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down to earth



Did you ever get a call from a friend, agree to do a favor, hang up and immediately ask yourself what in the world you were thinking?

First of all, I never talk on the phone while driving—even hands-free—but for some reason that evening, I hit the answer button for my friend Cynthia. "Any way you can babysit?" she said. "Now? We're in a bind." The whole family had been invited to Cynthia's company retirement dinner, so it was a big night. Her daughter Jacqueline had planned to leave her newborn at home, but her husband was suddenly too sick to stay alone with the baby.

"Sure," I said. "I'll be home in 10 minutes." I hung up, putting my full attention back on the road. But what had I gotten myself into?

I hadn't thought this through. I hadn't even met Baby Harper, which was what everyone called her. Only a few weeks old, she hadn't been around long enough for us to be introduced.

Did I even remember how to change a diaper? Burp a little one with a wobbly neck and tender head? What if I didn't hold the bottle the way she liked? Or she choked? I was totally out of practice. I turned into my driveway, praying for God's grace, for angels. Cynthia and her family pulled in behind me.

Mom and Grandma unloaded the diaper bag and put the baby in my arms. A quick tutorial—"she loves to be rocked," "if she's fussy, hold her like a football," "a bottle every couple hours"—and they were off.

"Okay, Baby Harper, it's just me and you." We settled on the sofa to get acquainted, and I snuggled her gently in the crook of my leg. "Chilly?" I pulled up her blanket. Embroidered in the corner was her real name, Harper Grace. I stood corrected. "It's me and you and the angels," I told her. She could have stayed all night.

Colleen Hughes

COLLEEN HUGHES, SENIOR LEAD EDITOR

DEBORAH ORY



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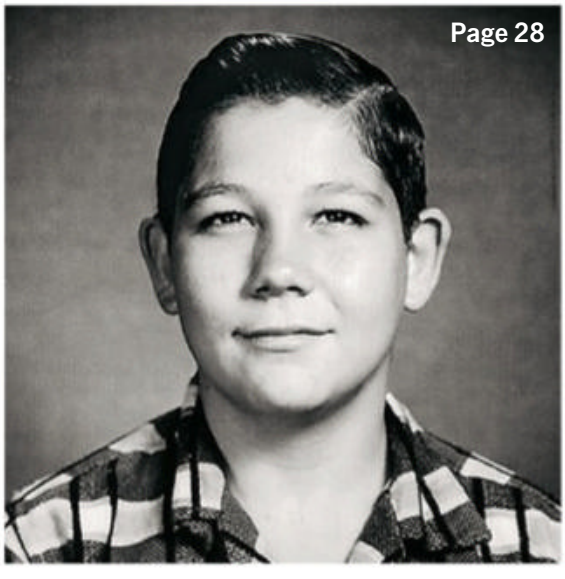
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Any Hour of Need

The heavenly help he got as a young man was never far from memory later in life

BY PAUL JAMES KASEN
RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA

One look at the thick, dark clouds above told me that the last place I wanted to be was far from shore out on the waters of South Dakota's Lake Oahe, a 231-mile reservoir with some of the best salmon fishing to be found. But that's exactly where I was, and this was suddenly no time for fishing. I'd brought two buddies along with me, but I was afraid we were going to have to call it a day. "Storm's brewing," I said. I doubted that the bad weather would just blow over, but before I said anything else, I glanced up again, hoping to see a ray of sunshine. Instead, the skies opened up. It started to rain, hard. "We need to get out of here," I said. We packed up our gear.

I'd bought an older fishing boat and done a ton of work making her shipshape again. I'd put so much care and effort into the project that in a way the old boat felt like an extension of me. I loved being out on the water with her. Now it was up to her to get us back to shore. Fast.

I switched on the ignition. Nothing. Tried again. This time the engine fired up but at only a fraction of its usual strength. *Of all the times to have a problem,* I thought. I'd seen a lot in my 70 years. I'd braved the great outdoors; I'd flown planes and parachuted out of them; I'd done con-

ILLUSTRATION BY OWEN FREEMAN







All the way: Paul today, retired from the Army's 82nd Airborne division, and back in July 1955, right before his fifth perfect jump during training

struction and operated heavy machinery; I'd worked as an air traffic controller. I liked to think I thrived under pressure, but still, I couldn't help but feel anxious. Helpless to find a way out of this jam, my buddies depending on me.

The boat limped along. At this rate it would be 30 minutes before we got to land. *If* we got to land. A bolt of lightning streaked across the sky followed by a thunderclap that seemed to shake the entire boat.

I assured my friends I had everything under control, but the truth was, I didn't. It wasn't me or my fishing boat that was going to get us back to shore. It was something else. A power I knew firsthand.

Every time I found myself feeling overwhelmed, and there had been more than a few times, I was reminded of a day when I was a young man, 21 years old. Then too I was in trouble and had nowhere to turn.

I'd been drafted into the Army, and after eight grueling weeks of basic combat training, I'd shown enough promise to be assigned to the famed 82nd Airborne infantry division, specializing in leading an assault after parachuting into enemy territory. Quite a change for a kid who had been working as a bricklayer in Chicago.

Until Uncle Sam summoned me to serve, I'd never been in an airplane, let alone jumped out of one. The Korean War had ended only a few years earlier. The world felt unsettled, on edge, especially from my vantage point running drill after drill

at Jump School training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

During graduation week, my fellow soldiers and I were running a course of an unknown distance. All I knew was that it was already the longest run of my entire life. I'd gotten used to our three-mile runs that built stamina with relentless conditioning. But this was something else entirely. About 100 of us, running in formation, men I'd gotten to know well as we were pushed to our limits. It seemed I was finding mine.

We'd been running at a fast clip down the streets and pathways of the base, three abreast, for at least an hour. The finish was still nowhere in sight. I was in the middle, between two soldiers, but I focused straight ahead, not taking my eyes off the back of the head of the soldier in front of me. Such discipline had been drilled into us from day one.

I could feel myself slowing. My legs felt like they were made of jelly, my lungs on fire, fighting for every breath. I didn't know how much longer I could last. All I could think about was quitting, collapsing into a heap, but I couldn't bear to imagine facing the wrath of my commanding officer. I feared being drummed out of the program. There were worse places I could be assigned than Fort Bragg. I was sure of this.

Pushing my legs to somehow keep going took everything I had in me. I was already at the point of total exhaustion. *Help me, God,* I thought, though it was more a cry of desperation than a conscious prayer.

My mind scrolled through everything I'd experienced to get to this point. We'd spent days practicing how to land from a jump. We'd jumped from platforms of varying heights and learned how to transfer the energy of a fall through our entire body. Jumping over and over until every inch of me ached. We graduated to jumping from the top of a 34-foot wooden tower, falling to a platform half the distance down. I'd jumped without a hitch, but I'd seen plenty of other men quit right then and there. This was the thing. Every day was a test, pushing ourselves to a point we never imagined, then the next day pushing a little further. The final graduation test was jumping five times from a plane flying 1,200 feet off the ground. That's what awaited me. I'd come so far, but I understood why soldiers gave up. Became physically sick. *I'm done,* I thought. I'd reached my limit.

I took a small stutter-step, positioning myself to fall out of formation, when I felt a strong soldier's arm

The soldiers' strength was like nothing I'd ever felt. With their support, I summoned the energy to keep going.

reach across my back from the right. Simultaneously, the soldier to my left did the same. The soldiers' hands clasped at the center of my back. Their strength was like nothing I'd ever felt. Their powerful brace practically carried me, and yet my feet continued to hit the pavement, my legs propelling me forward. How could these soldiers have known I was on the brink of quitting? With their mysterious support, I summoned enough energy to keep going. In my estimation, we ran for nearly a mile like this, my eyes never looking to either side.

At last, we made it to the finish. I was completely drained. I turned to thank these soldiers who had come to my aid, only glimpsing their faces before they vanished into the crowd. Still, they weren't faces I recognized. At mess that evening, I scanned the room, but the soldiers were nowhere to be found. I described them to others to no avail.

The next day I completed all five of my final graduation jumps, perfectly. Without fear. This time there were no mysterious arms holding me aloft. Nothing like that. I was suitably trained, and beyond that I'd processed what had happened during the previous day's run. I knew that in any hour of need, God would send angels to clasp me in their arms. The security I felt in that crucial moment of my training never left me.

Nearly 50 years later, gazing across the storm-tossed waters of Lake Oahe, I added another challenge to the list of challenges God had gotten me through in my lifetime. "We'll make it," I told my fishing buddies. "I'm sure of it."

The boat took on some water from crashing waves. The engine choked and hiccupped. And yet it didn't fail, even when there seemed no logical way for it to keep going. Much like that day so long ago, God had supplied the power needed.

My buddies and I reached the dock, soaked to the skin, but otherwise no worse for wear. When we'd all dried out, the guys wanted to know how I'd kept my cool. I told them the story I just told you, the story of a 21-year-old soldier who ran with angels and never stopped. ■

the collector

My 34-year career in long-term care began with a job as a cook, and I worked my way up to nursing home administrator. Inspired by the elderly folks I served, my daughter Tracy bought me my first Heaven's Retired Angels figurine.

Unlike most angels depicted in art, the Heaven's Retired Angels are up in years, as the series name suggests. For better or worse, I identify most with the aptly named Ms. Bossy, who boasts a pearl necklace and points her finger with authority. Tracy, who used to work for me at the nursing home, said Ms. Bossy reminded her of how I acted when I led staff meetings. In my defense, we had a lot to cover in those meetings!

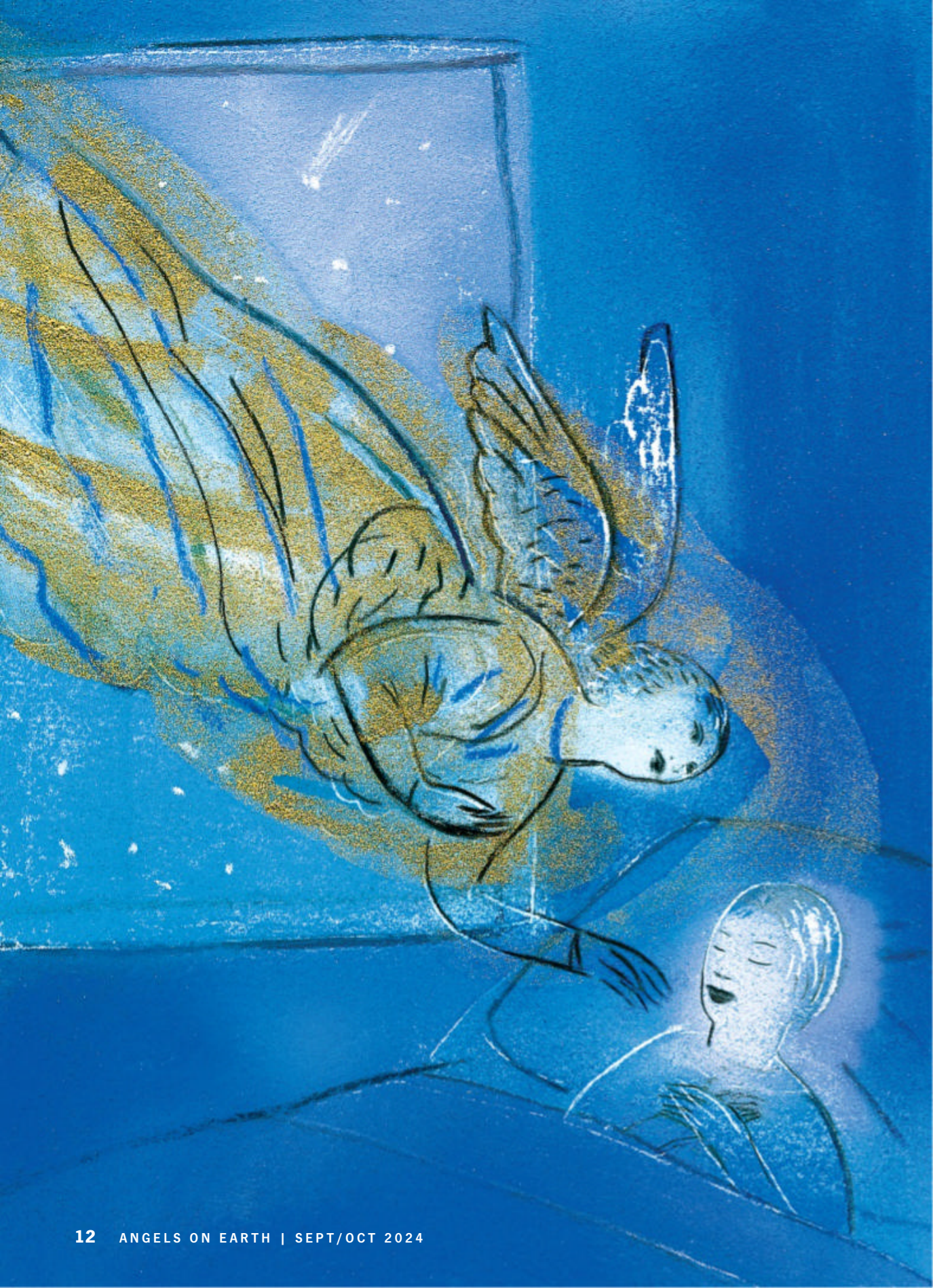
Another angel favorite from my collection is Dr. Two Pills, who calls to mind my supervisor at the nursing home. He set the tone for treating every resident with the utmost compassion. The figurine named Alice Goody, equipped with a stethoscope and a medical chart, is a tribute to all the excellent nurses with whom I worked.



