children's guitar lessons. I had done that before. The last three years I was in Coppell, I taught guitar lessons. I started with two colleagues, but as the word spread, I began teaching my colleagues' children. And then their friends. And then their friends. And in

²⁴ Mark 10:21.

three years, I had a dozen students. My last year in Coppell, I spent more time teaching guitar than I did going to seminary.

But that was two years ago. I hadn't played my guitar much at all in Corsicana, especially after Soulfire started leading us on Thursday nights. I'd gotten rusty. And I wasn't that great to begin with. I could teach guitar only because I was a good teacher, not a good guitarist. Fortunately, with children, I could teach slowly enough to learn with them. It's a good thing I left Coppell when I did because my high school students had progressed to intermediate level lessons, and I, after ten years of playing the guitar, was still a beginner. I could teach barre chords only as fast as I could learn them.

When God nudged me towards teaching guitar lessons in Austin, I thought that sounded like a good plan to earn spare cash. But I was anxious about having to relearn everything and having to find students in a town where I knew only a handful of people. So a day later when I saw the music school, I almost passed up the bookstore. As soon as the cashier paid me for my books, I crossed the street and walked into the music school. Rick, the owner, sat behind the counter. Unprepared for this conversation, I introduced myself with a ridiculous question. "Hi, do you hire teachers?"

Rick pardoned my ignorance and answered, "Sometimes I do, yes."

"What kind of qualifications are you looking for?"

"Most of my teachers have graduate degrees in music and four or five years experience teaching at established music schools."

"Okay, that's not me. Thank you." I turned to leave.

"No, no, tell me about yourself," he stopped me. I went back to the counter and told him I had a degree in English but had taught lessons on the side for a few years. I

told him how I went to people's houses and taught them after school a few days a week. He was mostly interested in my experience with children. "How young were your students?"

"My youngest was eight."

He went on to tell me he needed someone to teach really young students, like four-year-olds.

"I can do that." *No way a four-year-old can play a barre chord*, I thought.

We talked for a few more minutes, and he told me to call his wife Margaret, who ran the office. "Please be patient, though, because she's overworked, and it may take her awhile to answer the phone."

"I can help with that too. I have a lot more experience working in an office than I do teaching guitar."

"Oh, I could really use you here in the office. Maybe we can work something out. Please send me your resume." I agreed to do so and headed back to the hostel.

What was that, God? I just talked myself into a job. He wasn't even looking to hire anyone. What was that?

Sunday morning I went to meet Alexia, the third girl on my roommate list. We had arranged to meet at her church. I called her several times because her church was under construction and I couldn't figure out where to park or where the sanctuary was—and I was really nervous and had to talk to someone. She got me straightened out. Alexia arrived right on time and introduced me to her friends. After church a group of us went to eat lunch. Halfway through lunch, Alexia's roommate, Marissa, joined us. She seemed friendly.

After lunch, Marissa and Alexia took me to their apartment. Wow! What a view! The back side of their apartment was all windows, and their balcony overlooked a huge, tree-filled ravine. It was late spring, and it was beautiful. The view inside the apartment was nice too. It was bright and spacious, clean and tidy. And it had a washer and dryer—two things I had asked my mom to pray for—and central air and heat. It had all the luxuries I had given up in Corsicana. The grounds were beautiful and well maintained. Deer walked through the green spaces.

But more important than the apartment was relationship, relationship, relationship. I liked Marissa. We had talked for an hour or more and were getting along well when I brought up the issue at hand. “I can see myself living here.” Marissa and Alexia agreed. We discussed rent and arrangements. Alexia wasn’t leaving until July, so I would move in a little later.

In the meantime, I kept getting rid of things. United Christian Fellowship (UCF), a campus organization at the college, had their annual yard sale in May. I whittled my wardrobe down to three feet of hanging clothes and gave the rest to the UCF. I gave them several carloads of other stuff too. Getting rid of things felt so good, like a cleansing. I felt like God was taking all my junk to the dump for me. And I felt like He did the same with my sin. I put it all out in a yard sale. He paid for it, and He took it away.

I could feel the weight falling off my shoulders as I got rid of almost everything but pictures. Even plenty of those went in the trash. I threw away lots of old keepsakes, but I kept a boxful, including a letter Dana sent me when I was a freshman at Baylor. “Mel, I’ve always known God had tremendous plans for you,” he wrote. I couldn’t throw

that away. And I kept a single sheet of paper that said, “A man has begun to understand the meaning of life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he may never sit.”

Alexia and I decided she would leave her furniture in the apartment, and I would get rid of mine. The UCF had recently built a new building with an apartment to house two students. They got my electronics and some of my furniture. The furniture I had inherited from my grandparents stayed in the family. When Mom retired, Ashley brought Trevor’s truck over to Corsicana and helped me drive my grandparents’ dining table and chairs down to Houston. We put them in Mom’s U-haul and hugged her goodbye before she moved to Alabama. My landlords paid me to leave all my other furniture and bath and kitchen supplies for the new tenants coming from Spain. God gave me that money to help a family whose house had burned down and a student who was setting up her first apartment.

God continued to amaze me by giving me money to give away. Now that I had no salary, I was giving away all kinds of stuff: clothes, electronics, furniture, money for furniture, money for books. God told me I wouldn’t have to beg, and that even in famine, I would have enough to give away. I would bless others from the abundance He gave me. I was starting to believe Him. Especially when I found \$30 worth of laundry quarters hiding all over my apartment (my savings system worked again). I shoved them in the glove box of my car for the homeless people of Austin.

God gave me more money by letting me house sit and dog sit for my landlords and my friends the Roses up in Dallas. John Rose even graciously bought some transmission fluid for my car. And then somebody hit me.

I was in Austin for my interview at the music school. It was the worst interview I have ever had. I didn't fit into the culture. Rick and I had different teaching philosophies and techniques, and I could barely play my guitar. It was obvious I didn't know what I was doing. I was unqualified to teach there. But unqualified didn't mean disqualified. For some reason, God gave me the job at the music school.

I left the music school employed but even more confused than when I left it the first time. Did I make a mistake? I had jumped in over my head and I was bound to fail. On top of that, I didn't like the atmosphere. I overheard Rick convincing Margaret they should hire me. I was about to get stuck in the middle of a relationship I didn't like. This did not look like a happy place.

At least Alexia and Marissa's place would be. I went through several stoplights to get back to the highway. As I waited at the last one, the guy behind me drove right into the old Maxima. We pulled into a parking lot and exchanged information. Then I made my way to Alexia and Marissa's apartment with blue paint on my bumper.

No one was home when I got there, so I decided to go to the grocery store. But when I got back to my car, oil was leaking from behind the back left tire. *This can't be happening. How much worse can this day get?*

Mom called to see how the interview went, and I told her what a crummy day I was having. She was in Houston visiting friends, so she got her host on the phone. He said it was probably oil leaking from my shocks after the collision. It was drivable. One of the things I wanted to do in Austin that weekend was get my oil changed. This looked like a good time to check that off my to-do list. I drove to the lube center next to the

grocery store and talked to the insurance people while I waited. The mechanics didn't see anything wrong with driving my car back to Corsicana the next day.

On Monday, I talked to the insurance people again and took the old Maxima in for an estimate. I decided to let the insurance company pay their preferred shop for the repairs. The next day I changed my mind. I don't know what I dreamed about the night before, but I woke up with "My money pays for your future" echoing in my head. It sounded like the last thing someone had said in my dream, like the last song you hear on the radio before you get out of your car. I couldn't get it out of my head, and I couldn't figure out what it was about. And then it hit me. My car! Why in the world would I invest hundreds of dollars into a car that wasn't worth much in the first place? I needed that money to eat. I called and cancelled my appointment at the auto shop and asked the insurance company to cut me a check instead. Later I deposited that check and bought a \$2 cleaning pad that erased all the blue paint and 15 years of scuffs off my car. God had bumped into me on that crummy day in Austin to hand me money.

By the time I moved to Austin, I had three months' salary sitting in my checking account. But even after all God had provided, I was still scared. God brought me back to Psalm 81.

"Hear, O my people, and I will warn you—if you would but listen to me, O Israel! You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not bow down to an alien god. I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.

"But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.

"If my people would but listen to me, if Israel would follow my ways, how quickly would I subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes!

Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him, and their punishment would be forever. But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.²⁵

God told me again and again that He would take care of me. He would give me abundance in the midst of famine. He would feed me “with the finest of wheat.” He would even pull “honey from the rock” to satisfy me. If only I would acknowledge that He was God.

If only. I didn’t want to look back at this time and say, *If only I had hoped in God. If only I had trusted and submitted to Him. If only I had believed Him.* What if He did have some outrageous plan for me as a writer? What if He had some unimaginable plan for Austin, Texas? I didn’t want to miss it. I wanted to be a part of it. I didn’t want *If only.*

I told God, *I’m jumping out of the plane because I know You love me. Please don’t drop me. Please don’t make me guilty of believing You for too much.*

²⁵ Psalm 81:8-16

CHAPTER 6

NOT A GOD

Ashley and I packed most of my belongings into Trevor's new truck and put the important stuff in my old Maxima. We hauled it all to Austin and moved it into Alexia's room. The next morning I thanked Ashley for the hundredth time, made sure she knew how to get home, and hugged her goodbye. I went back upstairs and unpacked.

I was in Austin. My here-am-I map was accurate. For more than two years I had prayed for Austin. All those how-do-I-get-to-Austin days were over. "I-35 South" was right. I couldn't stop smiling. I felt like I had moved home.

But I still didn't know what I was supposed to do there. I had jumped out of the plane, but I didn't know how to land. Or where to land. I planned to work at the music school, but that didn't seem like the real reason I was moving to Austin. I had no idea what else I was supposed to do, so I continued to operate on a need-to-know-basis. My only goals were to write my thesis and plant trees. God was going to have to show me how to do that.

It wasn't long before I reported to work at the music school. In some ways, it wasn't as bad as I had expected. In other ways, it was worse. I didn't have any students, so I didn't have to worry about teaching. But that meant I wasn't getting paid to teach, and I wasn't getting paid much to work part time in the office. For four hours every Monday through Thursday afternoon, I sat at a computer in the back office and entered

data. It was as dreary as it sounds. Rick's friend had written a computer program to track the lesson schedules. He finished it only a week before I got there, and it was full of bugs. Sometimes I sat for an hour while I waited for him to fix it. And the hours I spent actually entering the data seemed futile. Why did they need to know who showed up for lessons a year ago? I didn't want to complain, so I entered and entered and entered, and I prayed for the students and teachers as I typed their names again and again. I volunteered to do anything to get out of that dark office. Sometimes I washed the dishes in the break room. I was thrilled when Margaret let me frame her jazz posters from New Orleans and hang them in the waiting area.

I soon found out that Margaret was planning to move to New Orleans. She was leaving Rick and the music school. Margaret and Rick had lived together for 13 years, but they had never married. She wanted out. They were hoping I would take her place in the office. This was not good. Every day they took turns complaining about each other. One day Rick would talk my ear off. The next day Margaret would. I tried to remain neutral. I figured out that I wasn't there to teach guitar lessons. I was there because God loved Rick and Margaret, and He wanted them to know that. So I kept smiling and listening and praying and entering data in the dark room in the back. At least it was only four hours a day, and I had Fridays off.

After a couple of miserable weeks at the music school, I headed off to stay with one of my Baylor friends for the weekend. Her husband was a pastor in the tiny town of Runge, Texas, east of San Antonio. I enjoyed visiting my friends, and I liked the people in their church too.

In Sunday School that morning, we studied King Hezekiah.²⁶ The interesting part for me wasn't the part where Hezekiah got sick and God spared his life. It was before that, the part where Sennacherib shows up. Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, sends an army to conquer Jerusalem. His messengers tell the Hebrews not to trust King Hezekiah when he says their LORD will deliver them. The Assyrians brag that they are more powerful than the Hebrews' God, and they list the other places whose gods failed to deliver them. They "ridicule the living God."²⁷

Hezekiah responds to their message by going to the temple. He lays the Assyrian's threat before the Lord and prays. He doesn't let fear skew his perspective. Hezekiah knows God is God. God made heaven and earth with His own hands, and He's in charge. "You alone are God," Hezekiah says. Those other gods were only wood and stone "fashioned by men's hands." But now that the Assyrians have insulted "the living God," He'll defend His name and show them who's God.²⁸

That night God kills 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in their sleep. When the survivors wake up the next morning surrounded by 185,000 dead men, they immediately return home. Jerusalem is spared. God delivers His people. And "One day, while [Sennacherib worships] in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons ... cut him down with the sword."²⁹ God shows the Hebrews and the Assyrians that He is God.

²⁶ 2 Kings 18-20

²⁷ 2 Kings 19:4

²⁸ 2 Kings 19:14-19

²⁹ 2 Kings 19:37

Before we finished the story about Hezekiah, God put the song “You are God Alone” in my head. So all day long I sang:

You are God alone
From before time began
You were on Your throne
You were God alone
And right now
In the good times and bad
You are on Your throne
You are God alone³⁰

I sang it all day Sunday. On Tuesday I woke up singing it again. After an hour of singing the chorus over and over, I stopped and thought, *God’s trying to tell me something. That’s why I can’t stop singing this song.* And when I got to “In the good times and bad,” I wondered, *Is this a good time or a bad?* I stood still and wondered what was coming next. My thoughts got heavier. I grew uneasy and had to sit down. I’d had this same feeling before I was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, and on this morning, I was going to the doctor again. What would he tell me?

I knew I had to go to the doctor because I recognized some of my old symptoms from college. So I went to see Dr. Doom that day. I came home in tears. He had the worst bedside manner I had ever seen. He didn’t listen. He was impatient, loud and abrasive. When I started to tear up, he got louder and more abrasive. And then he found my lumps—one on each side.

³⁰ “You Are God Alone [not a god]” by Billy James Foote/Cindy Foote ©2004 Billy Foote Songs/ASCAP (adm by Integrity’s Hosanna! Music) & Integrity’s Hosanna! Music/ASCAP c/o Integrity Media, Inc., 1000 Cody Road, Mobile, AL 36695. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

I had found them more than a year earlier and showed them to my doctor in Dallas, but she wasn't too concerned. She told me to let her know if they didn't go away in a couple of weeks. I knew if I quit exercising, they would shrink. I quit working out for a couple of weeks, and as expected, the lumps got smaller. Cancer doesn't grow and shrink proportionally to your exercise routine, so I never bothered my doctor in Dallas about it again. I wept, though, when Jonathan's wife died during my family fast. I wondered then if maybe I did have breast cancer, but I convinced myself I was being an overly emotional hypochondriac and dismissed the idea.

Dr. Doom actually calmed down a little when he found the second lump. Who has twin tumors? He told me to cut back on caffeine and see if they went away. He also gave me the business card of a surgeon and told me to have her examine my lumps—soon. I went home and wept.

Dr. Doom had a completely different reaction to my lumps than my doctor in Dallas did. What if these weren't cysts? What if I had cancer? Fear came, but I convinced myself it couldn't be cancer. Twin lumps that changed sizes depending on how often I exercised weren't tumors. And then the fear came back. And then I convinced myself they were cysts. And then the fear came back. And then I remembered:

In the good times and bad
You are on Your throne
You are God alone

This was a bad time, but God was still in charge. And He loved me, right? How many times had He told me that when I asked Him how I would eat? This was a bigger threat than starvation, but I knew He loved me. Cancer or no cancer, He loved me. And this

God who loved me was all-powerful. Remember Sennacherib? Remember those 185,000 dead Assyrians?

The next morning I worked out in the fitness center at my apartment complex. No one else was there. God and I were alone, and we were talking about cancer. At the moment, I feared the lumps were tumors, and I asked God why He would make my body the right environment for growing such a horrible disease. Obviously something was wrong with me. I felt flawed, and it was His fault. Why would He create me that way? I was lying on the floor stretching and blaming God when the song “Our God Reigns” came through my earphones. It was the song we had sung at the end of the Passion conference a few months earlier. The second verse answered my question: God was reigning when He made me, and Psalm 139 says He didn’t mess up.³¹ The song was right. God hadn’t messed up. He knew what He was doing. Cancer or not, He was God, and He was in control. He had a purpose for creating me the way He did. Again, God brought me humility and hope.

But if this was cancer, I didn’t want to go through it with Dr. Doom. I would find a new doctor, a compassionate doctor. First, though, I would get another cancer insurance policy.

While I was teaching in Coppell, I purchased my first cancer insurance policy. One year I had numerous cancer stories in my world, and I knew a fellow teacher’s

³¹ For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:13-16).

daughter had survived cancer as a teenager. Cancer insurance sounded like a good thing to have even in my twenties. But when I moved to Corsicana, I had to cut my expenses. I dropped the policy. A year later, though, the BSM had straightened out the mix up with my salary, and I could afford it again. I got another policy. But I dropped that one when I quit my job and moved to Austin. Because I still needed to write my thesis, I didn't get a full-time job, so I had to pay for my own medical insurance. Now I really couldn't afford cancer insurance.

But Dr. Doom scared me so badly that I called my insurance agent, told him I had messed up and asked how I could get another policy. He said he'd check into it and call me back. He called me back while I entered data in the back room at the music school. He had good news. The Texas BSM office had accidentally paid my premium the month before, and I was within the grace period to pay the current month's premium. I still had a policy. I didn't have to twiddle my thumbs through another application process and required waiting period. I could go to the doctor now.

I went home after work and shared the good news with Marissa. She was excited for me but confused. "I thought you said they were cysts."

"Well, yeah, they probably are, but I think the cancer insurance will pay for any tests. I'm not sure, though, because I threw away all the paperwork when I moved. They're going to send me another copy."

