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Angels ON EARTH



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an Angel*

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Angels on Earth, a bimonthly magazine from Guideposts, presents true stories about heavenly angels and humans who have played angelic roles in daily life.

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down to earth



When my friend and colleague, Edward Grinnan, Guideposts Editor-in-Chief, told me he'd finished his latest book on his family's experience with his mother's Alzheimer's disease, I knew you'd want me to share an excerpt, which begins on page 12. There's hardly a family that hasn't experienced a loved one struggling with this devastating disease. The story Edward tells in his book is both moving and hopeful as he explores his own uncertain fate at the hands of Alzheimer's, which seems to run in his family. "I'm just like my mom," Edward writes.

I can attest to that. I met his mom, Estelle, once, in my early days at Guideposts, when she visited New York and stopped by the office. Edward and his mom shared the same green eyes and unruly hair, the same eruptive giggle. Edward's dad had been a notoriously unadventurous eater, and now Estelle wanted to try authentic Chinese food. "I'll treat!" she said and corralled several of us for a trip to Chinatown. Poor Edward had to endure an hour of his mother's stories about "little Eddie" and all the angels who had to be called upon to watch over her rambunctious youngest child. I couldn't have imagined that even then, the early signs of dementia were subtly taking hold of her.

Nor could I have believed that the same disease would strike my daddy. How heartbreaking that he had to give up his law practice, that he had to stop jogging when we feared he'd get lost in his own neighborhood. My mother was overwhelmed by caregiving demands but worse, by watching the man she'd loved for a lifetime slowly slip away. Three years ago, the angels carried Daddy to heaven.

Nothing can stop this disease, but as Edward's story shows, angels are unwavering caregivers. To those we love and to us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Colleen Hughes". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping "C" and "H".

COLLEEN HUGHES, SENIOR LEAD EDITOR



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THE BROKEN ROAD

Something told
me the ruins
held a promise

BY SHELLEY ROBINSON, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

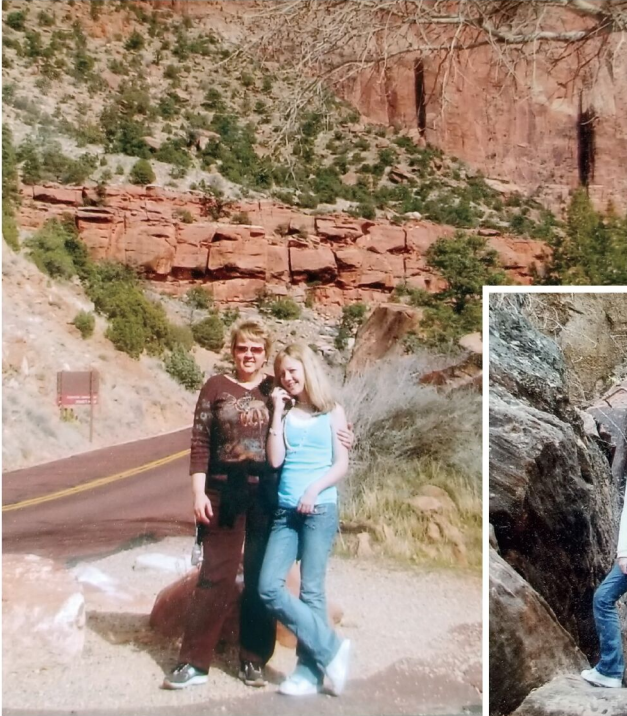
Zion National Park was only about 40 minutes away from our home. The perfect place for a day trip with my husband, Jim, and our 13-year-old daughter, Brianna. We'd chosen the perfect day for it too. The air was warm, the grass the bright green of spring. The same green lit up the buds on the trees.

The day was so beautiful, we decided to avoid the interstate and take the longer, roundabout route to the park. As the scenery rolled by, my mind drifted back to the many family car trips we'd taken while I was growing up. I did a lot of daydreaming with my cheek to the window and my back to my brothers in our old 1958 Ford station wagon.

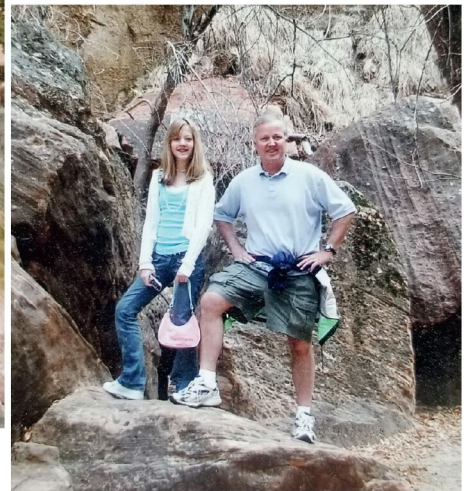
There was one roadside attraction that never failed to fascinate me as a child, one we always passed on our way to a relative's house in northern Utah. I called it the broken road. It lay about 20 feet below the roadway in a steep ravine between the rise of the mountain on one side and the sloping roadbed on the other, a piece of an old highway that had once wound up the canyon. All that was left of it in those days were two short sections of concrete with trees growing in between them.

The broken road was barely noticeable lying there below the new route, so whenever we got close, I pressed my face to the window to make sure I





Shelley and her husband, Jim, visited Utah's Zion National Park with their daughter, Brianna, in 2006.



didn't miss it. When it came into view, I tried to imagine our station wagon bumping its way along that old highway, and myself in the back seat looking up at the sheer walls of the canyon instead of down into the ravine.

I knew we would never actually drive along that road. No one ever would again. To me the broken road was the picture of a journey interrupted. As if the journey had come to an abrupt and unexpected end. So different from how I usually saw things in my young life, with time stretching out endlessly before me. It didn't make me feel sad, just curious. And it made me aware, in some innocent way, that I didn't have all the answers.

My family moved from northern Utah when I was 11. We took other trips on other highways. I barely thought about the broken road. I saw it once more in my twenties, on the way to a family gathering. I remembered exactly where it was, even though it was even harder to notice by then. The cottonwoods had grown taller and thicker. The road itself was worn down by time and weather. One day it would be completely erased. But it still felt as if it had something to teach me....

When Jim piped up to ask who was hungry, I realized I'd been day-

dreaming just as I always had on those long-ago family road trips.

“So where should we stop for lunch?” Jim said.

“Taco Bell!” Brianna suggested.

That settled that. We sat at a small metal table outside the restaurant. Once again I was struck by the beauty of the day. “Springtime” didn’t seem to describe it. Even “special” didn’t do it justice. The day was so much more. A gift that was almost heavenly.

After lunch, we continued toward the park, stopping halfway up the canyon to take in the views and get some great pictures. *Do Jim and Brianna feel something in the air today too?* I wondered, snapping a photo of the two of them. We jumped back in the car and were able to park right at the end of the canyon to walk along the river. We’d once had to take a shuttle bus to get this close.

“I can’t believe it’s not crowded on a day like today,” Jim said as we reached the beginning of the Zion Narrows hike. The lack of people seemed like another part of the mysterious gift we were being given. And the gifts just kept coming. Before we got two yards up the trail, we saw a group of mule deer right off the path. Totally unfazed by our appearance, they munched grass while Jim took pictures of them.

The three of us had the whole riverside path to ourselves: the boulders, the hidden springs, the delicate ferns that grew among the “weeping” rocks. Herds of deer, wild turkeys—the wildlife seemed to welcome our presence all along the way. It was as if angels had orchestrated an unforgettable excursion.

Driving back out of the canyon at dusk, we stopped to watch a blue heron fishing. It swooped down to the river, its wingspan amazing to behold, and walked on its long, graceful legs down the bank. When it spotted a fish, the heron swooped down with its beak, then in one swift motion threw back its head and swallowed the fish whole. Jim, Brianna and I watched in amazement.

We completed the day with a meal in a little town at the bottom of the canyon and made our way back home. “This was one of the happiest days of my life,” I told Jim when we were getting into bed that night.

The words didn’t quite capture what I meant. Our trip to Zion Park felt otherworldly. Mystical. A day that had been given to us for a reason. But what was it? *Something’s going to happen*, I thought a few days later. *Something’s going to change. That day was preparing us for it.*

A month after our trip to Zion, Jim

was feeling some back pain. That wasn't unusual, but when he began to lose weight and have trouble swallowing, he went to the doctor. The diagnosis was devastating: Jim had terminal stomach cancer. Three months after our trip to Zion National Park, he was gone.

After Jim's death, I got a call from the drugstore about picking up the photos Jim had dropped off to be developed. Pictures from our day at Zion. I flipped through them at the kitchen table. There was Jim in his shorts standing next to a boulder. Brianna at the scenic view, with the little purse she'd just begun to carry. The mule deer. The turkeys. The heron. Gifts from the One who knew that change was coming and wanted us to have these beautiful memories to hold on to when it did.

Standing in the kitchen, holding the photos, I felt as if I was falling through space. I saw myself tumbling off the familiar path I'd walked with Jim and onto a new path where I walked alone. *The broken road*, I thought suddenly, the image of it rising clearly in my mind. Perhaps that too had been a gift from God to prepare me for what lay far, far ahead. To show me that things can end, suddenly and swiftly, but life continues. In time, Brianna would see that too, and the notion kept me strong for her.

The road I've walked since Jim's death has sometimes been rocky and lonely. But God and his angels walk alongside me, guiding me on it. One day it will lead me back to Jim in the place where all roads lead. A place more beautiful than springtime and where nothing is broken. ■

Afterglow.....

President Woodrow Wilson established and named Zion National Park in 1919, but its sandstone canyons had been inhabited for thousands of years by indigenous peoples. Excavations in the 1930s found evidence of houses, granaries and stone burial chests, along with arrow and spear points, ceramic containers, sandals and baskets—artifacts believed to have come from communities in existence between 700 CE and 1200 CE. Today archeologists prefer to survey the land without excavation, leaving artifacts in the context in which they were found. Archeologists consult with associated indigenous tribal leaders to protect and preserve these valuable cultural resources for future generations. Stewardship involves the general public, who are required to leave artifacts in place and report the location of any new discovery, like a broken arrowhead, to a park ranger.

only human?

“**N**oah!” I yelled. Could my five-year-old son even hear me over the crashing waves and the noisy buzz of the Labor Day crowds on Oxnard Beach? “Noah!”

I ran across the sand, my heart racing, weaving through a forest of beach umbrellas and sunbathers. Every few feet I stopped to ask, “Has anyone seen my little boy? He’s got dark hair, blue eyes, three feet tall, in camo trunks?” No one had. I looked up toward the road, at the bike-riders and skaters zooming by.

Normally, I wouldn’t have let my son out of my sight. Today, though, we were with our extended family. It was our first big outing together since my husband’s mother, Noah’s beloved grandma Anita, passed away. With all the extra eyes around to keep watch, my husband and I had run back to the car for some forgotten beach toys. We returned to find our grown daughter, Tawny, near hysterics. Her husband, Jeff, was trying to calm her.

“He was right there, playing in the sand,” Tawny said with a sob. “I only turned around for a second...”