The Heaven's Retired Angels series, which depicts a broad range of professionals, was created by artist and sculptor Tom Rubel.

By the time the Heaven's Retired Angels series went out of production, I'd collected 25 of the resin figurines, which I display in a lighted glass hutch in my living room. Now that I am retired, my caregiving career behind me, I admire my collection every day. The thing I find most special about my angels is their wrinkled faces. Far from an imperfection, those lines testify to the hard work and dedication we seniors have given to the jobs we loved.

NAOMI GATES, PARIS, ILLINOIS



Heaven's Lasting Touch

Nights are long and lonely when sleep won't come

BY JOYCE BENEDICT, HYDE PARK, NEW YORK

How long could a person go without sleep? If I didn't get some rest soon, I was going to find out. I flipped my pillow over for the umpteenth time, knowing it wouldn't help. I'd prayed for relief and heard no answer in the dark silence. I closed my eyes, feeling nothing but dread in a tangle of bedcovers. This night would last forever, just like every night so far this week. Just like so many nights in the six months since my husband had asked for a divorce.

I'd always been a good sleeper. Even in my hospital stays as a teenager, when I'd needed surgeries to correct disabilities after a bout with polio. As uncomfortable as I was in the hospital's sterile surroundings, I believed that God and the doctors were working to make me stronger. I counted on it. Not once did I think things wouldn't get better for me.

Now I couldn't see how anything would ever get better. Insomnia was just one more challenge I had to overcome as a divorced mom. I had no family nearby. I had to find a job. The children had questions I couldn't answer. And the frustration that came with not being able to quiet my overtired body and mind was unbearable. I was worn out from fighting.

I punched my pillow and rolled over onto my side. Sometimes, when I was a little girl and had a nightmare, or imagined monsters under my bed, I hummed a nursery rhyme to myself. The melody of "A-Tisket,

ILLUSTRATION BY VIVIEN FLEISHER

Was God listening? Did he know I was suffering? Had he abandoned me too?

A-Tasket" used to make me feel safe. But even as a teen in the hospital, I hadn't needed anything so childish to soothe myself. I simply believed that everything would turn out okay. I flopped onto my back and stared up into the dark. *God, I'm not finding it so easy to believe that these days.*

My thoughts tortured me. Divorce wasn't just a shock when it came into my life. I felt like I'd been blindsided. I could no longer count on anything. Not even myself if I couldn't get some rest. I was rendered useless. How could I do anything at all if I couldn't sleep?

In my desperation to find relief, I started humming. *Focus on the tune,* I told myself. Again I rolled over onto my side. I curled up in a ball, rocking slowly back and forth. "*A-tisket, a-tasket, a green and yellow basket…*" I put God at the top of my thoughts while I hummed, as if the little rhyme was a prayer, a cry for his comfort. I couldn't soothe myself. He was the only one who could give me the rest I needed. Was he listening? Did he know I was suffering? Had he abandoned me too? I tried to drown out my anxious thoughts by putting all my focus on him. *I know you are near. I know you love me. I believe things will get better with your help.* I hugged my knees tighter, humming to myself.

Something warm and reassuring touched my shoulder. The feeling was unmistakable. It wasn't my bedcovers but a hand. A strong hand that belonged to a larger-than-life angel. God had sent an angel to comfort me. I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't have much time to wonder at the miracle. Within seconds, I sank into a deep, dreamless sleep that lasted all night.

Things were different when I woke up the next morning. My circumstances hadn't changed. My challenges going forward would be many. But I was a different person than I had been the day before. Fully refreshed after a string of sleepless nights, I knew now that there was always something I could count on, and it mattered most of all. God hadn't abandoned me and never would. Going forward, I refused to let my anxiety come between us. It had walled me off from the comfort he was trying to give all along—until he sent an angel whose touch I couldn't mistake. ■

lost & found

I sat down to slip on my shoes and noticed that the sole on the right one was coming loose. I sighed. These were my favorite brown loafers. They were so comfortable, and I'd broken them in just how I liked them. Plus, they were slip-ons, which made things easier at my age. What was I going to wear now?

Days later, I overheard my son, Scott, telling his dad about some kind of glue he'd bought. "It will hold anything together," he said. "It's like magic."

Hmm, I thought. *My loafers!* "Do you think your glue could fix the sole on my shoe?"

"Worth a try," Scott said, so I went off to get the pair. I tried the den, but the shoes weren't there. I trudged upstairs and looked around in our bedroom. I dug through the closet. I checked under the bed. Nothing. I looked in the other bedrooms and the bathroom too, but still no loafers. *God, only you know where they could be.*

Frustrated, I headed back downstairs. "My favorite brown loafers are nowhere to be found, so I guess I'm out of luck," I said.

Scott gave his dad a sideways glance and then squinted down at my feet. "Mom, aren't you wearing your brown loafers right now?"

I burst out laughing and took some good-natured teasing. Even God must have had a chuckle at my expense. I didn't mind, though, because Scott was right about the glue. It worked like magic. My favorite loafers were found—and fixed—and our family had a funny story to tell.

SHIRLEY UEKERT, MARATHON, WISCONSIN

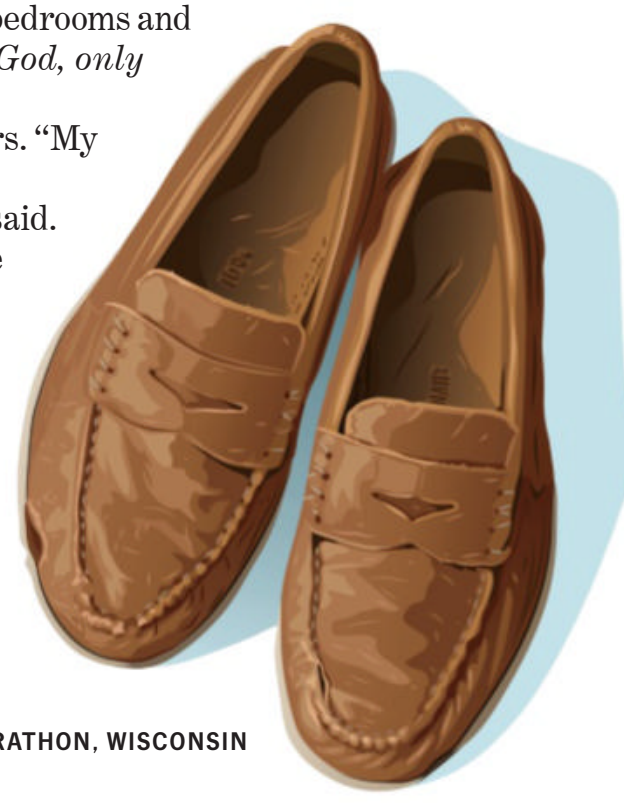


ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS LYONS

My Little Lamb

We'd moved to the country to be closer to God. Yet God felt farther away than ever

BY LUANNE BANDY HOLZLOEHNER, MILTON, VERMONT

I pulled the barn door closed behind me, shutting out the bitter cold and swirling snow. The ewe was on the floor of her stall, her head resting on a patch of straw. I stared at her swollen belly. *What a time to give birth.*

Her flanks heaved. I saw the strain in her eyes and reached down to stroke her side. She snapped at my hand. I pulled back. *What ever made Henry and me think we could do any of this?*

I was a city girl, but I'd always dreamed of moving to the country and living off the land. God's land. After my kids were grown Henry and I got married—a second marriage for both—and we'd decided to start a second life too. We had sold our city homes and bought five acres in Vermont dairy country.

We found a little white clapboard church that we liked, and dutifully introduced ourselves to our neighbors. I got a part-time job at a school and Henry took a job delivering newspapers, but mostly we stuck to ourselves and tried to make the farm work. We grew our own food and kept livestock for milk and eggs. Wasn't that the idea? To be independent. To live close to the land in our log house, with a few cows and sheep. Yet from the very beginning, it had been a lonely struggle.

I stared at the ewe, struggling herself now. *Lord, I thought this move would bring us closer to you. Why do you feel so far away?*

I tossed a handful of fresh hay into the ewe's stall. It was all I could do for her right now. Then I stepped out the barn door, threw my weight against it to shut it and headed through the fierce wind to the house. I would check on her again after dinner.

Maybe this life was a terrible mistake, I thought, trudging through the

ILLUSTRATION BY MARGARET CHODOS-IRVINE



snow. Each day, it seemed, brought a new problem. If it wasn't our pickup truck, it was the well, or the tractor we used as a snowplow. The work was endless. When something went wrong in the city, I could look in the yellow pages and make a call. Or if I ran out of something, I could knock on my next-door neighbor's door or run to the corner market. What were you supposed to do in the country at the end of a dirt road without a neighbor in sight?

Henry and I ate dinner in near silence. We did the dishes, then I pulled on his heavy jacket and headed back to the barn. Inside, everything was still. My clouds of cold breath hung in the air. I peeked over the side of the ewe's stall. There, nestled down into the matted hay, were two tiny balls of wool. Twins.

"You did it," I said to the ewe. I wanted to celebrate with her. But I saw in her eyes that something was wrong. One of the babies was curled up, motionless, in the corner.

I bent over and picked it up. The lamb wriggled slightly in my arms. Relief washed over me. I carried it to its mother. "Help your baby," I urged her. But the ewe just pushed it aside. She had already given up on its survival. If the baby were to survive, it would be up to me.

I tucked the tiny ball of fur beneath Henry's coat and carried her to our cabin. Henry quickly helped me arrange a little playpen with hay. Above it we placed a heat lamp to keep her warm. I decided to name her Lorrie.

For a week I looked after her constantly. Nights, I slept on an old recliner with the lamb snuggled in my lap and fed her every three hours with a baby bottle.

One night, as I cuddled her in my arms, she looked up at me with utter trust. That look unnerved me. *Who am I to save her?* I thought. I could barely save myself.

Please, Lord, save Lorrie, I asked. *She's weak and helpless. She needs you so much.* And then more softly I added, *So do I.* I put her down on the floor. She stood for a moment on her wobbly legs. Then she sank back to her knees.

I picked her up again and cuddled her in the chair. I started to doze off. A thought startled me awake. *Take Lorrie to church tomorrow.* I smiled, shook my head. *Take a lamb to church? How silly.* I went back to sleep.

The next morning I couldn't get the notion out of my head as I dressed for church. "I'll go warm up the truck," Henry said. When I passed Lorrie on my way to the door, I grabbed her from her playpen. I

I saw in the ewe's eyes that something was wrong. One of her lambs was curled up, motionless.

wrapped her in a soft blanket and headed out to the pickup. Henry looked at me from behind the wheel.

"What are you doing with her?" he asked me.

"I'm bringing Lorrie with us."

Henry started to protest, then just shook his head and helped us in.

We pulled up to the church and climbed out of the pickup truck. I took a deep breath and walked to the entrance with Lorrie in my arms. The minister stood in the doorway, greeting parishioners.

"I'd like to say a few words after the service, if it's okay with you," I said to him.

The minister looked down at my little lamb, curled up in the blanket. He raised his eyebrows, surprised, but nodded that it was okay for me to address the congregation.

I led Henry to a back pew. At the end of the service the minister motioned for me to come up, I walked to the altar, hiding Lorrie from view. Then I unwrapped the blanket so everyone could see. People stared and murmured when they saw Lorrie.

