

OF FAIRY TALES &
HAPPILY EVER AFTERS
MY STORY OF BREAST CANCER

TERRI GRAY



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Dedication and Acknowledgements

IN MEMORY OF MY DEAR FRIEND, OTTO MAYBERRY, SR.
APRIL 24, 1902 — MAY 13, 1986

I remember hearing him praying fervently every night for my brothers and me, sensing that there truly was a great God on the other end, listening to the prayers of this faithful man. Because of his faithfulness, I, too, find myself praying with the same confidence and fervency for my children. With love, from “Baby.”

And with loving thanks to my husband, David, and to our children, Jennifer and Christopher. Thank you for your patience, endurance, encouragement, and prayers during my treatment and writing.

To the caring and professional team of doctors and nurses who have poured their all into my life to help me fight for my life these past two years: Dr. Thomas Lossing and Mary, Dr. Bhandit Sinkaset and Tina, and Dr. Randall Scharlach and Noreen, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

With deepest gratitude to my parents, Robert and Susan Julian, my four brothers, Stuart, Brian, Sean and Kevin, and to David’s parents, Mary Kidwell, Harrison and Betty Gray, and to all my extended family who not only supported me through my cancer journey, but have also been there through all the many hardships our family faced. Because of your love and compassion, I never felt abandoned to face such difficult challenges alone.

In appreciation to my pastor, Ron Gravell, and the entire church of Lompoc First Assembly of God, for your ongoing prayers, support, and love. Thank you all. And of course, to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, I give my deepest thanks.

I would also like to thank my preliminary editor, Shannon McGraw Deitz, who encouraged me to write my story, and began the editing process, cheering me on with each chapter written. I also want to thank the team at Tate Publishing who worked diligently together to make this happen.

“Of Fairy Tales and Happily Ever Afters” by Terri Gray

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Of Fairy Tales and Happily Ever

Afters

MY STORY OF BREAST CANCER

About the Cover

When my cover designer, Sommer Buss, shared her ideas for a cover fitting for my story, I had no idea how perfectly it would depict my life. The design is “subtle, yet powerful” according to Sommer. In our discussion about the design, I shared with Sommer how Christ makes us beautiful, and that He truly is our Prince Charming who makes everything FIT (like a glass slipper) together for His sovereign purpose.

With these concepts in mind, Sommer created a faceless woman to represent women in general. Her Prince Charming, Christ, is fitting her for the perfect glass slipper. You can see the subtle scar on His wrist from the crucifixion, just a portion of symbolism from within the illustration. Christ’s skin is darker than hers, showing His Jewish heritage. The pinks, blues, and greens are colorful and fairy-tale like, and the orange behind the backdrop symbolizes the pumpkin. As in the fairy tale, *Cinderella*, we all have pumpkins waiting to be turned into horse-driven carriages, whisking us away from our troubles and into the palace of happily ever afters. Whether that pumpkin is cancer or some other life challenge, the Lord can take that pumpkin and turn it into a happily ever after ending that glorifies and exalts His name!

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Foreword

BY CAROL AHOLA

“You have breast cancer.” One in every eight American women will hear those words in their lifetimes, but every woman surely wonders if she’ll discover a lump someday. All of us know someone close who has heard those terrifying words. Ever wonder how you could live without allowing cancer—or the fear of getting it—dominate your life? Ever wonder how you can support the women in your life that drew the short straw?

Here is help for every woman and those who love them. Terri Gray’s travelogue through cancerland will inspire hope and energy for the battles ahead of all of us. No dry textbook account or a dreary journal, Terri shares her journey with refreshing humor and clear-eyed honesty. She doesn’t deny the possibility that she may not survive her struggle—that maybe she won’t see her children marry or even celebrate her next birthday. Yet she’s getting more joyous mileage out of each day than many of us.

How did she find such a place of rest and release? You’ll learn her secrets as you get to know Terri in these pages. Several years ago (b.c., before cancer), I picked Terri for my bouquet of favorite friends. Even then I was impressed by her “half-full” attitude—despite the dreary health problems that dogged her household. Her daughter, Jennifer, was born with severe spina bifida, and at age twenty-one has endured thirty major surgeries. Her husband, David, had a heart condition that has become a permanent disability. Her son, Christopher, survived heart surgery when he was ten. Terri was the only one left in her family who alone glowed with health.