The next morning Marissa and I hiked up to the fitness center. On our way there, we crossed paths with Michelle. I had met Michelle in the fitness center the day before and found out she was also new to Austin. After our workout, Marissa and I agreed that I would invite Michelle to go to the fitness center with us the next morning and then join

us for breakfast at our place. But it was Friday, my day off, and I managed to procrastinate talking to Michelle or doing anything else on my to-do list until four in the afternoon. I piddled around most of the day and sang

And right now
In the good times and bad
You are on Your throne
You are God alone

I eventually got my shopping list together and wrote a note in case Michelle wasn't home when I got to her door. I was standing next to Alexia's desk and about to head out when Dad called.

Now why in the world was Dad calling me? And at four in the afternoon? My family knew I had only a minimum phone plan. They had gotten good at calling me on nights and weekends. Ashley even waited until 9 p.m. for me to call and wish her a happy birthday. So why was Dad, of all people, calling me at four in the afternoon? *He probably forgot about my limited phone plan, I reasoned. Oh, well. This won't take more than two minutes.*

"Hey!" I answered.

"Hey," he echoed, sounding a little preoccupied but intentional. "How's your day going?" He started the script.

"Not too bad. I've been lazy."

"Are you at work?"

"No, uh-uh."

"Are you at home?" He didn't normally ask me about details. It sounded like a stall tactic.

“Yeah. What’s up?” I was pretty curious by now and wanted him to get to the point. Our two minutes were almost up and he still hadn’t told me why he had intentionally called me at four in the afternoon.

Dad took a big breath and let it out. “Ashley was in a car accident.”

I stood there next to Alexia’s desk holding my shopping list and the note for Michelle. This wasn’t going to be good. This was a bad time. I waited for Dad’s next words.

“She didn’t survive.”

At first the news was only a fact, like hearing about a fatal accident on the traffic report, except the fatality’s dad was on the phone with me. I didn’t know what to say. I just kept breathing. I stared out the window into the parking lot where I had last hugged her. Dad waited for me to speak. “Okay,” finally came out. It wasn’t “Okay, we’ll be alright,” or “Okay, I’ll talk to you later.” It was “Okay,” meaning simply, “I heard you. Go on.”

I heard Mom moan something in the background. “Mom wants to know if you’re by yourself.”

That’s why he cared where I was, I realized. “No, Marissa’s here. Tell Mom not to worry. I’ll be alright. I’m glad you’re there with them.” Mom and Dad had flown up to visit Jennifer in New Hampshire the day before. I was glad Jennifer wasn’t by herself. She wouldn’t have handled it well.

Ashley died on her way to work at Dillard’s that morning. Her emergency contact information had my parents’ outdated Houston address and phone number. She was

driving Trevor's truck, though, so the police found him on a job in Florida that afternoon. He found my parents in New Hampshire. Trevor was so hysterical when he called, my parents didn't believe him. It took them an hour to find someone in the Tyler police department to confirm the news. Then they called me.

"Don't you think we should bury her in Pensacola?" Dad asked. His family is buried there.

"Yeah, that's a good idea," I agreed. "She'll be close to you there."

When I got off the phone, I went into Marissa's room and sat on her bed. We were barely more than strangers a few weeks earlier. Now she would be the first person I told. Remembering how I had told her about the lumps only a few days ago, I prepped her. "My life isn't usually this hard," I started as I looked down at my hands. "My dad called." I didn't know how to tell her the next part, so I borrowed Dad's words. "My sister was in a car accident. She didn't survive." Marissa's eyes melted and her shoulders dropped. She hugged me. "I'm okay right now," I told her. "It hasn't hit me yet. It'll hit in a few weeks. That's when I'll need you." I told her I grieve by getting busy, so I was going to pack a bag and get on the road.

As the only Texan left in the family, I was responsible for going to Tyler and finding clothes for Ashley to wear to her funeral. I couldn't even figure out what I was going to wear. When I commuted between Corsicana and Fort Worth, I could pack a bag in eight minutes. This time it took me eight hours. I didn't know how long I'd be gone. I didn't know how many states I'd be visiting or what I'd be doing while I was in them. What could I bring to entertain myself if I got stuck in rural Alabama? I completely filled my giant suitcase, the one that's so big it has shelves inside.

While I packed, Marissa volunteered to fill my gas tank. When she brought my car back and parked it in front of the apartment, it started leaking. Gas bled from behind the back left tire—from the same place the oil had leaked a few months earlier. The gas covered the oil stain on the pavement. I decided not to care. It was the only way I could handle it. I knew the old Maxima would die sooner or later. Why not today?

I pushed myself back upstairs just as John Rose called from Dallas. I had sent out a short e-mail telling my friends what happened. Ruth Ann Rose called immediately. I don't remember why John called back, but I told him about my car. He instantly offered to buy me a plane ticket to Dallas and drive me to Tyler. I let him. Then I had to find a bereavement ticket from Dallas to Pensacola. And then I had to call the family and my parents' friends. That's my job when somebody dies. I call the living and give them the news. I've found it's easier when you're still in shock.

Jennifer flew to Alabama with Mom and Dad. They stayed in a hotel in Manchester that night so they could catch the early morning flight. Jennifer told me later that Mom sang in the hotel room at the top of her lungs:

You are my sunshine
My only sunshine
You make me happy
When skies are gray
You'll never know, dear
How much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away³²

³² "You Are My Sunshine" by Jimmie Davis. Copyright © 1940 by Peer International Corporation. Copyright Renewed. Used by Permission.

It was Ashley's song. Mom had sung it to her since she was a little girl. Ashley loved sunflowers because of that song. I can't imagine how gruesome it sounded that night.

Sometime after midnight I finished packing. Before I crawled into bed, I downloaded "You are God Alone." I plugged in my ear buds and listened to the song God had been singing to me all week.

And right now
In the good times and bad
You are on Your throne
You are God alone

That's when I finally cried. I muffled the sobs so I wouldn't wake up Marissa. I put the song on repeat and sobbed myself to sleep.

CHAPTER 7

HOME

I barely slept that night. The next morning Marissa dropped me off at the Austin airport. The lady who weighed my bag made me remove a few pounds. I had packed my baseball gloves in case Dad and I needed to play catch. I had to carry those on the plane with me.

I sat at the gate holding my Bible, my journal and my baseball gloves. As I waited there, I remembered to call the music school and tell them I wasn't coming in that week and I didn't know when I was coming back. I would call them the next week and give them an update. I called the Roses in Dallas, and then I read my five Psalms for the day. I heard a lady a few seats over sniffing. She kept sniffing. I couldn't look at anyone because I was sniffing too. I wondered if she was crying with me.

Ruth Ann picked me up at the Dallas airport and drove me to Tyler. We stopped at the emergency room and picked up Ashley's personal effects: her purse, her jewelry, her shoes. The staff was kind and sympathetic. They probably recognized me as soon as they saw me. Ashley was merely another version of me—a little bigger, even though I called her my little sister.

Next we went to Ashley's apartment to pick out her funeral clothes. Ruth Ann helped me clean up a bit. I threw away the paper plate and the end of the hotdog bun that sat next to the computer. Ruth Ann washed the dishes that had soured in the sink. I tidied

up the bathroom and put all the clean laundry in a pile so I could look through it for potential funeral clothes. I found the Italia hoodie I bought Ashley in Rome. It was late summer, but she was still wearing it. I had bought an Italia hoodie for Jennifer too, and I always regretted not buying one for myself. Ruth Ann told me to take it. I knew I couldn't fit anything else in my suitcase, though, so I decided to get it when I came back after the funeral. I found some of my old clothes in Ashley's closet. Some I had given her when she fled to Houston, and some I had given her because they looked so much better on her, like the black dress I gave her to wear to the party she hosted for Dillard's best customers. Trevor, who was still in Florida, insisted that we bury Ashley in the new sundress she bought but never wore. In the end, he got his wish, but at the time, I was still struggling to make decisions, so I put three outfits in her carry-on to take to Pensacola.

Our last stop was the salvage yard. We needed to get Ashley's belongings out of Trevor's truck. The guy working there told Ruth Ann I shouldn't see it, but after a few minutes of waiting in the car, I knew I had to. If I didn't, I would always wonder, and I knew Dad would wonder. So I went to see the truck.

I figured it was Ashley's fault. When she drove us to Houston for mom's retirement party, she almost darted out in front of people twice. Fortunately, I was there to stop her. This time I wasn't. She turned left onto a highway, and the oncoming Ford Explorer slammed into her door. By the time I saw the truck, it was missing its door, fender, wheel, and grill. I had a side view of the mangled engine. Car parts sat in the grass. Glass dusted the cab. Her seat crumpled towards the ground, and the steering column tilted upward, crowned with the airbag like a baker's hat. I saw where they broke

open the passenger door to get to her. I found a used oxygen mask in the back. They tried.

Ruth Ann helped me get everything out of the truck and we drove back to Dallas. The next morning the Roses took me to the airport. I sat at the gate and wept through Psalms. No one sat near me. No one sat next to me on the plane either, so I wept some more. I pulled out the plastic bag of Ashley's jewelry the emergency room staff had given me. I picked out her senior ring and fingered it until takeoff. It's amazing she ever graduated from high school. Ashley was born ten weeks early and suffered from slight brain damage. She had hydrocephalus, "water on the brain," and a tinge of cerebral palsy. Most people never noticed—until they watched her try to run, or saw that her right leg was skinny, or noticed her shoes were two different sizes. But because of her disabilities, Ashley never did anything fast. She was the slowest person I knew, incredibly pokey. And she never beat me at anything. *So how did she beat me home?* I asked God as I held her ring on my thumb.

Grief comes in waves, and as I sat on that plane, I drowned in it. The pain was physically suffocating. *How did she beat me home, God? It doesn't make sense. How can she be looking at Jesus while I sit on this plane?* I gasped for breath and went back under. *I guess she can run now, huh? And I bet she's beautiful, isn't she? Will You tell her "hi" for me?* Then I apologized for not being there as she died. *Was she scared? Was she in pain? Did she know she was dying? If only I had been there to tell her when to turn, I wouldn't be sitting on this plane.*

Everyone politely ignored me as I wept. I dropped her ring back in the bag from the emergency room and sealed it. Eventually the wave of grief passed over me and I fell asleep.

My parents and Jennifer met me in Pensacola when I woke up. Dad dragged my giant bag out to the car and we planned the funeral as we drove to my parents' new home in Alabama. I suggested some Passion songs. Matt Redman's "Blessed Be Your Name" made the list. Dad wanted Chris Tomlin's "How Great Is Our God." I also got "It Is Well with My Soul" on the list. Dad wanted that one, too. After an hour and a half of planning, answering lots of tender phone calls, and suffering through miles of painful silence, we pulled into my parents' driveway.

I had never been to this house before. My parents had moved in so recently, boxes still lined the walls. When we got there that night, people from the church were already congregated in the kitchen. They introduced themselves and hugged me as I walked in the back door. Their faces were as new to me as the house. More people came the next day. They were strangers to me, but I could tell they loved my parents. They kept calling and they kept coming. I could see why God had brought Mom and Dad to that little town in Alabama. Their church embraced them.

My aunt's church in Pensacola also embraced our family. Their music minister and their audio/visual director handled everything we needed for the funeral. Dad and I met with them and showed them the outline we had come up with in the car. They made it happen. And a ladies' class provided lunch for our huge family after the funeral.

The day before the funeral, we went to a copy center to get the programs printed. There was a delay, so I slipped into the Christian bookstore next door. The DVD

of the last Passion conference was scheduled to release that day, and I needed another dose of “Our God Reigns.” I needed to know God was in control. God was sovereign when Ashley pulled in front of that Explorer. God was sovereign when the other driver couldn’t dodge her. God was sovereign when the paramedics couldn’t help her. God was sovereign when He created her in only seven months and kept her alive even though He knew she would live only 25 years. He was sovereign when He put her in our family, knowing we’d be hurting today. And He’d be sovereign tomorrow. And this sovereign God loved us. And He was good. And He had a plan and a purpose, and it was good. I needed to know “Our God Reigns.”

There was a problem with the Passion DVDs so the bookstore didn’t have any. I left empty-handed.

From the copy center, we went to the funeral home to see Ashley. It was the first time we’d seen her since. ... They hadn’t seen her since Mom’s retirement party. I hadn’t seen her since she helped me move to Austin. We waited in a room by ourselves. They rolled her in as the four of us huddled together. We spread out into a line alongside her. Dad and Mom stood at her head. Jennifer stood next to Mom, and I, now the youngest, stood at Ashley’s feet. They opened the casket for us. There she was in that sundress she bought and never wore. She was beautiful. We cried in silence for a few minutes. Mom and Dad stepped back and let Jennifer and me move to the front. The two of us had been “the girls” before Ashley came along. Now we were back to the way we started.

Ashley had always looked more like me than Jennifer. Jennifer looked like Mom. Ashley and I looked like Dad. Sometimes I flinched when I saw her because I

thought I was looking at myself. When I looked at old pictures, I often confused us, especially if she had on my old clothes. Now as I looked at her, I couldn't help but see myself lying there in the casket. Like touching my reflection in a mirror, I touched her hand to make sure I was alive. I wondered how close I was to my own funeral. Would my family come back to this room in a couple of years? It was cold.

After our time with Ashley, we left the funeral home and picked up Jennifer Boyd at my aunt's house. Jennifer Boyd and my sister Jennifer had been best friends since we moved to Houston. Ashley was three. From that point on, Jennifer Boyd was one of "the girls." So once we picked her up at my aunt's house, Jennifer had her best friend to mourn with her, and Mom and Dad had each other. But the next morning as we walked back into the funeral home, I walked alone. I don't usually get lonely. Ruth Ann Rose describes me as my own best friend. She's right. But on the day of Ashley's funeral, I longed for a partner to grieve with me. I wished someone were walking beside me and holding me up as I struggled against the gulf winds.

At first I didn't know who I wanted beside me that day. My heart finally settled on Kandace. Kandace was my roommate at Baylor, and she loved me at my worst. It had taken half our senior year to figure out I had chronic fatigue syndrome. As I struggled through it, I tried to stay in school. Kandace cooked my meals and made sure I ate. In the mornings, she woke me up and walked me to class to make sure I went. She even took me to a resort with her parents because she thought I needed to be spoiled. She wouldn't stop fighting for me to get better. And not only has Kandace always been good to me, she also knows how my mind works. I can turn my brain off when she's around. I know she'll make the same decision I would, if not a better one. She knows my heart too. I had

told her some tough things about Ashley over the years. I wouldn't have to tell her anything today. She knew.

But by now Kandace had two young children and was pregnant with her third. She couldn't make it to Pensacola. So she called me and read Psalm 91 on my voicemail. My heart quieted as I listened:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.”³³

She knew.

After a little more time with Ashley in the funeral home, I needed some time to get my thoughts together. I had asked my parents if I could give the eulogy. I was glad they let me because it gave me something to focus on. And I was glad I had spoken at Dana's memorial service a year earlier. His was a rehearsal for this year. I was nervous about what I wanted to say at Dana's service. This time I was a little nervous, but mostly numb.

After a few songs, it was my turn to talk. I started with the last time I saw Ashley—when she helped me move. I talked about how our family moved around a lot, so when people ask where I'm from, I never have a good answer. But to me, home isn't where I'm from; it's where I'm going. And somehow Ashley got there first. I talked about all the surgeries Ashley endured as an infant and how Dad had warned Jennifer and

³³ Psalm 91:1-2

me that she might not live through each one. That's when I almost lost it. I felt the crowd pouring mercy my way, compassion for the sister who thought she could hold it together through a eulogy. I eventually regained my composure and went on. "The doctors told us she would never walk, but she was our walking miracle. And now she's looking at the Miracle Maker. I think she looks like this." I reached straight up in the air. I modeled what I thought Ashley looked like as she stared at Jesus, but I looked just like the picture we showed of Ashley taking her first steps. You could see my dad's hands right above hers. I put my arms down and sat next to Dad. He hugged me. We sang "How Great Is Our God" and the pastor got up to preach. Then we sang "How Great Is Our God" again.

After the service, we got in the black limo and followed Ashley out to her grave. We buried her next to Uncle Derold and our cousin Brandon. Brandon's parents bought the two plots next to him when he died in a motorcycle accident eight years earlier. Uncle Derold died in a traffic accident a few weeks later, so we buried him on the other side of Brandon. Mom and Dad bought the two plots next to Ashley. There are two more empty plots in case Jennifer and I need them.

Before we left the cemetery, I told Jonathan how much I appreciated his coming down for the funeral. We were only weeks away from the first anniversary of Nancy's death, and his presence honored me. We stood in the shade of the funeral home tent and talked about Heaven.



Ashley's first steps

CHAPTER 8

I AM

For a few days after the funeral, Mom, Dad, and Jennifer and I relaxed on the white sands of Navarre Beach near Pensacola. I was glad I had remembered to pack my swimsuit and sunscreen. While we were there, we made plans for tying up loose ends in Tyler. I flew back to Dallas, and the Roses let me use their extra car to drive the last two hours. My parents drove in from Alabama so we could clean out Ashley's apartment. It took us two days to sort everything. We packed a trailer with the things my parents wanted to keep and donated everything else. Ashley's car and the couch I had helped her move went to Trevor. Her clothes and many other things went to the Salvation Army. When my mom packed up the kitchen, she asked if I wanted Ashley's dishes. I was still in my purging mode from moving to Austin, and I wanted as little as possible. I had just gotten rid of my dishes. Marissa had enough dishes for both of us. "No, I don't want them." My mom's face turned red and I could see the tears coming. "Okay, I'll take them." But when Mom asked if I would take Ashley's fine china, I had to let her cry. The everyday dishes, the Italia hoodie, a special T-shirt—that's all I could take. I didn't have room for anything else.

At the end of one of our packing days, Rick called from the music school. He explained how they had improved the computer program, and I told him I'd be back the next week. I also got a call from Michelle. I had forgotten about my plan to invite her

over. I asked if she wanted to work out Saturday morning and then come over for breakfast. She did.