I wasn't sure what I wanted to say. But deep inside I knew I had to do this. I set Lorrie down on her wobbly limbs. As she struggled to walk, I explained how important it had become for me that she survive. And then the words just spilled out.

"I thought life would be easy here, that Henry and I could make it on our own. But I am weak and helpless like this little lamb. Sometimes I feel like there isn't any help. Then I try to remember, 'The Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want…'" My voice trailed off. Henry stood at the back of the church, his cap in his hand, blinking back tears.

Silence.

I picked Lorrie up, lowered my head to hide my face and headed quickly toward the door. But before I could reach Henry, the congregation was on their feet, closing in around me.

A little girl's hand reached out to pet Lorrie. A woman's arm tightened around my shoulders. Then another and another until it felt like the whole church was holding me, holding me the way I held that little lamb, the way the Lord would always hold me closer and closer.

At last I had found what I had been seeking all along. ■

A Day at the Museum

I knew nothing about art

BY PATRICIA GALLAGHER, WORCESTER, PENNSYLVANIA

Back when we were newlyweds, I accompanied my husband, John, on a job-training trip to Chicago. While he worked, I explored the city, enjoying a break from teaching my preschoolers. On one of our last afternoons there, I visited the Art Institute of Chicago, even though I was not ordinarily a museumgoer. I picked up a map and gallery guide at the entrance. The categories didn't mean much to me and left me feeling overwhelmed. Where to start?

For no good reason, I wandered into the contemporary art gallery. *How is contemporary art different from modern art?* I wondered. So far, everything hanging on the walls was a mystery to me. Trying to seem engaged like the other patrons, I feared the confused look on my face gave me away. I cocked my head this way and that in front of a Jackson Pollock painting and sensed that someone was standing beside me.

"Isn't it fascinating?" she said.

I looked down at the elderly lady beside me. She was tiny, not even five feet tall. "It *is* fascinating," I admitted, turning back to the white swirls and dashes on the canvas, "but I don't really know anything about art—"

"My name's Sylvia," she jumped in. "I'll give you the grand tour!"

She was too excited about the idea for me to pass. *Maybe she's lonely,* I thought. It felt good to think that maybe I was doing a good deed by keeping her company. In any case, I wasn't getting much out of my museum visit on my own.

Sylvia guided me to pieces she called mesmerizing, extraordinary, dreamlike and magical. She spoke of them as if they were old friends, each of them expressing something very specific. Her enthusiasm was infectious and put me at ease. I found that some of the artwork spoke to me as well. Sylvia inspired me to reach

ILLUSTRATION BY KIM JOHNSON



beyond what I thought I could understand. I resolved to be more like her when I got back to my preschoolers.

Over lunch in the museum cafeteria, I talked about John and me already having to juggle a home life with our careers back in Pennsylvania. "And we both want children." How would we ever manage?

Sylvia was encouraging about doing it all. "You'll find a way," she said. "Trust me." She'd never married, but she took great pride in being a beloved aunt. The museum was her favorite place in the world, and at this stage in her life, her time was her own. "I come here every day," she said. "There's so much to appreciate in the artwork and in the people who come to see it."

"What a pleasant afternoon," John said when I told him about Sylvia back at the hotel that night. "Sounds like you were lucky to find each other."

"We exchanged addresses before saying goodbye. Maybe we'll get a Christmas card from her. A beautiful one, if I had to guess."

Turned out, I didn't have to wait until Christmas. There was a card waiting for me when I got home. Sylvia's handwriting was as artful as her conversation. Of all the people I could have encountered on our brief trip to Chicago, I'd met a real gem.

We enjoyed a wonderful correspondence, though she wrote more regularly. My life just seemed to get busier, especially as our children came along. Sylvia always had an encouraging word and was thrilled each time I wrote to tell her about our latest addition to the family. She took to signing her letters "Aunt Sylvia" and included little gifts, like construction paper collages for the kids to imitate. Ever the art-lover, she was.

Our family took a trip to Chicago so John and the kids could meet Aunt Sylvia in person. The kids didn't ask if she was related to me or to their dad, or how she came to be their aunt. As far as they were concerned, she was simply family. That's what she was to me too.

I marveled that God had led me to one of my most important grown-up relationships by way of a chance encounter. In my innocence, I'd thought I was the one doing a good deed for an elderly lady. In fact, I was a better wife, a better mother, a better teacher because of the angel I met in Chicago that day.

Today I'm retired, and the kids are grown with kids of their own. Like Sylvia when I met her, I have more free time at this stage in my life. I try to use it for good, living each day with enthusiasm and the possibility of passing it on the way our beloved aunt Sylvia did. ■

only human?

Visiting San Clemente, California, not far from where I grew up, was what I did every year for my birthday in August. Early one evening, I was enjoying some quiet time alone on the beach, watching the waves sparkle in the sunset. Before I knew it, I'd stayed too long. My motel was about a two-mile walk away, and I was concerned about the now-dark underpass on the route back.

I started walking and eventually came to a bus stop. I looked at the schedule and saw that the next bus was not for another hour. I was torn. Should I wait? What if the bus didn't show up? I decided to continue on foot and said a prayer that I would be safe.

After about two blocks, I looked over my shoulder and saw a bus approaching. It pulled up to the corner just a few feet away. I ran over and asked the driver if he was going by my motel.

"Get on," he said.

I saw right away that I was his only passenger and asked about the fare.

"No fare," he said.

The bus driver dropped me off right next to my motel. "Thank you for being an angel," I told him. He smiled but said nothing and drove off into the night. I checked the schedule again when I got to my room. There was no bus along that route at that time. My driver might have been more of an angel than I thought.

KARIN SJOBAKKEN
WINSLOW, ARIZONA



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



Called by Name

I wanted to know God's plan for me

BY BERNADETTE PINKOS, BIDDEFORD, MAINE

How can I be of real service? I thought one morning sitting with my church prayer group. *Not in general but specifically.* I still hadn't figured it out.

I glanced over at Connie, someone I admired. Connie was a little eccentric, and to some, that was putting it mildly. But I could plainly see she had something I wanted: a deep and purposeful relationship with God. Her devotion showed in even the smallest things she did in his name. I wished I could be more like her.

So when Connie invited me for lunch after class, I accepted. Our conversation was lively. Then Connie asked: "Bernadette, do you know God loves you so much that he even has a special nickname for you?"

I put down my fork. "A nickname?"

"He calls me his myrtle," Connie said, matter-of-factly. "Why don't you ask him what your nickname is?"

This was the kind of remark that made people think Connie was a bit too much. But driving home after our lunch, I couldn't stop thinking about what she'd said. I imagined a myrtle shrub with its evergreen leaves. The myrtle knew God's intentions for it on this earth, just like Connie knew his intentions for her. Maybe I shouldn't dismiss her suggestion, even if it seemed "out there."

I woke up the next morning with the nickname question still on my mind. "Do you really have a pet name for me, God?" I asked.

A voice within me answered right away: *You are my rose.*

I nearly laughed out loud. That answer couldn't have come from God. Not when I was sitting here in my bedroom with its rose-covered wallpaper, lying under my rose-patterned bedspread. Of course the word *rose* had come to mind! I'd always loved roses, and I sometimes asked God to send me one as a sign. Could the rose hold a deeper meaning for me? Some investigating turned up a book that listed flowers with the virtues they symbolized. The rose symbolized God's com-

ILLUSTRATION BY SONIA PULLIDO

mand to love our neighbors. Was that what God meant for me to do?

At church that Sunday, the priest asked, "Do you know that God has a nickname for each one of us?" I wondered if Connie had gotten to him too. But then he gave a biblical example. "He called Peter his rock—the strong foundation for his church."

The priest explained that the plan God had for each of us was so specific, it could be identified in a nickname. If I really was God's rose, I would focus my efforts on new ways to love my neighbor. When the collection plate came around, I dropped my offering on top of a donation envelope. It was decorated with a rose!

I could no longer deny God's plan for me. I found my calling when I volunteered for the church's brand-new Neighborhood Service Group. For the first time in my life, I knew I was doing exactly what God wanted me to do.

My nickname had given me a purpose that I carried to a new parish when we moved. There was a road nearby called Myrtle Street. I thought of Connie every time I passed it.

One day I got a phone call from Marie, a young woman who was preparing her family for a move to Germany with her military husband. She was scared and anxious and needed guidance. I had encouraged her to ask God about her nickname.

"I read out a list of flowers, hoping I'd know which one was right," she said. "Maybe lily of the valley, but I'm not at all sure."

"They're hearty plants," I said, "so it seems like a good sign for a big move." I could hear in her voice that Marie wasn't convinced. She picked me up for a church meeting that night. *God, Marie might need one more sign, just like I did.*

I kept my eyes on the neighborhood gardens as Marie drove, but it would have been hard to see the small, white, bell-shaped flowers in the dark. "A sign could be anywhere," I told Marie when we pulled into the church parking lot. There were no floral sketches on a bulletin board flier or poster outside the meeting room.

With all our searching for lilies, we were a bit late. *Maybe Marie will just have to trust her feeling,* I thought as we opened the meeting room door. The group had already begun an opening hymn. "You are the Lily of the Valley…"

Marie thrived in Germany, just as God promised. Just as I've thrived doing his work with my neighbors. It's not always easy being his rose—they do have thorns, after all. But I know God loves me, thorns and all. I am exactly who he called me to be. ■

he makes winds his messengers

PSALM 104:4

Mom and I drove to the cemetery on a September day that was unusually still, especially where we were in the prairie land of southwestern Minnesota. We had expected to fight the gusty winds that were typical this time of year, but we wanted to celebrate Dad on his first heavenly birthday.

Three colorful helium-filled balloons bobbed in the back seat of the car. One said, "Happy Birthday," another, "Happy Birthday Dad," and the other, "Happy Birthday Grandpa." We'd covered all the bases.

At the cemetery, Mom and I taped the balloons tightly to Dad's gravestone to be sure they wouldn't blow away. We admired our festive decorations and reminisced about the joy Dad had brought us. He loved all his family dearly, but perhaps none more so than his grandchildren.

And they adored him. Dad always had a smile on his face and candy in his pocket. As youngsters, my daughters sat with him in the big rocking chair, reading books or listening to his stories. Sometimes they'd all nap right in the chair. They played endless card games and hide-and-seek. He told jokes while a whole booth full of his grands ate ice cream in the gas station convenience store. Back on the farm, he taught them about God's creation and the land he worked. When they bottle-fed the calves, Dad encouraged the kids to show the same loving-kindness to all God's creatures. My daughters couldn't have had a better grandfather.

As Mom and I turned to go back to the car, we felt a gust of wind more typical for this time of year. Both of us turned to check on the balloons. One was missing, the loosened tape still stuck to the stone. "Happy Birthday Grandpa" had blown away! There was no sign of it overhead. Dad's favorite birthday balloon must have been swept right up to heaven.