Then two years ago, just as she headed back to college to prepare to fill David’s role as breadwinner, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Many would have shook their fist in God’s face and surrendered to self-pity in the Slough of Despond. Not Terri. Instead, the furnace of affliction has refined her like gold. Just thinking about Terri edifies me, convicts me when I “bellyache,” and motivates me to keep on keeping on. Armed with her contagious faith—not a faith that she will beat this battle—but a faith that her heavenly Father really does know best *and love her most*, Terri has hiked to here. “Choose Joy” is the song she sings in the night. We can too.

Preface

This book grew out of a series of lessons learned throughout my life's journey with medical happenings. Along the way, a pattern emerged with each circumstance I faced. God unfolded His plan for my life, and in fact, I realized that everything truly has a purpose. Whether it's sitting near my daughter's hospital bed following her thirtieth operation or embracing the porcelain throne for the tenth time in one day following chemotherapy, I sensed God's presence in spite of my circumstances. As I chose to embrace His comfort and peace, others around me sought to find the same peace in the midst of their circumstances.

Sharing my experiences and journey through breast cancer via E-mail enabled me to reach so many more than those who crossed my path on a daily basis. Before long, my E-mail list grew to over one hundred fifty people, due to friends and family forwarding my letters to their friends and family. People I never met began sending E-mail letters telling how my story encouraged them to trust God in the midst of their difficulties.

After much prayer, I felt inspired to write my story in book form so that perhaps even more people could read my story and find hope for their lives. Since many compare me to the biblical Job, and his story has been read by many through the Bible, I hope that many will read my modern-day, "Job-like" experience and see that the God of the Bible is still the God of today.

Chapter One

BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED

Growing up, I recall watching movies like *Brian's Song* and *Death Be Not Proud* each time they played on television. My entire family gathered for the viewing, and they all waited for my tears to flow. Often, I noticed I was the only one crying, and my brothers and father teased me for my sensitivity. Watching the actor portraying Gayle Sayers, the professional football player dying of cancer, I thought how very sad and tragic it was to see a young person die of cancer. I convinced myself it would never happen to me as I dried my eyes each time. After all, my family history provided a clean slate. No one had ever died of cancer. In fact, my idealistic views of my future never included tragedy.

In my early years, I was deeply influenced by my dear friend, Otto, who moved in with my family after a diagnosis of diabetes stole his eyesight. He was a chauffeur for a wealthy doctor in San Francisco at the time, but he sold his house and moved in with our family. Otto had a deep faith in God, and at night, I could hear him crying out to God in prayer. His prayers gave me a sense of God's awesomeness, and I knew I could always bring my requests before Him like Otto did.

As his health deteriorated, gangrene set in to his leg, and Otto underwent surgery to have his leg amputated below the knee. It was at the rehabilitation hospital where Otto was learning to walk with his prosthesis that my interest was peaked about physical therapy. Seeing Otto's progress and eagerness to walk again, with the help of the physical therapist, stirred up a desire in my heart to do the same.

One year later, I was invited to attend an athletic training conference at Colorado State University during the summer after my freshman year in high school. There I found my eagerness to learn all I could about medicine growing. Upon my return to school in the fall, I was a student trainer for the football, basketball, and volleyball teams. One period a day, I was enrolled in a rehab class where, under the direction of a local physical therapist, I performed range of motion exercises, applied heat packs, and gave whirlpool baths to injured students from the various teams. Helping my peers gave me a sense of accomplishment.

I remember one student, in particular, who came to rehab class because he had cerebral palsy. He had very low self-esteem because of the disfigurement of his legs and his need to use forearm crutches. As I exercised his legs through range of motion exercises each day, I got to know him. He was a very kind person, and I encouraged him to get involved with activities at the school.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR . . .

Many of the entries in this book are actual accounts on my road of survival. They have been left intact, as written, to mirror a true reflection of my journey.

It was rewarding to see him blossom over that year, and I felt so happy that I could make a difference in his life.