Friday morning I put everything in the Roses' car, hugged my parents and left for Austin. But first I went to the crash site. Dad had given me directions to the site and Mom had given me money to buy a sunflower wreath.

Ever since my family fast, my default prayer for Ashley had been, "Let her make at least one wise decision today." I wondered what her wise decision was the day she died. Pulling out in front of that Ford Explorer wasn't wise. Getting up and going to work that morning was. That had to have been her wise decision for the day. However, as I pressed the sunflower wreath into the ground, I realized she had made a second wise decision. Ashley died right in front of the Fatherheart Maternity Home for young girls. What a great place to die—right in front of a place that's all about giving life. If I could pick my place to die, I'd want to die there, too.

I had expected my visit to the crash site to be mournful, but it ended up bringing me joy. After I walked around a little, I rang the doorbell at the maternity home. A young girl working there as a missionary answered the door. She gave me a tour of the house, introduced me to all the girls, and fed me lunch. Joy overwhelmed me and I couldn't stop smiling. God was near. He had His arms around that place. A month after Ashley died, I finally broke my habit of praying for her by praying for the girls at the maternity home instead. I prayed they would make at least one wise decision every day. I'm so glad Ashley died there.

After touring the maternity home, I continued on to Austin. I got home Friday evening and unpacked my giant suitcase, the dishes and Ashley's other stuff. Saturday

morning Marissa and I met Michelle on our way to the fitness center. After a little workout, the three of us enjoyed some omelets and got to know each other.

Sometime during the day, my friend Lacy called. Lacy was a graduate student at UT and a friend from Go Now Missions. She invited me to go to church with her on Sunday night. I had been to her church before I moved to Austin, and I really liked it. I visited several other churches once I moved there, but Lacy's was easily my favorite. I invited Michelle to go with us.

I didn't realize at the time what a pivotal Sunday that was for me. I didn't have the emotional and social strength to visit a church full of strangers by myself that day. I could have easily stayed home. But that would have made visiting a church the next Sunday twice as hard, so I might not have. And that would have made the next Sunday even harder. It could have been a long time before I found a church in Austin. Fortunately, Lacy intervened. Or God did.

The parking lot at Austin High School, where the church met, was crowded. Once we made it inside the building, Lacy knew lots of people, so we stopped and talked several times. When we finally entered the gym, the music had already started. They were singing Chris Tomlin's "Holy Is the Lord." Chris Tomlin himself was on the stage leading them. He had helped start this church a few years earlier, and every once in a while, he came home to lead the worshipers there. He was home this Sunday.

We found some space in the bleachers on the far side of the gym. I stood there while everyone else sang. It was the first time I had worshiped with the saints since Ashley's funeral, and I wasn't ready.

The music took me back to the Passion conference in Fort Worth. As always, that last night of the conference was powerful. It was the first time I remember tasting heaven. God made His manifest presence obvious, almost tangible. I couldn't breathe, much less sing. I couldn't stand, but I couldn't put my hands down. Ashley was right there next to me.

And on this night in the gym of Austin High School, I could feel God's presence again. When we finished "Holy Is the Lord" and started "He Is Exalted," I tried to sing. Mostly, I just stood there with my hands in the air, looking like Ashley taking her first steps. When we got to "We Exalt Thee," all that came out were tears. I knew at that very moment, Ashley and I were exalting our King together, like we had done that night in Fort Worth. But this time she wasn't standing next to me. She was standing next to The Exalted One. Right there with all the saints who had gone before her, with the angels themselves, singing, "We exalt Thee, O Lord." Heaven never felt so real. Ashley was there. Really there. And I was almost there. It felt like home.

Ashley got to stay, but I had to leave when the church service was over. As much as I wanted to be in heaven, I was grateful to be in Austin. I settled into Alexia's room again and faced the problems I'd left behind when Ashley died. Monday morning I got online and found a mechanic for my car and a doctor for me. Dr. Chalasani worked in the hospital only a few blocks away. A client's review described her as compassionate. That's what I needed, so I called her office. She had just canceled a surgery. I was in.

Three days later I met Dr. Chalasani. She was indeed compassionate, but also hospitable and near my age. Talking to her was like talking to a friend. She ordered an ultrasound for my lump on the right. The lump on the left disappeared that day—after

bothering me for more than a year. It was there after my workout that morning, but not when I met Dr. Chalasani. Gone.

I made my appointment for the ultrasound and relaxed until I drove the Roses' extra car to the music school that evening. I never said anything about my health to Margaret or anyone else. I entered data, and entered, and entered and prayed as I entered some more. I tried to remain positive, but I couldn't stand it anymore. On my way home, God and I had a heart-to-heart. *I don't get it, God. I thought You wanted me to move to Austin, but everything's gone wrong since I got here. I got an awful job. Ashley died. My car died. And now I've probably got cancer.* He was silent. *Did I misunderstand? Did I make a mistake in coming here?* As I turned the corner, I gave Him another option. *Or is this the opposition that comes when we're doing something right? You know, when Satan realizes we're working against him and he starts to fight back? Is that what this is? Satan getting scared?* He still didn't answer. So then I addressed the real issue. *Why did You take her instead of me? Especially if I have cancer. Why didn't You take me home?*

I was transitioning through the stages of grief. I had passed through denial and was vacillating between anger and bargaining. God understood, and He knew exactly what I needed. He finally spoke. "Melody," He assured me, "I have incredible plans for you."

He handed me hope. He took Ashley home instead of me because He still had incredible plans for me here. He wasn't finished using me. He had barely started. My question about moving to Austin was irrelevant. It didn't matter where I was. God had incredible plans for me. I couldn't mess those up. And yes, Satan was scared. God had incredible plans for me, and that was not good news for Satan.

So Satan tried to steal my hope. After bargaining comes depression, and I wasn't quite finished with anger. Sometimes this present world looks bigger than God, and one morning it looked so much bigger, I couldn't get out of bed. I had told Marissa everything would hit in a few weeks, and it did. The stress of losing Ashley, leaving my job in Corsicana, and starting over in a new city overwhelmed me. I was running out of money. I had put the old Maxima in the shop, and I knew it would cost hundreds to get it out. And I hated my job, my job that paid almost nothing. In a month, I wouldn't even make enough to pay the mechanic.³⁴ And I likely had all kinds of medical expenses on the horizon. How would I eat? I blamed God for getting me into this crisis. *You told me to jump out of the plane, God. I did. Now You're holding me by my shoestrings. You'd better be God!*

I felt like I couldn't trust Him anymore. Like He had dropped me and let me plummet. I wanted an emergency chute, a way out. A way out from the money stress, the job stress, the car stress, the living-in-a-new-place stress, the living-with-death stress and the possibility-of-living-with-cancer stress. Fear. I wanted to get away from the fear. And the pain. I wanted to escape. I tried to think of where I could escape to. An island getaway? A mountain refuge? A tent by the river? Where could I find a sanctuary?

But every time I dreamed up a place to escape, I decided I'd rather stay in Austin. Nothing sounded better than Austin. Nothing compared. Eventually my heart quit crying, "I want to escape," and returned to the prayer I had prayed for the last two years,

³⁴ Ironically, the mechanic's bill was nearly the same amount the insurance company had paid me for the rear-end collision damage a few months earlier.

“I want to be in Austin.” Other than heaven, that’s the only place I wanted to be. And I was.

Once I realized I was right where I wanted to be, I calmed down. My mind relaxed. I thanked God for bringing me to Austin, and I begged Him to show Himself faithful and fulfill His purpose for bringing me there, whatever it was.

About that time, the phone rang. I was so ashamed of still being in bed that I almost didn’t answer it. Good thing I did. It was the North American Mission Board (NAMB). Kandace’s husband Phillip worked for NAMB. When I visited them over Christmas, he showed me the new website he was building: www.peoplegroups.info. The site was online now, and he needed someone to help maintain it and find resources for working with each people group.

“Phillip says you’re exactly who he needs for this,” the Human Resources guy explained, “and I need to know if you’re interested.”

“I am interested,” I replied, hoping to disguise the fact that he had made my day. Phillip got me a job! A job that aligned with my dream of watching the nations worship God. And a job I could do in my pajamas when I wasn’t writing my thesis. Perfect.

You are God, aren’t You? I admitted as I hung up the phone.

God wasn’t finished. I opened my e-mail and found another job offer. Alexia was teaching English in the Dominican Republic with an organization called Makarios. Makarios had recently become a mission partner with The Austin Stone, Lacy’s church. They put a notice in the bulletin that Makarios was opening a coffee shop to support their ministry in the Dominican Republic, and they needed workers. Dominican Joe’s mission

lined up with my dream to watch the nations worship God, and the shop was located on South Congress Avenue—where God had first revealed His heart for Austin more than two years earlier. Dominican Joe e-mailed me a job offer even after I admitted I didn't like coffee. I accepted.

As I drove to the music school that afternoon, Matt Redman's song "You Never Let Go" came on the radio. *I get it, God. I get it. Thanks for making me jump out of the plane.*

I spent the next several weeks making adjustments. I gave Rick and Margaret my one-week notice. They were disappointed, but they understood, especially because I didn't have any students. I baked them a bunch of cookies on my last day and tried to leave on a good note. I started working for Phillip, but I had a hard time disciplining myself to do the research part of the job. Grief was still pulling me down, and I had a hard time disciplining myself to do much of anything.

Dominican Joe, or "the DoJo," brought in all its employees for training. The shop sat directly across the street from the office of The Austin Stone, and almost all of my fellow employees attended "The Stone." I spent a few days in training, but as a non-coffee drinker, I straggled behind on the learning curve. I was in over my head again. Most of the other employees had worked at coffee shops before and knew everything already. I didn't know the lingo, much less how to grind the beans. I was the worst barista I have ever met. I preferred to stand in the back room and wash dishes. Or sweep. The management was patient with me, though. They laughed when I e-mailed them a picture of the Styrofoam cups I had labeled with diagrams of how to make each drink. And they

were flexible when I told them I needed to take off a few days right after we opened because I needed some medical tests.

When I went in for my ultrasound, I had myself convinced the lump was a cyst, but the longer I sat in the waiting room, the bigger my fears grew. I recognized that sense of doom again. This was a bad time. They finally called me back. As the tech looked at my lump on her screen, she asked, “How long have you had this?”

“A year,” I admitted, embarrassed that I had waited so long to get it tested.

“Better late than never,” she tried to comfort me. “Have you noticed it growing any?”

“Uh, yeah, in the last few months it’s gotten bigger.” And then I explained the confusion with my exercise routine and the missing lump on the left.

She kept taking more and more pictures. I knew things weren’t good. She wouldn’t be asking me all these questions if they were. She finally stopped taking pictures and showed them to the radiologist in another room. She came back and told me I needed a mammogram. After the mammogram, the radiologist came to talk to me. He was kind and compassionate, and that scared me more. He explained some things I barely heard and told me I needed a biopsy. I met with the biopsy scheduler on my way out. She told me what to expect and how to prepare for it and asked if I had any questions before I left. “Yeah,” I answered as I sat there. “How do I tell my mom?”

The scheduler sank into her desk. She gave me that tender, maternal look and assured me, “Most of these turn out negative. And you’re young. The odds are in your favor.” I held back the tears, nodded, and found my way back home.

I had a week before the biopsy. I worked on the people groups site for Phillip and trained at Dominican Joe. That Sunday I went back to The Stone and sat in the back of the gym again. Right before Matt Carter, the lead pastor, walked on stage, we sang a song based on Isaiah 40 about how our everlasting God strengthens, delivers, defends and comforts us.³⁵ When we finished singing, Matt mentioned that Krista, a lady on the front row, was awaiting results of a biopsy, and a song like that takes on a whole new meaning when you're waiting to find out if you have cancer.

Someone had recently told me that Matt himself had survived cancer a year earlier. He knew what he was talking about. His comment made me wonder who this Krista was. I considered finding him after the service to see if he could introduce me to her. I needed a friend. But I had no idea what to say to either of them, so I changed my mind and went home without talking to anyone.

The next day I was washing dishes at the DoJo when someone poked his head in the back room and told me they needed help up front. *Crud*, I thought as I dried my hands. As I approached the counter, I noticed the espresso machine was already covered. They needed me on the cash register. *I can do this. I can figure this out*, I told myself. But when I looked up at the customer, I got shaky. It was Matt. And he wanted an orange juice.

³⁵ “The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:28-31).

Orange juice? Who comes to a coffee shop and orders orange juice—in the middle of the afternoon? He must not like coffee either, I decided. “No one’s ordered that yet,” I remarked as I grabbed the cheat sheet for how to work the register. We had a discussion about sizes while I figured out which buttons to push. The whole time, I was arguing with myself. *I should tell him. No, this man has no idea who I am, and I’ll be really embarrassed if I break down in the middle of my story. I can’t tell him. No way. But I should tell him. No, I can’t.* I shoved the drawer back into the register as Matt put a large tip in the jar. I gave his order to one of the guys who squeezed his orange juice, and I walked back to the dishes. Matt sat down and talked with some guys from The Stone. I argued with myself until he finally left, but when my shift ended, I started arguing again. *I’m right across the street from the church office. I should go over. No, he doesn’t know me, and he’s a guy. I’ll weird him out if I start crying. I should leave him alone. He’s probably not available anyway.* I reasoned back and forth for a long time until I came up with a solution. *I can write a note. That won’t weird him out.* I couldn’t find any paper, so I scribbled on a paper towel (as if that weren’t weird). I kept it short and sweet. I introduced myself as the girl who took his orange juice order and thanked him for the big tip. I told him I was new in town and had been visiting his church. I explained that my biopsy was the next day and asked if he could connect me with Krista. I signed my name and number and didn’t cry. When I walked into the church office, I recognized the girl behind the desk as another customer. She welcomed me and we chatted a bit. I delivered my paper towel note and headed out to beat the traffic.

The Stone doesn’t have traditional Sunday School classes. It has small groups that meet all over the city during the week. Tuesday night I visited the small group that

met near my apartment. It met at the Schoolers' house, but Marcus and Jocelin Hsia ("Shah") were the leaders. I had met the Hsias a few weeks earlier and really liked them. I also liked the Schoolers and everyone else when I met them. I was relieved to know I wasn't the only new person in the group. About 25 people showed up that night, and half of us were new. We laughed a lot, and we had a pretty good discussion about 1 Timothy. Afterwards we broke into small prayer groups. I met with Jocelin and Rebecca. I let them discuss their prayer requests first. Rebecca and her husband had moved to Austin at the same time I did, and they needed prayer for their housing situation and all their adjustments. Jocelin had some personal prayer requests. Then it was my turn. I tried to unload everything as gently as possible. I told them about moving to Austin, losing Ashley, and facing the biopsy. They took it well. They empathized with me, but I didn't feel I had overly burdened them, which was my fear. We prayed together, and Jocelin introduced Rebecca and me to more people before we left.

Jocelin called me later that night. We had a great discussion and I could tell we were going to be friends. She asked if she could e-mail my prayer requests to the entire group. I agreed. By the next morning, not only had Jocelin sent out an e-mail, but Christy Schooler and several others had responded with messages of encouragement. Christy even volunteered to bring me dinner. *These people are amazing, I thought. This is exactly what I needed, God. Thank You.*

After I responded to all the e-mails that morning, Marissa dropped me off at the radiology center. Michelle picked me up after the biopsy. She brought me home and helped me eat lunch without my right hand. Michelle came back the next afternoon to

practice her presentation for a job interview. She was pitching her spiel when my phone rang. I walked back to Alexia's desk to answer it.

"May I speak with Melody, please," the lady on the line said.

"This is she," I answered.

"Melody, this is Dr. Chalasani."

I knew it was her. I'd been waiting for her call all day. It was three o'clock. She had to call soon. We went through the usual how-are-you's, but she didn't waste any time. She knew I knew why she was calling.

"We got the pathology report from your biopsy," she started. And as if she had to get it out before she changed her mind, "It's cancerous," she told me.

I had been pacing, but now I had to sit down. Here I was again at Alexia's desk getting bad news. Six weeks ago, I stood in shock through the whole conversation with my dad. By now weariness had overtaken me. I had to sit. "Okay," I responded again.

"It's invasive ductile carcinoma," Dr. Chalasani continued. I recognized all the words in her sentence but had never heard them strung together like that. "Invasive" and "carcinoma" didn't sound good. She explained that I needed a surgeon and asked if I had a preference. I reminded her that I was new in Austin and totally dependent on her for referrals. I thanked God for letting me find her. She was compassionate, and I needed other doctors like her. We talked about a couple of her favorite local surgeons. She said she'd make me an appointment with one for tomorrow and call me back.

I could tell she was nervous. I tried to hold myself together to make it easier on her, but my voice finally trembled.

"That'll be good," I quivered.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, I’ll be okay,” I said with a stronger voice.

“I hate doing this.” She finally let it out. She was young, and I wondered if I was one of her first cancer patients.

“I know this is hard for you too. Thank you for calling me personally.”

“And I hate doing this over the phone!” I could almost hear her hands go up in frustration.

“No, I’m glad you did. It’s easier for me this way. Besides, I was kind of expecting it.”

“Really? How did you know?” She sounded like I had informed her I knew about my surprise party ahead of time, like everyone else had known I had cancer all along but didn’t tell me. I still wonder if they all suspected it was cancer when they saw the ultrasound pictures but waited for solid evidence before they said anything.

“Sometimes God warns me about these things,” I answered. I thought about all the conversations I’d had with God about this throughout the last year. And I thought about how He’d miraculously given me cancer insurance. *God doesn’t work miracles on accident*, I determined. *He’s up to something*. I knew. But I didn’t know. I didn’t believe Him.

I thanked Dr. Chalasani one more time before I hung up the phone. I sat there in silence. My heart broke. My dreams shattered around me. *Are these the incredible plans You have for me, God?* What was He thinking? Had He let go? But even as I doubted His grip on me, all I could do was grip God. I had nothing else to hold onto.