DEEANN FROELICH, MELISSA, TEXAS



GETTY IMAGES

A Surprising

School learning couldn't compete with what the mountains had to teach me

BY DOUGLAS SCOTT CLARK
STURGIS, MICHIGAN

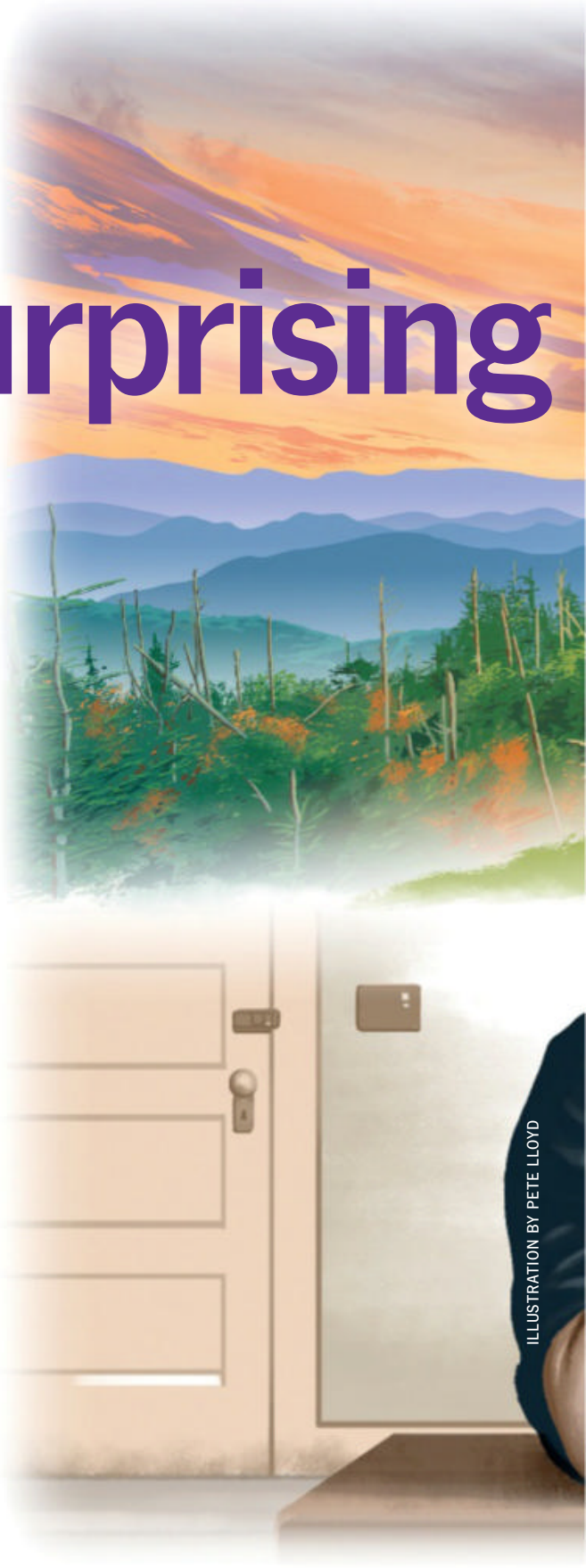
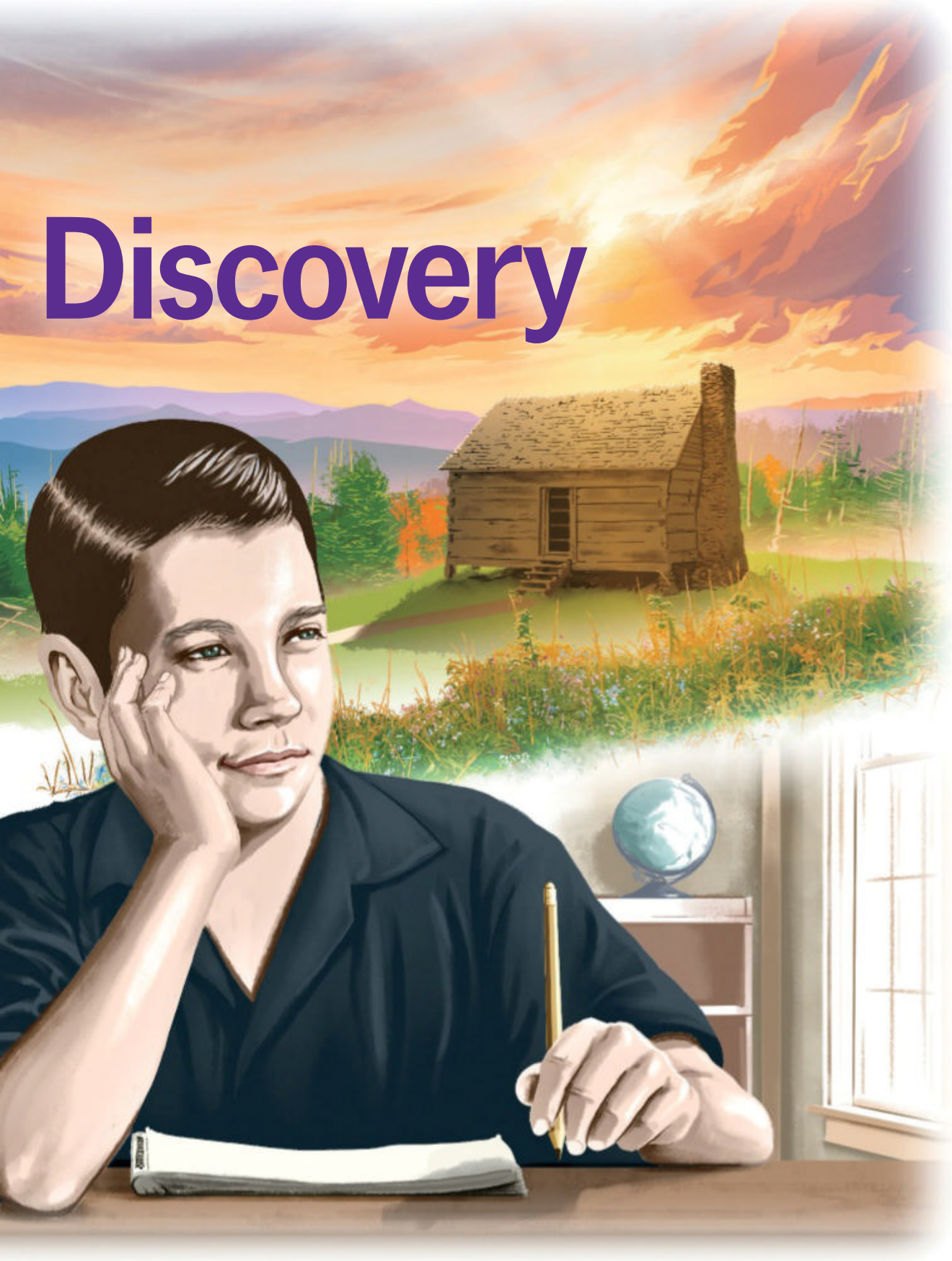


ILLUSTRATION BY PETE LLOYD

Eighth grade meant a new classroom and a new teacher, but I barely noticed the change. As far as I was concerned, a classroom was a classroom. I longed to be outside, roaming the hills of Tennessee, where I grew up. My teachers didn't appreciate hidden caves, running creeks and wild bears any more than I appreciated algebra, history and good penmanship. My report cards always included notes, like "Douglas needs to apply himself instead of gazing out the window."

My parents tried their best with me, but school hadn't been a big part of their lives either. Daddy left after the third grade. Mama after the sixth. "He'll grow out of it," Daddy said when yet another teacher had concerns about me being too much of

Discovery



a dreamer. "Our boy came along a hundred years too late," Daddy said. "If he'd been born in 1842, he would have fit right in around these parts."

The rugged land, the wildlife, the adventure to be had back then—more for me to dream about while chained to my eighth-grade desk. It seemed there were two kinds of people in the world: those who belonged in the classroom and those who belonged in the mountains. The teacher, Miss Cook, seemed to know which one I was and had put me as far away from the window as possible.

"Douglas Clark." The sound of my name snapped me out of my reverie. Miss Cook had appeared at my side without my even knowing. "If this daydreaming continues, I'm going to have to pay a visit to your parents," she said.

Miss Cook listened intently as I told her about my world where angels kept me in awe.

I gave her a grin. "If you ain't going to help cook supper, you might as well not come," I said.

The class laughed, but Miss Cook did not. "That's very clever," she said. "I think you should stay after school and share more of your cleverness."

I sighed. My joke was going to keep me where I didn't belong. That's the way it was with teachers. They never missed a chance to remind me of that.

As soon as the bell rang, I took out my notebook to get a head start on writing *I will not be clever in class* 200 times. But Miss Cook had something else in mind. She called me to the front and told me to sit facing her. "I want you to tell me what you love about the world outside that window," she said.

I was so surprised that for a long moment I didn't know what to say. Who was this person—a teacher, no less—asking me about my roaming? Was she setting some kind of trap? I started out cautiously and played it safe with my revelations. But Miss Cook really seemed interested. She listened intently and even smiled as I told her about my world where angels kept me in awe. I described the fragrance of mountain laurel in spring. The artifacts I'd come across. How if you sat quietly long enough, young animals would come up close and let you touch them. Like water from a spring, my memories flowed. For the first time in my life, I didn't want the school day to end.

"I have an assignment for you tonight," Miss Cook said as I prepared to leave. "I'd like you to write a 100-

word story about the outdoor adventure you enjoyed most."

That night, I couldn't wait to get started on my assignment. Mama raised her eyebrows when I sat at the table, working dutifully after dinner. The first draft of my paper—like most of my homework assignments—was illegible. So I started again, printing carefully this time. I wanted Miss Cook to be able to read every last word. "Through the trees, I saw the roof of a structure in the valley below," I wrote. "At first I thought it was only a hunter's lean-to…"



Young Douglas, the storyteller

Everything else faded away as I painted a picture of the abandoned cabin I'd come upon, and the mysterious lady in the single photograph I'd found within its splintered walls. I filled two pages imagining Miss Cook's face as she read my story. As much as I loved wandering alone in the mountains, there was something special about writing it all down for someone else.

I turned in my paper the next day and waited for Miss Cook's reaction. "This story was wonderfully told!" she said. "I would love to read another. But only if you do your other assignments first." We had a deal. I skipped the creek that afternoon and went straight home to get my algebra and history homework out of the way. My reward? I'd write about the time I saved a fox from a trap!

Miss Cook read dozens of my stories that year. Sometimes she asked questions if she wanted more details. I started asking questions too. I raised my hand in class when I didn't fully understand what Miss Cook was saying. I discovered that school learning could be as interesting as what nature had to teach me. My parents stopped getting those "Douglas this, Douglas that" notes attached to my report cards.

Miss Cook wasn't at our school for very long. But I stayed all the way through to the end, right up until I graduated high school. My eighth-grade teacher had shown me there was no place in God's world I didn't belong. In the mountains or in the classroom, angels were there to set my imagination flying. ■

earning their wings





Pastor Chris knows the signers of every single leaf.

Church Family Tree

JERILYN LOWERY, BATESVILLE, INDIANA

Nance is our church's unofficial seamstress. Anytime someone needs a prom dress altered or a pair of pants hemmed, we call on Nance. When Pastor Chris mentioned that he thought a quilt would look lovely hanging in the church, Nance and her friend Kathy brainstormed a one-of-a-kind gift for Pastor Appreciation Month. To start, they made a quilt with a large, bare, brown tree trunk in the center. They cut out fabric in the shape of leaves. To keep the project a secret, they drove to each church member's home to have the leaves signed. Then they attached the signed leaves to the tree trunk on the quilt. A birdhouse that resembled our church hung from one of the branches. Nance and Kathy finished the project by adding a memorial garden to honor congregation members who'd gone to heaven. When they presented the quilt to Pastor Chris, he ran his fingers over each member's name and was overwhelmed with gratitude. The talented quilters had stitched our church family together one leaf at a time.

Something Just for Me

MARTHA ARTYOMENKO, SILVERTON, OREGON

My fingers trailed up the sleeve of the soft blue sweater hanging on a rack at the box store. I checked the price tag and sighed. It was so pretty, but there was no room in the budget for nonessentials. My husband had been hospitalized for several months, and we had four young boys to feed and clothe. To say money was tight was an understatement. I headed toward the checkout to purchase our necessities and tried to forget about the sweater.

When I got home, I grabbed the mail and found an envelope with my name on it but no return address. Inside was a gift card and a note that read, "You are loved. Use this for yourself—something just for you. Love, a friend from church." Tears pricked my eyes. After I purchased the sweater, I tucked the gift card into my wallet to remind me that God never forgot me. And I'd never forget the anonymous gift-giver's kindness.



It's sweater weather!



Kristy's mom (left) with her quilting buddies

Momma's Pincushion Posse

KRISTY HORINE, PARIS, KENTUCKY

Friends and loved ones gathered around the guest of honor in the fellowship hall. Four months earlier, on her sixty-fifth birthday, my mom had been diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer. She'd already endured a mastectomy and the removal of 15 lymph nodes, and she'd just received her first dose of aggressive chemotherapy. It hadn't been easy, but today, we wanted to celebrate Momma. I teamed up with her quilting group—whom I'd affectionately named the Pincushion Posse—to plan this party. Since Momma would soon be losing her hair, we'd asked guests to bring a colorful head scarf or a soft, crocheted hat. As Momma opened each gift, she was reminded she wouldn't be walking this road alone. Everyone in the room loved her and was there to help. Her "posse" even taught her flattering ways to tie the scarves to help boost her confidence. More than 10 years later, Momma is cancer-free, and we celebrate her every day.





