

TOTAL ABANDON

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with Elizabeth Cody Newenhuyse



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Designed by Beth Sparkman

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A WORLD ENDS

God, You are the Lord of our circumstances. We did not come to Lebanon by accident—we are exactly where You meant for us to be. Lord, I want to worship You in the place where You've put me today. Help me to remember these four words: "This is My doing."

—From Bonnie's journal: February 2002

Sidon, Lebanon: November 21, 2002

I thought it was someone laughing on the answering machine.

Bonnie had left early as usual for the clinic where she worked assisting poor, pregnant Palestinian women. It was my day off and, night person that I am, I was contentedly sleeping in, happy for a respite from the busyness of our lives ministering in the southern Lebanon city of Sidon. The phone rang about 8 a.m. in our apartment overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. After two rings, the answering machine came on. I heard a shrieking, garbled voice on the line—it sounded almost like hideous laughter. At first I thought it was someone joking around, but then I recognized the voice of

Bonnie's coworker Alison, pleading with me to get to the clinic. I jumped out of bed and rushed to hit the replay button. As I listened, my world ended. Her call was no joke; instead it filled me with horror and panic. I needed to get to the clinic, fast.

It's strange how trivial details stand out at a time when the planet seems to be spinning out of control. I dressed and looked for the one thousand Lebanese lire (equivalent to seventy cents American) for a taxi fare across town. Desperately I pawed through all the drawers, looking for money in the money-management envelope system we had adopted from a Larry Burkett book. I pulled out a couple of notes and raced down the seven flights of stairs out to the main road. What I did notice was that on this 2 November day the sun was shining, the air warm.

Traffic streamed along our beachside road. I hailed a cab and asked the driver to take me to the other side of town, directing him toward a well-known candy store we regularly cited as a landmark for the drivers. In keeping with the city's air of shopworn elegance, the cab, like most of the taxis, was an older Mercedes-Benz, pocked with dents, leather interior worn. Yet I knew the driver was extremely proud of his car, considering it a beloved old friend. He navigated slowly, weaving through traffic and cutting other cars off. We drove through the main downtown square of Sidon, which at Ramadan and Christmas is festooned with lights.

As we neared the clinic, the driver decided to stop and fill up the cab's gas tank. It had already been a slow ride, and my anxiety was mounting. Slow was the normal pace in Lebanon; the driver had no idea what I was going through. As he pulled into the station, two other taxis were also waiting. I realized it would be a good wait to get to the pumps, so I paid the driver and began running. It was close to a half-mile sprint. People rarely run in the Middle East, so I

stood out. My panic grew as I ran—although I fought off the fear, telling myself, *It can't be anything that bad. Can it?*

I finally made it to the road of the clinic where Bonnie had spent more than a year bringing love and mercy to Palestinian women who knew little of either. My adrenaline surged, propelling me down the dusty street. That moment on the bright Mediterranean morning, little more than a year after 9/11, days before Thanksgiving would be celebrated in America, was surreal: I was running through a city few have heard of or will ever see, running to my wife's side to protect her, running for my life, running for her life.

I thought of the children we planned to have and how we wanted to grow old happily together. I thought of the way Bonnie's face was changing and maturing—*Oh, how much I loved that face.* Then my mind flashed back to Portland, Oregon, and all the peaceful evenings we had spent on our balcony with the cool summer breeze blowing through the tree branches as we sat quietly drinking coffee, laughing, and playing Scrabble. Oregon seemed very far away, a place we gave up to love the hurting and unloved in the world. If we had stayed, by this time we could have already built a beautiful house in the hills, among the trees. But we simply could not ignore the call to bring a message of hope and forgiveness to a world devastated by hate and war.

As I approached, I saw our car parked outside the church where the clinic was located, just as Bonnie had left it, and an ambulance without lights on. *Why was it here? Had Bonnie miscarried again?* Fear was spiraling into terror. I reached the front gate and a young soldier raised his AK-47 at me, telling me I could not enter. He was slight of build and his face registered shock. Perhaps he had been brought up in some village in Lebanon, hearing a lifetime of stories about the civil war that had ravaged the country in the 1970s and

'80s. I pushed him aside, thinking he might just shoot me, but I would take that chance. I ran through the heavy black steel gate with fear pounding in my soul.

The clinic was located on the second floor of a small evangelical church. On the third floor was a home for foreign workers where you could always find a place for in-depth conversations over great food and strong, acidic Arabic coffee. The building had been there for many years, since well before the war when it was part of a thriving Christian community. But as was true of most areas in Lebanon, many of the believers here had fled or died in the war. Mosques surrounding the area seemed to defiantly point their loudspeakers right toward this little church. Their messages of political anguish saturated everything; it fell on the streets and into every house. The Palestinian *intifada* was in full swing, so there was always reason to broadcast more than the call to prayer. But inside the church, away from the clamor, it was peaceful. Here, where Jesus' words—I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6)—are carved in wood above three arched windows, Muslims were always welcome, to be friends and cross the barriers of hate and fear.

Lebanon could be described as a tolerance zone in a region fractured by hatred and violence. Although the civil war is over, peace remains tenuous between Christians and Muslims—for many Christians, Islam seems to be becoming more and more victorious.

I ran up the stairs, the same steps where women came for help, the same steps where the local Christians gathered, where many people from Sidon came to learn English. It was where children were able to find a warm, safe environment. At the top of the stairs, two large soldiers grabbed hold of me. I twisted around to see through the clinic door and caught a glimpse of Bonnie's legs on

the floor inside the reception area. I tried to see more but they ripped my hands from the door frame and pushed me onto the floor in the next room. The soldiers were protecting me from the horror of what had happened.

One of the believers in the room who had arrived before I did tried to calm me down. He quickly handed me a white plastic cup of water. I pushed him away and the water splashed across the room. What was he thinking? that I was thirsty? that water would help me calm down?

"What's wrong?" I yelled to no one in particular. "What's happening? Let me see my wife!"