We called the police, then split up to comb the beach and the surrounding neighborhoods. *Maybe he’s scared and hiding*, I thought. *He’ll come out if he just hears a familiar voice*. I’d taught Noah never ever to talk to strangers, and to approach only a police officer or someone he knew and trusted if he got lost.

Five minutes turned into 10. Then 20. I was praying frantically when I heard my cell phone ring. It was Tawny.

“Noah’s all right,” she said. “Jeff found him on the street, walking back to the beach with two elderly ladies.”

I almost fainted with relief. I found our family gathered around Noah, but the two Good Samaritans had just left.

“They told us they knew somebody had to be searching for him,” Jeff said, “but he wouldn’t say a peep. Until one of them introduced herself. She told him he could call her Grandma Anita.”

DEBBIE BADANO, NEENACH, CALIFORNIA



Protected

If Mom had forgotten angels, they hadn't forgotten her

BY EDWARD GRINNAN
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, GUIDEPOSTS

My mother believed in angels. When I was a boy, she told me, “You have a guardian angel who watches over you and keeps you safe.”

I was a skeptical kid. “You mean some invisible guy following me around all the time?”

“Not following, Eddie, watching.”
“What’s the difference? Does he

AMY ETTRA

Edward in Great Barrington, Massachusetts

tell on me? To you—or the teacher?”

“He might.”

“I’m not sure I like that.” He sounded more like a spy than anything else.

“It’s not your choice. God assigns him to you.”

“Does he ever sleep?”

“If he does,” she said, “he probably has backup.”

Eventually the concept of a heavenly bodyguard faded into a childhood memory. And all these years later, as the disease of Alzheimer’s stole my mother’s memory like a thief in the night, I wondered if she too had forgotten about guardian angels. One thing I was to learn: They hadn’t forgotten her.

As her memory and cognition deteriorated, my brother, Joe, and his wife, Toni, had moved my mother into a sweet little house next door to them. There was a short path through some woods that connected the adjoining properties.

One bright morning when the sun was just burning off the spring chill, Toni and Joe sent my nieces, Clare and Rachel, over to Mom’s with some fresh scones. They returned just a few minutes later.

“There was a fire at Grandma’s house,” Clare said.

Toni and Joe rushed over. Mom seemed calm, or more to the point, oblivious. She didn’t have much of an explanation to share.

And the fire certainly needed an explanation because it was a miracle the house hadn’t burned to the ground. Apparently, the fire started in a staircase that led to an attic space that Mom often haunted, looking for what no one ever knew, least of all her. She would rummage through things, dumping out boxes, a behavioral manifestation of what must have been going through her mind, searching for the parts of herself that were disappearing, as if she was trying to find out who she was, an echo of King Lear: “Who is it that can tell me who I am?”

The walls and ceiling were scorched and charred, and the smell of smoke still stung the air. There was evidence Mom might have tried to throw some water on the blaze, but clearly it would have taken more than that to put it out. Much more. This had been a real fire.

How it started was as much a mystery as how it was extinguished. Mom didn’t use candles or anything like that. My father had forbidden it, given his own pyrophobia. Maybe a lamp fell over, Mom didn’t notice or forgot about it, and the hot light bulb set fire to some of the piles of



Edward's mom, after her move to assisted living

papers she was muddling her way through. There were half-emptied boxes everywhere, giving Mom a good excuse to complain about having to move in the first place.

"There was nothing wrong with my other house. I could find anything there." She paced back and forth in the living room, talking to herself and scratching her head, as Joe and Toni inspected the damage.

How had the house not burned down? A fire doesn't put itself out.

"Mom, did you call the fire department?" Joe asked. It was difficult to believe a fire crew could have come out in the middle of the night without Joe and Toni noticing.

"Two men in a car stopped. They helped me."

"Two men?"

"Yes, they put the fire out."

"Then what?"

"Then they left."

"Did they say who they were?"

"No."

"Did you ask?"

"I don't remember."

"Were they firemen?"

"No, I don't think so. They wore suits and ties."

"Police?"

"I don't think so."

"Just two men?"

"Yes."

"And they just...left?"

"I think so."

Mom's house was far enough back from the road that it was unlikely anyone would have noticed flames. As much as Joe and Toni probed, they couldn't get anything more than the story about the two mysterious men. There was no use pressing Mom for details. She was growing more anxious and defensive.

At some level Mom knew something dangerous had happened, the result of something she shouldn't have been doing, especially in the middle of the night. I think she sensed she should have been able to explain the incident and was upset she couldn't, that it was all so confusing. This is one of the most heartbreaking things about the mid stages of dementia. Mom knew her mind was slipping—it had happened to both her sisters, a brother and their father, and who knew who else all the way back to County Wexford, Ireland—and she was trying desperately to hold on, to grasp for some explanation. Yet it was no use. Memories slipped through her hands like

quicksilver. Confusion begets confusion. Anxiety fuels greater anxiety.

Beverly Hills, Michigan, is a fairly small community, and Joe and Toni, both lawyers, were well-connected. They checked with the fire chief and the fire department. They hadn't responded to a fire at my mother's address. They checked with the cops. No record of a fire with them either. They talked to neighbors. No one saw a car with two men in it stop. No one saw anything. Yet Mom insisted, when questioned again, that two besuited men put out the fire. Then she went to bed after they left.

"Are you sure a couple of kids out late didn't stop?" I asked Joe when he called me in New York.

"Doesn't seem plausible," he said.

I wracked my mind for an explanation but couldn't come up with any-

thing except that Mom's situation was getting increasingly perilous. How much longer could she live on her own? There are few things more unnerving in life than when you start worrying about a parent the way they once worried about you. I guess that's just karmic payback. I called Mom later. "I heard about the fire."

"What fire?"

"In your attic."

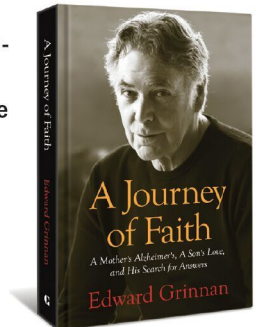
"There wasn't any fire. I don't know what you're talking about."

We never solved the mystery. My sister, Mary Lou, was sure she knew, though. "I think they were angels," she said. "Angels that came to protect Mom. It's the only explanation."

Maybe it wasn't such a mystery after all. Mom believed in angels, even if they wore suits and ties, watching over her. ■

A Journey of Faith.....

Edward's story is excerpted from his new book, *A Journey of Faith: A Mother's Alzheimer's, a Son's Love and His Search for Answers*. In this deeply personal narrative, Edward shares the all-too-relatable progression of his mother's Alzheimer's, its impact on him and his siblings, his quest to understand the disease and his search for answers about his own vulnerability and uncertain fate. Woven in are the experiences of others who have traveled the Alzheimer's path. In his story, we see a reflection of ourselves, the universality of human experience and the indestructibility of love even at the hands of a disease that steals our very selves. *A Journey of Faith* will be available in September 2023. Preorder your copy today by visiting shopguideposts.org/jof or calling 800-932-2145.





Rescued From the Deep

*Would God notice
me all the way down on
the ocean floor?*

BY BELINDA SMITH-CICARELLA
OTTUMWA, IOWA

At 14, I was the youngest of my cousins, so I was thrilled when they invited me along on their Acapulco vacation. I felt lucky to be included, though admittedly I found the crashing waves of the vast Pacific Ocean intimidating. I didn't even know how to swim in a pool! But when my trustworthy cousin offered to walk me out into the surf, I gathered my courage and went with him.

He took my hand, and we walked deeper into the water until it was up to my chest, about as far as I wanted to go. I didn't want to venture out where I couldn't feel the bottom. I was nervous but felt comforted to have someone older by my side.

Feeling proud of myself, I looked over my shoulder for the cousins we'd left on the beach. They seemed to be running away from the ocean. Confused, I turned back to the cousin I trusted. He was racing toward the dry sand, probably sure I was following close behind.

Before I could yell for him to wait up, I felt the ocean pull at my legs. In an instant, the water level dropped dramatically. I looked down at my feet. I was standing on wet sand. I hadn't moved from the spot where my cousin and I had stood together only moments ago. It was as if the whole ocean had just been drained. With that, the beautiful Acapulco sunlight went dark. A shadow rose overhead.

I turned to look behind me. An enormous wave loomed. It looked like

an immense, cupped hand that was about to scoop me up. I sprinted forward. When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw that the wall of water had grown bigger and closer, draping over me like a canopy.

The wave collapsed on me in an avalanche, knocking me down and smashing my face into the sand. I spiraled helplessly inside the water. The more I paddled to get out of the wave, the faster I spun inside of it. Sand filled my mouth and ears and nose. I swept away my hair and tried to open my eyes, but they burned in the saltwater. *I'm going to die*, I thought. A vision of my mother flashed before me. I saw her watching the news about a giant wave hitting Acapulco. My uncle tried to comfort her as he told Mom I had drowned. She fell to the ground sobbing. *I can't let that happen! I can't give up!*

I fought with new strength until my head popped up out of the water. I gasped for air, frantically looking for the beach, but saw no sign of it. I was surrounded by ocean in every direction. I had to try and stay above the surface until someone caught a glimpse of me.

The sea swelled, lifting me with it. For the briefest moment, I caught sight of the beach. It was so far away the people on it were barely visible, but at least I knew where it was.

I tried to paddle toward shore as another wave pushed me down. I was underwater again, but this time I felt certain I knew which way was up. I swam toward the surface with everything I had. *Please, God, let me see sky!* I tried to copy froglike strokes, coordinating my arms and legs. Any second I would break through the surface again and feel the warm air on my face. I exhaled my last bit of breath and gave one last, strong push.

The top of my head hit the ocean floor—hard. So hard my neck bent sharply, causing my ear and shoulder to collide. I had been swimming downward! My body went limp. The saltwater no longer stung my eyes. I could see clearly, and no longer struggled. I felt at peace. The undercurrent rolled me into a sitting position on the ocean floor. The water's surface was glistening far above as I rocked in the current. My hair flowed out in front of me. Then doubt set in. *Will God notice me all the way down here?* I wondered. *Will he find my soul to take it to heaven?*

I rolled in the water again. Just as my face turned toward the ground, two strong hands gripped me by the ankles and pulled. I sped backward in the water, just above the sandy floor, my arms stretched out in front of me. Had someone dived

in to rescue me? Perhaps my rescuer was attached to a speedboat? No, that was impossible. We were moving parallel to the ocean floor. No boat could do that.

The hands on my ankles adjusted position, gripping me even tighter. I could see the high ceiling of the ocean water getting closer. We neared the beach as my body dragged over the sand and the hands released me. My panic returned, just as I was grabbed again. This time I was pulled up onto the beach, completely free of the water. I lay on the shoreline, choking out water and expelling the sand and pebbles packed in my nostrils. Several people worked over me trying to help. Despite the hot sun, my muscles shook as if I was freezing. Finally, I was able to ask, “Who saved me?”

My cousin’s boyfriend knelt down next to me. He tried to explain. “No one saw where you went. You were gone in an instant,” he said, obviously

shaken. “We couldn’t find you. Then I saw your hair right below the surface, and I dragged you out.”