ILLUSTRATION BY WEITONG MAI

till we meet again

Gifts of love arrive when least expected

From the Sea

I walked barefoot along the shore of Playalinda Beach at the Canaveral National Seashore, near Titusville, Florida. Just the way I wanted to spend my birthday: my toes in the cool water, eyes on the wet sand, doing something I loved—seashell hunting. I only wished my dad could be with me. He had gone to heaven more than a decade ago, but looking for shells was one of our favorite pastimes. I missed him, especially today, when he would have called me first thing in the morning with a cheery "Happy Birthday, Little Bit."

My collection bag was nearly full. Foamy waves rolled in to deposit more treasures. Could my bag fit even one more?

The tug of the receding wave pulled at my ankles, and a particular shell caught my attention. I hadn't seen one like it all day. I scrambled to catch the beige whelk before the ocean reclaimed it. I ran my fingers over the shell's perfect crown. Its once sharp points were worn smooth into dainty bumps. How long had the

whelk tumbled through the ocean and scraped against the sand before arriving at my feet like a gift?

I looked out at God's vast ocean. Mingled with the comforting sound of the surf was Dad's "Happy Birthday, Little Bit." My whelk shell had tumbled all the way to me from heaven.

SANDY KIRBY QUANDT, SEABROOK, TEXAS

Forever Besties

When my best friend, Bonnie, died in Portland, Oregon, she left me her car in the will. I'd flown from where I was living in California to attend the funeral, but I would drive Bonnie's car back. I signed the papers and collected the car. Keys in hand, I sat behind the wheel for a moment before beginning the long drive home.

Bonnie and I had been besties since first grade. Even back then, she had to have the last word. I always teased her about that, and she didn't deny it was true. We were different in so many ways. I had to have a dog; she had no desire for a pet. In our travels, she enjoyed making the journey, and I just wanted to get there. She was brilliant at math, while I couldn't even do long division. We both loved to watch movies, even though she rolled her eyes if I got emotional. I often did.

When *Beaches* came out in 1988—the story of a lifelong female friendship much like ours—Bonnie and I saw the movie together. I was already crying before the end, when one of the women died. The song "Wind Beneath My Wings" played over the credits, and I sobbed into a tissue. "You'd cry at *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*!" Bonnie said. "A musical comedy!" I couldn't help but smile away my tears.

Sitting behind the wheel without her beside me, I wished Bonnie could lighten my mood now. I started the engine and flicked on the radio, already set to a Portland station. What else would be playing besides "Wind Beneath My Wings"? It was just like Bonnie to get in the last word and keep me smiling.

RHODA BLECKER, BELLINGHAM, WASHINGTON

A Cardinal Blessing

My mother was a proud grandmother as she watched my daughter, Mary, walk down the aisle on the arm of her stepfather. I knew what Mom was thinking. Only one thing could have made this wedding day more perfect.

My parents had lived next door to our little family until Mary was five years old. Her grandmother loved to tell the story of how Mary's dad used to mimic the cardinals who sat on the phone wires outside. Mary was too young to remember herself. "I believe they actually talked to one another!" Mom would say. I was so grateful that Mary had her grandmother's stories to comfort her after her dad passed away when she was only 16.

I eventually remarried, and Mary happily invited her stepfather into her life. At one point during the Quaker ceremony, the guests were asked to stand and offer words of encouragement to the bride and groom. In a silent moment between speakers, we heard a cardinal outside the church window. No one made a sound as we listened to its song.

The bride looked to her grandmother as she stood up. "Think of it, Mary. Your dad now talks with angels like he used to talk with cardinals when you were a child," Mom said. "In his perfect way, God let a cardinal deliver this heavenly wedding blessing."

BETH ANNE KING, NORTH YARMOUTH, MAINE

Appointment to Remember

The phlebotomist at my lab appointment carried heaviness in her smile. As she pulled the tourniquet tight, I commented on her ID tag. "Hope," I said. "What a beautiful name." She seemed startled by my compliment, but as she continued filling the vials, she glanced down at her watch. With a gentle shake of her head, she opened up.

"I lost my sister a year ago," she said, "and it has really rattled my faith. She'd always told me I had a beautiful name. You said the same thing—and you said it at exactly 10:05." Hope went on

to explain that 10:05 had always marked a special time for the two sisters. As if it was a message of God's faithfulness. "I have to believe he sent you to me this morning," she said.

I left the lab in awe that God had used me as a messenger to remind Hope of his love for her. I prayed that her trust in him would be restored. That was evident in the joy she exuded during my follow-up visit three months later. Only our Hope-Giver could have brought Hope the everlasting comfort she sought, and at the exact time it would have meant the most.

CATHY BAKER, TAYLORS, SOUTH CAROLINA

A Voice I Loved

My uncle Bill has Alzheimer's, and I spent a good portion of the last year cleaning out his house. The job could be emotionally draining, summoning up so many family memories. When I got weary, I asked God to help me stay strong.

One day, deep within the recesses of my uncle's home office, I found a box of recordings marked "Stories From Mom." I was lucky enough to have known my grandmother, but she had been dead now for nearly 30 years. More than her sweet voice itself, I remembered the feeling I got when I listened to her talk. No matter what the subject, the softness in Grandma's voice told me that everything was okay and it always would be. If I listened, would I be able to feel that same reassurance all these years later?

I quickly got my hands on a tape player. I popped in the old cassette and held my breath. There she was, telling stories about growing up on a farm, her voice as much a comfort to me as it ever was. Then I heard a tiny voice telling Grandma about a tea party. My eyes welled with tears. It was me! In a moment with my grandma that I didn't even remember!

The taped exchange lifted me up in a way that I never could have imagined. I was overcome with gratitude for family and the strength I drew from it.

Everything was going to be okay. Grandma told me so.

HEATHER JEPSEN, WARRENSBURG, MISSOURI

quotes to comfort

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you…" **MATTHEW 11:28–29**

"Today is the tomorrow you were worried about yesterday.… Just keep in there, just keep fighting. Be bold, and mighty forces will come to your aid."

ANTHONY HOPKINS

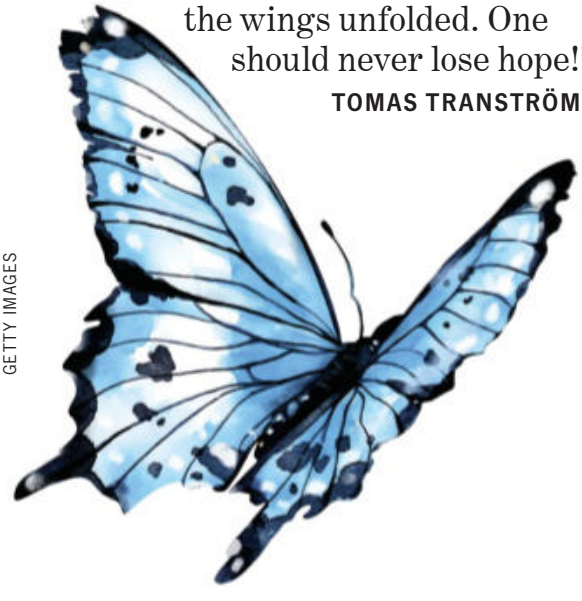
"The only things that we can truly give to each other are the only things that we truly need—an ear to listen, a heart to care, a word of encouragement and a hand to help." **JIMMY CARTER**

"Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up."

GALATIANS 6:9

"The caterpillar feet were gone, the wings unfolded. One should never lose hope!"

TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER



GETTY IMAGES

"Grace always meets you exactly where you are, and then it doesn't leave you where it found you."

ANNE LAMOTT

"To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it—but we must sail, and not drift, not lie at anchor."

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES SR.

"If you want to go fast, walk alone. If you want to go far, walk together."

AFRICAN PROVERB

"The cyclone derives its power from a calm center. So does a person." **NORMAN VINCENT PEALE**

"Hope does not deny all the difficulty and all the danger that exist, but it is not stopped by them. There is a lot of darkness, but our actions create the light."

JANE GOODALL

"My view is simple: I believe that God is love. Period. End of story. For love runs through everyone and everything." **WILLIE NELSON**

Turn to the Angels

In his walk on earth, Jesus had to do what we often do ourselves

BY RICK HAMLIN
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Think of it: Those heavenly beings were there right from the beginning of Jesus' story. It was the angel Gabriel who announced to Mary that she would give birth to God's son. Meanwhile, an angel in a dream urged Joseph to stand by her. These were quiet appearances, unlike what happened that first Christmas night, when a "multitude of the heavenly host" appeared to the shepherds, "praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.'" Two thousand years later, we celebrate Jesus' birthday with that same celestial joy, singing, "Angels we have heard on high."

But Jesus' angels were not only creatures of glad tidings; they were at hand to pave the way forward. An angel appeared to Joseph, for instance, urging him to take the child to Egypt to escape King Herod's wrath. Determined to kill the newborn king, Herod had all the innocents in and around Bethlehem slaughtered. Not until Herod was dead did an angel alert Joseph that it was safe for the Holy Family to return to Israel. They settled in Galilee in the town of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, the carpenter's son.

Fully grown and ready to obey God's will, Jesus remained under the watch of angels. The Spirit led him into the wilderness to fast for 40 days and nights in preparation for ministry. There, the devil waited. His plan was to entrap Jesus while he was hungry and at his most vulnerable. Jesus was sorely tempted to misuse his power—he was fully human, after all.

In one instance, the devil transported Jesus up to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem, urging Jesus to throw himself off. The devil went so far as to quote Scripture as proof Jesus would survive the fall: "For it is written," the devil said, "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up

ALAMY



in their hands…'" The devil was unsuccessful in his attempt to manipulate God's word.

Jesus responded with his own bit of Scripture: "It is also written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Holy writ speaking to holy writ.

At the end of those 40 days and nights, which we observe every year during Lent, the angels came to comfort Jesus. He needed the angels as much as we do in our own times of suffering and despair.

On the Mount of Olives, the night before his crucifixion, he prayed his disciples would not fall into temptation, as they were tired and weary. "The spirit indeed is willing," he warned them, "but the flesh is weak." He himself asked God to take this cup of suffering from him, until finally conceding, "Not my will, but yours be done." In Luke's account, even as Jesus' beloved disciples fell asleep, abandoning him in his final hours, "an angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him."

Later, when the men came to seize Jesus and arrest him, one of his companions took out a sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back," Jesus said, making the profound observation that "all who draw the sword will die by the sword." He knew he could make it all go away if he really wanted. He had the power to create a new scenario. "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" he asked. A world of angels were always at his command. Jesus could change everything with their help. "But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?" There could be no Resurrection without the Crucifixion.

And of course, on that glorious Easter day, even before the women showed up at the tomb, an angel of the Lord came down from heaven. The angel rolled back the stone so the empty tomb could be seen. "His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow," the Gospel of Matthew describes the heavenly being, noting that the guards were scared out of their wits. No wonder. When the women arrived, the angel reassured them, "Be not afraid," and delivered the good news: "The Lord is risen."

When Jesus ascended to heaven at the end of his walk on earth, the disciples gazed upward, yearning for him. Two men in white robes appeared, encouraging the disciples to continue the work Jesus started. Jesus might have ascended to heaven, but angels remained to walk with his followers, to walk with us. ■

angel sightings



My golfing girlfriends chatted as the sun rose for our seven o'clock tee time. "You know," I said to the group, "if it wasn't for this foursome, I'd be home snug in bed at this hour." Everyone smiled. We knew we were good for one another, on our best days and our worst, supportive through thick and thin. We walked up from the putting green to our golf carts. "Look at that shape in the grass," one lady pointed out. "It shows how much we love each other." I wholeheartedly agreed. **B.J. TAYLOR, PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA**

Twin Angels

I saw myself lying there, crushed beneath the truck. Dead

BY BRUCE VAN NATTA
RUDOLPH, WISCONSIN



Eyes wide open: Bruce witnessed it all.

It was a big job, the kind I loved. There aren't many people who know how to tear down and rebuild the engine on a Peterbilt logging truck. I'd built my mechanic business from scratch and was proud of what I'd accomplished. Across central Wisconsin I was the guy to call for heavy machinery repairs.

