the miraculous **TRUE STORY**
of a boy who lost his eyes but could still see

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AQUANETTA GORDON
WITH CHRIS MACIAS

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Echoes of an Angel: The Miraculous True Story of a Boy Who Lost His Eyes but Could Still See

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INTRODUCTION

JANUARY 1995

My first thought as I walked into the surgical recovery room was how small my baby looked. I'd probably paced back and forth a thousand miles in hospital waiting rooms. I'd tended to surgery scars so fresh they made me wince. But nothing could have prepared me for this.

Ben, who was not quite three, was still groggy, and bandages covered everything above his nose. The brightly lit room was filled with other patients recovering from operations, and the sounds of machines monitoring everyone's vital signs ping-ponged around me. Ben was hooked up to IVs, his lips parted and slightly chapped. His body was dwarfed by the machines monitoring his breathing and heart rate. Once I was at his bedside, I placed my hand on Ben's arm to let him know that I was there and that I loved him. He was just so young and so little—and now he would have to learn to live without his eyes. I wanted to be the first person Ben touched when he finally awoke.

As I stroked his hand, Ben mustered enough energy to speak. What he said made my heart shatter.

"Mom, I can't see anymore!" he said, his voice a strained whisper. "What's wrong with my eyes? I can't see anymore!"

It took every ounce of strength to fight back my tears. I knelt over Ben and put his little hands on my face.

"Yes, you can see, baby!" I struggled to speak in my happiest voice. "You can see me with your hands!"

I felt Ben's fingers wriggle over my face. Then I brought my face close to him.

"You smell me?" I asked him. "That means you can see me with your nose. That's a way of seeing me too!"

I gently tugged his tiny ear.

"Hear me? That means you can see me with your ears."

I took a deep breath and hugged him as closely as I could.

"Baby, you don't have eyes anymore—but you can see me with your ears, you can see me with your nose, and you can see me with your hands. That means you can still see me!"

My boy may have lost his eyesight that day, but I was going to be sure he never thought of himself as blind. And as I later discovered, Ben could see—just differently from you and me.

■ ■ ■

SUMMER 2013

As I let my eyelids close, the memory makes me smile. It always does.

My mind drifts back to a summer evening in our south Sacramento neighborhood. I feel the cool breeze tickling my skin and catch a few whiffs of barbecue smoke teasing my

nose. A group of kids ride their beat-up bikes around our cul-de-sac of tract homes. I hear laughter and yelling as they pedal faster and faster.

They've set up a little wooden ramp in the middle of the street. One by one they circle around, launching themselves into the air over and over again, scraped shins and all. They've been at it for a good hour now: white kids, Mexican kids, a couple of Vietnamese kids from down the block—and a seven-year-old black kid in an oversize yellow T-shirt and baggy jeans.

That's Ben. And he's the fastest of them all.

"Hey, y'all!" Ben yells to the others. "Get out of my way!"

I watch Ben pump his bike pedals furiously, picking up speed as he turns toward the ramp. As long as Ben makes his sound, I know he'll be okay.

The closer Ben gets to the ramp, the faster he clicks with his tongue. In his mind, the ramp begins to take shape:

Click

Click click

Click click click

Clickclickclickclickclick

He rolls straight into the middle of the ramp, pulls his bike into a wheelie, and flies into the air. It's only a second of flight, but I know he loves it. It's one of those moments of freedom that kids live for. He'd do this all day if it were up to him.

"Ben!" I yell. "Will you come put that bike away and get in the house already? You know it's your turn to set the table tonight." No response. "Ben! Are you listening to me?"

"Mom, hold up!" he yells back, skidding his rear tire. "I'm just going to jump one more time."

"Boy, you better hurry up!"

I open my eyes and smile.

■ ■ ■

Because of Ben, I now know that there's such a thing as vision beyond sight. True vision doesn't come from the eyes but from the soul. I learned from Ben that even if you are blind, faith will guide you in ways you never thought possible. That life has no limits, no matter what physical, mental, or emotional challenges come your way.

That blindness is only a state of mind.

CHAPTER 1

COUNTRY GIRL

THE OUTSKIRTS OF BLYTHE, CALIFORNIA: MID-1960S

Ben found freedom flying over ramps on his bike; at age seven, I found freedom exploring the California desert on foot. On most of the long, hot summer days, my brothers, younger sister, and I headed out to an irrigation canal, fed by the lower Colorado River, in one of the farm fields near our home.

Often we'd grab our fishing poles from the back of the house first. That way, after spending hours swimming, we could dry out as we dangled our feet over the edge of a canal and cast out our fishing lines. When we got hungry at noontime, we'd race home for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. A few minutes later, we'd slam the screen door behind us as we ran back outside.

If you've ever heard the term "living in the sticks" or "in the

boonies," you have a good idea of what Blythe was like. It's in the Sonoran Desert near the California-Arizona border. That's about a three-hours' drive from San Bernardino and Riverside.