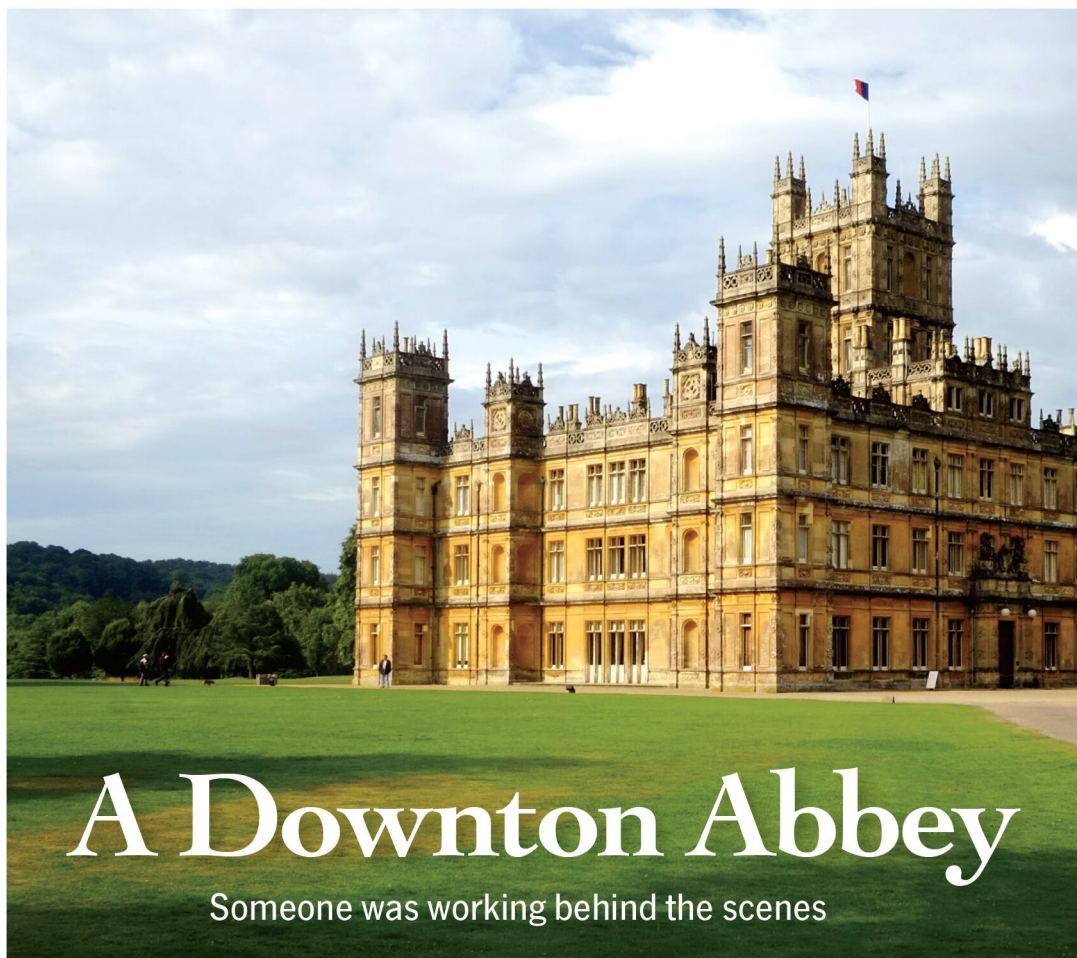
I looked at my cousin’s boyfriend in disbelief. His hair and his white T-shirt were completely dry. “No,” I said to him, “who pulled me out from deep under the ocean?” He didn’t know what to say. He certainly hadn’t.

Our conversation was cut short. The lifeguards warned us to move off the beach immediately. An earthquake had caused a tsunami, and the waves were still dangerous. My cousins knew I was safe—for them that was the end of it. For me it was a beginning.

Since then, I have gone over the experience in my head hundreds of times, recognizing undeniable truth: God is with us. No one could have found me under the water. No one except God. When I was hidden from the world, God knew exactly where I was and sent an angel to pull me up from the depths. ■

Afterglow.....

When Belinda and her cousins got back to the hotel, someone was waiting for them. “The hotel clerk immediately asked if I was Belinda,” she says. Her mom had been calling over and over after seeing the news about the tsunami. “The clerk promised he’d have me call her as soon as I returned. He dialed her number from the front desk, so Mom didn’t have to wait another minute.” It wasn’t until years later that Belinda told her mother the whole story. You can read more about her amazing experiences in her memoir, *Miracles and Mayhem: A Testimony of God’s Ever-Present Love and Protection*.



A Downton Abbey

Someone was working behind the scenes

BY RICK HAMLIN, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Ever have the experience of desperately wanting some information—and having absolutely no way to get it? You toss the problem up to God, sure it's a hopeless cause, and to your amazement, shortly thereafter you get an unexpected blessing.

Let me tell you about such an incident. It had to do with the popular

television series *Downton Abbey*. That first season it aired in the U.S., my wife, Carol, and I couldn't get enough of it. We were totally absorbed in every episode.

Perhaps it was because Carol, who writes under her maiden name, Carol Wallace, had always been fascinated with English history, especially that turn-of-the-last-century period,

ABOVE: CARLES CODINA ARMENGOL/SHUTTERSTOCK



Story

when rich American heiresses were marrying into the British aristocracy. Carol and her friend, Gail MacColl, had written a book about it, *To Marry an English Lord*, published in 1989.

The book was long out of print, but *Downton Abbey* seemed to reflect so many of its themes. The series even included an American character, played by the actress Elizabeth McGovern,

Real-life Highclere Castle is the setting for *Downton Abbey*. Fans of the era will enjoy reading *To Marry an English Lord*.

who was married to the lordly owner of the house. It was an engaging portrait of the very title of Carol's book.

The writer of the series, Julian Fellowes, was the subject of much press—and for good reason. His creation seemed to captivate every audience it touched, including almost everyone I knew. In the fall of 2011, the second season appeared on the

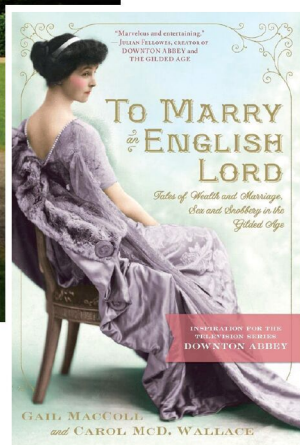
“telly” in Britain.

Carol and I couldn't wait for it to show up on PBS here in America, as it would in January 2012.

In anticipation of the first episode, the *New York Times* ran a piece about books you might want to read if you were a fan of *Downton Abbey*. And who wasn't? Carol and I pored over

the article that early-January morning at the breakfast table, imagining a legion of *Downton Abbey* fans doing the same. Alas, Carol's book was not mentioned.

“I just wish you could talk to Julian Fellowes,” I said. “He'd love your book.”





“But how would we ever reach him?” Carol asked.

There was the wish—and the prayer. It seemed impossible to get Fellowes’ attention amid the fanfare. Only God and the angels could figure out a way.

Late that same afternoon, I was heading home from the office, strolling down Thirty-Fourth Street in New York City, when I happened to run into an old friend. She introduced me to the friend she was walking with, both of them, as it turned out, devoted fans of *Downton Abbey*.

We commiserated on how it was too bad the *Times* didn’t mention Carol’s book. “Perhaps Julian Fellowes would have taken note of it,” I said. “If we could only get hold of him.”

My friend’s friend spoke up. “Believe it or not, I know how to reach him.” She had his contact information, thanks to her involvement with a British historical society, and pulled out her phone to share it.

I brought home the info to Carol, and Carol sent off an email. “Who knows if he’ll ever see it,” she said.

Carol wrote a new version of her great-great-grandfather Lew Wallace’s classic, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*.

But the very next day she heard directly from Fellowes. Yes, yes, he knew of her book and was a big fan of it. In fact, it had also informed the series. With that, he graciously offered to write to the *New York Times*, which ran his Letter to the Editor almost immediately.

“In your very flattering article about books that might please fans of *Downton Abbey*,” Fellowes wrote, “I was sorry that one title was missing: *To Marry an English Lord...*” He went on to say that Cora Graham, the character played by Elizabeth McGovern, was very much inspired by Carol’s book. Wow.

Carol thanked him profusely and asked if maybe he’d write a blurb for the book, hoping the endorsement might inspire a reprint. Of course, by all means, Fellowes agreed.

When *To Marry an English Lord* was republished, the cover christened it “an inspiration for the popular television series *Downton Abbey*.” Right above that was Fellowes’ praise: “Marvelous and entertaining.”

The second printing went on to sell more copies than the first time around. And all because of a chain of events no one but God and the angels could have seen coming. ■

on a wing and a prayer

Birds and blooms weren't the only things I had to be grateful for as I basked in the sunshine on my porch that early summer's day. For months I'd been worried about my aging parents. Their home was in desperate need of repair. Mom and Dad weren't in any shape to do the repairs themselves, and neither they nor I had the money to hire someone. But God had found a way, and my heart was filled with thanksgiving.

A glorious red cardinal landed on the porch railing, close enough for me to admire the orange beak and black mask he'd been blessed with. *God cares for every detail*, I thought. He'd answered my prayers when Dad spotted a surprising note in the church bulletin. A short article described a group of wonderful, young volunteers who did home repairs for free. What timing! They were able to fix every problem.

"Thank you, God, for leading us to them!" I said a little too loudly. I glanced at the cardinal, hoping he wouldn't fly away. Instead he answered with a hearty chirrup. He tilted his head and chirped again. He seemed to be singing in thanksgiving with me. After we finished, I set out a dish of seeds for my new prayer partner.

From that day on, the cardinal came to my porch daily. Like a comforting angel, he was there in late summer, when my father passed away, and then my mother. As sad as I was, the cardinal reminded me that they were with God. The last time I saw my cardinal, he had four fuzzy brown babies beside him.

Today my yard is full of cardinals. Many must be the descendants of my old friend. Each time I see one, I know I'm safe in God's hands. And I say a prayer of thanksgiving.

KAREN MALENA, MONROEVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA

NEED PRAYER? Visit ourprayer.org or go to guideposts.org/prayer-request to submit your concerns and join the OurPrayer community in praying for others. Give your spirit a lift by visiting facebook.com/ourprayer.

You Rang?

I was in work mode and resisted answering my doorbell for as long as I could

BY LINDA LAROCQUE, SOUTH HAVEN, MICHIGAN

Whoever rang my doorbell could come back later. I was knee-deep in tedious accounting work and couldn't afford distractions. Especially when I seemed to be hitting a wall in my progress.

The bell rang a second time, but I ignored it. Living in a beach community on the banks of beautiful Lake Michigan, I got a lot of visitors. Sometimes too many. So on this hot July day, I'd locked my front door and sequestered myself in my home office with no intention of coming out until I finished the work in front of me.