On this particular November day, I was finishing up work on an engine at the truck owner's garage. I'd spent most of the last three days removing the head gasket and cylinder head, carefully disassembling clamps, cables and other engine parts. It took a lot of horses to power this big boy. The front wheels and axle alone carried over 11,000 pounds. Now, in the home stretch of a 12-hour day, my mind kept returning to a discussion my wife, Lori, and I had two nights ago about our faith. I wasn't sure where she was coming from. God had already changed me so much, helped

PHOTOS BY TIM EVANS/SATURN LOUNGE

me overcome problems with drugs and alcohol. And he had given me this talent to fix engines and a successful business. Yet Lori believed I could deepen my faith still more. She believed I could meet God in my life in ways I had yet to understand.

I filled the engine with oil and coolant, then started it to make sure everything was in running order. *Almost done.* I was putting away my tools when the truck driver and part-time mechanic asked if I'd look at an oil leak unrelated to my work.

"Sure," I said.

The passenger-side wheel was removed and the jack was still in place. I slid under the truck feet first on a creeper. Peering into the underside of the rumbling engine, I wiped away oil with a rag, trying to find the leak. As I looked up, I saw some movement in my peripheral vision, turning my head just in time to see the jack shoot out from under the front axle like a rocket. Before I could react, the axle slammed across my midsection, crushing me to the floor. I screamed in agony till I was gasping for air, my lungs burning. Then a final involuntary cry from deep inside me: "God, help me!" My arms strained against the axle. It didn't budge. Sweat soaked my face and hair. The engine rumbled, each vibration grinding the axle down on me.

I heard the other mechanic calling 911. "Hurry! Please! He's smashed under the truck."

It's too late. I'm going to die. I tasted blood, felt it running down my chin. The mechanic turned off the engine. Then he began jacking up the truck again. The axle slowly raised off me, but the pain didn't let up. I reached back and grabbed the bottom of the front bumper with my hands to pull myself out. But I moved less than a foot before my muscles collapsed, only enough for my head to stick out from the bottom of the truck.

I thought about Lori and the kids. I loved them so much. I wished I could see them to tell them goodbye. But everything was fading. Turning black.

The next thing I knew it was as if I were watching a movie from 15 feet in the air, a scene unfolding below me, the logging truck in the foreground. A man's head stuck out from beneath the front of the truck, another man on his knees by him, stroking his hair. "Hang on," said the kneeling man. "I don't want to move you. The paramedics are coming. Please don't die." The man under the truck was me…. I was watching myself. Intrigued, I looked closer. Was I alive? There was no sign of movement. I realized the pain was gone. Now I felt nothing. *No, this can't be the end.* I shut my eyes tight, trying to will my-

self back into my body. I opened my eyes again. I was still watching myself from above.

But wait…there below me were two incredible figures kneeling on either side of the other mechanic. I knew what they were—angels. God had sent angels! They were like no angels I'd ever imagined—massive, powerful men, bigger than any NFL linebacker. I could see only their backs. They wore radiant, white robes made from some type of heavy material, almost as if it were woven from ropes. Curly blond hair fell halfway down their backs. Their arms reached under the truck toward my crushed midsection. Their presence filled the garage in a supernatural way, yet the scene, to me, seemed natural, inviting. I wanted to feel their touch, to see their faces. *Is this what happens when you die?*

I saw a paramedic rush into the garage, seemingly oblivious to the angels. She knelt on the floor next to my head, the angels not moving. She was talking to me as I watched from above. Then she tapped me on the cheek—hard. *My face!* I could feel again! In the distance I heard a voice getting louder. "Open your eyes!" When I did, I was looking up—into the eyes of the paramedic. "Hello, Bruce," she said. "Keep those eyes open for me. It's very important."

I was alive! I looked to my right and left. The angels were gone. Excruciating pain ripped through my body. Where were the angels? Why had they left? I felt myself fading again, something telling me to let go. I didn't have the strength to push back. Then a clear, powerful voice: *If you want to live, I'm here,* it said. *But it won't be easy. You're going to have to fight, harder than you've ever fought for anything. Are you willing?* It wasn't an angel speaking, or the paramedic. It was God's voice speaking deep inside me, deeper than the pain. I'd have to fight. But not alone.

My mind flashed on an image of Lori and the kids. I thought of how much they needed me. No, that wasn't right. I needed them, especially now. *God,* I prayed, *I want to live. I want to fight for them and for you. I'll do whatever it takes.*

More paramedics, urgently discussing how they'd move me. Slowly they pulled the creeper out from under the truck. "We're going to take you to the hospital now," the first paramedic said. "From there you'll be airlifted to the trauma center in Madison. We've contacted your wife. She'll meet you there. I know you're hurting, but stay with me. You're doing great."

For the next hour—till we reached the trauma center—I focused with all my strength on keeping my eyes



Younger years: Bruce and Lori enjoy hot cocoa and a Bible lesson with their children (from left), Jacob, Caleb, Emily and Lauren.

open. *Keep looking around. As long as you can see, you're alive.*

The doctors at the trauma center rushed me to the operating room. I have a vague memory of the anesthesia mask covering my nose and mouth. Then all went dark, as dark as death.

The next thing I remember is looking through a kind of haze. Lori was sitting beside me. Even in my stupor I could see the huge smile on her face. "Bruce! You're awake! The doctors have had you in a coma for two weeks. They said to cross my fingers. I told them I was going to pray. I've never said so many prayers!" I wanted to talk, but a breathing tube filled my mouth. I wanted to write, but my arms were too weak to move. It was another week, the second week of December, before the doctor removed the tube and I could tell Lori everything.

"Something happened to me," I finally told her.

"It's okay," she said. "The accident. You've had three surgeries. Don't push yourself. You don't need to talk."

"No," I said. "I need to tell you. It's about our discussion. You were right. God has something he needs me to do. I know he'll help me figure it out. Lori, I saw angels after the truck fell on me. He sent angels to save me!"

"Even the doctors said it was a miracle you survived," she said. "Rest now." I nodded weakly. There'd be plenty of time. The future stretched before me like a blank page, inviting me to write a new chapter. God had sent angels to let me know he'd be there with me through the challenges ahead, that my relationship with him would deepen. That was the promise of the angels.

Doctors operated on me twice more—literally putting my insides back together. It was months more before the pain subsided enough for me to function. Today, I travel around the world, sharing my story in churches, jails, schools and on the internet. I've even written a book. The accident has changed my life forever. I've learned how frail the human body is. Yet I've discovered the strength the Lord offers us to draw from, present in ways I could never have believed. ■

Over the Line

I'd carried my guilt for so long. Could I ever let it go?

BY GRACE SUSSMAN
RIO RANCHO, NEW MEXICO

Two months into my new teaching job at a big inner-city school, I followed the crowd into the gym for an afternoon assembly. Teachers, students and staff filed onto the bleachers as I looked around, wondering what was coming next. The veteran teachers had been buzzing about the assembly's importance, and I had a lot to learn. My Language Arts classes were going well so far, but there were so many students with real troubles in their lives, both in the school setting and at home. I wanted to become a teacher these students, especially, could trust.

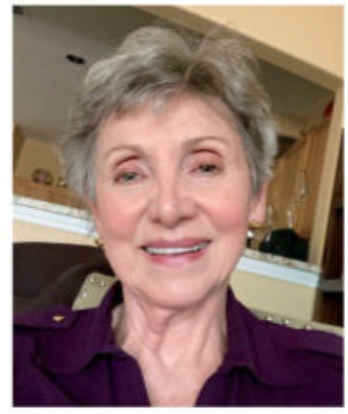
A role model like Richard, I thought when my eye landed on one of the history and civics studies teachers who'd found a seat. Richard was one of our most popular instructors. He'd started his career as a lawyer representing inmates on death row. Later, he decided he could do more good in the world by helping kids get on the right path before they got into trouble and needed a lawyer. He became an educator. His devotion to each and every one of his students was plain in the way he engaged with them. He'd earned their trust, and it showed.

On another row of the bleachers, I noticed one of my own students whose trust I was trying to gain. Awad often hid behind his hoodie, as if trying to disappear. When I saw that he was having a hard time fitting in, I started meeting him during lunch for extra help. I was also trying to convince him to sign up for the after-school cooking class, where he might make some friends. I wasn't sure I was getting through to him, though. It was a slow process. Awad had no reason to trust a teacher he hadn't known for long, but I hoped I could become a positive influence in his life. Maybe I was expecting too much.

I took a seat just as the school principal walked to the center circle painted on the gym floor. She raised

ILLUSTRATION BY AMALIA RESTREPO





Grace learned to let go.

the microphone and welcomed us to the presentation. "When I was in high school," she said, "I wanted to be cool more than anything." Some of the students giggled. "Unfortunately, one way I tried to be cool was by being a bully." I heard surprise in the audience. "That's what we're here to talk about today."

The principal went on to tell her story about the girl she'd picked on as a teenager. In my mind, I pictured another girl. A shy girl with shabby clothes. Her name was Margaret, and she was in my sixth grade class. My face prickled with shame as I saw myself ridiculing Margaret, trying to make the popular girls laugh. The school was big and unorganized. Student supervision was inconsistent, so there was often no adult around to put a stop to my teasing. I knew it was wrong even then, but I stopped picking on Margaret only when she moved away. I thought about her all through my growing-up years, and I never behaved that way again. But that didn't help me feel any less guilty about what I'd done.

As a teacher, I wanted to protect kids like Margaret. I talked to my students about bullying a lot, in hopes that they would learn to show kindness and compassion. It was a good thing they didn't know what I'd once been like. I only wished I could change the past. I shuddered to think of it.

Down on the gym floor, the principal pointed to the midcourt line running through the circle she was standing in. "All my life I've carried shame for how I behaved," she said. "But now, the time for healing has come. Anyone who has been bullied, please stand to the right of the line. Anyone who has bullied, please stand to the left of the line." The principal moved to the right of the line. "Teachers, staff, I invite you to participate."

I swallowed hard. *She wants me to announce to the whole school that I was a bully? No way!* What would my students think if they knew? What would Awad think? Probably that I was a hypocrite who couldn't be trusted. I didn't want to ruin any goodwill I'd built with him. But at the same time, I longed to step over that line. To be truthful. To once and for all confess what I'd done and maybe, finally, let go of the guilt I carried.

While I sat paralyzed, unsure what to do, I saw Richard get up. He climbed off the bleachers and took a stand—on the left side of the line! *Richard was a bully?* The teacher I admired and everyone loved?

Richard wasn't the only staff member brave enough to step over the line. I couldn't change the past, but I could own up to it. Before I knew it, I'd risen to my feet. I made my way down to the gym floor and stood beside Richard. A weight lifted from my shoulders. I gave my past sins over to God, and I felt his mercy. Then I thought about Awad up in the bleachers. I hoped I wasn't a failure in his eyes.

"Our goal as a school is to see fewer and fewer people on both sides of this line," the principal said. "I hope you will each do your part to put an end to bullying."

The assembly came to a close, and I left the gym to head back to my classroom. In the hallway up ahead, I saw a figure leaning against the wall. His face was hidden by his hoodie, but I still recognized him immediately. Awad. He seemed to be waiting for me.

As I got closer, he pushed off the wall to walk with me. "Hello, Awad," I said, but I couldn't look at him. I braced myself for whatever harsh words he might have to say.

"So you were a bully, huh?" he asked, his voice muffled by his hoodie. "Who did you bully?"

"A girl in the sixth grade," I said. "Her name was Margaret."

Awad was quiet. I kept my eyes straight ahead, afraid to make eye contact with him. The echoes of our footsteps filled the silence between us. When we got to my classroom, he stopped at the doorway. I fiddled with the knob.

"I was a bully too," Awad said quietly. "You know that white kid, James, who lived in the home for boys? I bullied him right up to the day he left here."

Finally, I let my eyes meet Awad's. They were misty with regret. I could see he wished he could change his past as much as I wished I could change mine. That was impossible, so Awad did the next best thing. He trusted me enough to share his confession. It was a first step toward letting go of regret and making way for forgiveness. God forgave our imperfections, and we had to forgive ourselves too. My hesitant steps onto the gym floor had changed both Awad and me for the better.

We stood at the classroom door for another moment, but no more words were necessary. Awad continued down the hall, his hoodie disappearing around the corner. My students didn't want to trust a teacher who was perfect. They wanted to trust someone who knew what it was like to make mistakes and learn from them. Awad had taught me everything I needed to know. ■



An Abundance of Angels

Our family had already seen one miracle. How could we expect another?

BY SUSAN OLIVER
OZARK, ARKANSAS

"Gunner's been in an accident."