And God, who is so near to the brokenhearted, immediately calmed me, “Melody, cancer is not God. I AM.” My Father comforted me by reminding me who He was. And like King Hezekiah when Sennacherib’s army stood outside his city, I had to pray.

And right now
In the good times and bad
You are on Your Throne
You are God alone

Humility and hope met me again. God gave me His eternal perspective. Whatever happened, cancer was not in charge. The loving, all-powerful God was.

I didn’t have long to think about everything because Michelle was still sitting in the living room waiting to rehearse her presentation. I walked back in and sat on the couch. I had borrowed my dad’s words when Ashley died. This time I would borrow Dr. Chalasani’s. “It’s cancer,” I told Michelle, but my voice cracked and she didn’t understand me. It took her a minute to figure out what I said.

She packed up her computer. “This doesn’t seem so important anymore.” I nodded, and she let herself out.

I knew I had to talk to Mom before everything sank in. The longer I waited, the harder it would be to tell her. I went back to Alexia’s desk and dialed.

“Mom, the doctor called.”

“Yeah?” She tried to act upbeat. “What did she say?”

“She got the pathology report. It’s cancer.”

Mom didn't react like I did when I got the news. "Well, that's okay. We can beat this," she started cheering. "We can beat this."

"Yeah," I whispered.

Mom went on talking about how we were going to beat this. "People beat cancer every day. We will too." She had worked on the cancer floor at The Texas Children's Hospital in Houston for a couple of years, so between the two of us, she was the cancer expert. "Melody, I know we can beat this, but they say you have to have a positive attitude. That's the only way we can beat this. And we're going to beat this."

I could hear her convincing herself she wasn't going to lose her child—not again. She had every right to be terrified, and she came out fighting. All my life she'd been ready to fight for me. She wasn't going to back down now. She was going to fight harder. I didn't expect any less from her. So I played along.

"Yeah."

All great moms cheer their children to victory, and mine was in my corner. But I wasn't even in the ring. I wasn't ready to beat cancer. I wasn't ready to fight at all. My heart was in a different place.

For the past three years, I had prayed, "Here am I, all of me/Take my life, it's all for Thee." I had learned how to die, and I'd figured out that life is much easier when you're dead. I wasn't about to start fighting for my life now. I wasn't going to beat anything. And I didn't need to beat cancer. Cancer wasn't in charge. God was in charge, and there was no way I could beat Him. Knowing the sovereign God loved me gave me the courage to surrender to Him. I could trust Him. I wasn't ready to fight. I was ready to submit to the Almighty God, the Great I AM. My broken heart was crying out, *Yes, Lord.*

CHAPTER 9

UNFAILING LOVE

That night I sent an e-mail to a few dozen friends. I hadn't prepped anyone, so I tried to break the news gently. But how do you do that? I didn't have much information for them except that I had an appointment with a surgeon the next day. I didn't know much else. I thanked them for praying and assured them I had hope.³⁶

I had to work at the DoJo the next day. I called Annie, the general manager, and told her I wanted to keep my shift. I didn't want to sit at home and think about cancer all day. Before I left that morning, my cousin Michal, who was diagnosed with breast cancer a year earlier, called to encourage me. She explained a handful of medical terms so I wouldn't get confused when I heard them at the surgeon's office that afternoon. She wrote down my new address so she could send me a book that had helped her. And she shared the wise counsel her doctor had given her: This does not define your life; this is an event in your life. I needed that perspective as I started another hard day.

When I got to the parking lot to leave for work, my car wouldn't start. Nothing. Just clicks. *How does this car pick the worst days?* My spirit drained with the battery. I almost walked back inside and crawled under the covers, resigned not to start this day either. The old Maxima and I would take the day off. But I was determined not to let my circumstances rule my attitude. Marissa had already left for an appointment, so I

³⁶ "But as for me, I will always have hope" (Psalm 71:14).

brainstormed who could drive me to work. *Can Michelle take me? No, she has her job interview today. Who else do I know around here?* I surveyed the parking lot to see if I recognized any of my neighbor's cars. I did recognize one—the Roses' car. I hadn't had a chance to drive their car back to Dallas yet. It was still parked up the hill. I couldn't believe I had an extra car. How could it be that easy? God had provided. So I switched cars and drove to work.

I walked into the DoJo fifteen minutes late and found I was working with two of the most experienced baristas plus Ryan, the manager on duty. I could probably get out of making any drinks that day and maybe even avoid the register. I relaxed a little. Early on, I noticed Ryan was in the back by himself, so I took the opportunity to apologize for coming in late.

“Hey, Ryan, I'm sorry I was late this morning.” He looked like he was about to brush it off as nothing, but I was nervous, so I kept talking, “My car wouldn't start.”

“Your car wouldn't start?” He wasn't expecting that excuse.

This time I brushed it off, “It wouldn't turn over so I think it's just the battery it's not a big deal and I just got it out of the shop and I still had my friend's extra car to drive. ...” I realized my nerves were talking and I cut myself off, “Everything worked out.”

Once I finished my story, Ryan took the opportunity to tell me he knew. “Annie told me about your test results. I'm really sorry.” I almost broke down right there by the sink. I felt my face turn red. I squeezed back the tears and nodded. “She said you wanted to come in today so you wouldn't have to think about it.” I nodded again. “Is it okay if I tell the guys in the office so we can pray for you?” Ryan was also an intern at The Stone.

I wanted them to pray for me, so I nodded again. “Is it okay if I ask you about it from time to time to see how you’re doing?”

I finally spoke, “Yeah, as long as it’s not in front of the customers.”

“Is there anything you need?” Ryan had acclimated into The Stone’s culture well. They’re always ready to meet needs. As soon as they hear of a crisis, they offer help.

I answered him by admitting my lack of confidence in my DoJo skills and confessed I needed him to watch out for me. “I have a lot of brain fog. I don’t want to do anything that’ll keep someone from coming back.” He acted like he hadn’t noticed how clueless I was.

I couldn’t talk anymore. Reality was overwhelming me. For the first time, I wanted out of the back room. I walked up to the front and didn’t say anything else about cancer the rest of my shift. I swept.

I got off work in time to meet my surgeon. Jocelin Hsia and another girl from the small group met me there. Jocelin didn’t have brain fog, and she’s a pharmacist, so she took notes for me. Dr. McFarland explained my options as Jocelin jotted everything down. The first option was a lumpectomy, a smaller surgery which would simply remove the lump and the surrounding tissue. If the outer margin of the tissue was cancer-free, then the lumpectomy would be considered successful. If the margins were not clear, a second surgery, called a re-excision, involved removing more tissue and checking the new margins around the cancerous area. If the new margins were not clear, the last resort was a mastectomy. Some people choose to start with a mastectomy because it greatly

reduces the chance of the cancer returning. When cancer comes back, it's called a recurrence. And no one wants that.

Dr. McFarland said many women have a hard time deciding which surgery they'll have, so they need time. But I knew instantly. The lumpectomy was the only option that made sense. Yes, having a lumpectomy meant I would also need radiation, but the mastectomy felt like overkill. It didn't even seem like a decision to me. Lumpectomy plus radiation was the way to go. I left Dr. McFarland's office confident in my choice. I called my mom to tell her the plan, and Jocelin e-mailed her the notes. It was Friday afternoon. The surgery was scheduled for Tuesday.

Saturday I got a voicemail from Matt. *Oh, my gosh!* I thought. *I can't believe the pastor from the coolest church in town called me personally. I expected Krista to call me, not Matt himself. I'd better call him back.*

Matt and I had a somewhat strained conversation. He called to be pastoral, but it backfired on him. He asked about the results of the biopsy. My answer had a sting to it as it came out. He assured me the diagnosis would get easier to swallow over time. That was good news, but it didn't mean much to me until later. He asked how my heart was doing. I told him I was hopeful. I asked about Krista. Her biopsy had also come back positive. I asked how old she was, still wondering if we could be friends. She was only a few years older than I was.

Then Matt brought up the other "C" word. "The doctors told her she'll probably need chemo because she's so young," he explained. He was talking about Krista, but I heard it as a personal warning.

Chemo? I'll have to have chemo? Because I'm young? I wasn't ready to hear that news. I had held chemo at a distance hoping I wouldn't have to embrace it. I got quiet. Matt could tell the conversation was over. He asked me to put him on my e-mail list so he and his wife could pray for me as things developed. I agreed and we hung up.

Not all young cancer patients need chemotherapy. My cousin Michal didn't. Matt didn't. But for some reason, Matt's words about Krista and young people echoed in my heart, and they didn't sound good.

God and I had a long talk about my fears Tuesday morning before my surgery. We sat out on my balcony overlooking that beautiful, wooded ravine. Again and again God told me I could trust Him because He was sovereign and He loved me. You'd think after all those times He told me He loved me over the last few months, I would have believed Him. I was still asking Him how I would eat, and He was still answering that He loved me. I had no idea. Sometimes I think that's why I had cancer—so I'd know He loves me. I figured out a long time ago that God is working out every detail for His glory. But for years I didn't understand that God is also working out every detail to show me He loves me. He's always showing me He loves me, but I don't believe Him until I have to. Now I had to.

I'm sure there were lots of other reasons I had cancer. I've never really asked God why. When Ashley died, I learned that *why?* was the wrong question. Every time I asked *why*, He answered *who*.

Why did You take her Home, God?

“I am gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.”³⁷

Why didn't we get to say good-bye?

“I am gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.”

Why did You bring me to Austin to suffer?

“I am gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.”

No matter what followed *why?* He reminded me He was “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.” While I couldn't understand what He was doing, I could trust who He was. He was abounding in love. He is love, and I could trust in His love for me, His perfect love that casts out fear.³⁸

So out on the balcony that morning, I didn't ask why. I submitted once again to the Creator of the universe. *Here am I, God. I'm ready. Let's go. One, two, arch.*

I came home from surgery on Tuesday and moped around for a few days until Dr. McFarland called me on Friday. Good news. My lymph nodes were clear. If the cancer had spread to any other organs, it would have shown up in my lymph nodes. So clear lymph nodes meant it hadn't spread. That was extremely good news. But he also had bad news. My margins weren't clear. He didn't get it all. Cancer was still sitting around the tumor site. I had to go back for a re-excision.

Before I went back for a re-excision, though, I had to meet my oncologists. I met my radiation oncologist first. He ordered an MRI to make sure there wasn't any cancer on

³⁷ Exodus 34:6; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2

³⁸ 1 John 4:16-18

the left side. Soon I was lying perfectly still in an MRI tube with my arms painfully raised over my head. The lumpectomy and lymph node biopsy had left my right arm so sore that I could barely lift it. The next time I saw my surgeon, he explained that I needed to stretch my arm over my head every hour if I ever wanted to straighten it again. Then he read the results from the MRI. They found a suspicious spot on the left side.

At first I thought, *Oh, great, another lumpectomy*, but then I realized having cancer on both sides was a much more dangerous situation. Another lumpectomy wouldn't solve the problem. This was cancer. It could be all over me.

Dr. McFarland postponed my re-excision and let me sit in the exam room while the nurse scheduled another biopsy for me. I noticed a pattern as I sat there. Every other Friday I got bad news. On the first Bad News Friday, I found out I still had cancer even after the lumpectomy. On this Bad News Friday, I found out I might have cancer on the left side too. We'd even lost Ashley on a Friday. How many more Fridays could I take? I sat there scared.

God was with me, though, and He again brought me humility and hope as He reminded me, "Cancer is not God. I AM."

I raised my left hand over my head and sang:

And right now
In the good times and bad
You are on Your throne
You are God alone

I spent the weekend praying and fasting, and I felt like God was preparing me for a double mastectomy. But the biopsy came back benign. We were back on track for the re-excision on the right.

A few days after the re-excision, Dr. McFarland called. I paced as he explained my latest pathology report. He still didn't get clear margins. And the news got worse. The cancer they found this time wasn't coming from the tumor. I had a whole field of cancer sprouting in me. It was growing like mold spores. There was only one way to get it all out. I needed a mastectomy.

I halfway expected that. It was Friday.

At this point, my choices were whether to have a single or a double mastectomy and whether to have immediate or delayed reconstruction. I told Dr. McFarland I'd decide by Monday.

I thought about how confident I'd been in my first decision to have a lumpectomy. Was it the wrong decision? No, it was the decision I could live with. If I had started with a mastectomy and found only a small tumor, I would have always wondered if I could have lived with only a lumpectomy. I would have regretted being so aggressive. Now I had more information. I had an aggressive cancer that wasn't confined to a tumor. And I had another decision to make—single or double. Once again, I didn't have to make the right decision, just the one I could live with. I thought about the MRI scare on the left side, the original lump that vanished, and the weekend of praying and fasting. I decided to have a double mastectomy. I could live with that.

As I thought through everything, even on Bad News Friday I found some good news. First, if I had a mastectomy, I wouldn't need radiation. Radiation requires six

weeks of daily treatments, and it burns. I was glad to miss out on it. Second, after my MRI scare, I had written an article about worshiping God with cancer.

RadiantMagazine.com posted it on this Friday.³⁹ God was using my cancer as a platform for me to write for His glory.

Even my e-mail updates gave me opportunities to write for God’s glory. I sent my first update to fewer than 50 people. Soon I was sending updates to more than 150 people. And those 150 people forwarded them to people who forwarded them to people who forwarded them to people. People all over the world were reading my e-mail updates. Back in Corsicana, I had asked God to make me like the Apostle Paul who wrote letters to the churches. I never dreamed God would bring me to Austin to start an e-mail ministry to the Church around the world. I was writing for His glory.⁴⁰

And people prayed for me around the world. Many of my friends and even strangers sent me e-mails telling me how they prayed for me. People I’ve never met wrote about how their children prayed for me at bedtime every night. One time Kandace’s son interrupted their blessing at supper to add my name. A friend told me how God made her turn off her TV and pray for me. I tried to explain how that made me feel. I tried words like “loved,” “cared for,” and “special,” but nothing described it. One of my BSM students from Corsicana finally gave me the right word. “Doesn’t it make you feel precious?” she asked. I couldn’t believe God loved me so much that He recruited an

³⁹ *Radiant Magazine* is no longer online, but you can find the article at <http://moregreat.com/bonus-materials/>.

⁴⁰ You can read these e-mail updates at <http://moregreat.com/updates/>.

entire army of people to pray for me. Yes, He made me feel precious. And even on Bad News Friday, He filled me with humility and hope.

I called Dr. McFarland on Monday. We scheduled a double mastectomy. Both he and my oncologist agreed that was the best thing for me to do.

I had met my chemical oncologist between the first two surgeries. Most people don't know what an oncologist is, and Marissa is terrible with names, so I named this doctor Chemo Man. He informed me that, yes, I did need chemo. Lots of chemo. He scribbled on the paper rolled across the exam table as he explained my particular cancer cells. I had an abundance of the HER2/NEU protein. Everyone has this protein. It makes our cells divide. But my tumor had more of it than most breast cancer tumors have—more than 75 percent of them. This was an aggressive cancer. As you would expect, people with this much of the protein that causes cells to divide had a low cure rate—until someone developed Herceptin. Herceptin attaches to this protein and kills the cancer. It works so well that it raises cure rates to 20 percent higher than the rates of patients with normal levels of HER2/NEU cells. The curse had turned into a blessing.⁴¹ But I would have to take Herceptin for a whole year after the regular chemo.

I went home from the oncology center facing fifteen months of chemo, including three months of Adriamycin, the Red Devil. They call it the Red Devil because it's red and it kills everything it touches. You can see it moving through your veins. And if the nurse doesn't get the needle straight into your vein, you can lose your arm.

⁴¹ “Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing” (Nehemiah 13:2).

These days, most chemo patients don't get injections in their arms, though. They get them through a port-a-catheter, or "port." A port is a permanent catheter that drops the drugs right into your heart. When Dr. McFarland went back in for my re-excision, he placed a port about two inches below my left collar bone. It was a silver-dollar-sized half sphere made of rubber and plastic, and you could see it protruding under my skin. It grossed me out. I called it my port-a-bump. I looked like I had an on/off button.

I had two weeks to get used to the port-a-bump before I went in for the mastectomy. Once again, I had surgery on a Tuesday, and it wasn't long before Friday arrived. Instead of recovering after this surgery, I felt worse and worse. My head hurt, and my left hand, arm and neck swelled. I looked like Olive Oyl on my right side and Popeye on my left. As soon as Dr. McFarland saw me, he knew what was wrong. I had developed a blood clot where my port connected to my jugular vein. He removed my port right there in his office and scheduled me for yet another surgery to replace it. A month later, he put my new on/off button on the right.

The port replacement brought the end of my surgery season. I'd had four surgeries in two months. I was tired. But my small group from The Stone never grew weary. Through this whole time, they fed me every three days. They wanted to feed me more often, but I couldn't eat that fast. I didn't have enough room in my refrigerator for all the leftovers as it was. Now I laughed at my fear of not having anything to eat when I moved to Austin.

From the beginning, Marcus Hsia had asked how the church could help financially. Could they buy my groceries? Could they pay my rent? After a few months, I realized the biggest financial expense was flying my parents back and forth from

Alabama. So my small group set up a gift account with my parents' favorite airline. They donated plenty of money. And when The Stone's staff found out about the account, they emptied their benevolence fund into it. My parents didn't pay for a flight to Austin for a year.

My small group was the Joseph I had asked for before I left Corsicana. God sent them to Austin ahead of me to provide for me in my time of famine. Besides feeding me, flying my parents back and forth, and buying me some new clothes, they also cleaned my apartment when my arms didn't work. They even organized a Race for the Cure team in my honor. They showed me the love of God again and again.