On the third *ding-dong*, I peeked through the curtain but couldn't see who'd come to disturb me. I stomped downstairs and opened the door to find my longtime neighbor, Janet, with her finger poised on the bell to ring again.

"I knew you were home," she an-

nounced without a hint of embarrassment. "So I just kept ringing." Janet settled herself in one of the old wicker rocking chairs on the porch and waited for me to join her.

"Sorry I wasn't answering," I said. "I have a lot of work to get done today, and I really need to concentrate on it." She showed no sign of realizing I couldn't wait to get back to it.

Janet and I had known each other for more than 30 years. We went to the same church, often cooked together for our Open Door Ministry, and she was one of my dearest and most respected friends. You get to know a person when you spend time with them across a sink, and on this particular hot afternoon, I got the feeling that Janet simply wanted to

Linda takes a smile break in her home office.



visit. I sighed and plopped into the other rocking chair.

“Look at those loud pants!” she said, laughing when I sat down. “They don’t seem like your style.”

“Four bucks on the clearance rack,” I said. “And comfy to do a good day’s work in.” *Hint, hint*, I thought.

Our talk drifted down the usual paths: the new pastor at church, a house that had just sold down the street, a pasta recipe we both wanted to try. My workday was slipping through my fingers—and for what? A conversation that wasn’t important at all.

“I haven’t heard much about the new neighbors,” I said. “Maybe they’ll...” I trailed off. Janet’s expression had suddenly darkened. Clearly something was bothering her. I realized our light conversation had been her way of working up to it. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I had a horrible confrontation with my sister yesterday,” she confessed. She looked down at her hands. “It got ugly. I don’t know if it’s repairable.”

Janet and her sister had very different views on a lot of things, so another confrontation was nothing new. But as she repeated the painful details of this one, reliving every hurtful moment, my heart went out to her.

There was nothing I could say to

fix Janet’s situation, no wise advice I could give. But Janet wasn’t looking for any of that. She just needed someone to listen, a shoulder to cry on, and she’d come to me, her friend, trusting that I would be present for her. She needed my attention, way more than any work I had waiting for me inside.

Eventually, it seemed natural for me to bring out two dishes of chocolate ice cream and with that, our conversation returned to lighter topics, and I found myself enjoying the summer day in good company. It may have been just the break I needed to refresh me for the work I’d been pulled away from. Besides, was there any work more valuable and important than friendship?

It was getting late, so I hugged Janet goodbye. She stepped off the porch, then turned back. “You know, there’s that scripture in Proverbs,” she said. “‘As iron sharpens iron, so does one person sharpen another.’ Our conversation was the sharpening I needed.”

“It was the sharpening we both needed,” I admitted. And I secretly wondered how many opportunities for sharpening I had missed in my life because I was too busy?

Janet disappeared down the block. I picked up our empty bowls, grateful for my friends and the doorbell that called to me when angels rang. ■

he makes winds his messengers

PSALM 104:4

From the school pickup line, I spotted my son, Kason, as soon as he ran out of the building with his birthday balloons. We'd had a bunch delivered to his second-grade classroom to make his school day festive. Kason climbed into the back seat, but the strings slipped from his grasp and his balloons floated away. I prayed that it wouldn't ruin his day. On the way home, I distracted him with musings about where the balloons might end up and reminded him he had a birthday cake waiting. Kason was a good sport, and the balloons were soon forgotten.

About two weeks later, a package arrived at Kason's school from a man named Todd Huyler. Todd was a woodworker who lived in Cleveland, Tennessee—500 miles away from us. He'd found Kason's balloons stuck on his fence! He saw the note we'd written and the school's address on the delivery card. Todd wrote a letter of his own, explaining that he'd found the balloons while mowing his lawn. He liked to pray while he mowed, and on that day, he asked to come across someone he could bless. The wind had delivered his answer.

Todd sent Kason a handmade baseball bat with one of our family's favorite Bible verses engraved on it, and a photo of him and his dog, Henry, for the whole class to see. The kids were amazed that the balloons had traveled so far, and the teacher built a science lesson around wind and a kindness lesson around Mr. Huyler.

KAYLA JOHNSON, MOUNTAIN GROVE, MISSOURI



earning their wings



Some things you never outgrow. For David, that would be building sandcastles. But a lemonade stand?

Castles on the Beach

DAVID COYLE, WILLIAMSTOWN, NEW JERSEY

When my son, Dawson, was little, we loved to go to the beach and build sandcastles. After he grew up, I stuck with the hobby. Friends and family often asked me to lend my sandcastle expertise. In 2021, my nine-year-old nephew, Joey, and I created a sandcastle of Citizens Bank Park, where the Phillies play. The beachgoers loved it. Last year, Joey asked if we could make a lemonade stand out of sand—and sell lemonade.

This gave me an idea. I reached out to Alex's Lemonade Stand, an organization that raises money for childhood cancer research, and arranged a fundraiser centered around our sandcastle build. We invited a helper, 16-year-old Lily, who'd fought childhood cancer and survived. We also honored Connor, a family friend who is currently battling cancer.

We built our sandy lemonade stand at Ocean City Beach in New Jersey and sold lemonade all day. We raised \$3,550, which made our day that much sweeter.

Make It the Usual

WENDY OWENS, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

At the drive-through coffee shop where I work, we have a regular customer named Amber, whose order is always the same—one medium peach iced tea. The day she changed it up and added a chai latte, I asked her if she was taking that drink to someone at home. “Nope,” she said. “It’s for the grocery store employee who will be carrying my online order to my car.”

On her next visit, Amber requested her usual—and added a cappuccino. That one was for the baker who’d made her a special cake. “I just want her to know that I appreciate her,” Amber said.

Amber has bought drinks for co-workers, a vendor at a crafts fair and

a tamale maker. I like hearing where her gifts are going. Her thoughtfulness has inspired me to find my own ways of showing gratitude to customer service workers and other people who are often taken for granted.



Wendy at work at the drive-through



Shirley and her daughter on a great day in 1998

On the Road Again

SHIRLEY UEKERT, MARATHON, WISCONSIN

While talking with a group of friends, I mentioned that my daughter, Nancy, had invited me to go on her upcoming family road trip to Florida. I explained that Nancy lived in Nashville. “I really want to go, but I’m afraid to fly to Nashville by myself,” I said. I was still adjusting to life as a widow.

My friend Elaine piped up. “When are they leaving?” she asked. She and her family were driving to a wedding in the Nashville area around the same date. “We love to drive, and you can ride along with us!” They dropped me off at Nancy’s front door.

The following summer, Elaine and her family were driving to Myrtle Beach. “We’re going by way of Nashville,” she said. “Is there anyone you want to visit with there?” Elaine winked, and I took her up on her offer. I enjoyed a lovely time with Nancy’s family, and another memorable road trip with Elaine and hers.

Heaven Help Her

I couldn't imagine how Mom would react if she ever saw an angel **BY DIKKI-JO MULLEN, ORLANDO, FLORIDA**

I always prayed for my 83-year-old mother, Elayne, first thing in the morning. It wasn't that I particularly worried about her. She was in good health and fiercely independent, a fixture in her Florida beach community. A few times a week, I made the 70-mile drive from Orlando to her home, but I relied on God's watchfulness in between visits. Even though Mom insisted she needed no help from anyone, my daily prayer gave me peace of mind.

"If an angel could keep an eye on her I'd really appreciate it," I added one morning as I got in the car to go see her.

My mother had followed me to Florida from our native Wisconsin three decades earlier. I was going to college at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and Mom wanted to start a new life after her divorce. She had easily embraced the laid-back, carefree, sand-between-your-toes

ethos of the Sunshine State. Her move felt meant to be, as if some part of her spirit had been in Florida all along, just waiting for her to catch up to it. Amid the heat and humidity, the afternoon rain showers that left everything feeling misty, Mom had truly blossomed, like one of the tropical flowers she tended in her garden.

With the proceeds from the sale of a small motel she and Dad had owned back in Wisconsin, she bought a small house made of concrete blocks on a quiet dead-end street in Indialantic, a barrier island off Florida's Space Coast. She lived as a mixed-media artist, selling beautiful creations made from driftwood she'd collect, bits of moss and dried flowers, paper and paint. With a wood burner she'd add fun or inspiring messages. In her eighth decade, she was still creating. Feisty and free-spirited, she wasn't one to go to church or pray even, yet there was a deeply spiritual side to



her. I saw it in her love for nature and the sense of awe and wonder that still animated her. I figured that I did the praying for both of us.

I was thankful I'd inherited Mom's creative spirit, even if I was more focused on practical concerns than she was. As I drove, I chuckled at how she'd refused the Meals on Wheels service I'd ordered for her. "I told them it was completely unnecessary," she said with a steely resolve. "You know I can take care of myself." I never mentioned my daily prayers and couldn't help but wonder how Mom would react should an actual angel come to her aid.

I reached Indialantic and drove down Atlantic Avenue. Mom's house was the fourth one on the right, more secluded than I might have liked. I parked and headed up the walkway.

When I saw Mom through the screen door, I gasped. There were purplish bruises running down each arm. "What on earth happened to you?" I said as she let me in.

"Oh, I'm fine," she said. "Nothing's broken. I went out to get the mail yesterday, and I guess I tripped on something. I landed flat on the ground."

The thought of Mom falling sent a shiver through me. Once her neighbors left for work in the morning, she was pretty much on her own. I hated to hear how long she must have laid

there, helpless. But Mom seemed strangely unfazed, almost cheerful.

"I was struggling to get up," she said, "and just then a big black pickup truck slammed on its brakes right in front of me." Her story was getting more frightening with every detail. This was exactly the kind of thing I'd prayed so hard about.

"What then, Mom?" I asked. "Who was in the truck?"

"This good-looking young guy jumped out. Maybe he was a surfer," Mom said. "He picked me up and carried me to the door, asked if I was hurt. I'd never seen him before, but he acted like he'd known me forever. I tried to thank him, but I couldn't find the words. Next thing I knew, he was back in his truck. I guess he drove it back to heaven."

"To heaven?" I said, not sure I'd heard her right.

"Well, he was an angel, of course," Mom said, a hint of impatience in her voice. "Try to keep up, Dikki-Jo. A surfer angel rescued me. That's what I've been trying to tell you."

In my mind I imagined the scene, Mom in her moment of need met by an angel who had literally left her speechless, a young, handsome surfer dude at that. God had selected the perfect guardian for her, a woman with a Florida soul, whose idea of heaven definitely included a beach. ■

the collector

My maternal grandparents spent two months every summer road-tripping from their home in Louisiana across the United States and Canada. Everywhere they visited, PawPaw picked up rocks that caught his eye, loading the car trunk with his finds to decorate their porch and garden. He told us children the stories behind each find: how he'd scoured the creeks of the Great Smoky Mountains for the smoothest, flattest stones, and fished in Oregon for his most exotic prize, a flashing pink and yellow opal. He'd even scored a piece of petrified wood from Arizona's Petrified Forest. On a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Hawaii, PawPaw had searched the volcanic slopes for chunks of cooled lava.