I could only listen in shock as a family member told me how my 17-year-old great-grandson in Texas had been hit by a truck while riding his motorcycle. Luckily, Gunner had been just about to turn into the driveway at home when it happened, so he wasn't going very fast when a truck suddenly pulled out in front of him. That probably explained how he'd survived the collision at all. But his injuries were severe. Massive head injury. Crushed chest. Punctured lung. Broken arm. Eye damage. The list went on and on.

It was the kind of phone call no one ever wanted to get. Yet it wasn't the first time I'd received news like that. My mind went back to the day 23 years earlier, when my grandson Justin—Gunner's uncle—had a tragic horse-riding accident. For 10 days he remained in a coma while the family kept vigil, not knowing if he would ever wake up.

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES O'BRIEN

I prayed for angels to surround my great-grandson, but none appeared.

Our prayers for Justin were answered, and he recovered from his accident. It turned out our family had been blessed with a miracle. Why God chose us was beyond our understanding. I was a retired nurse, and I'd lost plenty of patients like Justin. Patients with families who'd prayed for their loved one as hard as we had. Our family had already seen one miracle with my grandson. How could we expect another?

It was Justin himself who'd called to break the tragic news to me about my great-grandson.

Gunner had been airlifted to a trauma center in Austin. Of course I wanted to get right on a plane. I wanted to go to my great-grandson's side.

"He's comatose," Justin told me when I suggested it over the phone. "Only immediate family are allowed in the room with him. We're all taking shifts so someone can be with him around the clock."

With my professional experience, I wasn't surprised that the hospital was limiting visitors. But even knowing he was in good hands—Gunner's mother was a nurse too—I wished I could be there myself.

"We can't all be with him in person," Justin reminded me. "But we can pray for him from wherever we are."

No one trusted in God more than my grandson Justin. When I hung up the phone, I remembered that day years earlier when he'd woken from his own coma. His father had been sitting beside the hospital bed when a pretty woman entered. "She touched Justin's face," he'd told me later. "She said Justin had been assigned to her, and she would be with him wherever he went. Then she left. A moment later, Justin opened his eyes."

I never doubted that the mysterious woman was an angel sent by God to heal him, and neither did Justin. He never missed a chance to share the story with others. Of course Justin was thinking about her now, as was I.

It wasn't easy being far away, relying on regular reports by phone. For two months Gunner remained in a coma. I prayed for angels to surround him, but none appeared at his side to heal him like they had

his uncle Justin. Gunner experienced periods of consciousness, sometimes even calling out, but nothing like alertness. Until one glorious day when I got the phone call I'd longed for. "Gunner is awake!" his father said. Whether it was a miracle or a medical triumph, I couldn't have been more grateful for his healing.

Visitors were still very restricted. I had to wait another month before I could see my great-grandson with my own eyes. But it was all worth it when I finally hugged Gunner to me, and he kissed my cheek. Little by little, he was able to relate everything he remembered from the accident.

"I saw the truck pull out in front of me," he told me one afternoon. "And then God was there, holding me in his arms. He said, 'Gunner, it's going to be a while, but you're going to be okay.' There were angels with us too. Five angels in a circle around us."

Two miracles in one family. And five more angels! It was almost too wonderful to believe. But the living proof was right in front of me. "God had his hand on you, Gunner, just like he did your uncle Justin," I said. "You know he still talks about the angel he never even saw."

"It's different for me, Nana," Gunner said. "My angels visit. Every night, before I go to sleep, we talk about all kinds of things. They laugh a lot and put me at ease. When they leave, I go right to sleep."

Gunner is at home now and making progress in a long recovery. He's looking forward to getting his driver's license. As for his angels, they came home with him too.

I'd once worried that two miracles were too much for one family to expect, but there's no limit to God's mercy and generosity. And his angels are too many to count. ■

Afterglow

Susan always knew God had plans for her grandson Justin. It seems some of those plans involved becoming a mentor for Gunner. "Traumatic head injuries have lifelong effects," she says. "Gunner is so lucky his uncle knows exactly what he's going through. Justin helps him get used to physical things, like making sure he's stable on his feet when he stands up or turns quickly." His uncle also gives him tips on how to stay organized. "They both struggle with short-term memory loss since their accidents," Susan says. "Justin has shared tips such as carrying a notebook to write down important things, so Gunner can refer to it later instead of relying on memory." It looks like Justin is one more angel at his nephew's side.

Room With a View

Mom just couldn't settle into any of the apartments we'd found for her

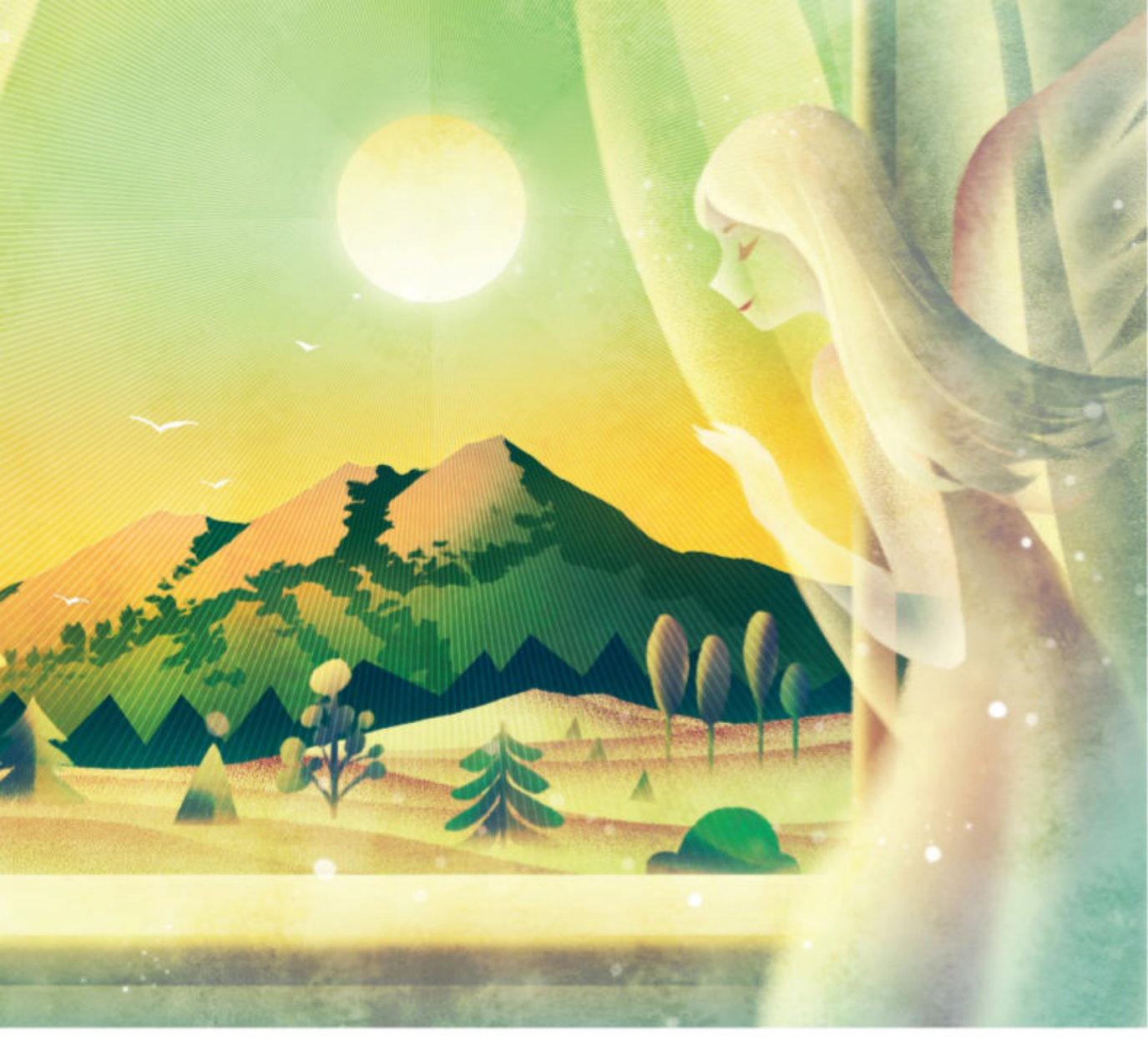
BY ROSEANN DASHKOWITZ
BROOMFIELD, COLORADO



How many mornings was I going to wake up from the same dream about searching for the perfect place for my mother to live in? I sat up in bed and shook my head. It was true that my husband, Charlie, and I had been through a half-dozen different apartment moves for Mom in the past 10 years. As much as she liked her independence, Charlie and I had discussed that her next move would probably be in with us. Mom hadn't gotten around to complaining about her current residence yet, but I knew it was coming. I got up out of bed and dressed for the day, wishing I didn't have Mom's living arrangements on my mind even while I slept.

My parents had made very few moves during their marriage. But ever since Dad's death, Mom just couldn't settle in anywhere. It was always the same. We'd find a nice

ILLUSTRATION BY JASU HU



apartment, and she'd be satisfied. "This is it, Rosy," she'd say. "No more moves for sure!"

But in time, I'd hear the words I dreaded: "I'm just not comfortable here…." Her reasons were always valid. Noisy neighbors, not enough light, low ceilings that felt claustrophobic… Things that didn't seem like a problem at first but had eventually made her miserable. And of course, there was the one thing that Mom really wanted but could never have. "If only we could find a place with a view of the mountains," Mom would say. "You know how I love the mountains."

I looked out my kitchen window while I waited for the coffee to brew. Yes, I did know Mom loved the mountains. In her decades of living in Colorado, she never tired of them. But those mountain view apartments were expensive, and her more practical needs had to come first. We all



Roseann found Mom's dream home.

knew Mom wasn't trying to be a bother. She appreciated everything my brothers and I did for her. She just couldn't seem to find peace.

Currently, she was living in the same condo complex Charlie and I lived in. I could walk around the corner and see her every day. It seemed like the ideal situation until a bout of shingles left her too weak to move around much. She spent most of her days in an easy chair, and even slept there when she was too tired to go to her bed. I was realizing that "just around the corner" wasn't close enough for us anymore. If Mom was still content with where she was living, I wasn't sure I was.

I poured myself a cup of coffee. *Maybe that's why I keep having these dreams,* I thought. It was always the same. The dream started with Mom begging Charlie and me to help her move again. She was more demanding in the dream than she had ever been in real life. "The place must have a mountain view," she'd say. "A perfect view I can enjoy from my bedroom chair." At that moment, the dream would sweep out over the landscape toward the iconic rock formation known as the Boulder Flatirons. It was as if God was showing me the exact mountain view he had planned for Mom. A view that would bring her the peace she sought. But that was wishful thinking on my part, and I didn't even tell my husband about my far-fetched, recurring dream that was ridiculously specific.

Charlie and I had some errands to run after breakfast that morning. In the car, we talked about Mom. Was it time to try to convince her to move in with us? Of course that would mean we'd have to move too. We didn't want to rush things for all of our sakes. But when we passed a sign for a new 55-plus subdivision that was going up soon, I did a doubletake. "Why not have a look?" Charlie said.

We went into the office, where the sales rep showed us a map. "The properties are selling well in this development," she said, "and we expect to house a thriving community. For example, here's a lot that's the last one available on its block." She drew an X on the map, and Charlie and I followed the street signs to the marked spot just for fun.

"It's not much to look at," I said

when we got out of the car. Just an empty bit of land that could have been anywhere. I turned to Charlie to see what he thought—and gasped. There behind him stood the Flatirons. But I definitely wasn't dreaming this time.

"What is it?" Charlie asked.

I pointed toward the mountains. "This is where we're supposed to live with Mom." Once I'd explained, Charlie and I made a decision.

With the deal sealed a few weeks later, I took Mom for a drive through the subdivision. "Oh, this neighborhood is lovely," Mom said, looking out the car window. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if you and Charlie lived here?"

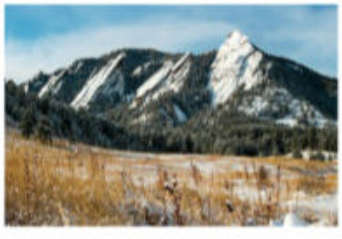
Struggling not to grin, I pulled up to our lot, and the Flatirons swung into view. "Oh, Rosy, will you look at those mountains!" Mom cried.

"You know, Mom, you're right about how wonderful it would be to live here. So Charlie and I will do that," I said. Then I got to deliver the best news of all. "And you will move in with us." Mom's face lit up with excitement. The view was all the convincing she needed.