The physical therapist, Wes, who oversaw the rehab class, offered me a job, working at his private practice after school. I was thrilled to get more hands-on experience and even more excited to be mentored under Wes. He loved his work, and the patients praised him for the “miracles” he performed in his office, as they seemed to walk out feeling better than when they walked in. I yearned to make that kind of difference in people’s lives. I knew, then, my life would take me down the path of the medical field.

During my junior year, I visited the high school career center, hoping to learn how I could get the education required to become a physical therapist. An Army recruiter happened to be in the center that day, and we talked at length about the possibilities of obtaining my education through joining the military. By the time I left the center, I felt excited about my future, and I was eager to tell my parents of my plans.

Being supportive parents, Mom and Dad happily agreed that this was a good option. I knew we did not have the money for college, and my recruiter promised I could attend college once I completed school and started my job. Everything in my world seemed to be falling into place. No worries.

None of my friends could believe I was brave enough to join the Army. Some even tried to talk me out of it. However, in September of 1979, during my senior year, I joined the Delayed Entry Program, promising to start basic training in the U.S. Army the following July, shortly after high school graduation. My ducks were all in a row, just the way I liked them to be. Being in control of my environment seemed to give me the power to try new things and afforded me the self-confidence and determination to reach my goals. It was all about me . . . or so I thought.

I carried that steadfast spirit with me into basic training, in the middle of summer, in the middle of a record heat wave, in the middle of Alabama. Growing up in California left me ill-prepared for the mugginess of the Deep South. I lost ten pounds, most likely from sweating, during that time. The eight weeks in basic training introduced me to people of varying backgrounds and the opportunity to become a leader.

My brother, Brian, serving in the Navy, gave me one bit of advice before basic training. “Do what you’re told, be quiet, and never volunteer yourself.” I applied these principles, but somehow found myself wearing a black cuff with gold sergeant stripes over the sleeves of my green Army fatigues. I was the platoon sergeant, in charge of the women’s platoon throughout basic training. Again, it was fitting for me, because I did like to be in control, and I was also a notorious people pleaser. So my fellow platoon members and I got along valiantly.

After graduation ceremonies, I was back on a plane, headed for my school at Ft. Sam Houston, Texas. My recruiter’s promises included my duty station of choice, Ft. Sam Houston, my initial schooling pre-requisite, 91B Combat Medical Specialist Course, and the guarantee that after my 91B course, I could sign up for the Physical Therapy Assistant course with my first sergeant upon arrival at my permanent duty station. He told me I could take the college classes required for my bachelor’s degree at the same time. He lied.

Although I did attend 91B School and I was stationed at Ft. Sam Houston, Texas, my first meeting with my first sergeant did not quite go as planned. The first sergeant sat me down and told me I was assigned to the Academy of Health Sciences (AHS) in the Classroom Support Division of the Combat Medical Specialist Division (CMSD). He explained that medics were expendable on this Army post because there were already specialists in every field. Medics, he explained, were trained to be in field units, sort of like their civilian counterpart, emergency medical technicians. I told him of my plans to sign up for the Physical Therapy Assistant course and would not need to be at CMSD anyway. Oh . . . what naiveté I possessed. The first sergeant cleared his throat, smiled at me, and informed me that I had to work in my job for a year before I could sign up for another course.

Suddenly, my world began to crumble. I felt my face flush and heart beat into my throat. I had been deceived, and I was not in control. I thanked my first sergeant for his time, picked up my barracks assignment, and carried my Army-issue green duffle bag up the stairs to my room. My roommate was gone for the weekend, so I lay on my bed and cried myself to sleep. What I didn’t realize, at my very young age of eighteen, was that God had a plan for my life, and things were not always as bad as they seemed.

When I woke up, I remembered that there was a Bible study at the Academy Chapel where I attended during my 91B school. That little chapel held a special place in my heart. Just the week before, I attended a Christian concert at the chapel. At the end of the performance, the singers each gave their testimonies, sharing how they came to committing their lives to serving Jesus Christ. One woman in particular shared how she was a very good person, enjoyed helping others, and found herself wanting to please people. I listened attentively and felt myself walking in her shoes, amazed at how our lives paralleled each other. Then she explained how someone told her that one could never be “good” enough to get to Heaven, and that no one could earn his/her way to Heaven. Nevertheless, God had provided a way for eternal life through Jesus’ (who was God’s own son) death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead.