But like so many relics of our childhoods, the magic of PawPaw's collection faded over time. Then on a visit to PawPaw a few years ago, I watched our four-year-old son, Jake, thrill to the rocks and his great-grandfather's stories about them. PawPaw let Jake pick out five treasures of his own, which he brought home to Tennessee. PawPaw passed away not long afterward.

I gazed on his collection with new eyes, allowing it to inspire my own wanderlust. Since then, I've foraged for craggy rocks in the Alps, sifted sand from the beaches of Normandy, and picked smooth, flat stones from Belgian streams. Today I cherish all of the treasures I've arranged on my own porch, keeping the memory of my grandfather alive.

JoLYNDA STRANDBERG, CLARKSVILLE, TENNESSEE



Just a few of the rocks from PawPaw's collection

An Angel in Sheep's Clothing

Of all the animals who'd
come to Whispering Acres,
Baa stood out

BY JANINE SMALLEY, MEDINA, OHIO

Life on an animal sanctuary may seem like heaven, with a rooster crow at the break of dawn, fresh eggs for breakfast, kids visiting to pet the donkeys and romp with baby goats. But heaven couldn't possibly require so much work.

Maybe too much work for someone who already has a full-time job, I thought one hot summer morning when I headed out to the barn. It was feeding time for the animals,



even if I hadn't yet had my breakfast.

I'd started Whispering Acres Farm Animal Sanctuary with one small barn and a pasture. I thought that was all I could handle, but the need was so much bigger. We'd expanded in response, and now had three pastures, a larger barn and a paddock. When I went out to the barn that morning, I checked on our eight goats, a pig, a flock of chickens...

This is it, I thought as I filled a feeder with hay. *This is as much as we can do.*

Before I'd finished the morning chores, my phone rang. It was the ASPCA calling with a problem. They'd picked up a sheep, a ewe, on the side of the highway. "She can't

stand up,” the humane officer said. “We think she might be blind, and she’s covered in what looks like years of heavy fleece.”

Poor thing! I thought, imagining wearing all that wool in the heat. “Bring her in.”

Thirty minutes later, a truck pulled into the driveway. The ewe cried out in distress as a team of volunteers carried her to the barn. She had no idea where she was or what was going on. She couldn’t know she’d been rescued.

Our first order of business was to get rid of that wool—over 45 pounds of it weighed down her frail little body. Once she was shorn, she was able to stand again. We let her have a nice soak in a kiddie pool, offered her fluids and food, and waited for our vet to come out and examine her.

“She’s emaciated and dehydrated,” he said, “and she’s suffering from snow blindness.” The winter snow had frozen the wool over her eyes, leaving her with an infection that took most of her sight. “She’s pretty old, with arthritis,” the vet said. “I’ll be honest. I don’t think she’ll live to see the Fourth of July.”

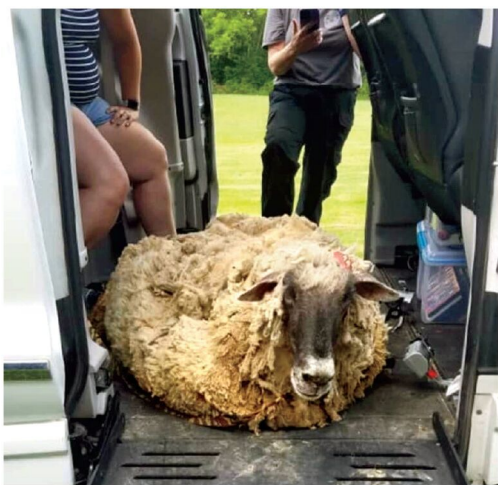
That wasn’t surprising. It was clear that it had been years since the old sheep had been cared for, even before she’d found herself on the side of a busy highway, hungry, thirsty,

sick and weighed down with wool. We couldn’t expect her to live much longer after all that. She seemed to have given all the fight she had in her, just to stay alive in the harshest circumstances. All we could do was to make sure she stayed comfortable now. We owed her that, at least.

I slept with her in the barn those first few nights, stroking her gently and making her a promise: “For however long you’re here, you will never again be hungry or afraid or in pain.” She walked around in the barn tentatively, and we kept a bright light burning to help guide her with her limited sight. The vet had prescribed eyedrops for her snow blindness and medicine for her arthritis, hoping to give her some relief from her ailments. Only time would tell. When I was confident enough to sleep in my own bed, I recorded “Baa Baa Black Sheep” for her to listen to at night. We started calling her Baa.

Baa quickly got used to her new surroundings and would greet us in the morning with a crooked smile. Even better, she learned to navigate the sanctuary when the eyedrops gave her back full sight in her left eye. She ventured further and was soon exploring the pasture too. We

Say Baa: Janine never missed a chance to throw her arms around this wooly lady.



When Baa arrived, she could barely walk. She soon became the sanctuary's #1 ambassador.

learned she had a favorite treat—bananas. She never turned one down.

The Fourth of July came and went, and Baa was still with us. She was no longer just exploring the pasture, she was prancing around it. She even made a new friend, a big goat named Andy, who followed her everywhere, and guided her with his horns when she needed help. Crystal, one of the volunteers, called me over to watch them together one day. Baa gave Andy a crooked smile and pranced away as if to say, Catch me if you can.

“I’ve never seen an animal with a stronger will to live,” I said.

“After everything she’s been through,” she agreed, “Baa never gave up.”

Baa spent the fall munching on crunchy leaves and napping in the sun. I thought the harsh cold of winter might drive her back inside, but Baa wanted to experience that too. The cold seemed to invigorate her. Although she couldn’t run far with her arthritis, an attack of the zoomies could still send her racing around in the snow. When fresh flakes fell, Baa turned her face up to catch them on her nose. We all stopped what we were doing to watch this ewe, who seemed grateful for snowflake blessings from above.



Volunteers Yuliana and Wynter, the farm's youngest helper, can't resist the baby animals.

Baa started to slow down when spring arrived. She took more naps in the sun. "She's not in pain," the vet said. "She's just old." *Almost a year older than when we met her*, I thought. When none of us could have predicted the joy she'd bring to Whispering Acres.

One day in May, I arrived at the sanctuary after my day job. Baa trotted up to greet me at the gate, her crooked smile fainter than usual. I could see right away that she was more than tired, more than "just old." I gave her a massage and a kiss, but when I offered her a banana, she refused it. I walked her slowly to the barn and sat down with her in the straw. Baa laid her head on my lap and let out a deep sigh. I knew she was telling me it was time to let go.

I made a tearful call to the vet. Within the hour, every volunteer who could gathered around Baa in the barn. Andy too insisted on being close to his friend in her last moments. Surrounded by love, Baa closed her eyes for the last time.

After she was gone, I remembered the promise I'd made to her. That she would never again be hungry or afraid or in pain. Back when I thought we would just be keeping her comfortable for her last days. But





(Top) Donkey bros Jack and Olaf; Saint Francis seems to carry Baa on his shoulders.



Baa had fought for more than that, just as she'd fought for her life on the side of that highway. She'd lived every day she had to the fullest, down to the snowflakes she felt on her nose.

Baa had never given up, and so neither would I. Whispering Acres has continued to grow. We recently broke ground on a new barn. We currently have sheep, donkeys, a mule, guinea hens, a horse, a goose, ducks, pigs, turkeys and about 45 roosters. We especially care for animals that are sick or old. When our work seems overwhelming, I think of Baa, my inspiration to give my all for the good of God's creatures. And whenever it snows, I tilt my face up to the sky to feel the flakes on my cheeks, grateful for blessings from above and the animals who make life at the sanctuary seem like heaven. ■

Afterglow.....

Today Whispering Acres also offers animal assisted therapy. "We work with those who struggle with PTSD and children with autism," Janine says. "Animals and people heal together here." The sanctuary is also a great help to people dealing with domestic violence. "Animals can make it hard to leave an abusive situation," Janine explains. "Especially farm animals. We're here to support them until they can return to a safe environment." Janine is heartened by the fact that almost all the animals they've fostered have eventually been able to go back to their families. If not, Janine and her volunteers make sure all creatures are happy and loved in their new home at Whispering Acres.

lost & found

I pushed my cart across the Walmart parking lot and loaded my purchases into my car. A call came in from my friend Elaine while I was driving, and I put her on speaker. “Someone named Delivontae Johnson is desperately trying to reach you via Facebook Messenger. When he saw we were friends, he tried me. He has your wallet, saw your address and is on his way there to return it.”

Immediately, I realized I’d left the wallet in the seat of the shopping cart. I was driving without my license and quite a ways from home! I pulled over in a restaurant parking lot to respond to Delivontae’s message. I told him where I was, and he agreed to meet me if I’d wait. I thanked God that an honest person had found my wallet.

When Delivontae arrived, I noticed he was driving on a spare. He explained that he’d gone to Walmart to get his tire fixed, but when he found my wallet, he went on a mission to get it back to me. I thanked him and gave him a cash thank-you for all his trouble. Then I snapped a photo of the two of us to share on Facebook.

Back at home, I accepted Delivontae’s Facebook friend request. That Sunday, he attended services at our church, and I got friend requests from some of his family members. His mom and I hit it off and met for lunch. I quickly learned why Delivontae is the wonderful young man he is. Elaine and I even attended a baby shower for one of his aunts.

I lost my wallet in a busy Walmart parking lot. I not only got it back, but received something even more valuable in the process: friendship.

DEE HARKRIDER, WYNNE, ARKANSAS







Kids & Angels

One is never far
from the other

Kindness Wins the Day

My daughter, Grace, came home from first grade in tears. “That mean boy Dylan called me names again,” she sputtered between sobs.

I hugged her tight. “I’m sorry, honey. Did you tell your teacher about it?”

“Yes.” Grace wiped her eyes. “She changed our seats. But he’s still not nice to me.”

I struggled to think of a way to help her. “Maybe we could say a prayer for him?”

Grace agreed, but it seemed that nothing changed over the next week. Then one day I pulled a slip of paper out of her backpack. “School shoutout!” was printed in bold across the top of the page, with Grace’s name written in. “For showing kindness and good character to another student.”

“Gracie! What’s this?” I asked.

“Well, in gym class today we were learning how to throw a football, and we had to pick partners. Dylan wasn’t getting chosen...so I picked him!”

After that, the problem was solved. Dylan and Grace even ate lunch together a few times. I wished I could protect my little girl from every bully in life. But it looked like she was going to be okay. After all, she’d figured out a way to be a first-grade angel to a boy who needed a friend.

KATE FENNER, BALLSTON LAKE, NEW YORK

From One Mother to Another

I sat on the hard emergency room chair, holding my three-year-old daughter, Mia, in my arms. Her fever had spiked over 104, and I was weak with worry.

The ER was packed, and we waited for hours. Another mama, there with her daughter, kept peeking over at us. She was about my age, the same build, wearing black Converse sneakers, just like my favorite pair at home. She also wore the same worried expression. *Yeah, we’re in the same boat*, I thought.

The woman got up, walked over and handed me a drawing. “I sketched this for you,” she said. There was Mia across my lap, with her ponytail and hair bow, her eyes closed while I rocked her in my arms. I teared up. “Thank you,” I said. “It’s beautiful.”