When our house was built, Mom's bedroom window looked right out on those mountains. Charlie predicted that the subdivision would grow and more houses would be built. He warned that the view from Mom's bedroom might eventually be blocked. But that never happened. Mom spent many happy hours sitting in her comfy chair and soaking in the view she loved so much. Both our dreams had come true.

Angels have since parted the curtains so that Mom looks out on the glories of heaven now. But God let her spend her last days on earth in the peace she'd been seeking and we were amazed to find. ■

Afterglow



XUAN NGUYEN/GETTY IMAGES

Colorado is known for its mountain ranges, but the Flatirons (shown here in winter) are Boulder favorites. The unique reddish-brown sandstone formations appear on artwork and business logos throughout the city. Home to an array of wildlife including squirrels, rabbits, bats, falcons, bears and mountain lions, the Flatirons are nearly 300 million years old. They've been known by many names over time, but pioneer women thought they most resembled the flat, metal tools they used to press clothes. That was the name that stuck.

LIFE IS A HIGHWAY

All you need is the perfect guide

BY JEANNIE HUGHES, HURRICANE, WEST VIRGINIA

Divorce changed my life in a big way and in small ways I hadn't considered. Like always being in the driver's seat, trying to find my way with two small children and no sense of direction. That's what gave me pause when my longtime neighbors, Venus and Larry, invited the kids and me to join them on a road trip to Myrtle Beach. A family vacation was the last thing on my mind, but I knew it would be good for the kids. The drive? Well, that was a sticking point.

"A week at the beach," Venus said as the two of us discussed the possibility over coffee. "What could be better than that?"

"My sense of direction is terrible," I confided. "I'd never find my way to Myrtle Beach." I didn't tell her I worried about finding my way in life post-divorce, period.

"It's a long drive, but you'll follow right behind us, and we'll pull over together if we need to. We'll be your personal guides!"

If only it were that easy in life, I thought. But Venus did seem to have the answer to my immediate problem. The kids and I packed for our much-needed vacation.

The day we left, my spirit felt lighter than it had since the divorce. We rode with the windows down and the radio on. The kids entertained each other in the back seat. I didn't have to worry about road signs or exits. I could just focus my attention on my neighbors' bumper. The day went as planned, with Larry using his turn signal to direct me way in advance of our planned stop at the halfway mark. Before I knew it, we were pulling up to the hotel.

The kids and I shared a room with a king-size bed; Larry and Venus were right down the hall. Under a beach

ILLUSTRATION BY ASIA PIETRZYK



umbrella with a good book, I thanked God for good friends who let me know I wasn't alone. Maybe he had a whole path laid out for me as a single mother. If I trusted in him, I hoped I would learn to find my own way eventually.

I was sound asleep a couple nights into our stay when the knock came at the door. It was Venus and Larry. They were dressed for the road and full of apologies. They had to return home for a family emergency. "Will you be okay on your own?" Venus asked, squeezing my hands.

"Don't worry about me. Just get home where you need to be." I gave each of them a hug. I'd just have to find my way back. Alone. Somehow.

I tried not to let worry ruin the rest of our week. The kids had a ball, and I knew that even if I got us lost on the way home, it was all worth it. I got directions at the front desk when we checked out, starting with the nearest gas station.

With the kids all set in the back, I pulled out of the hotel parking lot and made it to our first stop, at least. I paid for the fuel and asked the attendant to point me to the highway. We were on our way—I hoped. I checked the compass in my car. *God, just keep me going north, and we'll be okay.*

We drove and drove, and pulled in and out of a rest stop, but the highway seemed to go on forever. The kids were in the middle of a game of I Spy when my faith took a nosedive and I panicked. My palms got sweaty; my heartbeat increased. Holding back tears, I gripped the silver cross that hung from my blinker. *God, I feel so lost. Even if I am going in the right direction.*

I stayed the course without my neighbors' trusty bumper in the lead. I slowed to keep a safe distance from a vehicle pulling onto the highway. Another car pulled around me. An old car. A car with West Virginia plates. Could the driver be headed home too? Could I follow him all the way, or was that desperate thinking? Getting closer, I noticed a sticker on the car's back window. An angel sticker. *I'll follow her!* This was either the smartest thing I'd ever trusted or the dumbest, but I wasn't letting that angel out of my sight. I followed her for hours straight, right to a sign on the interstate welcoming us to West Virginia. The kids cheered from the back seat.

I followed the angel until I knew exactly where I was, then turned off toward our house. The neighbors ran out to greet us in the driveway. "You didn't get lost!" Venus said. Not with my personal guide in the lead. On the road and in life post-divorce, God was present to show me the way. ■

heaven's music

BAM! BAM! BAM! The MRI machine started up again, and I flinched. I didn't think I could take being trapped in the long, narrow tube one second longer. I was only 11, and already scared because I'd be having surgery for my scoliosis in a few weeks. Suddenly, the technician pulled me out of the machine.

"You need to lie completely still," she said. "If you keep moving, we'll have to reschedule the appointment for another day."

"Try to relax," Mom said. "Remember, I'm right here."

I was ready to cry. It was a big financial burden for my family to drive the six hours from Chattanooga to Shriners Children's, a hospital in Tampa, Florida. As the technician pushed me back into the tube, I asked God to please help me stay still. The loud knocking started again, but I heard something over it: the unmistakable sound of violins playing. Harps joined in and the soaring music drowned out the noise of the MRI completely. A choir began to sing. I couldn't make out the words, but I lay still, listening in wonder. I'd never felt so at peace. I wanted to stay in there forever, but in what seemed like no time, the technician pulled me out. Everything went quiet.



Music is a known stress reliever.

"Thank you for playing the music," I told her. "It really helped!"

The technician looked puzzled and so did my mom. "What music?" they both asked.

In that instant, I knew God had blessed me with a choir of angels and their favorite stringed instruments.

KIMBERLY KIRK, CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

letters & messages



Phyllis and her husband, Rod, discovered more than tulips in the Netherlands.

PHYLLIS MICHAEL
CROPSEYVILLE, NEW YORK

In the March/April issue of *Angels on Earth,* I wrote about once finding feathers on a trip to Italy. Recently, my husband and I took another trip, this time to the Netherlands. Turns out, angels are everywhere there too. My favorite example? A tea bag that came wrapped in an envelope labeled Green Angel Blend!

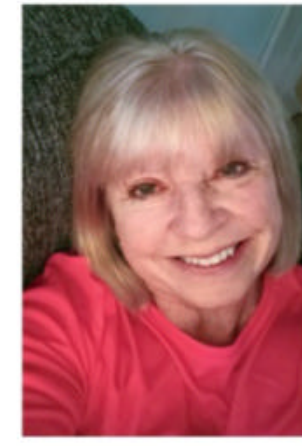
PATTI KELLY
FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE

Nearly every day of my two-week stay at Folly Beach, South Carolina, I searched the beach for angels. That is, whole shells or pieces of shells I could put together to make angels the way a friend at church had taught me to do. I learned how to use what washed ashore.

Walking along the sand, I kept an eye out for shells in just the right shapes for heads, robes and wings. I was able to bring home enough to make about 25 angels to share. What a great reminder of how God can repurpose anything—even us—into messengers of his love and grace.

MARY WHITNEY
LEAVITTSBURG, OHIO

My anxious thoughts circled the pillow like horses on a carousel. So many people to help and comfort! Then I heard the soft click of our little dog Max's nails on the living room floor. Max, now 12, had cata-



Mary found comfort in the night.

racts and nighttime anxiousness. I slid out of bed, careful not to wake my husband, and found Max. I cuddled him in my arms and whispered in his floppy ear until he calmed down. He settled into his bed as I covered him with a soft blanket. I realized that my own anxieties had vanished into thin air. While I was comforting Max, God was comforting me.

B.J. TAYLOR
PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA

Out at dinner with a recently widowed girlfriend, I did my best to console her so she could enjoy her meal at our favorite Chinese restaurant. Our plate of egg rolls came with a dipping cup of soy sauce in the corner. When I lifted the cup, this heart appeared. The sauce pooling in the corner of the plate looked like an arrow pointing upward. We decided that it was God showing his love, reminding us to keep our eyes on heaven, where he watches over us all.



God's love made a restaurant reservation.



A log cabin home keeps Roberta cozy.

ROBERTA MESSNER
HUNTINGTON, WEST VIRGINIA

Belts have always been one of my favorite accessories. But when my health took a downturn, I lost interest in making fashion statements. I got rid of most of my belt collection. Little did I know that my sister had lovingly saved some of my favorites, praying that I'd one day feel like wearing them again. When that glorious day came, I was reunited with a belt whose soft leather exuded a comfort I couldn't explain. As I wrapped the old favorite around my waist, I noticed some writing on the underside: "Where there is great love, there are always miracles."

My fashion statement? More like a fashion promise.

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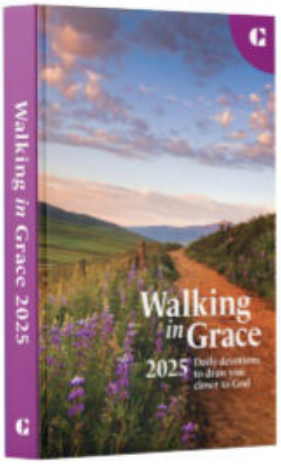
TOP: SCOTT GOLDSMITH

A SELECTION FROM

Walking in Grace

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."
—Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

One of my husband Jim's favorite shows is *The Joy of Painting* on PBS. "It's almost meditative," he'll say as he watches Bob Ross layer paint onto the canvas. I love it too and will often watch with him. It feels rewarding to see empty white space transformed into something beautiful.



One day, though, as Jim and I enjoyed an episode together, Bob Ross did something that took me aback: He dipped one of his broadest brushes into a dollop of midnight-black paint and proceeded to pull it across the middle of what had been a lovely forest scene. I'd thought the piece had been nearly finished. But now it looked ruined—bisected by an ugly, black gash.

"Why'd he do *that*?" I asked my husband as I stared at this new, ruinous flaw. I could not imagine how it would be made to belong within a painting that had been so pretty. Bob Ross didn't seem worried. Clearly, he could see something I could not.

Sure enough, as we watched, brushstroke by brushstroke, the artist transformed that black stripe into an incredible river. Vibrant and realistic, the river tumbled its way through what, just moments ago, had been a nice—but much less interesting—painting of a forest.

I smiled, impressed. That black stripe had never been a flaw at all. Bob Ross had a plan, but instead of telling his viewers about it up front, he'd waited for us to discover the beauty as his plan unfolded.

Much like God's plans for me. Because I trusted, when the time came, I saw their beauty too.

Where you are at work, God, what might appear calamitous to us at first does not remain that way.

ERIN JANOSO

Order our most popular devotional, *Walking in Grace,* online at shopguideposts.org.

on a wing and a prayer

In retirement, my husband, Phil, and I traveled all over the country. I'd often noticed big, thick, curled pieces of rubber littering the highways, but it wasn't until one afternoon while we were driving through Texas that I wondered about it out loud.

"They're pieces of tires," Phil explained. "Probably from those big tractor trailers." One of them drove past as he spoke. "A blowout can be intense," Phil went on, "but with all the other tires, the trucker doesn't necessarily lose control or even notice. Sometimes it takes an inspection to reveal a problem."

"Still, it must be dangerous for others on the road," I said. "All those rubber pieces flying through the air." The more I thought about it, the more scared I got. My fear threatened to ruin our favorite retirement pastime. *No,* I thought. *I won't live like that. God, I give my fears over to you. Please watch over us as we travel.*

I repeated the prayer to myself when another tractor trailer went by. It was soon followed by a snazzy red Corvette full of young men. "They're going mighty fast," I said.

Seconds later one of the truck's tires started throwing rubber up ahead. Pieces flew in all directions. It was as scary as I'd imagined. The sports car was still in view. It swerved, barely missing the projectiles, and came to a stop on the grassy median strip in the center of the highway. The car was facing the wrong way, but none of the boys inside were hurt. We slowed down enough to be sure. The tractor trailer rumbled on in the distance.

It all happened in seconds, but I carried the experience with me on every road we traveled to visit landmarks and friends around the country. God had not only answered my highway prayer but sent extra angels to protect the young men in that red Corvette.

PHYLLIS COCHRAN, WINCHENDON, MASSACHUSETTS

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Angels ON EARTH

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