She then invited anyone who had never made a personal commitment to Jesus to pray with her. I knew God was calling me to a deeper relationship with

Him, so I raised my hand. I asked God to forgive me for my sins and to come live in my heart forever. It was an awesome night for me, like the feeling I had when I realized I could get my education through the Army. I felt confident that I had made another very wise decision. However, unlike the recruiter, this singer led me to a truth that would never change. Jesus would never lie to me as my recruiter had.

So I grabbed my purse, dried my eyes, and walked three miles to the chapel. If there was one thing that was stolen from me in Basic Training, it was the fear of safety. I figured that with all the muscle I had built up during physical training, no one better even try to attack me.

I arrived about thirty minutes early and was greeted by a chaplain's assistant, Sgt. David Gray. We chatted for a while, and I was charmed by his Southern accent and gentlemanly qualities. After the Bible study, David asked how I was getting back to the barracks, as it was already dark out.

"Oh, I'm walking. I'm in great shape, so it's not a problem." I declared fearlessly.

"Oh, no, you're not! Don't you realize how dangerous it is to walk alone in the dark?" David demanded. So I climbed into his black Chevrolet Monza, and we drove off to the barracks. I learned that he and I were in the same company and battalion. It was the first of many car rides I was to take with David Gray. Our barrack rooms were separated by a stairwell, and I felt comforted by the fact that I had already made a friend who lived close by.

Feeling sorry for me, *I think*, David became my main source of transportation on the Army post. He was easy to talk to, and since he told me he was a Christian, I trusted him completely.

About a month after we met, David asked me to commit to dating only him. Being the naïve, oblivious teen I was, I had not seen it coming. I liked him, but I hadn't yet fallen in love with him, but that was not the case with David. He was head over heels for me and wanted to stake his claim before someone else did.

I thought about his request and decided that dating would be fun, and I really did enjoy his company, so I said yes. Getting to know David distracted me from the disappointments I faced working at CMSD. I found myself unlocking classrooms, cleaning chalkboards, and monitoring the sound system for special presentations at AHS—a far cry from the duties of a medic or a physical therapist.

I didn't realize it at that moment, but God was teaching me something about blooming where I was planted. Nothing was happening the way I had planned it, nothing at all. Yet one thing was for sure, as every day passed, I grew deeply in love with David. He was the first guy I ever dated who showed respect and courtesy to me.

By December, David had proposed and I accepted. My parents were certain that I was just lonely, and they convinced me to postpone our initial wedding date of February 14 to the summer of 1981. I had no problem with that. Dave graciously agreed, and we were married July 1, 1981.

Throughout our courtship, we spent hours together, just getting to know one another. It was definitely a City Mouse/Country Mouse type of relationship. David hailed from a small town in North Carolina, where he had worked on dairy, tobacco, and chicken farms. I knew nothing of his lifestyle. He also was an avid hunter and fisherman. I, on the other hand, lived for shopping malls, swimming (in heated pools), playing soccer, and dancing the night away. We were as different as two people could be. To top that off, Dave grew up in the Southern Baptist Church, and I . . . in the Roman Catholic Church. How different could we get? However, there was one tie that was inseparable; we both had committed our lives to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He was the tie that bound our relationship together.

Neither David nor I had a clue as to the road we were about to travel. Yet we did know that commitment to our Lord and marriage was essential for the journey. After our fairytale wedding, I completely expected to live happily ever after, *and we did*, for a while. When the fall of 1981 arrived, I revisited my first sergeant to finally sign up for the Physical Therapy Assistant program. Again, I walked out disheartened and disappointed. The rules had changed . . . again. This time I was told that I had to be a 91B for two years before I could sign up for the Physical Therapy Assistant course. In an attempt to comfort me, my supervisor sent me to another location to work and promised to give me opportunities to work as a medic at the hospital. David, too, offered to take college classes with me, so I could continue working toward my goal of becoming a physical therapist. We each signed up for two night classes at St. Phillips College. A few days before the classes commenced, David's classes were dropped, and one of my classes was dropped as well.

"Oh well," I sighed, "at least I will have one class under my belt."