Others joined them. A former Latin student brought meals and washed my hair for me when I couldn't raise my hands over my head. A friend from The Stone came over and fixed my hair before she took me to church. She came back when I was on chemo and fixed my wig. Another friend, whose dad died of brain cancer right before she and I started working at the DoJo, dusted and vacuumed for me and shared stories of what she had learned from cancer. Ryan organized a Dominican Joe Race for the Cure team. Lacy, my friend from Go Now, drove me to church. People from my parents' church sent me money and cards. Strangers sent me money. My mom's friend read my *Radiant Magazine* article to her Sunday School class, and someone responded by handing her cash to send me. And after that surprise, I got a plain, white envelope in the mail with no return address. It was full of cash. I couldn't believe God loved me that much.

God also sent me other money during this time. It came from Ashley's life insurance. It was a humbling gift that still baffles me. For years no one would insure Ashley because of her medical history. But 11 months before she died, my parents got a

policy on her. They gave me a large portion of that money. I lived off of it for six months.
Even in death, God provided for me. His is the strangest love.

CHAPTER 10

UNFOLDING GRACE

Before Dr. McFarland could replace my port, I started chemo. Without a port, I had to take my first dose of the Red Devil in my arm. I was terrified. Like an Israelite who couldn't remember to trust the God who gave her manna every morning, I often forgot He loved me and was working miracles on my behalf. Every day I had to choose to trust Him again. And these days the Red Devil looked bigger than the Red Sea.

Not long before I started chemo, I found enough courage to go to the grocery store. Exhausted from my latest surgery, I leaned on my grocery cart as I waited in a checkout line that was so long it curved to let shoppers pass by. I spotted a pink magazine in the rack up ahead. I left my basket and walked to the front of the line, squeezed between the customers who'd been waiting much longer than I had, and picked up the magazine. It was the premier issue of a magazine for breast cancer survivors, and Laura Miller was on the front cover. Laura Miller was the mayor of Dallas when I lived there, but I had no idea she was a cancer survivor. I flipped through the pages until I found her section. A picture of her celebrating her last chemo treatment flooded my heart with fear. I returned to my basket and read most of the article before I slapped the magazine facedown on the conveyor belt. I slapped the tortillas on top of it so I couldn't see it anymore. The tears came.

I'm not ready for chemo, God. I'm not ready for this. The cashier didn't ask me how I was doing like she normally did. She could tell. I sniffled and dabbed my nose with the back of my hand as I tried not to have a breakdown in the grocery store. The line was already backed up. I didn't want to cause a delay. I unloaded the rest of my groceries on the conveyor belt and acted like the ladies behind me weren't staring at the ground because they pitied me. *Do I look like I have cancer?* I wondered. *Can they tell I'm hunched over because I'm mutilated? Can they tell my hair's a mess because I can't raise my arms over my head? Do they know I'm about to lose it all?* No one spoke to me. The cashier knew better than to tell me to have a nice day. She didn't even say "thank you," so I thanked her, and she nodded, as if to say "I'm sorry."

I cried my way home and then went to my small group for the first time in months. I was strong enough to go again the next week—right before I started chemo. They huddled around me and prayed for me. I didn't have to ask. They just did it. They must have known how scared I was. Two days later I showed up for chemo—terrified.

Mom couldn't come the first time. Dad had to have a tumor removed from his arm that day. We found out later it was benign, but Mom needed to be with him in Alabama until we knew. So Kaci, a friend from Go Now Missions, drove down from Dallas to take care of me. Kaci is a nurse, and I'm glad she was there. And I'm glad Mom didn't have to watch me weather that first dose.

My veins must have known what was coming. They went into hiding. After an hour of poking, running my hands under hot water, and wrapping my arm in a heating pad, the nurse finally got the needle in. Kaci and I sat in the chemo room all day. I kept my left arm completely still the whole time. I was afraid of losing it.

Samantha, Chemo Man's nurse, came to talk to me about coming back the next day for rehydration. Chemo Man had learned from my previous surgeries and my blood clot that I was prone to complications, so he planned ahead. Samantha scheduled me to receive two IV bags of saline in the morning.

Samantha was my age and we got along well. She always smiled. I felt comfortable with her. So while she was sitting with me, I asked her, "Wasn't I supposed to have some sort of heart test before I started chemo?"

"No, we only do that for older patients we think may be at risk for heart problems. You don't have to worry about that," she explained with a smile.

I stared at her on the other side of the IV pole that held a bag of Red Devil over my head. "You'd better hope I don't die."

She understood. "I know. It's scary, isn't it?"

I wasn't scared. I was terrified. A week after my first surgery, Ruth Ann Rose called to tell me a friend from our church in Dallas had died. She found out she had breast cancer shortly after I moved to Corsicana. She survived for two years, including a year of Herceptin, the wonder drug I would take, only to develop leukemia. Her heart failed during chemo. I was terrified. And not only because I knew I could die, but also because I knew the side effects I might have to live with. Dying from chemo might be easier than living through it.

It was the middle of the afternoon by the time I finished the Red Devil and my other chemo drug, Cytoxan, which causes awful headaches. I didn't feel too bad when we left, though, so Kaci and I picked up Marissa and headed to Bath & Body Works to get me some anti-bacterial lotion. Bad idea. Everyone told me I would be sick on the third

day. I believed them. They were wrong. But I forgot that they also told me I'd be scent sensitive. They were right about that. After ten minutes of smelling lotions and soaps and girly bath stuff, I was sick. I had a migraine in my face. I called it chemo face. Every sound, sight, and smell made me want to vomit. I bought some anti-bacterial lotion and some anti-bacterial soap and waited for Kaci and Marissa to finish shopping. When we got home, I took my anti-nausea medicine, closed my eyes and sat completely still on my bed with an emesis bin (barf bucket) in my lap for an hour. Then I filled the bin. Thank You, God, for Kaci.

I felt much better, so Kaci fed me some finger foods. I was hungry, so I asked for seconds. And thirds. We started a movie. Halfway through, the nausea returned. I filled the bin again. I don't like apricots or Hawaiian trail mix anymore, and for months I couldn't handle sliced bread. Simply looking at the sweater I wore that day made me gag. Throughout my treatments, I tried all the different anti-nausea drugs, but nothing worked. I learned to eat a big breakfast before chemo and then starve for the next three days. Chemo Man always ordered me two IV bags of saline for the day after treatment. I survived on saline. And I gave Marissa the smelly soap.

Mom came three weeks later for the second chemo dose. We scheduled my treatments on Tuesdays because Dad could drive Mom to the airport on Mondays and he could pick her up on Saturdays. The schedule worked well for my parents, and it meant I could eat on weekends and gain some strength before I went to The Stone on Sundays. But it meant I had to miss my small group on Tuesday nights. They were really good about praying for me, though.

On this Tuesday, Mom and I walked into a crowded waiting room at the oncology center. We sat in the chairs along the back wall and looked through magazines. Cancer patients and their families filled the seats around us. Bald heads dotted the room. My hair had already fallen out. I wore a pink scarf Jocelin picked up for me at the Race for the Cure. She brought me extras, so Mom wore one too.

As we passed the time, Mom gave me the latest count on the donations people had made in Ashley's name. We had opened an in-lieu-of-flowers account at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston. Ashley lived the first two months of her life in the neonatal ICU, so we designated the money for that ward. People from all over the country made donations in her name.

I'd wanted to tell Mom something ever since Ashley died, but hadn't found the right moment to say it. Now, while she was talking about Ashley's donations, seemed like the perfect time. "Mom, if anything happens to me," I said gently, "I want the donations to go to Go Now Missions."

Mom didn't argue with me. She didn't deny that I could die. She didn't come out fighting this time. She heard my request and received it. "Okay," she said as she looked at her magazine.

A few minutes later they called me back for my blood test. I gave them several vials of blood and came back to sit some more. After the room cleared, the nurse sat down next to me with my lab results. I hadn't recovered from the first dose of chemo. I didn't have enough white blood cells for them to give me another dose. She told me to go home and come back in a week.

I was relieved. I felt like my professor had given me an extra week to work on my paper. This called for a celebration. And I could eat! We stopped at the Chick-fil-A by my house. I ordered a milkshake because Ashley had told me how good they were. She was right. As I celebrated with my milkshake, I thought of how Louie Giglio's dad designed the Chick-fil-A logo, the big "C" with the chicken head. And then I thought of something else. Now that we had moved my second chemo treatment back a week, my third chemo treatment fell right at the beginning of the Passion conference. My celebration ended. I knew I wasn't strong enough to go to Passion, but I wanted to be alert enough to pray for the people who did go. I knew one of them personally—Anya.

A year after my trip to Central Asia, I received a card from a girl with Go Now. She had met Anya, who sent her back to Texas with a note for me.

Hello, Melody!

How are you? How is your family, your students? ... I am so happy I'm given an opportunity to send you this letter. ...

I've got news to tell you. I believed in God, Jesus. And thanks to God for you. You were the first to pray to Him in my presence, the first who gave me the Bible to read, the first to tell me something about being a Christian. Thank God for you. May He bless you and your family. ...

Sincerely,
Anya

No way! Anya had become a Christian! A few months after I met her, she participated in a debate tournament. She wasn't a debater, but one of the two representatives from her school backed out at the last minute. The tournament was in English, and because Anya was the best English speaker they knew, the school officials

automatically chose her as the replacement. And it just happened that Anya's new debate partner was a Christian. A bold Christian. One of those Christians who can't stop talking about Jesus and sharing the gospel everywhere she goes. Anya said anytime an unsuspecting stranger approached them, this girl told them about Jesus. So all day long for days, Anya heard the story of Jesus.

In the meantime, Anya, the inexperienced debater, floundered through the tournament. At the end, the judges gave public criticisms of each student. They humiliated Anya. She went to her room and wept. Her partner found her there in despair. And what else would a bold evangelist do besides tell her how much God loves her and offer her hope in Jesus Christ? She told her about God's gracious gift of new life. Anya halfway believed the girl, so she recited the sinner's prayer right there in their dorm room.

But Anya says she didn't fully believe that day. She wasn't a wholehearted Christ follower. She figured she could back out of the Christianity thing at any moment. Her heart changed, though, as she attended a weekly class at her debate partner's church. The class covered the basic beliefs of Christianity, and the more Anya learned about Christianity, the more she believed it was true. By the last class, Anya was a no-turning-back Christian.

Unbelievable. God, in His great mercy, had reached down and grabbed Anya. How did a girl from a mostly atheist country end up with a Christian from Texas sleeping on her couch and then get a Jesus freak from her own "unreached people group" as a debate partner? God wanted Anya, and He worked miracles to get her. And then He

brought her to the States to learn more about Him. He even convinced her atheist country to pay her way.

Two of Anya's Christian friends had applied for a government program that sent students to study at universities around the world. They suggested Anya apply also. Anya hadn't benefited from the upper class education these girls had. She viewed her academic skills and social status as sub par, and she didn't think she'd be chosen for such an honor. She didn't want to apply. But she wanted to teach English, which meant she needed to study in an English-speaking country, and she knew she couldn't afford to do that on her own. One of the girls who had already applied challenged her, "You have God. Ask Him." Anya was still figuring out how to have faith at the time, but she accepted the challenge. She asked God to help her get accepted to the program, and He did. He graced her with a full ride to Ohio University.

Anya moved to Ohio soon after I moved to Austin. And before she even landed in America, I bought us tickets for the Passion conference. It was in Atlanta that year and only a few hours from my parents' house in Alabama. Anya could spend Christmas with my family and we could drive up for the conference after New Year's. Easy.

But then I found out I had cancer. My plans changed. Because I didn't feel like traveling, I asked my family to come to Austin for the holidays. They loved having an excuse to come back to Texas, so they granted my request. Anya joined us for Christmas in Austin before she went to Passion. She came early because her classes had ended and she had nothing to do in Ohio. She arrived the day before my rescheduled second dose.

The chemo room allows only one guest per patient, so while I sat with the Red Devil that Tuesday, Mom and Anya took turns sitting with me. The chemo face came

early, but I didn't tell them how miserable I felt. I didn't say much at all. I went home, threw up and slept. We went back the next day for saline. As Anya sat next to the IV pole tethered to my new port, she confessed, "I thought you were going to be sick."

I lifted my head to look at her, "I am sick."

I figured everyone knew how terrible I felt; I didn't need to complain. Besides, complaining required energy, so I kept my mouth shut. But by day four I almost blew up. Each time I went in for chemo, the first thing they pumped into me was a steroid to counter the nausea. I never noticed any affects until day four, the day I got the munchies and regained all the weight I had lost in the previous three days. Day four was also the day I wanted to lash out at everyone. Everything irritated me, and I wanted to yell about it. I could barely choke back the aggression. I wanted to complain and unleash all the irrational accusations bridled at the back of my tongue. Madness was waiting to charge out of my mouth.

I woke up on this day four to a phone call that pushed all my buttons. The caller told me I was grumpy. Grumpy? Why would anyone call me grumpy? I almost gave her some other words to call me. If I'd had the energy to say what I wanted to say. ...

I ended the call and dragged myself to breakfast. I could barely hold myself up in the chair, much less hold a conversation. My frailty made me look calm and quiet on the outside, but I was fiery on the inside. I wanted to shout to everyone at the table, "Would you please stop talking and go away!" I was tired of discussing the connotations of the word *friction*. I was tired of pretending there was no friction between me and everyone around me. I was tired of people stealing my solitude. I was tired of explaining

that chemo made me so scent sensitive that I could smell the water in the toilet all the way from my bed and after hanging my head into the toilet so many times the smell of the water made me even more nauseated but if I got out of bed or if I moved at all I would vomit again so for the tenth time would you please put the lid down! And don't call me grumpy!

I wanted to say a lot of things that morning. Instead, I finished my pancakes and crawled back into bed. I begged God for some kind of relief. But it didn't come. I fumed for the rest of the day.

On the morning of day five, as Mom flew back to Alabama and Anya read quietly in my living room, I pled with God. *God, I'm angry, frustrated, anxious, irritable, irrational, and just about out of my mind. I can't take much more of this.* But I knew I had much more of this to come. I had a year of chemo and lots of steroids ahead of me. My circumstances weren't changing any time soon.

I picked up my Bible and read from 2 Corinthians. I read about Paul's thorn in the flesh and how God refused to remove it because He wanted to show His all-sufficient grace.⁴² *Where is that all-sufficient grace now, God? I need more grace, I begged. You said Your grace was sufficient, so why are You holding back? This isn't enough, God. This isn't enough.* I thought maybe He agreed with me because He didn't say anything. Maybe my thorn was bigger than Paul's. Maybe God didn't have enough grace for me.

⁴² "There was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

I flipped back a few chapters to read some other things Paul said about God's grace during suffering. I read from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* that morning:

So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace."⁴³

"Look around you, Melody," God finally spoke. He pointed out where I was, and He reminded me how I had gotten there and how He had changed my heart and my life on the way. He opened my eyes to the abundance of grace He had shown me in recent days. "Not a day goes by without My unfolding grace," He assured me.

Not even day four.

⁴³ Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 4:16

CHAPTER 11
LIFE WITH LEFTOVERS

Fortunately, I never chewed anyone out. There were times, though, when I didn't have the energy to communicate kindly. I complained a little too. And I was grumpy. Mom cooked a bunch of food and froze it for Marissa and me. Instead of showing gratitude, I whined about what she cooked and how she packaged it. "Mom, will you please not make so much comfort food? All this starch makes me feel worse. And will you freeze it in individual servings next time? We can't eat a gallon of chicken-n-dumplings."

"Oh, I love chicken-n-dumplings," Marissa the Diplomat responded. "That's one of my favorites," she thanked my mom. Marissa often made up for my bad attitude.

But I needed someone who could do more than make up for my bad attitude. I needed someone to cure it. I needed a transforming understanding of God's grace for me that humbled me into giving grace to others.

As God exposed the lack of grace in my heart, He continued to unfold layer after layer of the grace in His own heart. Each time I thought my needs exceeded His limit, He unfolded His grace to reveal that it was much bigger than I had thought. He had more than enough grace for me. He showed me "grace upon grace."⁴⁴ He was indeed

⁴⁴ John 1:16 (NASB)

“gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.” And He was daily growing that same character in me. He was making new life in me.

Over the course of my treatments, God overwhelmed me with His gracious provision. As Ashley’s life insurance money dwindled, I wondered how I would pay my bills. After my first surgery, I didn’t go back to work at Dominican Joe, and I told Phillip he should find someone else to work on his website. I had no income other than what randomly showed up in my mailbox. Ironically, I sat on Alexia’s furniture in Alexia’s room and doubted God’s ability to provide for me. I was acting like an Israelite again, constantly forgetting all God had done for me and not trusting Him to come through for me when I needed Him. One day I got really anxious about my stack of bills.

I had figured out that whenever I got anxious or depressed (or grumpy), I needed sunshine and exercise, so I walked to the mailbox and back. Our apartment mailboxes were a third of a mile away, and the first half of that journey was up an outrageously steep hill. The first time I made my mom climb that hill, she had to sit on the curb and rest. Some days I barely made it to the mailbox and considered hitching a ride home. On this day, I made it to the mailbox and back and sat down at Alexia’s desk to open everything.

First I opened some medical bills. Then I saw an envelope from my church in Dallas. I wondered why a church I hadn’t gone to in two years was sending me something. It was January, so I thought maybe they sent me an end-of-the-year giving statement. But I couldn’t remember giving them anything in the last year. I opened the envelope thinking I had probably sent them money and forgotten about it. Nope, I hadn’t sent them any money. They had sent me money. Inside the envelope I found a check from

an anonymous donor. It arrived right when I needed it. While I sat in my room doubting God's provision that day, more than half a month's salary had been sitting in my mailbox. And I had one more envelope left. I opened it to find my first payment from the miraculous cancer insurance policy. It covered another three months' expenses. I wrote my tithe check that night and called my friend Emily, who was praying I would know God as my provider.