“You’re a tough mom,” the woman said before the nurse ushered her and her daughter down the hallway.

Mia was in the hospital for three days with the flu. We hung the picture on the window, and it kept me strong while Mia healed. At home, we hung it in her room. She’s now happy and healthy again. We never learned the name of the mystery artist. She hadn’t signed the picture that was worth a thousand words of encouragement from a fellow mom in black Converse sneakers.

JENN MARRA, STEPHENTOWN, NEW YORK





Driving Lesson

I thought I was pretty mature the summer I turned 16—finally old enough to drive! I cranked up the tunes on my way home from across town. At the end of the main drag, I took a left onto the street that led to my neighborhood. My rearview mirror showed a car following closely behind. Thank goodness, I was almost home.

When I pulled into my driveway, the other car stopped. I jumped out and dashed toward my front steps. “Hey!” a voice called. I felt safe enough to turn around. A middle-aged man stood at his car door. “You cut in front of two lanes of traffic back there on White Street,” he said. “I have a daughter your age, and I would never want her to get in an accident. And I wouldn’t want you to get hurt, either.”

I didn’t know what to say. I climbed the steps and looked back shyly over my shoulder. The man was already gone, but his advice has stayed with me all these years later. I wish I’d thought to say thank you for the reminder to be attentive on the road.

PEGGY FREZON, REXFORD, NEW YORK

The Eighth Commandment and a Preschooler

When my sons were small, four-year-old Gabriel and his brothers often spent the night at my parents’ house. My mom had a chest of drawers filled with art supplies. She and my boys spent hours stringing beads, making collages and building little cities out of boxes covered in construction paper.

One day, when the boys returned home, Gabriel pulled me aside. “*Shh*,” he whispered, fingers cupped between his lips and my ear. “I have something to show you.” His wide green eyes held wonder as he thrust his hand into the front pocket of his jeans. He peered around so no one would see as he slowly withdrew his hand and uncurled his fist. “I stole the Jesus stuff for you,” he said. “It means love.” In his palm lay an assortment of beads—shiny plastic crosses and agape fish.

Gabriel and I had a hushed conversation about the eighth command-

ment, and then we sat together and threaded the beads on a length of twine to make a necklace. I won't forget the day my misguided but well-meaning angel gave me a secret fistful of love.

SHAWNELLE ELIASEN, LECLAIRE, IOWA



Father Knows Best

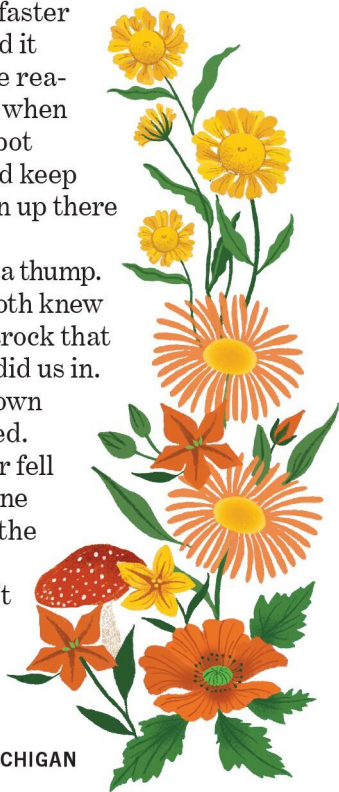
Our old roof needed patching. Daddy enlisted my brother, Buddy Earl, and me to do it. “This job must be done right,” Daddy said. He instructed Buddy to go up in the rafters and poke a metal rod through the holes where the sun shone through. I’d be up on the roof to tar the holes he pointed out.

But Buddy had a better idea: “It’ll be faster if we both work from the underside.” And it kept me out of the blazing sun! I saw the reasoning behind tarring from the outside when we had to use an unsightly glob in one spot in particular, but we prayed angels would keep the roof intact. “It’s as dark as a dungeon up there now!” I told Daddy proudly.

The next day at breakfast, we all heard a thump. Buddy and I glanced at each other. We both knew that glob of tar had fallen onto the Sheetrock that lay below the rafters. The next big rain did us in. Water soaked the Sheetrock, leaving brown spots on the ceiling. Daddy was perplexed.

One evening, a drop of brownish water fell to the center of the dinner table. Everyone looked up just in time to scatter before the ceiling collapsed. Buddy and I got a good what-for when we came clean. Why hadn’t angels come to our rescue? Because angels always did their job right. Sometimes that meant letting a couple of kids learn a lesson the hard way.

DOUGLAS SCOTT CLARK, STURGIS, MICHIGAN



words to grow on

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” **MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**

“Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.”

PROVERBS 22:6

“Watch what you say and do because little eyes are watching you.”

REBA McENTIRE

“A person’s a person, no matter how small.” **DR. SEUSS**

“Cleaning your house while your kids are still growing up is like shoveling the sidewalk before it stops snowing.” **PHYLLIS DILLER**

“A child’s life is like a piece of paper on which every person leaves a mark.” **CHINESE PROVERB**

“When I approach a child, he inspires two sentiments — tenderness for what he is and respect for what he may become.”

LOUIS PASTEUR

“The mother’s heart is the child’s schoolroom.” **HENRY WARD BEECHER**

“And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.” **MARK 10:16**

“Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.” **JAMES BALDWIN**

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.” **FRED ROGERS**

“Kids go where there is excitement. They stay where there is love.”

ZIG ZIGLAR



The Good Bad Day

Taking a cue from my kids

BY LEAH VIDAL, NEW BRAUNFELS, TEXAS

“**W**hat do you have to thank God for today?” I asked the kids when they were ready for nightly prayers. Olivia heard a funny joke at school. Evan made a great catch in Pee-Wee football. They went back and forth, bouncing on the bed as they thought of a new blessing. *I’d better come up with something for my turn*, I thought. *But it won’t be easy after the day I’ve had.*

The morning began when I woke with a start. My alarm clock hadn’t gone off. “Kids! Wake up!” I shouted, throwing off my covers. “You’ll miss the bus!” I ran down the stairs,

dressing for work as I went. I had an important presentation to give and wanted to look my best for it. But I also had to make the kids breakfast and throw together some sandwiches for their lunch. I got them out the door at last—only for them to run back and tell me I’d forgotten to give them a hug. In the interest of time, I hugged them both at once. “Now get going!”

I grabbed some coffee to go, jumped in my car, tossed my blazer in the back seat...and discovered my battery was dead. “You’ve got to be kidding,” I mumbled. “Today of all days.”

In my rearview mirror, I glimpsed my neighbor leaving for work. I tucked my coffee into the cupholder and rolled down my window. “Do you have a minute to help me?” I called.

A jump start did the trick. *Thank goodness*, I thought as I zoomed off to the office. *I’ll be there just in time, as long as nothing else goes wrong.*

I pulled into the parking lot, grabbed my cup from the holder... and splashed coffee on my fresh blouse. *Is the universe out to get me today?* I thought, pulling on my blazer. When I checked myself in the ladies’ room mirror, I was relieved to see that the jacket covered the stain. At least if I didn’t move my arms around too much.



What a complete mess my day was, I thought again as the kids finished thanking God for every positive thing they could think of. They seemed to see his hand in everything.

“What are you going to thank God for today, Mommy?” Olivia asked.

I’m grateful it’s over, I almost said. But then a light bulb went off. “I’m

Leah is positively grateful in all things.

grateful for you two wanting a goodbye hug this morning. For neighbors who are happy to help. For my blazer that came in extra handy at work. And for God who woke me when my alarm clock didn’t.” His hand was in everything. ■

Suncos *on the Trail*

We had miles to go on an arduous hike out of the forest

BY PHILIP SCOTT, MIDLAND, MICHIGAN

A massive thunderclap jolted me awake. The earsplitting explosion sounded like it was directly above my tent in the heart of West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest. My adult son, John, his friend, Nic, and I had set up camp near the banks of a peaceful mountain river that lulled us to sleep with its melodious sound. Now, from inside my sleeping bag, I stared upward. The tent battered under a relentless torrent of rain.

We'll just wait out the storm, I thought hopefully. Then over the rain, another sound. A frightening roar. I sprang out of my sleeping bag and unzipped the tent. Even in

the darkness I could tell the river had overflowed its banks. The storm had unleashed a raging monster that would wash away everything in its path. John and Nic were peering out from their tents as well.

"Is this that 'chance of light showers' you forecast, Dad?" John teased.

"Hey, don't blame me," I said. "We've done enough backpacking to know the weather changes fast in these mountains. Let's just thank God the thunder woke us up before the tents were flooded."

"Yeah, okay," John said. "I'll be more thankful once we're out of here." Nic agreed.

They had a point. While John is a



true believer in God, he didn't share my conviction that the Almighty involved himself in the daily workings of people's lives, right down to a clap of thunder. But this was no time to debate theology.

We dressed in our rain gear and took down the tents in a hurry. Within 30 minutes we were on a trail headed uphill from the river. In the predawn stillness, there was just enough light to see the trail. For two hours we hiked in the downpour, my earlier thoughts of gratitude sorely tested.

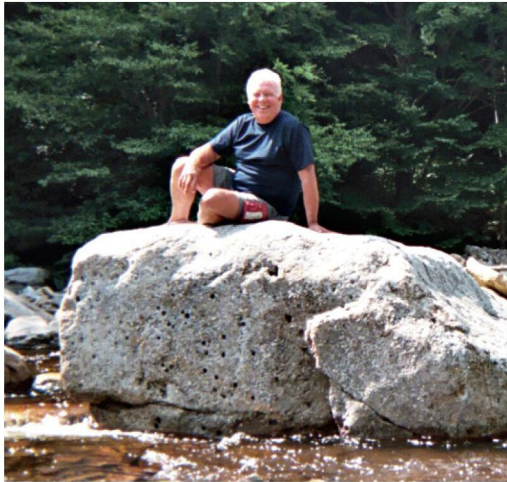
John and I had backpacked together at least annually for the last 15 years. At 70, I appreciated our time together more than ever. I was still working as an air traffic control manager at a small airport in Michigan, a demanding job I loved, but it felt great to get away from it all and enjoy the solitude of the deep woods, where I'd always felt closest to God.

John was 48, a specialist working with autistic clients and their families. He'd gone to college in West Virginia and stayed. In our backpacking adventures, we'd become well acquainted with the state's beautiful mountains and scenic vistas. I was proud of all my son had accomplished and savored the chance to have longer, deeper conversations than we did

in our busy working lives. Even if we didn't always agree.

There'd be no heart-to-heart discussions today. Even though John and Nic were seasoned hikers, I felt a father's need to be vigilant, those same skills I'd honed as an air traffic

controller, staying ever alert. We were headed for a small footbridge that our map showed would take us to the main trail. There we could find a less hazardous campsite not too far from the trailhead where we'd parked our car. But when we reached the bridge, we could barely see it un-



Philip in West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest. He and his son, John, are avid hikers.

I'd gotten water inside my boots.

My feet were freezing, aching with every step I took. I'd never make it 10 miles.

der a flood of raging water. “We can’t cross here,” Nic yelled over the rapids. “John, check your map for another way out of here.”

