

*that Eternal City, and when he thinks of God's calendar—he smiles—for he knows it will not be long—safe forever in the arms of Jesus. (Joyce Nordhielm—July 4, 1972)*

I look forward to the day that I will be with Ricky again.

Terri Pillatsch

### **God's Inexhaustible Love**

Little did I know in dealing with Terri's death that God was preparing me for a personal crisis still ahead. Not even a full year after her death, I received the phone call from my sister in Virginia that Mom had been diagnosed with stage-four lung cancer. Through my mother's short-lived battle with cancer, I learned firsthand about God's unending love in the face of death. And perhaps I came to understand just a little better where John found his strength when his best friend left him for a better world:

For men are not cast off  
by the LORD forever.

Though he brings grief, he will show compassion,  
so great is his unfailing love.

For he does willingly bring affliction  
or grief to the children of men. (Lamentations 3:31–33)

My mom's battle with lung cancer was over practically right after it began. We had counted on six months, hoped for six years, but were given just over six weeks. Since I had the most flexible career of the five remaining children, I committed myself to being with my mother as much as possible to help out my two sisters who lived there, and who both worked full-time jobs.

As a result, when I was in there (I ended up spending thirty days total, spread over four different trips), I spent a lot of time by myself sitting with Mom in hospitals. As she began to cycle downward, the time got progressively harder, and I had to dig

deep spiritually to find my bearings.

But the real story of God's intervention begins just a little over a week before Mom died. I had flown in to Virginia where she had been transferred to a new hospital in a city forty-five minutes away from her home. Dave and I had made a difficult decision to ask Mom to come to live with us as soon as she was well enough.

Dave was home converting a small area that was part of our family room into a temporary bedroom for my mother until we could find a house better suited to her recovery. We were amazed when another couple, hearing of our plight, offered to switch houses with us indefinitely, feeling their house might be better for Mom's recovery.

### **Homes, Mothers, Daughters**

When I arrived, I booked a hotel room. By the second night, I realized that coming back to this tiny room after being at my mom's bedside all day was depressing. Needing fellowship, I decided to try to find the couple who had first introduced the Bible to me when I was a teenager—Michael and Karyn. The last time I was back home I had heard that they were now leading a small church in the same city where my mother was in the hospital. Remarkably, that church turned out to be five minutes from my hotel.

The next Sunday I attended the church, and when I was ushered to a seat right beside Karyn, she was both stunned and overjoyed. We hadn't seen each other for twenty-six years! After the service, she urgently pleaded with me to stay at her house (Acts 16:15). It turned out that she was now a trained counselor (God's gracious provision) who would become my ear during the tough week ahead.

My sudden appearance also had made a big statement to her faith. On that very Sunday, she had awakened mourning the rift she was currently having with her adopted daughter. And with-

out any notice, another woman she had studied the Bible with long ago and I showed up and sat on each side of her. Suddenly she realized she had many daughters. She later told me that this was one of the most powerful moments of her life, testifying to God's love for her in a very personal way.

Staying at her house was incredible—they gave me a guest suite in their gorgeous Colonial home. Every night I came back, Karyn and I took long walks, catching up, talking about my mom, our mutual faith, and the turns each of our lives had taken. She was the healing balm I needed. I was the statement of God's love she needed. We discovered we were kindred souls reunited. The truth of Jesus' statement made more than 2000 years ago came alive in a new and real way to both of us:

"I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life." (Luke 18:29–30)

### **Send in the Angels**

At the hospital my mom was taking a distressing turn for the worse. Most of her time was spent either having radiation treatments or sleeping, since she was on morphine. When she was awake, she was often queasy, in pain or incoherent. When she was asleep, I took the opportunity to pray and sing over her often, asking God to send his angels to surround us in the hospital. My first sign of angels came in the form of gracious social workers and nurses who literally wrapped their arms around me.

When my sister had died years earlier, I hadn't been able to share my grief with anyone. I was embarrassed and afraid to let anyone in. This time, by God's grace, he allowed me to let others, even kind strangers, in on the roller coaster of emotions I was riding. Likewise, my friends seemed to be able to decipher the moments I would steal away, go outside and turn on my cell

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phone, and would call me with encouragement right when I needed it most.

Thankfully, a simple medication change brought Mom back to her right mind and what turned out to be her last good day. It was on this day that the doctor explained to my mother that she wasn't going to get better, and that if anything at all went wrong with her health, her body wouldn't be strong enough to combat it, and that she could end up on life support. She made it clear that wasn't what she wanted. She also made the final decision to move to Chicago to fight the cancer. After weeping into my shoulder, she turned to the doctor and said, "You know, there is one bright spot for me. I'll be back with my daughter Jennifer again."

The doctor later told me I should get my mom back to Chicago as soon as possible. Much to her delight, the doctor said she could go home to prepare. I took her home, got her extensive list of medications and caught a flight back to Chicago to prepare for her. She was happy to be home and fell into a deep sleep on the couch. My brother flew in from Indiana to help pack her and fly with her to our house.

I had only been home for a little over twenty-four hours when I started getting calls. Mom was back in pain and crying for help. The next day my sister called in a panic. She had come over to find Mom in a total state of decline. Soon, Mom was in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. When they got her there, they discovered that the radiation on her hip had punctured her colon. The doctor said the surgery required to repair her colon would kill her (and would be a violation of his Hippocratic Oath), but he would do it if we insisted.

My youngest sister, a nurse, called me weeping. She had to tell the doctor what to do. I told her of Mom's desire not to be put on life support. All of the children agreed that the answer was obvious, but devastating. I made plans to fly back that night. My brother from Philadelphia drove in so we could all be there.