As soon as I turned in my tithe for that money, I received another plain, white envelope with no return address. Yep, full of cash. I broke into "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" as I counted it. "Wooooo-hoo! That's 802 mornings of new mercies I see!" I declared to my apartment walls. "All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided/Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"⁴⁵

And as soon as I paid my tithe on that money, more arrived. My mom had driven the old Maxima down to Houston for the weekend. The friends she stayed with snuck a card into her suitcase. We both got teary-eyed when she found it. They had stuffed a stack of cash into the envelope. She handed me almost half a month's salary. And it wasn't long before another cancer insurance check and yet another plain, white envelope with no address landed in my mailbox. They covered my expenses for the next year.

Other random checks showed up whenever I needed something extra. Checks from family and friends came right when I had large medical expenses. I even got an unexpected refund check from the seminary. They said I overpaid them \$400 five years

⁴⁵ "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" Words: Thomas O. Chisholm © 1923. Ren. 1951 Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

earlier. They also reimbursed my late fee for that semester. Later they initiated a \$100 discount for students who registered early. I didn't know that. So when I registered for Thesis Continuous Enrollment like I did every semester, I didn't factor in the discount. The seminary sent me a refund check right when I needed \$100. Refunds replaced my old savings system of finding money I didn't know I'd lost.

God provided. He even gave me enough money to give away. Each provision came with a little extra to cover the tithe. One time a medical provider received more money from my insurance company than they had expected. They refunded me the difference. The refund covered the tithe for the money my mom found in her suitcase plus the refund itself. Besides the tithe money, I always had quarters for the homeless people, and the beggar bag that I kept in the backseat of the old Maxima never ran out of socks and water and granola bars. When I invited friends over for meals, we never went hungry. And when people asked me to support their mission trips, I had enough to share.

Jennifer Boyd, my sister's friend who's like family, sent me a gift card and specifically told me, "I thought you could use it to buy stuff for other people." That was the best gift Jennifer's ever given me. I used the gift card to buy baby gifts for people in my small group. God used Jennifer, the insurance companies, the seminary and friends and family all over the world to provide abundance for me in the time of famine.⁴⁶

I call it a time of famine, but my small group wasn't about to let me go hungry. At first I kidded that I could tell my sob story to all the other small groups and see if they would feed me too. "I could get free food for a year," I joked.

⁴⁶ "In times of disaster they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty" (Psalm 37:19).

“You don’t have to do that,” one of the guys announced. “We’ll feed you for a year.” He was serious.

Sometimes people ask me if all the small groups at The Stone are as wonderful as my group. “They can’t be,” I used to answer. But then I saw another group rally around a family when their twins came prematurely. And people from other groups sat with me in the chemo room, even college girls. I found out this culture of service permeated the whole church. It started with Matt, the lead pastor. He was a youth minister before he came to Austin, and Chris, one of Matt’s former students, was now on staff at The Stone. Chris’s dad died when he was a teenager. Matt poured into Chris’s family and even made sure they had food to eat. Chris says Matt lived out the “religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless,” which is to “look after orphans and widows in their distress.”⁴⁷ The rest of the church has followed Matt’s example.

I felt like a widow in distress my first year in Austin, but my amazing small group embraced me and cared for me like family. The Schoolers and the Hsias even let my family stay in their homes during the holidays. And whenever Christy Schooler went to Costco, she called to see if I needed anything. She’s the reason Marissa and I love organic milk.

When God moved me in with Marissa, he gave me the chemo patient’s perfect roommate—a quiet germaphobe with a servant’s heart. Marissa has such a quiet nature that she watches TV with subtitles so she doesn’t disturb anyone. I could sleep all day and all night, and she would never bother me. And Marissa hates germs. Her extreme

⁴⁷ James 1:27

disinfecting kept me from getting sick while I lacked white blood cells. She drove me around in her car where she stored anti-bacterial wipes in the door pocket, and she fed me in our ultra-sanitized kitchen. And Marissa showed enormous grace when she welcomed my mom and Anya into her home indefinitely. She never complained about the crowd. She even made a welcome sign for my mom.

On top of all that, Marissa altered her meals when I had dietary restrictions. When I got so anemic I had to have a blood transfusion, Marissa fed me spinach and beef every day that week to increase my iron levels. But then the nurse told me to quit eating so much spinach. I didn't know that one cup of spinach has 1120 percent of the recommended daily intake of vitamin K. Vitamin K makes our blood clot. I'd already had one blood clot swell me up like Popeye. Now I was eating eleven days worth of vitamin K—twice a day. So Marissa and I gave up spinach and broccoli and other green, leafy vegetables for six months while I took blood thinners.

My menu selections decreased even more when I developed what I thought was acid reflux. By Valentine's Day, I had finished my three months of the Red Devil and Cytoxan, and I started three months of a drug called Taxol and my year of Herceptin, the wonder drug. I took Taxol and Herceptin every Monday and convinced my Mom she didn't have to come to chemo with me anymore. Friends from The Stone, mostly Jocelin, took me to my appointments from then on. Because I took Taxol and Herceptin every week, I received a lighter dosage, light enough to let my hair grow back. I regained some strength and energy. But after two months, the Taxol made me lose the feeling in my fingers and toes. I frequently dropped things and usually ended up with Band-Aids® on

my hands and feet. Chemo Man feared the Taxol would give me permanent nerve damage, so I had to quit taking it. That's when I got that awful reflux feeling.

Normally I slept through the Taxol-Herceptin cocktail because the nurses doped me up with Benadryl first. Two minutes after they turned on the IV pump, I couldn't keep my eyes open. So Jocelin dropped me off at the chemo center one day thinking she could run errands while I slept. But it was the day Chemo Man decided not to give me any more Taxol. And he reasoned that if I didn't take Taxol, I could skip the Benadryl. Plus, without the Taxol, I could handle a stronger dose of Herceptin, which meant I would need to come in for chemo only once every three weeks instead of every Monday. It sounded like a good plan until we tried it.

I sat in the chemo chair that day with Herceptin pumping through my port and read for a while. I read for half an hour before I realized I didn't feel well. I felt a little nauseated. Then I started coughing. Then I got a huge lump in my throat. The coughing hurt, but I couldn't stop coughing. Breathing hurt. Everything from my chest up to my ears hurt. I took shallow breaths and gave shallow coughs. I wanted to call for help, but it hurt so much to breathe that I didn't dare try to yell. I tried to turn off the IV pump. It was stuck behind my chair and I couldn't reach it. I considered pinching the tubing until the alarm sounded. But in the end, I did nothing. I reasoned, *Maybe this is what a panic attack feels like. Maybe I just need to calm down.* So I slowed down my breathing and relaxed. I relaxed so much that I put myself to sleep. Or maybe I passed out. Now I recognize that cough as a sign of congestive heart failure. Maybe I should have pinched the tube.

When I woke up, I could breathe, and I wasn't coughing, but I still had a lump in my throat and my ears still hurt. Jocelin showed up and asked how I felt. "Terrible," I mumbled. She took me home and I slept. A few days later I went back to the chemo center and talked to Samantha, Chemo Man's nurse. I told her how miserable I was and that I couldn't sleep at night because of acid reflux. She wasn't happy that I had waited so long to say something. I explained the earlier coughing episode and she really got upset.

"You didn't tell anyone?" She asked in disbelief.

"It hurt to breathe," I defended myself.

"You had a Doctor Blue!" she informed me. I'd seen a Doctor Blue before. As soon as they hear "Doctor Blue" over the PA, all the Chemo Men and the Chemo Woman dart across the lobby and into the chemo room. They huddle around the ailing patient, who may or may not be blue. The nurses switch off the chemo and feed saline through the IV pump as fast as they can. All the other chemo patients try not to stare. We glance up at our own drugs and thank God it's not us. On a good day, the patient returns to normal and the staff return to their stations. On a bad day, the patient leaves on a stretcher. All that attention would have scared me and embarrassed me. I'm glad I went to sleep and didn't say anything.

"Didn't you call me the other day?" Samantha continued to question me while I pictured myself in the hot seat of a Doctor Blue.

"Um, yeah."

"And you still didn't say anything?"

"Um, no."

She brought Chemo Man into the conversation. He switched me back to the lighter dosage of Herceptin and wrote on my chart that I wasn't allowed to sit in the back corner anymore. Samantha sent me home with samples of acid reflux meds and told me to quit eating anything spicy, including tomatoes and citrus. "And no spinach!" she reminded me as I left her desk.

I went home and told Marissa about my newest dietary restrictions. What was left for me to eat besides breakfast and meat? And my taste buds barely worked. Most everything tasted like cardboard, except pork-n-beans. Every time I got hungry, I'd rummage through the pantry and the fridge and ask, *What can I eat with pork-n-beans?* My small group had a cookout. I brought pork-n-beans. We went to the lake. I brought more pork-n-beans. I'd start with a can of maple-syrup-flavored baked beans and load them with brown sugar and bacon. Mmmm. Pork-n-beans.

As the pork-n-beans and all the meat I ate helped me regain strength, I started helping in The Stone's office on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They needed help, and I needed to get out of the house. I made copies, answered the phones, filed, and eventually started making the bulletins. One day I walked in and saw a big, red bow on the front desk where I worked. I laughed when I saw what was underneath it—a can of pork-n-beans.

The girls in the office got a kick out of my eating habits. They constantly asked if they could bring me lunch as a thank-you for helping them. For months I refused, telling them I couldn't eat because I didn't have my pink stuff. I had to take a high-powered Pepto-type medicine 30 minutes before I ate. It was supposed to keep me from getting

sick. Finally, one day the office manager, asked, “We’re going to Chick-fil-A. Can I get you anything?”

I couldn’t resist. “How about a vanilla milkshake?”

It made me sick. And I got sick again on the day I snuck cookies out of the kitchen while I was printing the bulletins. This time it wasn’t the cookies, though. Eighteen people in my small group had caught a stomach virus. We were all sick together. Fortunately, I still had the best anti-nausea meds on the market. Everyone else had to suffer. Of course, they got to eat whatever they wanted once they got well. I had to drink the pink stuff and search the fridge for something to eat with pork-n-beans.

A perk of living with Marissa was her habit of feeding the fridge. She rarely ate leftovers, but she frequently brought home take-out boxes and put them in the fridge. Or she’d make enormous amounts of pasta and feed the leftovers to the fridge. At first I let her food go bad and then threw everything out when I couldn’t stand the clutter. After a while, though, I started eating her leftovers. In the beginning I asked for permission, but soon we had an understanding that I could eat whatever she fed to the fridge. Each time I sat down to eat her forgotten food, I marveled that God loved me enough to grace me with a roommate who didn’t eat leftovers. He had strange ways of making sure I had enough to eat.

Marissa also didn’t eat spotted bananas, and the ones she bought seemed to spot especially fast. As soon as I saw the first speck on them, I knew they were all mine. Weeks after I moved in with her, I told Marissa the story of Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban, dividing their sheep. Jacob offers to leave all the white sheep for Laban and take all the spotted sheep for himself. To bless him, God puts spots on the new lambs and

significantly increases Jacob's flock.⁴⁸ I told Marissa God wanted to bless me with bananas so He put spots on all of them. She wanted to know where that story was in the Bible.

God wanted to bless me in other ways besides food, but it took me awhile to figure that out. I knew Alexia was coming back from the Dominican Republic in August, and I had to find another place to live. One afternoon, after a couple of hours of helping at The Stone, I drove around looking at apartments. I didn't find anything that day. So on my way home, as I inched down the highway in rush hour traffic, I begged God, *Please give me a place to live.*

"I'm all you get," He responded.

You're all I get? At first I sat behind the wheel disappointed. *So where am I going to live?* Then I got angry. *That's so unfair, God. What about all these people?* I eyed the drivers stuck on the road around me. *They get You plus a car. And I bet they get You, plus a car, plus a place to live. And some of them even get spouses and children. All I get is You? That's so unfair.*

"Am I not enough for you?" He asked.

I knew I'd insulted God. I broke into tears on the highway that afternoon, grateful my sunglasses hid my crying face from the other drivers.

I knew it was coming. Once I started Taxol and Herceptin on Mondays, my energy and my attitude plummeted every Tuesday at five o'clock. Like a baby who needs a nap, I got weepy. I barely made it to my small group on those Tuesdays. If my friend

⁴⁸ Genesis 30:25-43; 31:1-13

Emily hadn't come to pick me up each week, I would've skipped. Especially the day I tried to make pancakes for dinner. Batter streamed across the stove and puddled in the burners. Marissa ended up making the pancakes and cleaned everything up for me so I could go.

Eventually my mood swings moved to Wednesday mornings. I e-mailed Alexia one Wednesday and asked, "May I borrow your faith? I can give it back by lunch time." She said she really did need it back after lunch. One week I got so upset, I drove to Baylor. God and I rehearsed the old prayers and promises while I sat in the window and on the swing again.

Then for some reason, the mood swings moved to Wednesday afternoons. Jocelin called during one of those times and had me look online at a company that sold wigs, hats, and scarves for chemo patients. She wanted me to pick something out for the small group to buy me. I couldn't handle it. I couldn't face the fact that I needed anything to cover my head. I was bald. No head covering could change that. But of course, in a mood swing, the problem is not the problem. The problem was I had lots of problems. I looked like a boy—no, an alien—I had a port-a-bump, it hurt to sleep on my right side, I couldn't feel my fingers and toes, my nails were orange, I couldn't drink orange juice, I couldn't taste the few things I could eat, I couldn't think straight, I felt awful, and life wasn't going the way I had prayed and it looked like it never would. I read a cookbook that night hoping it would increase my appetite and make me want to eat. It didn't. It made me more upset because everything I wanted had tomato sauce or spinach in it. I e-mailed Jocelin later and apologized for being so despondent. She must have e-mailed all the girls in the group because they immediately e-mailed me encouragement.

For a long time, I asked God to take away the mood swings. Instead, He took me back to Paul’s thorn in the flesh and assured me His grace was enough. He showed me the depths of His love. He showed me that no matter how low I felt, His love reached deeper than the pit I was in. At my lowest points, He was most tender with me. I needed to know that part of Him. While I was at the bottom of mood swings, He revealed the lies I had swallowed that weighed me down. Lies about worth and identity. Lies about what I should value and what my priorities should be. He taught me to replace those lies with truth. Truth like I am “chosen by God and precious to him,”⁴⁹ and I am “holy and dearly loved.”⁵⁰ Truth like “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”⁵¹

I chewed on that last verse for months. I knew what “My flesh and my heart may fail” meant, but I had no idea what “portion” meant. How was God my portion? I asked Him to explain it to me.

My first concept of portion came from food. Americans tend to eat Texas-sized portions, and when we go on diets, the first thing we do is learn appropriate serving sizes. We’re usually shocked when we see how little food should be on our plates. “That’s all I get?” we question. Yep, that’s a proper portion. That’s all you get.

So I wasn’t surprised when I found myself at the bottom of a mood swing on the highway that day and God said, “I’m all you get.” He was teaching me that He was my

⁴⁹ 1 Peter 2:4

⁵⁰ Colossians 3:21

⁵¹ Psalm 73:26

portion. I got angry because I didn't understand a God-sized portion. Yes, He's all I get, but He's huge.

The Big Texan Steak Ranch in Amarillo will serve you a 72-oz steak for free if you can eat the whole thing in an hour. That's 4 ½ pounds of beef, plus a baked potato, a salad, a dinner roll and shrimp cocktail. But even The Big Texan doesn't serve you a God-sized portion.

In John 10:10, Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Some versions translate that word "full" as "more abundantly." It can mean "exceedingly," or "beyond measure." When Jesus offers us "life to the full," He means Thanksgiving-dinner full. I-can't-eat-again-for-a-week full. Life-with-leftovers-into-next-month full. Much more life than we can ever live. When Jesus fed the 5000, He started with "five loaves of bread and two fish." After the meal, the disciples collected twelve baskets full of leftovers.⁵² And after He fed the 4000 with seven loaves of bread "and a few small fish," the disciples collected seven large baskets full of leftovers.⁵³ When Jesus comes around, there's life with leftovers.

And before Jesus came to give us life to the Thanksgiving-dinner full, God showed us God-sized portions in the Old Testament. He asked Moses to construct a tabernacle for His presence where the people could meet with Him. God gave specific instructions for making the tabernacle, telling Moses the exact dimensions and the materials he should use to make it. When the people heard all this, they immediately

⁵² Matthew 14:15-21

⁵³ Matthew 15:32-38

donated supplies for this Tent of Meeting. They brought so much stuff that the guys making everything asked Moses to tell the people to stop.

Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: “No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.” And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work.”⁵⁴

They brought too much. God supplied “more than enough” for the people to do the work He asked them to do.

And generations later, when King Hezekiah restored the Temple, the people brought too much again. Because the priests didn’t work the land, they received their food from the offerings of the people. They made the appropriate sacrifices on the altar, and the rest was theirs.⁵⁵ The priests ate God’s leftovers. When Hezekiah reminded the people of their responsibility to provide enough for the priests, they piled up heaps of food offerings in the Temple. The people brought so much food that the priests’ portion was more than they could eat. “Since the people began to bring their contributions to the temple of the LORD, we have had enough to eat and plenty to spare, because the LORD has blessed his people, and this great amount is left over.”⁵⁶ Leftovers. Again.

The priests had so much food to spare that Hezekiah had to build storerooms for all the leftovers. And God offers me that same not-enough-room-for-the-leftovers portion. He dares me, “‘Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food

⁵⁴ Exodus 36:6-7

⁵⁵ Leviticus 2:2-3

⁵⁶ 2 Chronicles 31:10

in my house. Test me in this,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.'⁵⁷

I'm pretty sure that even if I hadn't eaten in six weeks, I wouldn't have enough room for a 72-oz steak. But God offers me the cattle on a thousand hills.⁵⁸ How can I refuse a God-sized portion? I don't know why I thought God was offering me less than a place to live that day I cried down the highway. He wasn't. He was offering me more, more than I could ever need.

But even though God offers me more than enough, sometimes I don't believe He offers me what I want. I mean, yeah, the cattle on a thousand hills is great, but what if I want spinach?