In February 1982, we learned that I was pregnant with our first child. Excitement filled the air at the Gray household. Immediately, I began planning how things would be. I signed up for a prenatal class required by the Army and began shopping. I also realized how much my body objected to pregnancy. I didn't just have morning sickness; it lasted all day long. My supervisor placed a sign on the bathroom door, reserving it for me!

In May, after a long night of cramping and bleeding, I miscarried our baby. Deeply saddened, Dave and I returned home, empty-handed. This was to be the beginning of several difficult medical tragedies in our lives. Fortunately, we had marvelous support from the chaplains and their wives. We had become much like a family. A community health nurse also took me under her wing

and helped me through the emotional roller coaster following the death of a baby.

The next month, Dave received orders for a one-year unaccompanied tour of duty in Camp Casey, Korea. He was scheduled to leave in December 1982. We were both heartsick over this news. Then, in October, another wonderful event occurred. We were expecting another baby. I remember thanking God for another chance at parenthood, but again, I was terribly sick throughout the pregnancy.

Driving David to San Francisco and watching him board that airplane was one of the most painful experiences I had endured in my short twenty years of life. I realized I had depended upon David for so much, and I could not imagine living without him. After leaving the airport, I traveled back to my parents' home to spend the Christmas holidays with them. My mom, being a very wise woman, had a stern talk with me. She told me if I didn't stop crying and being so upset, I might risk losing another baby. That was all I needed to hear. My baby needed me. It was a proverbial splash of cold water in my face. I drove back to San Antonio, and on the way, I had a very long discussion with God. I told Him how much I needed His presence in my life.

By February, I noticed some spotting and cramping, and immediately, I feared the worst. I couldn't imagine miscarrying this baby too—especially with David being so far away. I was admitted to the hospital and told I was having premature labor. My doctor's compassion enabled me to remain calm, and God began to provide me with the presence I had asked Him for back in December. I started taking antilabor medication and was sent home with a profile for working only half-days.

As the months rolled by, I continued to experience bouts of premature labor and had numerous hospitalizations to stop the baby from coming. David had already submitted his paperwork for three weeks of leave starting two weeks before my due date, in case the baby came early. A friend went with me to Lamaze birthing classes, and my community health nurse friend helped me think through all the things I needed for my baby.

On the morning of June 14, 1983, I went to the bathroom, only to see my mucous plug drop into the toilet. I immediately knew what that meant. This baby wasn't waiting until July 16 to be born. I decided to hold off calling the chaplains in order to contact David. Instead, I cleaned my house and got everything ready, just in case it was time. (You know . . . the side of me that said, "I'm in control.") All throughout the day, I had cramps, and I thought perhaps they might be real contractions. I packed my bags and drove myself to the hospital, just in time for my prenatal exercise class. My doctor supervised the class, and when he saw me, he asked how I was doing. I told him what had happened earlier, and he quickly escorted me out of class to the OB ward.

It was too early to have the baby, but I had been taken off the antilabor drugs in my seventh month to protect the baby. An ultrasound was performed to check on the size of the baby's lungs, head, and legs. The lungs and head appeared to be sufficient size for survival, but the leg measurements did not. The baby was also in a breech position. So my doctor went to consult with the chief of OB about whether to attempt to turn the baby.

While he was gone, my bag of water broke. Both doctors returned to find me in a puddle of water.

"You've just bought yourself a c-section, Specialist Gray." The chief of OB reported.

The next several hours were quite the opposite of what I had envisioned. The chaplains were contacted, and word was sent via Watts line to David in Korea. My labor coach showed up just as they were giving me a spinal block. She prayed for me, which gave me great comfort.

Then I was wheeled into the operating room, where Jennifer Lynnette made her appearance. When they pulled her out of my womb, the room became deathly silent.

I asked, "What is it?" wondering if I had delivered a boy or a girl. Instead of hearing "It's a girl," I heard medical terms of which I was unfamiliar.

"Your daughter has myelomeningocele. We need to take her to the neonatal intensive care unit immediately." With that, they quickly showed her face to me and then whisked her away. At that moment, I was given heavy sedation, and the next thing I remember was waking up in the recovery room.

God placed this very special little girl in our lives to love *and* learn from. Jennifer entered the world with a severe spinal defect, more commonly known as spina bifida. Over a period of twenty years, Jennifer underwent twenty-nine operations to correct the associated problems with her birth defect.