The three of us sat on a fallen log to rest. John showed us the rain-soaked map. “The only option is this higher trail that gets us above the river,” he said. “But it means hiking 10 miles farther up the mountain and then a 12-mile hike to our car.” Not the backpacking trip we’d envisioned, but we didn’t have a choice.

After a breakfast of PowerBars, we began again on a trail that snaked steadily upward. The rain had let up, but as we gained elevation the temperature dropped. Somehow, I’d gotten water inside my boots. My feet were freezing, aching with every step I took. I’d never make it 10 miles.

I looked to John and Nic. They seemed fine, striding confidently. There was no way to dry the insides of my boots, and I didn’t want to slow us down further. All I knew to do was pray. *God, show me a sign. I just need to know we’re going to make it out.*

I soldiered on for another mile, my

hope sinking with nothing but forest in view. Until, in the distance, I noticed half a dozen birds—juncos—skipping along the trail. I’d rarely seen birds this deep in the forest. They stayed far ahead of us but for several minutes never left the ground. As if they were leading us. “Thank you, God,” I whispered. I didn’t tell John and Nic that I thought the birds were heaven-sent. But for the next mile or two, my strength was renewed. My pace quickened.

I was several paces ahead of John and Nic when I realized that while the birds had warmed my heart, they had done nothing to help my frozen feet. Even with my more vigorous hiking, we still had nearly eight miles to go. *How could I have let myself think a few birds were going to save me?* The very thought seemed ridiculous, and I was glad I’d kept it to myself. *God, please tell me you have more help in store.*

In my next miserable steps, I noticed that the path had widened. There was no reason to believe it meant anything—until I stepped into a clearing. Divided by a road. A

paved road! We were still surrounded by mountain forests, miles from where we'd parked. But did I dare hope for a passing car?

Peering down the road, I saw a red pickup truck. It was parked just off the side of the road, facing in my direction. I could clearly see the driver. He was looking straight at me. Almost as if he'd been expecting us. For a second, I worried I was imagining him. That I was delusional.

"Would you like a ride?" the man yelled to us.

"Yes! Yes!" I said. John and Nic caught up to me. "We've got a ride!"

We piled into the truck. I felt like a drowning man plucked from the sea. John pulled out his map. "If you can take us to the closest town, we'll find a way to get to our car from there."

"I'll just drive you to your car," the

man said. "By the way, my name's Bob." He turned on the heater with no mention of what he'd been doing parked where he was.

While warming up, I reflected on how this misadventure had been filled with blessings at every turn. The thunder had awakened us just in time. The birds had found me at my lowest point. And then Bob, who wouldn't even accept money for gas when we reached our car 30 minutes later. "I'm just doing what God would want me to do," he said.

We thanked him again, and I watched as he drove away. *I've just seen an angel*, I thought. It was a sentiment I didn't share with my son. It wasn't important that we agree on the fine points. We were always in God's hands, and that's all that mattered. ■

Afterglow



The comfort Philip found from spying the juncos on a trail in West Virginia reminded him of a similar experience he'd had a few years earlier. He'd gone with his wife to a nature center near their mid-Michigan house, hoping the tranquil outing would relieve some of the stress he felt from his job as an air traffic control manager. He had his camera with him to capture some interesting snowscape, with a fresh six inches blanketing the trees. Nothing stood out, until he looked up. There, perched on a tree limb only about 10 feet away, was the glorious bald eagle you see here. "A verse came to mind," Philip says, the one from Isaiah, telling of God's promise to those who trust in him. Philip went home with his spirits lifted.

heaven's music

I'd just returned home to Texas from visiting my 91-year-old mother on hospice care in Ohio. Even though she seemed stable when I left, I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to call her right away.

My stepfather, Ed, picked up the phone. "Do you want to sing to her?" he asked me. Mom couldn't always recall our conversations these days, but she remembered the words to our favorite songs. I knew Ed was holding the phone close to Mom's ear so she could hear me. I remembered how, as a child, I'd loved listening to Mom sing along to Bobby Vinton's "There! I've Said It Again" while she ironed. Now I knew the exact verse I wanted to sing for her: "I've loved you since heaven knows when. There! I've said it again."

"I'm not sure she heard you," Ed said. I wasn't surprised Mom was unresponsive. She'd been sleeping comfortably most of the time lately. But just 25 minutes after Ed and I hung up, my sister called to tell me that Mom had passed. I realized she may well have been gone when I sang to her, and sadness washed over me.

The night before her memorial service, I left the radio on to help me sleep. I awoke in the morning to Bobby Vinton crooning, "I've loved you since heaven knows when." The exact same verse I'd sung to Mom. I knew then that she had heard me, indeed, and it touched my heart to know I'd sung Mom to heaven.

LYNN CHANT, CORINTH, TEXAS



Lynn and her mom liked to sing together.



thoughtworthy

“The fullness of joy
is to behold God in all.”

—JULIAN OF NORWICH



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



SUMMER OF ANGER

The psalm promises, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,” but I couldn’t feel his presence when I needed it most

BY LOU DEAN, DINOSAUR, COLORADO

The dusty park service pickup inched its way into the campground where I was working. The minute I recognized who it was, a flush of anger warmed my cheeks. It wasn’t even lunchtime, and my su-

pervisor, Bill Dye, was checking on me again. Was he trying to catch me shirking my duties?

Almost from the April day I’d started as a summer rehire at the Dinosaur National Monument, Bill had made it

MATTHEW STAYER

Lou Dean eventually saw the light.

a point to find me during the work-day. Whether I was cleaning the dinosaur quarry near the main entrance or testing the water at the campgrounds on the far side of the park, he appeared. Sometimes more than once. Our run-ins were no accident.

That first summer with the National Park Service, I'd rarely seen Bill, except mornings for my daily work orders and afternoons when we filled out our time sheets. Bill hadn't hesitated to hire me back for a second summer, so I figured I'd proven myself. He knew I'd suffered a great personal loss just days into my stint, but if I was pulling my weight, why should he be concerned? I lived alone on an acre in a rural area of nearby northwest Colorado, took care of my place and had worked various construction jobs for years. I was more than capable of doing my job under any circumstances. Bill had some nerve treating me like a beginner.

"Everything okay today?" he asked, walking toward me.

I tried not to seem agitated. "Doing fine," I said.

As usual, Bill gave a nod and walked back to his truck. I watched him disappear slowly up out of the remote canyon. Maybe his watchfulness was my own fault. I had to admit

that I was the one who'd said more than I'd intended. I generally kept my private life to myself. Especially on the job, and especially now, when I wasn't even feeling trustful of God himself. I backed the commercial weed whacker down off the trailer and jerked it to a start. *I was a fool for telling my boss any of it*, I thought over the whacker's buzz.

Only three days into the job, I'd gotten a call about my younger brother, David, in Oklahoma. He'd taken his own life. I cried with my dogs through the night, replaying each of my brother's long string of heartaches, going all the way back to childhood. In the face of overwhelming sorrow, my practice had been to offer up the shortest prayer: "Lord, help me. I know you are near." That brief plea had gotten me through the worst days of my life. But losing David in such a horrible way left me bitter and angry. I could only choke out, "Help," too mad at my creator to even call him by name.

I whacked the weeds with a vengeance, working the tool harder than necessary. I was glad Bill had gone on his way and went over in my head the mistake I'd made.

Perhaps it had been anger that fueled me the morning after I got the call. I'd brushed my teeth, put on my green Park Service uniform and driven the 30 miles to work. Bill must

have noticed my red, swollen eyes and that I didn't take part in the coffee room chatter. "Lou Dean, can I see you in the office?" he said as everyone grabbed their daily work orders and started out the door. "You okay?" Bill asked quietly. In a burst of emotion that surprised me, I blurted out everything, then wiped my face with my sleeve. I hated to show vulnerability, especially on a job.

"You should take a few days off," Bill said, "as much time as you need. Your job will be here for you."

I stared at him for a moment, thinking about how difficult it would be to go home alone. "There's nothing I can do. My sister is...taking care of things for now. I'm better off working."

Which I was doing! Finished with the weed whacker, I turned it off, fuming. More than a month had passed since that day in Bill's office. Surely by now, he would have seen that I was still a capable worker. Was he just waiting for me to fall apart? I loaded the weeder and secured it on the trailer. "They're probably all expecting that," I mumbled. Working with an all-male crew had never been a problem for me, but I had the feeling that the guys were tiptoeing around me. Had Bill told them all? How dare he.

At quitting time that day, armed with what seemed like a valid reason

for my fury, I lingered in the office as the guys filed out toward their vehicles. "What's up?" Bill asked, ushering me toward the door with his clump of keys.

"Did you tell the guys about my brother?" I asked.

Bill gave his nod. "Yes. They knew something was wrong, and they asked me. We are a team. What affects one of us affects us all. We just wish we could help."

"Well, tell them they can help by not looking at me different," I said. "It's annoying."

Bill hesitated outside the door and nodded. "I can do that."

In midsummer, I took two days off from work and held a memorial service for David. Family and friends gathered on Blue Mountain to scatter the ashes. By then, my tears were all dry. The grief had turned into a small stone that stayed in my throat every minute of every day. I'd even quit praying, "Help," or talking to God at all.

As July fell slowly into the heat of August, I made a special effort to blend back into the morning coffee conversations and to do twice the work expected of me. The guys began to act normal around me again, but Bill continued his daily checks.

"Slow down," Bill said to me one

hot afternoon as I painted the kiosk near the park entrance. “You’re making the rest of us look bad.”

“Well, if the shoe fits,” I said sarcastically. A look of impatience flashed across Bill’s face, but he walked away without a word. I knew it was a mean thing to say and not true. The guys on our crew were patient and hardworking. Bill was a good boss. It wasn’t fair to take my anger out on him, but I relied on that anger to help me put one foot in front of the other.

By September, when the traffic at Dinosaur National Monument had dwindled to a trickle and the heat had given way to jacket weather, I knew I owed Bill an apology. I seized an opportunity one day when he and I were alone eating lunch.

“They say that grief can trigger unexpected emotions,” I started. “I’m sorry about the mean-spirited jab I made that day when you told me to slow down.”

“Oh,” Bill said, “it was forgotten that day.”

“I just got so frustrated because you kept checking on my work every day, like you didn’t think I could do my job.”

Bill looked at me with a lingering stare, then shook his head. “That isn’t at all what I was doing, Lou Dean.” He got up, stuffed his empty

bags into his lunch sack and disappeared into the office. Maybe I’d embarrassed him by calling him out, so I didn’t mention it again. Somehow I made it through to the end of the job, keeping my anger to myself.

With the summer behind me, I tried reaching back into Scripture, hoping to find comfort there. I missed the closeness I’d always had with the creator. One morning I read from Psalms: “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”

Near to the brokenhearted? In what possible way? I thought. If the Lord was near all summer, his presence was lost on me. He certainly wasn’t as near as my supervisor, who did nothing but look over my shoulder every single day. It still rankled that Bill Dye thought my grief would render me incompetent. I was glad I’d confronted him. And then I remembered what he’d said in response: “That isn’t at all what I was doing, Lou Dean.”