As I told a friend about what God was teaching me, I quoted the portion verse I'd chewed on for months. She, in turn, quoted the verse before it, Psalm 73:25, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you." Really? That was the verse right before the portion verse? I pulled out my Bible and checked. She knew what she was talking about. Looked like I had more to learn.

Eugene Peterson paraphrases Psalm 73:25 in *The Message*, "You're all I want in heaven! You're all I want on earth!" It took me a long time to pray that verse and mean it. It's easy to pray it when God's manifest presence overwhelms me. In those times, I want to go home. Earth no longer appeals to me. "The things of earth ... grow

⁵⁷ Malachi 3:10

⁵⁸ Psalm 50:10

strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”⁵⁹ But on most days, I get distracted with what the world tells me I should want, which is more of the world. God has to refocus my attention and show me how broken and unsatisfying these temporary and elusive pleasures are.

The process can sting. Sometimes I have to give up comforts and luxuries, preferences and favorites. Like a child who can't see what's really important, I accuse God of being unfair and mean. Sometimes I get overlooked or rejected. The person I want to like me isn't impressed, and it hurts because I value man's opinion of me more than God's. And some mornings when I wake up alone, I get irked with God for not giving me what He knows I want. When today stinks, my plans fall apart, and I realize my dreams aren't going to come true the way I thought they would, my heart breaks. I feel like God is taking away the things I want.

An elder at The Stone asked if I ever felt hopeless through this whole ordeal. “No, I really haven't. But I've felt cheated,” I answered from under my wig. I often have to remind myself that God isn't going to steal from me.

My BSM student who reminded me I was precious wrote to tell me her car had been stolen. I thought of how I got the old Maxima. I had been driving a Toyota Corolla. I called it Grace because it was an undeserved gift from my parents. And when a lady T-boned me and totaled the Corolla, I felt like she had run over my dog. I loved that car. But eventually I realized God was giving me a better car. He gave me the insurance money to buy the Maxima. I named it Pearl.

⁵⁹ “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus” by Helen H. Lemmel. Public Domain.

Around the time I got Pearl, a local radio station frequently played a recording of a story about a little girl who wore a treasured necklace of imitation pearls. Every night as her dad tucked her into bed, he asked her to give him the pearls. She refused for many nights. But finally, one night she handed them to him, and he handed her a beautiful string of genuine pearls. He replaced what she treasured with something better.⁶⁰

So when my student told me about her car, I offered her another perspective. “God wants to give you something better, so He cleared a parking spot.” That’s what I told my student, and that’s what I tell myself whenever I feel like God is stealing from me. Whenever I feel like God is robbing me of everything I want and dream of, I remind myself that God is good, and He is for me, not against me. He is the perfect Father and He loves me. He is not going to gyp me.⁶¹ When it looks like He’s robbing me, He’s actually clearing the parking lot of all my junk cars to make room for something better. He won’t let me live with anything less than His best.

And you know what His best is? Himself. That’s why He wants me to want Him.

Somehow through the “He’s all I’ve got” and the “He’s all I need,” I’ve grown to see that He is all I want. He’s everything to me. I forget that at least once a day,

⁶⁰ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:44-46).

⁶¹ “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11-13)

though. My values and priorities get skewed and I go chasing after the unsatisfying things of this world—comfort, security, esteem, influence. But God doesn't let me run far before He wows me with His presence or woos me back through disappointment.⁶² Disappointment brings me back to eternity. God uses heartache to show me that what I don't have isn't what I want. That other person's approval won't satisfy me. A nice place to live with 2.4 kids and their extraordinary dad isn't enough.

My core desire is to be in God's presence. And I want to watch the nations worship Him. And I will. I won't be disappointed. But until then, God continually brings me back to that place of humility and hope where I bury my face in the carpet and tell Him, "You're all I want."

That day on the highway, I thought I wanted a place to live, but God knew my earthly shelter was only temporary. So He offered me more. He offered me everything I could ever want. I hate that I was too cocky to understand.

God did give me a place to live, though. When Alexia came back to Austin, I moved in with a family from The Stone. The Werners' oldest daughter had gone to Africa for a few months, so I stayed in her room while she was out of the country. I'd been at the Werners' house for a month when I panicked about where I'd live next. After all I'd been through, you'd think I'd know better than to borrow fear from tomorrow,⁶³ but I did it

⁶² "He is wooing you from the jaws of distress to a spacious place free from restriction, to the comfort of your table laden with choice food" (Job 36:16). "The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods. I will not pour out their libations of blood or take up their names on my lips. LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance" (Psalm 16:4-6).

⁶³ "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34).

anyway. Every time the future looked uncertain, I freaked. I got down on my knees on the carpet of my second borrowed bedroom next to my second borrowed bed and informed God, *You've got to give me a place to live!*

I opened my Bible and read my Psalms for the day. God patiently answered my demand with Psalm 90:1: "Lord, You have been our dwelling place throughout all generations." Frustration brought me back to eternity. I calmed down a little and told God I wanted to dwell wherever He dwelled. I wanted to live in His presence.

So praying to dwell where God dwelled, I went back online to search for another roommate. I found a girl on The Stone's message board who owned a large house on the south side of town and was looking for someone to live with her and several other girls. It wasn't close to anything I'd been calling home for the last year, but I sent her my lease application anyway.

Several days later, Alexia called me. Two friends from her church needed a roommate, and their house was only five minutes from The Stone's new office on the north side of town. I continued to volunteer at The Stone on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so the location sounded perfect. But I reminded myself to focus on relationship, relationship, relationship. I met Tiffany and Heather a few hours after Alexia told me the place was available. I called them the next day and told them I was moving in. The day after that, my lease application for the house down south came back to me. The yellow sticker on the envelope said, "UNDELIVERABLE." I checked the address. It was the same address I had driven to when I went to see the house. How could it be undeliverable? I showed the yellow sticker to the Werners in disbelief. God wasn't going to let me go to the wrong

place. He showed me He was in charge, and He wouldn't let me mess up His plans for me—His incredible plans for me.

I moved in with Tiffany and Heather the next week, only days after The Stone moved its office nearby. I continued to help answer the phones and make the bulletins on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On Wednesdays, my friend Emily and I led a small group for college freshmen girls. It was heartbreaking to leave our original group, and we often mourned our loss. They served us and our girls well as an excellent parent group, though, and we went back to visit when our girls went home for the holidays.

On Mondays I continued my Herceptin treatments. Every three months I had to have a heart test because Herceptin frequently causes congestive heart failure. I complained of a persistent cough right after I moved, and Chemo Man sent me to get a chest X-ray. My chest X-ray showed everything was normal, but a month later I failed my heart test. Chemo Man suspended my Herceptin treatments a few weeks before Thanksgiving. I had a follow-up heart test in early December. I failed again, even worse this time.

I felt pretty crummy by now. I was usually nauseated, and sometimes I felt like I was drowning. I had to quit taking the stairs because I couldn't breathe. And I had to give myself grace when I constantly took wrong turns because of brain fog. I slept a lot. I didn't feel like eating, much less cooking, so the ladies from my original small group took it upon themselves to make sure I had meals. They started bringing me their leftovers. One lady would give me a few containers of leftovers from her kitchen, and when I brought them back, she'd refill them. Another lady dropped off her family's leftovers at The Stone's office for me.

I couldn't believe I was actually living on other people's leftovers. I was even sleeping on someone's extra sheets on my roommate's extra bed. And after I lived out of my giant suitcase for four months, a girl from The Stone gave me her extra dresser. This was life with leftovers. And one day as I sat at a stoplight under 1-35 South, I stared at the homeless people under the bridge. I used to give them my leftovers. As I watched them, I realized the only difference between them and me was I had an address. God told me I wouldn't have to beg for bread. But I had no idea He'd go to such lengths to take care of me. Leftovers. He gave other people leftovers so they could give them to me. Under the bridge that day, I knew He'd take care of me, or He'd take me home. My heart responded, *My flesh and my heart may fail, but You are the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

My heart failed another test in January. Even though I hadn't had Herceptin in two months, my heart pumped at only 44 percent. Chemo Man decided I wouldn't get any more Herceptin—ever. I felt like I'd failed chemo. I hadn't finished my last month of Taxol because my nervous system couldn't take it. Now I wouldn't finish my last three months of Herceptin because my heart couldn't take it. I knew this was a possibility when I started, but I had planned to finish. I didn't.

I sat in the exam room at the chemo center feeling like a failure. As Chemo Man recited my treatment timeline into his voice recorder for someone to transcribe later, he noted, "We stopped Herceptin in January."

I interrupted him, "But I quit in November."

Chemo Man slammed his pen down on my chart, pointed his voice recorder at me and raised his voice, "You did not quit! We made you stop!"

I sat up straight and faced the truth. Stunned, I nodded, “Yes, sir,” and he continued talking into his voice recorder.

When Chemo Man finished talking to me about checkups and aftercare, I walked over to the chemo room. I wished the other patients good luck and almost cried as I hugged the nurses good-bye. I waved at the schedulers and the receptionist on my way out, the lump in my throat keeping me from saying anything. I wasn’t coming back next Monday. It was over.

CHAPTER 12

REDEEMER

During my months of weekly chemo treatments, different people drove me each Monday. Jocelin usually took me, but others filled in when she had to work. Sitting with different people gave me a chance to tell my story again and again. Lots of questions about life come up in a chemo room. At one point, my friend even pulled out a pen and paper and took notes. “Discretion,” she wrote. I was still learning about discretion and keeping my mouth shut.

When college students sat with me, I felt like I was planting trees. Laura came with me once. She had Lyme disease and was deciding whether she wanted to get a port for the massive amount of antibiotics she would receive soon. The nurses explained how ports work, and then Laura and I sat and talked about the joys of suffering. We were relieved to talk to someone who shared the same perspective.

We also discussed the complexities of taking a break from school and moving in with our parents again. Laura was about to move home for a semester while she underwent treatments. I told her about my experience with chronic fatigue syndrome. “At 18, I couldn’t wait to get out of the house, but when I got sick at 22, I had the opportunity to go back home and strengthen my relationship with my parents as an adult. It was my second chance. And when I started all these cancer treatments and my mom moved into

my room for several months, God gave me a third chance to love her. He keeps giving me opportunities to love my family,” I explained.

Laura and I talked about all kinds of things we were learning. Courtney came. Lauren came. Erin came. And with each visitor, I told story after story about how great God had been to me. Who knew I’d come to Austin to mentor young women from a chemo chair?

After I stopped taking Taxol and Benadryl, I got to where I could drive myself to my Herceptin treatments each week. As long as I drove straight home and went to bed, I was okay. Jocelin called one Monday afternoon and checked to see how I was feeling. I told her I’d had my nap and was coming back to reality. She kept asking me if I felt okay. She was either stalling or trying to make sure I was alert and thinking straight. I wasn’t, but I remembered something important was going on with her, so I did my best to convince her I could engage in conversation. I knew I needed to ask her about whatever was going on, if only I could remember what was so important. As soon as I remembered what it was, she told me. “It’s cancerous,” she said.

I wished I had said it for her. I wished I had asked her if it was benign so she would only have to say yes or no. Telling people you have cancer is hard. It sounds like a death sentence. Jocelin sounded brave, though. We talked for a while and threw around cancer jargon like it was our second language. We talked about her unknown future and she confessed her fear of going bald. “I don’t have a good head,” she said. “Mine won’t look good like yours.” She had told me that numerous times when she took me to chemo. She had contemplated what it would be like to be in my shoes ever since she met me the night before my biopsy. She took my cancer personally. It scared her. That’s how she

found her lump. They said the first lump was benign, but when she came back with a second lump a few months later, it was cancer.

The next night she told our small group. She almost couldn't say the words this time. I could barely look at her. Marcus broke down as he followed her announcement, "This is God's plan for us, so it must be good." The whole group cried with them. We huddled around them and prayed for them. As we finished, Ryan Schooler turned on some Chris Tomlin music and we all sang together. It was beautiful.

Jocelin and I had many phone conversations in the coming weeks. She had lots of questions, and I was her resident expert. I never dreamed we would go through cancer together twice. Our group never dreamed it would go through cancer together twice either. We were all so young. What were the odds?

It turned out Jocelin had a rare type of breast cancer with an excellent prognosis. Months later we found out she didn't need chemo, so she didn't go bald after all. She did choose to have a double mastectomy, though. And the day before her surgery, I got a phone call.

I got lots of phone calls. My phone's battery was dead, and I didn't know it. When I showed up to help at The Stone's office that morning, Paul, a guy in my small group, and Marcus had both left messages for me there. The church had asked Paul to make a video of me and the Hsias, and they needed me to meet them right then. I told them I was on my way and headed to the Hsias' house.

When Paul and I started my interview, the camera had only six minutes of memory left, and the cameraman was already late for an appointment. I rushed through the questions. The point of the video was to show the church a picture of what it's like to

live in community. I tried to explain the social trinity, the idea that our ultimate example of community comes from the way God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate to one another. It's a great concept, but I never explained it. I wasted a bunch of time talking about each person in the Trinity and never addressed how they relate to each other or how they exemplify community. I also said a bunch of stuff about the sovereignty of God and other things Paul didn't ask me about. But my most memorable comment referred to Proverbs 27:17. First I quoted it, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Then I commented, "As we rub each other. ..." I don't remember what I said after that. It doesn't matter. No one would remember anything I said after "As we rub each other." Especially if they saw the look on my face when I heard myself say it. Horror.

In only six minutes, I had spewed all kinds of theological hogwash and thoroughly embarrassed myself. And now the whole church was going to watch me do it! Disastrous. What had I done?

I e-mailed Paul the next morning and asked him to let me try again. I even attached a script of what I wanted to say. He didn't respond. I e-mailed him again. And again. He never let me redo it. He said I'd given him plenty to work with. No redo.

A few weeks later, Paul brought the edited version into the office for our production team to view. I happened to walk in while they were watching it. I kept waiting to hear my blunders. They never came. The whole video was surprisingly good, even inspiring. In disbelief, I turned around and looked at Paul. "That was amazing! I can't believe you got that out of ... that!" Somehow Paul had taken all my mistakes and used them to create something beautiful. He used my words to tell a powerful story.

And when the whole church saw the video, people wept. All day long, friends and strangers thanked me for sharing my story. For weeks people told me how powerful that video was. Even as I ran around town, people asked me about it. The receptionist who checked me in for a chest X-ray asked, “Do you go to The Stone?” My banker asked, “Have you ever been to The Austin Stone?” Everyone who recognized me told me how much they loved that video.⁶⁴

I felt bad that I hadn’t trusted Paul more. He knew what he was doing. He was really good at making videos. My mistakes were beautiful in his hands. He redeemed them.

Once I realized what Paul had done, I started praying that God would make me as good at writing as Paul was at making videos. I wanted to write for His glory, and I wanted that special touch that Paul had, that Holy Spirit power that ushers in the manifest presence of God.

At the time, I was editing someone else’s seminary thesis. It was crunch time and I was frustrated. I prayed for God to help me redeem that thesis like Paul redeemed the video. Apparently God did because my advisor sent me another thesis to edit. And after that one, Kandace and Phillip sent me the book they wrote.⁶⁵ And when I finished editing their book, I edited for my advisor’s writing class. Each time I received a new project, I asked God to redeem it. “Fix their mistakes and turn them into powerfully beautiful lines,” I’d pray. “Make their weak points Your strongest points. Reveal

⁶⁴ You can watch the video and see a shot of the old Maxima at <http://moregreat.com/bonus-materials/>.

⁶⁵ Phillip and Kandace Connor, *Who is My Neighbor? Reaching Internationals in North America* (<http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/who-is-my-neighbor/3052684>).

Yourself in these words.” Editing became redemption practice for me, and I marveled that God allowed me to exhibit His character in my work. I had asked Him to let me write for His glory. I never dreamed He would have me edit theses, books, papers and even church bulletins for His glory.

One morning before I went in to make the bulletins, God and I were talking about my past, mostly about the time I yelled at a friend in college. Regret overwhelmed me. I regretted so many things I’d said to people. I regretted all those years I’d wasted being bitter and critical, cocky and self-centered. I wanted to go back and do things right. I wanted to do things right with my students and my assistant at the BSM, with my high school students and teaching colleagues, with my college friends, with people I knew before college, and especially with my family. I wished I’d had discretion. I wished I hadn’t been such a know-it-all. I wished I had been kind. I wished I had trusted God more. So I asked for a redo.

“Can I get a redo, God? Can I go back and do it all over again? Even if it’s just my 20s. Can I relive my 20s? I want to do it right this time.”

God answered me so tenderly, “Melody, you don’t need a redo. You need a Redeemer. And fortunately, you have one of those. I AM.”

Once again God brought me humility and hope. All those moments I regretted—He could use them for His glory. He could use my weaknesses to display His

perfect strength.⁶⁶ God could transform the ugliest parts of me into beauty. He could take my worst and turn it into His best. I didn't need a redo. I had a Redeemer.

I often regret what comes out of my mouth. I regret what comes out of my heart. I know my words and my thoughts don't please God. They don't even please me. I used to pray, "May the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD."⁶⁷ But as I read Psalms and Proverbs and the rest of the Bible noting how God, in His mercy, has redeemed me, I understood why David included the last part of that verse, "my Rock and my Redeemer." David messed up too. He was cocky. He had lapses in discretion. He said and did things he regretted. But he knew his Redeemer. He knew his mistakes could be beautiful in God's hands. God could make it right. God could take David's worst and turn it into His best.

Now I pray the whole verse. I need God to redeem my words. And it's not only my words and meditations that need redeeming. I need God to redeem what I've been through. I'll never fully know why I've been through all this strife, but I expect God to use it for good. He'll turn my pain into something beautiful.