Jennifer became the single most important priority in our lives, next to God. The ensuing months following her birth, Jennifer required constant medical care. She had three operations by the time she was two months old. Although David was sent home on emergency leave, he only stayed for three weeks and was sent back to Korea.

The fascinating thing was that I had perfect peace about Jennifer. Social workers, neurosurgeons, pediatricians, and nurses were sent to my hospital room to explain the severity of Jennifer's birth defect. I was told she may never walk, she would have no control of her bowel and bladder, and she may have mild mental retardation.

I did not feel afraid. I knew God would be right by our sides. Jennifer was a gift from God, and He would equip us to care for and bring her up in a loving, godly home. My mother flew out on numerous occasions to be with me while Jennifer had surgery. The chaplains and their wives continued to assist

me, and my community health nurse friend called daily.

Most mommies come equipped with an inherent need to nurture, protect, and kiss away children's boo-boos. I learned early on, in order to offer Jennifer a promising future, I had to allow her to endure painful procedures. Often, my heart broke when I held her soft, petite hand, bruised by needle sticks and intravenous lines, while she lay in pain in her hospital bed. An incredible feeling of helplessness overwhelmed me in her early years. If it were not for the comfort I found in Bible verses committed to memory in my heart, I could not have endured such hardship.

"You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you." (Isaiah 26:3)

God, ever faithful to His Word, kept my heart in perfect peace as I remained steadfast in Him, praying daily, often hourly, over this precious, broken body. As I considered God's moment of anguish, watching His son be beaten and ultimately sacrificed for my sins, I knew He could relate to me in a very compassionate, deeply loving way.

Also, during our happily ever after, David suddenly became ill with severe asthma in 1986. The asthma's severity eventually led to a medical discharge from the U.S. Army. Months before the discharge occurred, David's heart became infected with bacteria entering his bloodstream from recent dental work and sinus surgery. He spent four weeks on intravenous antibiotics in the Army hospital. Little did we know the havoc this infection would wreak on his heart valves. During David's prolonged stay in the hospital, Jennifer occupied a bed in a children's hospital, forty-five miles away, fighting yet another disease, ulcerative colitis.

Driving between the two hospitals several times a day took all my strength and fortitude, as I was nauseous with morning sickness and three months pregnant with our second child, Christopher. Again, my heart, a mother's heart, was chained to Jennifer's bedside, yearning never to miss a single moment with her that I might be of some comfort. At the same time, the one I loved deeply, my husband, my one flesh, tugged at my heart, tearing me inside between his needs and Jennifer's. Although David would never place me in the position of choosing between the two of them, I could not help feeling torn. Again, God's Word came to my rescue. Knowing even before I uttered a prayer, God knew my request, comforted me.

"...for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Matthew 6:8)

Often, I found myself praying, as I left Jennifer's bedside, for God to keep her resting comfortably while I was away. Many times, I would return to find a nurse or a volunteer dressed like Raggedy Ann, entertaining my fragile child. Seeing God's arms wrapped around Jennifer warmed my heart. My

prayers had been answered, and my faith muscle developed rapidly as I realized I could trust God to love Jennifer, *even more* than I loved her, if that were even possible.

It was during this time I was convinced nothing horrible would ever happen to Chris or me, because God had already allowed multiple medical disasters to visit my family. However, like Job of the Old Testament, I had *no* idea what was ahead. In 1997, after a visit to the new pediatrician in town, we learned Christopher had a dangerous connection between the pulmonary artery and the aorta in his heart. My heart beat so rapidly, feeling like it would explode, the day I heard the words, "He needs surgery, or he may die." Lord, not him too! I silently pleaded at that moment.

Christopher was unaccustomed to the physical pain associated with major surgery. As a young boy, even a small scrape sent him running to my arms, with alligator tears streaming down his soft sweet face. A kiss, hug, and a band-aide provided all the comfort he required. God had placed a tender, merciful heart inside my son, and I knew he had the gift of mercy.

In the book of Romans, the seven motivational gifts are described.