### **Ministering Servants**

The next day, the watching and waiting began. Someone called and talked with my sister. Struggling with her own grief, this person questioned our decision to, in so many words “sit back and let Mom die.” My sister was devastated. We went to a waiting room to talk. I was trying to reassure my sister that we had done the only thing we could. I wanted to comfort her, but I sensed she needed something that I couldn’t give her.

It was about that time that we noticed a TV high up in the corner. A radiant woman came on the screen and started talking. She said, “There are some of you out there tonight who are struggling, who are facing difficult decisions. You are full of pain and you don’t know where to turn. This song is for you.” Then she started singing an amazing song about Jesus being the answer and how God cares about everything in our lives. My sister later said it was the most beautiful thing she had ever heard.

At the end we sat for a moment in stunned awe. We noticed that an extra-large, dark-skinned black man in a bright red shirt was trying to get our attention from the other side of the room. “Excuse me,” he said in a kind voice. We hadn’t even noticed that we had company in the room. He turned to my sister, “Excuse me, but I couldn’t help but overhear what you were saying.” He went on to tell her, “That song was a gift for this very moment, given to you by God. He wants you to know that he’s taking care of everything. That he loves you. That everything is going to be okay. He wants you to give it to him. To trust him.”

It didn’t occur to me until much later, that I might have witnessed a message from an angel (Hebrews 1:14).

### **Singing Mom Out**

We had some blood tests done, confirming the doctor’s warning that Mom would have never survived the surgery. All they could do was keep her unconscious so that she wasn’t in pain. We settled in to wait. Every day I prayed for a little time alone with

my mother. And every day, God granted my wish. I had my quiet times with her, prayed over her, sang songs to her, and even confessed her sins as I knew them.

Weeks after she had discovered that she had cancer, she asked me how to get things right with God. She had been baptized years ago, but had fallen away. She wanted to be restored. We read from a beautiful book explaining the way God seeks out a personal relationship with us. She was moved and told me that she had never seen God that way before.

Now, I was realizing that there would be no more opportunities. The doctor said that although Mom was unconscious, she could most likely hear everything we said, so I talked to her more about preparing to meet God. My heart's desire was to sing her out of this life, but the doctors had no idea when it would happen. I spent the night with my mother that Saturday night, and again worshipped over her in the watches of the night.

The next morning I headed to Mom's house to get ready for church. At church, I asked if I could take a songbook with me. I had planned on waiting until the evening to head back to the hospital, but I felt an urgency to get back to my mother.

When I arrived there, my brother and dad were there. My brother saw the songbook and asked if I'd like to sing for a while. We sat and sang for about an hour. Then I looked at Mom and noticed her breaths were getting further apart. The nurse came in and said it was her time. A few breaths later she was gone. God had granted my one parting wish, and my mother was sung out of this life, leaving with a little sigh and a smile.

My mom had been a nanny for many years to a little boy named David, or "little David" as she called him. Little David was in fifth grade now, and was devastated about my mother dying. He came to see her at the hospital, and his mom brought food for us. When my mom died on Sunday, his mother made the decision to wait until Monday afternoon to tell him, after he had

a big test at school. On Monday morning, before he knew she had died, he woke up and told his mother he had dreamed about “Nana.” He said that Nana had been talking to him when Jesus walked up and held out his hand. Nana took Jesus’ hand and they walked away together.

Likewise, my teenage son Caleb was lying in bed on Sunday afternoon thinking about his grandma, when a feeling of peace washed over him. A couple of minutes later, my husband Dave walked in and told him his grandmother had died.

### **Music in the Night**

Because of the time frame, we decided to move quickly to have Mom’s funeral. So we had to make a lot of decisions quickly. God graciously moved the hearts of two of my best friends to make the decision to fly in to support me. Although they independently decided to come from two different cities, they arrived within an hour of each other and were delivered to my doorstep together like a giant kiss from God.

Another dear friend, who we had supported through his own battle with cancer, volunteered to drive Dave and the kids all the way from Chicago to Virginia for the funeral. These friends and servants of God protected me, pulled me away when I needed it, helped me laugh a little and encouraged me to take time to grieve (1 John 3:16–20).

The morning of the funeral, I still had no music for the ceremony. It was on my heart to find the Natalie Grant song my sister and I had heard at the hospital. I ran to a Christian bookstore just four hours before the funeral. Although I couldn’t find that particular song, I found four others by Natalie Grant that I knew were perfect.

When I was ready to check out, I told the cashier that the CD was for my mother’s funeral. She looked me in the eye and without hesitation asked if she could pray with me. I was surprised, but quickly agreed. She then lightly touched my shoulder saying

a prayer that amazed me—talking about how God was sending me a message that my mom was fine, that he had her, and that I shouldn't worry. Another ministering angel.

A couple of days after Mom's funeral, we were going through her things when we found her journal. One of the last entries was this quote:

And the night shall be filled with music,  
and the cares that infest the day  
shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,  
and as silently steal away.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

It struck me that Mom had undoubtedly written this down after she found out she had cancer. Undoubtedly, although she reached the night of her life fraught with pain, that night was also filled with sweet music. God was singing over her and me. Leaving that experience, I knew my faith would never be the same—God had showed himself and his unfailing love to me and my family in a way that would stand forever as part of our family heritage.

### **Secure in Heart**

The LORD, the King of Israel is with you;  
never again will you fear any harm.  
On that day they will say to Jerusalem,  
"Do not fear, O Zion;  
do not let your hands hang limp,  
The LORD your God is with you,  
he is mighty to save.  
He will take great delight in you,  
he will quiet you with his love,  
he will rejoice over you with singing."  
(Zephaniah 3:15b–17)

Before we finish this journey, I want to thank you for walking with me. Certainly, as God has led me through the questions