After a year of absolute craziness, I finally got around to reading Job. Other than Jesus, Job gives us the most famous example of suffering. Bad things won't stop happening to him. Foreign enemies steal his oxen and donkeys and kill the servants who tend them. Fire falls from the sky and consumes his sheep and the shepherds. More foreigners raid his camels and kill those servants. A gust of wind blows the house down

⁶⁶ "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

⁶⁷ Psalm 19:14

and kills all his children. And that's all in the first day. Then Job breaks out in boils. And to make everything worse, his wife and his friends turn on him and tell him he must have done something to deserve these tragedies. They encourage him to curse God and die.

Sounds awful.

I was on the backside of my own trials when I read Job's reply to his accusing friends:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!⁶⁸

Job knew he had a Redeemer. Someone was coming to rescue him. "You just wait and see!" he told his friends. He knew that in the end, God would deliver him from these trials, and He'd take all this suffering that didn't make sense and turn it into good for His glory. Job hoped in a Redeemer who would make everything right.

Job could have used many names to describe God. He could have yearned to see his King, his LORD, his Sovereign, his Creator, anything. But He yearned for his Redeemer. Because there's more to the name Redeemer. If Job had expected God to make everything right simply because He had the power to do so, he would have called him Almighty. Or if he'd expected God to make everything right simply because God hates wrong, he would have called him Judge. But a Redeemer pays a price to make things right. A Judge would proclaim Job free from his suffering; a Redeemer would

⁶⁸ Job 19:25-27

make a personal sacrifice for his freedom. Job needed someone to mercifully ransom him out of Satan's hands.

And so did I. I've done a lot of wrong things. I've said and thought and done things that didn't please God. And the payment for my sin is death,⁶⁹ eternal separation from God. I don't want to pay that price, but I can't make my wrongs right. And I don't get a redo. So I need a Redeemer. Fortunately, I have one of those. His name is Jesus. He made a personal sacrifice to pay the price for my sin and ransom me from death. Then He recreated me into something beautiful, and everything I've ever regretted is now a powerful story of His mercy.

That's what makes redemption so unbelievable. It's based on sheer mercy. I deserve death, but for some reason, God wants to give me life.

I talked about my Redeemer with Anya a few months ago. She was at that point many people go through where she doubted her salvation. She needed a reminder that salvation was not up to her. When I answered the phone, she sniffled out a question, "Remember when I asked if you believed Ashley was in Heaven, and you said you did? How did you know that?"

"Because I know Jesus," I blurted out. "Ashley trusted in Jesus, and Jesus made all her wrongs right. In complete mercy, He paid for all her sins. His blood made her righteous. It's all Jesus, Anya. It's all Jesus."

⁶⁹ "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

CHAPTER 13

GREATER

Anya frequently calls me with questions about her faith. Sometimes she stumps me and I have to admit, “I don’t know, but I do know this. . . .” And we end up talking about who God is. Almost every phone call includes a discussion about God’s sovereignty and His faithfulness, or His grace and mercy, His unfailing love, His goodness. We always come back to who God is. He is “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.”

At the end of Job’s story, before God comes in to redeem and steal the show, Job’s one wise friend encourages him to remember who God is. God is just, and He’s in charge. He controls everything, even the clouds, the thunder and the lightning, and every drop of rain. He is “exalted in power . . . beyond our reach.”⁷⁰ We don’t have any idea how powerful He is. And right in the middle of this speech on God’s Godness, Elihu, the wise friend, exclaims, “How great is God—beyond our understanding!”⁷¹ I want to call Elihu when I need a friend.

A friend recently asked if I would relive the last two years. “Absolutely,” I replied. Crazy, isn’t it? People often say cancer is the best thing that ever happened to

⁷⁰ Job 36:22; 37:23

⁷¹ Job 36:26

them. I'm not going that far. God has given me much greater things—salvation, redemption, grace, unfailing love, family. And the best is yet to come. God has incredible plans for me.

But sometimes when life is going great, I get an it-doesn't-get-any-better-than-this attitude. Wouldn't it be terrible if it didn't get any better than this? If my best moment has already passed, what do I look forward to? Some days I live like God has already given me the best He can, so tomorrow is bound to disappoint me, as if the best has already come—and gone.

My cancer insurance money is about to run out. I'm having to trust God to provide again. At times I fear He'll let me down. Either He won't provide, or He won't provide as well as He has before. This good life He's given me will end. I'll end up living in my tent or at least in some place worse than where I am now and with people I don't get along with. I'll have to eat leftovers I don't like or peanut butter and jelly for every meal. I'll have to work at some job I can't stand. I won't be happy.

God pointed out my it-doesn't-get-any-better-than-this attitude recently. I moved again. In my search for yet another place to live, I prayed to dwell where God dwells, and then I looked at what I could afford and checked online for what others had said about the places I was considering. Every place had complaints of rats and roaches or poor management. I'm not a fan of rats and roaches, so I got discouraged.

But then I read Psalm 85. The psalmist reminds God of how He's shown His mercy in the past and begs Him to show it again. "Restore us again, O God our Savior. ... Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your

unfailing love, O LORD.”⁷² At the end of the Psalm, the writer assures himself that God will come through. “The LORD will indeed give what is good,” he says.⁷³ As I read the chapter, I saw how the psalmist believed in God’s goodness and His love for His people. God had shown me His goodness and love too. I could trust His character. *God is good, and He loves me with His unfailing love*, I remembered. *He will indeed give me what is good. So if He moves me into a place with rats and roaches, they’ll be the nicest rats and roaches He’s ever created. They’ll be a blessing.*

I got up off my knees encouraged, and a few weeks later, my roommate Heather and I moved into a nice place. Everything’s new and clean, and so far I haven’t seen any rats or roaches.

As my small group helped me move for the third time in nine months, they noticed I was leaving the bed behind. When they had moved me the first two times, there was always an extra bed in my new home, so I never replaced the bed I left in Corsicana. But this time, no bed was waiting for me. Someone asked, “Melody, where are you going to sleep?”

“On the floor,” I answered, a little embarrassed.

I had just talked about it with Heather the day before. I thought I had given away my sleeping bag, but I found it in the garage while we were packing. I planned to use it until God provided a bed. I wasn’t looking forward to sleeping on the floor, but I

⁷² Psalm 85:4, 6-7

⁷³ Psalm 85:12

couldn't afford to buy a bed, and God hadn't provided a free one. I would wait until He did.⁷⁴ "The Lord will indeed give what is good," I told Heather.

So many people had shown up to move Heather and me that I didn't know who had asked me where I would sleep or who had heard the answer. But as soon as he heard I planned to sleep on the floor, one of the guys responded, "What? We'll take you to Costco this afternoon. They have beds on sale."

I didn't believe him until he'd stacked the mattress, box springs, and frame in the back of his SUV. He bought me a bed! He wanted to buy me sheets and a comforter too, but they were out of twin sizes. I convinced him not to worry about it. My friend Emily had extra sheets for me. So my first night in my new place, I slept on a new bed with new sheets. I didn't spend one night on the floor. The Lord had indeed given me what was good. "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."⁷⁵

A week before I moved, my friend Wes called. He's the biggest Jesus freak I know. Wes would get along well with John the Baptist. When people ask him what he does for a living, he tells them, "I share the gospel and I'm homeless." Not long after we met, he sat in my BSM office and told me his story—for two hours. He was living in Corpus Christi, Texas, and doing drugs when a murderer told him about Jesus and gave him a Bible. That's how he became a Christian. When I met him, he was doing well in

⁷⁴ "I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD" (Psalm 27:13-14).

⁷⁵ Psalm 23:6

school and working in the oil fields near Corsicana, and God was doing big things in his heart.

Wes quit school to drill water wells in Nicaragua—for free. As a teacher, I fretted over his decision to quit school, but nevertheless, I put my hands on his head and prayed, “Give him a life that goes, God.” Wes hasn’t stopped going. He gave away his house and his truck and headed to Nicaragua. Every few months he came back to Corsicana and popped into the BSM. We all sat and listened to his multi-hour stories of what God was doing as Wes drilled wells.

When I left Corsicana, Wes was in Nicaragua. I rarely heard from him because he rarely had access to the Internet or a phone. And when I did hear from him, he’d simply type out a Bible verse. I knew this was his “word from God” for me. Usually it made sense. After a year of random e-mails, Wes called to tell me he was living in a homeless shelter in Reynosa, Mexico, and he was getting married. Someone kept talking to him in Spanish, so our conversation was short. He called me again from Georgia a few months later.

Wes still didn’t have a car, so he hitchhiked to Georgia to see his fiancée, Jessica. People expressed concern that he was getting married without means to provide for this girl. He questioned his decision himself until his dad, who only recently admitted that God exists, scolded him. “Wes, you’re f—ing stupid! How long has God provided for you? He’s gonna provide for Jessica! He loves her more than you do!”

Wes told me over the phone how right his dad was. “I haven’t worked for money for three years, but God has provided everything for me.” Sometimes people did

give Wes money for jobs, but he always gave it away. He worked so he could share the gospel and give. “I’ve only had two bags all this time, but I’m ready to give it all away.”

As he told me this hour-long story, I teared up. I don’t have much. But I’ve got so much more than Wes does. Can I trust God as much as he does? I don’t know how I’ll pay my rent soon. Or how I’ll eat. Wes doesn’t have rent, and he trusts God to bring him his daily bread, which he usually gives away. And he wants to trust God more.

He told me about this vision he had of the Throne Room in Heaven. He said he wept there because he could see God’s glory and power. It was so much greater than he had believed. He wished he had believed God for more. He wished he’d had more faith on Earth. But there in the Throne Room he didn’t need faith anymore. He could see how great God was.

Wes’s faith became sight here on Earth. After his dad encouraged him to trust God to provide, some people built a house for Wes and Jessica in Reynosa. Their only rent is that they have a date night once a month, and they’re not allowed to bring their Bibles. And while Wes was in Georgia, someone gave them a car and agreed to pay for the insurance and the gas to get them back to Mexico. When I saw him at his wedding reception in Corsicana, he said he’d hitchhiked to Georgia with two bags and come back driving a Jeep with a trailer. “God must love Jessica,” he concluded. “It’s okay if I sleep on the floor in a homeless shelter. But for her. ...” He pointed to the Jeep. God is providing.

After Wes finished his hour-long story on the phone a few weeks ago, we prayed together before we hung up. As soon as I put the phone down, I wanted to tell you

about him. I tried to figure out how to describe this Jesus freak. And then I remembered all those plain, white envelopes with no return address.

God sure does love me.

There's a park near South Congress Avenue, not far from where I was driving when God first invited me to come to Austin. When I need to meet with God before I jump out of the plane again, I'll go to that park. It has one of those splash pad fountains with lots of spouts shooting out of the ground. In the evenings, children play in the fountain and couples spread their blankets on the big hill. They watch the sunset reflect on the downtown skyline and Town Lake. Sometimes I go there in the mornings. I sit on the hill and watch the sun rise over the city. Each time, I fall in love with Austin again. And this morning I realized what I love most about Austin. It's not the beauty of the place. It's not the weather that's so wonderful that people plan lunch dates on the patios of grocery stores. It's not the live music or the college scene, the casual atmosphere or the down-to-earth people. What I love most about Austin is God's presence. He is here, dwelling among us. God is drawing people to Himself, and He has incredible plans for this place. I bet that's what you love most about your town too. We can believe Him for more.

When I walked away from my teaching career and when I moved to Austin, I believed God for more, but I've got so much more to believe. I went back to the Passion conference this year with The Stone's college group. As the last session ended, Chris Tomlin led us in an old favorite, "Take My Life." I hadn't heard him sing it in years. I

went silent, this time not because I wanted to hold onto my life, but because I wanted to offer it. God's manifest presence overwhelmed me again and I couldn't sing. My knees went down and my hands went up. When I could breath again, my voice joined the chorus, "Here am I, all of me/Take my life, it's all for Thee." I sang my life away again.

When we finished the song, Louie closed with these words, "This is a great place to end our journey together. And this is a great place to begin whatever's next." He's right. This has been a beautiful journey, but I'm waiting for whatever's next. I can see how far I've come since the first time I sang "Take My Life," and I want to go farther. Five years ago I clung to my little dreams, wanting my life to stay exactly like it was. But God convinced me His dream was bigger and He had a better plan than the status quo. Instead of settling for what I thought was good, I hoped for greater things, and I've seen greater things. I've seen greater things than I ever believed I would.⁷⁶ And now that I know how much I've been missing, I'm praying for bigger faith. I don't want to be disappointed on the day I don't need faith anymore.

After the Passion conference, we drove back home down I-35 South. As soon as we entered Austin, someone turned up the Passion music on the bus's stereo system. We pumped our fists in the air as we sang to our city,

⁷⁶ "Jesus said, 'You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that'" (John 1:50). "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these" (John 5:20). "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12).

There is no one like our God
For greater things have yet to come
Greater things are still to be done in this city...
Greater things have yet to come
Greater things are still to be done here⁷⁷

God has greater things planned for Austin, Texas.

And God has greater things planned for me. This is the last page of my thesis, which means I'll graduate from seminary soon. I've finished my outdoor work and made my fields ready. It's time for God to do what He's prepared me to do. I have no idea what that is, though. When I look at my future, it's blank, as blank as it was when I moved to Austin. So I'm praying for obedience without city limits again. I'm praying that my "here" will be where God wants me to be and my "I" will be who He wants me to be. And I know that whatever's next is better than anything I could expect. It's greater than anything I could imagine. Because He is more great than I believe.

⁷⁷ "God Of This City" by Aaron Boyd, Andrew Mccann, Ian Jordan, Peter Comfort, Peter Kernaghan, Richard Bleakley Copyright © 2008 worshiptogether.com Songs (ASCAP) sixsteps Music (ASCAP) (adm. at EMICMGPublishing.com) All rights reserved. Used by permission.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I think of writing, I think of hours of solitude. But this book was born out of community. I may have sat alone when I typed it, but I didn't write this by myself.

I am extremely grateful to everyone who prayed for me. I don't know most of your names, but I thank you for taking my name to the feet of Jesus again and again. You are precious to me.

Here are a few names I do know. Enormous thanks go to Dr. Robert DeVargas, for advising me as I wrote this and for unleashing my writing skills—you're a great advocate; Dr. John Babler, for reading this and offering encouragement; Karen Duggan, for reading and living this story with me, I'm so proud of you; my second round of readers—Jennifer Hunt, Gayle Norris, Brett Westervelt—for helping me make this book the best it can be; Kirk Tardy, for bringing moregreat.com to life; HEB Central Market for letting me sit on your patio for hours as I wrote this and for making the excellent All Natural Flour Tortillas that sustained me through many skipped meals; my friends from Dominican Joe; Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola, FL; the people of Corsicana, TX and the Navarro College BSM; Texas Baptist Student Ministries, especially Shawn Shannon, Joyce Ashcraft, and Brenda Sanders; my students and colleagues from Coppell High School; families I know from Northway Baptist Church in Dallas, TX; the Pylates and the Holleys for being so good to my mom; the great people of Alabama; Beth Moore, for challenging me to believe God; Louie Giglio, for teaching me what worship is; Chris Tomlin, for leading the nations to worship God; Jeremy Nagorski, who called to sell me a

Bluefish TV video and ended up praying for me to have the faith of Abraham; Tiffany Palmer; the Fehmers; the Werners; the Orsaks; Kyle and Terra McDaniel; Laura Wascom; Laura Bess; Laura Cannici; Charlotte Coffee; Michelle Sutherland; Joy Denman; Erin Covert; Lacy Beckler; Courtney Tardy; Deanna Valdes; Ryan King; Laura Gordon, Pauline Renucci and Krista Valdes Zamora, for suffering alongside me; Kaci Hickox, for serving the least of these; my group of college girls from The Stone; Leigh Ann and Heath Powers; Terra George; Heather and Peter Sassone; Alexia Estes, the needle in the Craigslist haystack; Kandace and Phillip Connor; John and Ruth Ann Rose, Katie, Sarah “Major Me” and Lily; the medical professionals of Austin, TX; The Austin Stone Community Church for showing me what Church is supposed to look like; The Austin Stone staff, especially Melanie and Brett, who encouraged me to write this while I was supposed to be answering the phones and printing the bulletins, and Matt, for affirming me as a writer and for being Austin’s pastor, I can see why God chose you; the Arboretum small group for showing me that God gives me life with leftovers: Tim and Heather Chow, Phil Nichols, Phil Pense, Aaron and Michelle Gibson, Brad and Roberta Cobb, Melissa Ludwig, Lisa Johnson, Matt and Leah Gibson, Bia Hazelton, Mike and Brook Riley, James and Katie Orneleas, Michael and Sara French, Irving Emmerth, Paul Merryman, Jordan and Lauren Tardy, Andrea Murray, Jeff and Rebecca Finn, Chris and Erin Reichman, Matt and Faith Lyon, Ryan and Christy Schooler, who modeled hospitality for me, Emily Ward, who encouraged me to write as a gift to others and who laughed with me through much of this story, Marcus and Jocelin Hsia, the friends I prayed for; Marvelous Marissa Mahoney, I still have much to learn from you, you’re my Gaius (3 John); my family near and far, for decades of love; Mom, Dad and Jennifer, for

surviving this story with me, for praying for me as I wrote it, and for your habit of speaking me forward, I love you; and to God, for redeeming me and this book. “O Sovereign LORD, you have begun to show to your servant your greatness.”⁷⁸ How great Thou art.

⁷⁸ Deuteronomy 3:24

MORE GREAT ORGANIZATIONS

I'd love for you to respond to our *More Great* God by joining Him in blessing the nations. If you're wondering how to do that, please consider supporting some of my favorite organizations that are leading the nations to worship God.

(If you choose to respond in some other way, please share your experience on the [Your More Great Story](#) page at <http://moregreat.com/your-more-great-story/>.)

100 People Team



100 People committed to leading the nations to worship God

[Info](#) [Donate](#)



Go Now Missions

College students leading the nations to worship God

[Info](#) [Donate](#)



Passion Conferences

Please write “International Students” in the comment box to help students across the globe worship God with their peers.

[Info](#) [Donate](#)