It was suddenly so clear. Bill hadn’t been checking on my work; he’d been checking on me. Finally I saw the Lord’s faithfulness. I ran my finger over the line in Psalms. “You were near,” I whispered. Every day, all summer long, in a supervisor’s caring watchfulness. ■



My Long Cruise

Would I ever make it
home to my family
in Alabama?

BY BECKY ALEXANDER, DECATUR, ALABAMA

Sea and sun, buffets and soufflés, steel-drum music and tropical islands. I was working on a cruise ship, training tour directors during our hours at sea, with leisure time to explore the ports of call included in our 12-day package. The *Norwegian Breakaway* had departed out of New York, and every day since had been paradise—until I got news that my father was gravely ill back home in Alabama. Surrounded by the beauty of the Caribbean, I just wanted to get to my family. I’d never felt so alone.

My father had been living with a heart condition since I was 15. I was used to him being in and out of the hospital. Dad didn’t let it interfere with his life too much, and he didn’t want it to interfere with his children’s lives either. He was fine when the ship left New York. Three days later I’d called my sister, Cindy, while we were docked in San Juan. “How’s Dad?” I’d asked.

“I don’t want to worry you,” she said, “but he’s declined some since you left. The home health care nurse is here with him now.”

“Should I come home?”

“Oh, no, the doctor’s adjusted his

medication and we think it’ll help. I’ll keep you posted. Enjoy your trip.”

After a restful night in my cabin, I woke up ready to explore our next destination, St. Thomas. Full from my favorite cruise breakfast of eggs Benedict, I disembarked and rode the Skyride to the island’s Paradise Point. I was there, overlooking the harbor, when my phone rang. The caller ID read “Cindy,” but it turned out to be Dad himself. “I’ve got to get out of this bed!” he said.

Dad was not one to indulge his weakness, and I knew he’d rather be in his tractor seat than recovering in bed. “You’ll get out of that bed, Dad,” I told him. “You always do. I’ll be home soon. I love you.”

But this time, Dad wasn’t going to make a recovery. Shortly after that phone call, he slipped into a coma. Cindy held the phone up so I could talk to him, but that did little to console me. The only comfort I could possibly find was with Dad and my family in Alabama.

I talked to some of the staff about getting there faster than the ship would get us back to New York, but according to the flight schedules, my chances didn’t look good. We had two ports to go—Saint Kitts and Tortola—before the ship turned back,

but the air didn't seem faster than water at this point. Reluctantly, I decided it was best to stay on the *Breakaway* and take my return flight back to Alabama.

In Saint Kitts, I counted the hours until the ship started moving again. I did the same in Tortola. That morning, I stood on the highest balcony of the ship's atrium. The sparkling, luxurious decks below were full of people, but I felt completely isolated. So much so that when someone tapped my arm, I jumped.

"I didn't mean to startle you," the man said. I recognized him. I'd been seated with him and his family in the dining room one night. Over three delicious courses, I learned that he'd served as a church minister, as had I.

"My mind was far away," I said. *All the way in Alabama...*

"This is going to sound strange," he said, "but I saw you up here while we were having breakfast. I felt God nudging me to come talk to you."

He waited to see my reaction. He had no way of knowing how desperately I wanted company at that moment. "Thank you," I said. "I received terrible news from home... My father is in a coma. He's dying."

The man threw his arms around me right there on the balcony. He asked God to cover me with his heavenly love. His prayer was a welcome

balm to my soul, and I was moved that he would show such kindness with his hug.

Instead of going back to my cabin, I distracted myself by going ashore. With no destination in mind, I followed the signs for Main Street in the village of Road Town, the capital of the British Virgin Islands. I walked around, snapping pictures of the churches there. I stopped in front of one of them, a neat little white building with red shutters, red handrails and a red cross above the entrance. I walked up to the door and remembered the kind passenger's words about feeling God's nudge. I felt one now, drawing me inside, and turned the doorknob. The sweet interior was peaceful and soothing, empty but for me. I sat down in a pew.

A man's voice broke the silence. "Welcome," he said. I hadn't noticed him sitting at the piano up front. "Please feel free to stay as long as you'd like," he said. "We're having a worship service with the children from our school."

Right on cue, a side door flew open and children in green-plaid uniforms rushed in. I was immediately surrounded as they filled the pews. The man at the piano hit a lively intro, and the kids sang out, clapping joyfully and dancing in place. I recognized

the Scripture song: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever.” I walked back to the *Breakaway*, holding on to the love the children sang about.

Back in my cabin, I received a text from Cindy. “Dad just met Jesus,” she wrote simply. While I was brokenhearted that Dad had left for heaven before I could get to him, I felt that in some small way, the children’s worship service had prepared me.

At last, the *Breakaway* was headed to New York, but not without delay. We were hit with a terrible storm that brought 19-foot waves and wind gusts over 90 miles per hour. Hundreds of passengers got seasick as the ship tossed and groaned. The *Breakaway* was enlisted in a search and rescue mission when the turbulent seas threw a man overboard from a nearby cargo ship. I stayed in my cabin as our ship rocked and rolled on the sea, wondering if I would ever get to the comfort waiting for me in Alabama.

Finally, we anchored in the Hudson while the seas calmed enough for



Becky was blessed at sea.

us to get to the pier in New York. We were a half day behind schedule. I missed my flight back to Alabama, but my family delayed Dad’s celebration of life service so I could be there to say goodbye in the comforting bosom of my family. “I will never get on a cruise ship again,” I told my sister

after the service. And I meant it.

For a while, Covid-19 took the choice out of my hands. But recently I got an offer to teach on another cruise. The offer brought back vivid memories of the *Breakaway*. I was surprised to find that the memories weren’t the torturous ones of feeling lonely and far from family on stormy waters. What I remembered was God nudging a fellow passenger to come to me with a hug, the joyful voices of the children singing in a random church. Singing a song that seemed meant for me. When my family was too far away to offer comfort, God had sent me his own comfort from above. It was almost as if Dad’s loving spirit had gotten up out of that bed to find me where I was.

I took the cruise job. I leave in December. On land or sea, in Alabama or the Caribbean, I was never truly alone. God had shown me that. ■

letters & messages



Jennifer's grandfather, "a gentleman and a scholar," with one of his six grandsons

JENNIFER LOOMIS
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

I often think about how much my late grandfather would have enjoyed my sons. "You're a gentleman and a scholar," he liked to tell the boys in my family. My sons laughed when I told them about their great-grandfather's favorite saying. I hadn't heard it since.

As a high school sophomore, my son Kyle started work as a busboy, his first job. I picked him up after his shift one night, and he got in the car looking stunned. The bartender had just thanked him for his hard work,

smiled and said, "Kyle, you're a gentleman and a scholar." We knew it was a pat on the back from above.

ADRIENNE MATTHEWS
WEST BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP, MICHIGAN

"Excuse me, are you Mrs. Matthews?" I turned in the church vestibule to see a young woman making her way over to me. "You don't know me," she said, "but I want to tell you something about Eric." My heart quickened at the mention of my son's name.

Eric had passed away from a viral infection when he was 19. He'd been active in our church's Sunday night teen program. The young woman explained that Eric would pick up anyone who needed a lift to the group. His encouragement had led the young woman herself to attend and join the church. She spoke of the difference he'd made in her life and the lives of other kids. She thanked me, and I thanked God for reminding me that my son had also been an angel on this earth.



Adrienne cherishes an unexpected encounter.

BOTTOM: STEVE KOSS



Lynn and her daughter Lacey had no idea how perfect a supermarket bouquet could be.

LYNN MAMROS
VANDERGRIFT, PENNSYLVANIA

On the day before Thanksgiving, my daughter Lacey and I were checking out at Aldi when I spotted the flower bouquets. It reminded me of something I saw on social media: people giving flowers to random strangers. We agreed we should try it, so Lacey selected pretty yellow roses. We looked around for the perfect recipient, someone who might need a pick-me-up, but no one stuck out. We went home with the flowers feeling defeated.

The next day, the mother of a good friend passed away. I told her to stop by and at least take home a turkey dinner.

My friend came by the house and stood in the doorway, not up to mingling, and told Lacey and me about the funeral arrangements. “We’ll have

Mom’s favorite yellow roses,” she said. Lacey and I looked at one another. I went to the kitchen to get the turkey dinner and, of course, the yellow roses! We’d found our perfect recipient.

KITTY FABRICO
YONKERS, NEW YORK

Deeply depressed after my 10-year marriage ended, I often had trouble sleeping. Then one night I had the strangest dream. I had never been to the tropics, yet I dreamed I was lying on a cot in a straw hut. The most melodious music was carried in on the breeze, and I looked outside. A group of young girls in white dresses was standing on a grassy mound singing like angels. I found myself humming along with them. When I awoke, I felt uplifted, free of my heavy heart. I was alive and hopeful for the future. Only God’s angels could have changed my outlook overnight.



Kitty dreamed of tropical angels.



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A SELECTION FROM

Walking in Grace

*“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”*

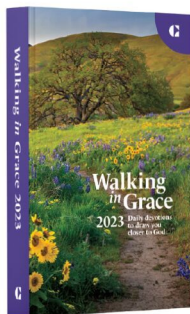
—Psalm 139:14 (NIV)

I looked out my hotel window at the pool below and saw her, a solitary mallard female, paddling around in the water. It was early, before the sun replaced the shade and the sunbathers gathered. The duck paddled as if she didn't have a care in the world.

I smiled at her freedom and imagined the conversation she might have had with the rest of the flock before deciding to take a dip in the hotel pool.

“Where are you going? Don't you know you'll be the only duck there?” To which she would have replied, “The pool looks inviting, and I want to swim in it. You go ahead, and I'll catch up later.” The other ducks would shake their heads, think her foolish and fly away.

So she paddled, seemingly unbothered by the fact that she was different, not at all like the human sunbathers who eventually arrived poolside. She was enjoying being



a duck having a swim, stopping briefly on the water to preen before flying away.

I admired her and envied her. Here I was, trying to dredge up enough courage to go out to the pool by myself. My insecurities told me I might not fit in. My body wasn't model-perfect, and

I might draw unwanted attention. But I also wanted to have a swim in the cool water without worrying about others' opinions.

How odd that a lone mallard visited the pool that morning. How wonderful that I had witnessed it. Was God sending me a message? Was he telling me that I too could be myself without regard to what others thought? I accepted that encouragement, put on my bathing suit and headed to the pool.

Lord, thank you for making me who I am. Give me courage to be the person you want me to be.

MARILYN TURK

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angel sightings



My friend Vicki was dying of cancer. I spent the day praying for strength for her husband, comforted by the assurance that the pain she'd long endured would soon be replaced with a new heavenly body. As I drove into our church parking lot, I spotted this angel sprinkling love and color in a bright blue sky. Vicki died peacefully a few hours later, and I knew that an angel had guided her on her journey.

EILEEN BARLAGE, COTTONWOOD HEIGHTS, UTAH



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