"We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully." (Romans 12:6-8)

Throughout the Bible, I noticed examples of each gift lived out through different people. Timothy definitely had the gift of mercy, as Paul admonished him with encouragement several times for his tenderheartedness. Christopher is my Timothy. He feels everything *deeply*. How would I protect and nurture him through this? God's Holy Spirit had already whispered the answer in my ear:

"I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (Philippians 4:13)

After preparing Chris in every way that I had learned from Jennifer's operations, Chris sailed through his operation like a true soldier, almost as though it was a right of passage as a member of the Gray family. This, I assured myself, was the final chapter in the Gray family's medical crises, and all would be well.

God wasn't finished with molding our testimonies, when later that same year, David's heart went into a dangerous rhythm, requiring the surgical placement of an internal defibrillator. It was then we learned of the damage the infection in 1986 caused to his mitral and atrial valves. David's surgeon, Dr. Ilvento, with a gentle and caring spirit, explained how David was "a candidate

for sudden death” without the defibrillator. For a moment, I imagined life without David. It was more painful even to think of than I realized. Our marriage bond, deeply cemented by God’s graciousness, carried us through the storms in our lives. Without David, I felt I might wither and die, like the grass on a hot summer’s day. I pleaded with God, again, to keep him safe, as I needed him so. God already knew my needs, and taking David from me was not part of His plan.

Many of our closest friends and relatives began comparing our lives to that of the biblical Job, who God allowed to be severely tested by Satan.

“One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. The LORD said to Satan, ‘Where have you come from?’ Satan answered the LORD, ‘From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it.’ Then the LORD said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.’ ‘Does Job fear God for nothing?’ Satan replied. ‘Have you not put a hedge around him and his household; and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.’ The LORD said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.’” (Job 1:6–12)

After Satan’s attack on Job’s family and possessions, Job’s response to this horrific news became my desire as well:

“At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.’ In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.” (Job 1:20–22)

By this time, I had learned how to walk each day, trusting God for my needs and those of my family. I felt safe knowing I would always be well, since God entrusted me with such a medically fragile family. Yet I was wrong to think that way. My strength . . . every ounce of it, came from God, not from myself. I would begin to understand the error in my immature beliefs shortly thereafter.

Chapter Two

IT’S MY TURN NOW

Each year I faithfully visited my gynecologist, Dr. Calderon, for the dreaded exam most women avoid. My pap smears consistently came back negative, and my breast exams, without fail, showed lumps. These were most likely from the frequent breast infections scarring my milk ducts during the years I nursed Jen and Chris. Three different years I had mammograms at the hospital to remove any doubts in Dr. Calderon’s mind regarding these lumps. Everything always came back fine, and I was given a clean bill of health to witness Jennifer and Christopher successfully complete their educations.

In June of 2002, Jennifer proudly walked across her high school stage, accepting the diploma she so rightly deserved. Her graduation marked an important milestone in her life. She accomplished so much in spite of her numerous hospitalizations and permanent disability. Seated on the cement bleachers with my family that day, I shed tears of joy and relief for Jennifer. The senior class president opened her speech by telling Jennifer’s story of triumph at walking on her crutches to be seated at this monumental event, which started the flow of tears throughout the stadium.

For the past ten months, Jen worked weekly (sometimes daily) with her physical therapist following spinal fusion surgery, to regain the strength to walk again. During the final week before the ceremony, the physical therapist met Jen daily out on the football field, practicing maneuvering her brace-clad feet and forearm crutches over the uneven grass. It was painful and tiring, but Jen was determined to walk. After all the students were seated, and Jen’s story had been shared, the entire class, along with everyone in the stadium stood up in applause with a standing ovation. I sensed that God stood too. He had been her strength throughout these past nineteen years. It was because she trusted in Him that she did walk that day. Even as a young child, she would quote scriptures like,

“I can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens me.”
(Philippians 4:13)

Jen’s strength through Christ is what led her to continue to persist and attend college in the fall. After her first semester, she encouraged me to go back to school. I must admit, the idea had crossed my mind so many times, but the time was never right. Someone was either in the hospital or recovering from a hospitalization, and I chose to be available to my family.

With much prayer, discussion, and insistence from Jennifer (and she can be mighty persuasive), I sat in the college counselor’s office that December, signing myself up for the nursing program. Imagine that! At forty-one, I was