I loved growing up in Blythe. I never stayed in the house playing with dolls. I was a little tomboy who liked to be out playing with sticks, jumping off stuff, and swimming in the canals that watered the thousands of acres of corn, alfalfa, and melons that grew in southeastern California.

The air outside smelled so fresh and unpolluted, and with the next house a quarter mile down the road, we had all the space we'd ever want. To me, this was rich living. There was always something to do—like hitchhiking into downtown Blythe, nine miles away; riding on our neighbor's donkey; or playing with the pigs my daddy raised for our family. Sometimes I'd ride them around the pigpen, holding on to their ears as they cried, *Squeeeee! Squeeeee!*

In the summertime, though, we always seemed to end up swimming in one of those irrigation ditches. It was so hot! I remember the temperature once hitting 120 degrees. Back then, kids played outside all day, returning home to stay only at nightfall, when the endless blue skies gave way to the pitch-black of night.

Even in the middle of nowhere, I had plenty of playmates. I have four brothers and two sisters, and I'm right in the middle. We were surrounded by lots of extended family too. My grandmother raised thirteen kids, which meant I had about two dozen cousins and other relatives to play with. Though we didn't have much money, we didn't ask for much either. Our life was simple but happy.

We'd sometimes get in a little mischief, as kids do. Some of us would steal bottles from a local factory and sell them back for pocket money. Another time, a few other kids and I went door-to-door saying we were raising money for disabled kids—but we kept the money for ourselves. I didn't think we were doing any harm, but looking back now, I should've known better. When I had my own kids, I sure didn't let them think that kind of thing was okay.

My childhood was the best of times, even with our family of nine crowded into a shack. And yes, it was truly a shack—a wooden house that was barely holding up, old and musty-smelling on the inside. We had three bedrooms, a small living room, and a cramped kitchen that led straight to the back door. Wild cats skittered around the property, and once in a while a snake would find its way inside the house. That's how country we were, and it was all part of the adventure.

A lot of people ask me about my name, Aquanetta. I was named after Acquanetta Ross, a Native American actress from the 1940s. She was nicknamed "the Venezuelan Volcano" and featured in a bunch of silly movies like *Tarzan and the Leopard Woman*. Acquanetta and her husband later owned a car dealership in Arizona, and she appeared in their commercials. I believe my mother liked the name because it sounded unique. My family calls me "Aq" for short.

My dad was about twenty years older than my mom. When Mom and Dad met, she already had two kids and was pregnant with one of my brothers. I was their first child together, and they'd go on to have three more. I was actually born in the car on the way to the hospital in Riverside. My

birth certificate lists my birthplace as "Highway 99, three miles east of Indio."

My father, Ben Gordon, was my hero as a kid. He was a tall, strong man, about six feet three with a medium-dark complexion. He loved his children, and I thought he was the best dad in the world. He was a sweet guy, and all the women fawned over him. Everybody, in fact, respected him so much that they'd say, "Don't mess with Big Gordon's kids!"

My dad worked as an agriculturalist, driving tractors and irrigating fields for a living. Sometimes we'd go to work with him and ride on the tractors, then come home dirty and happy. He'd even let us take our own lap around the fields on the tractor.

My dad rarely laid an angry hand on us. One time when I was playing with my siblings in a field near our house, we thought it would be fun to light and throw matches and then see how quickly we could stomp out the flames. Well, we weren't as quick putting them out as we'd hoped. One of the matches started a fire, and the flames got too big for us to control. We started yelling, and my dad ran over to put out the fire. Oh, he was mad.

"What are you kids trying to do?" he yelled. "Are you trying to burn down Blythe or something?"

We all got a whupping for that one. That was the first time Dad ever spanked me. It didn't hurt, but I screamed like he was trying to kill me.

What I remember most about my dad is his kindness. He'd pick up hitchhikers. He'd give money to people even though he didn't have much of his own. He was a man with a

lot of love to give, and we all felt lucky to be around him. He didn't play favorites with any of us. If there were seven kids in the house and he came home with five extra dollars, nobody got any. He wouldn't give out spending money unless he had enough for everyone.

I didn't get along with my mom very well. I grew up feeling like she hated me. Her father had picked and chosen favorites among his own kids. If he loved you, he really loved you. And if he didn't like you, it was almost as if you weren't one of his kids. My mom treated her kids the same way. My sister Denise and I were a year apart, but Denise could get anything and go anywhere she wanted.

Nothing I did seemed to make my mom happy. I remember cowering between our stove and the wall once, trying to get away from her because she was beating me with a leather belt. The crazy thing? She was angry because my sister wasn't folding clothes with me. For some reason, she took it out on me. My grandmother stepped in that time and forced my mom to stop.

As a young girl, I tried so hard to satisfy my mother. I studied a lot so I could make straight As. I played sports, and I ran so fast that I should've run in the Olympics. But not once did I ever hear her say, "I'm proud of you."

My parents had a fairly good relationship, until they'd drink and start fighting. Then, boy, would they have some really nasty moments. My mom ran over my dad one time while we were packed in the family car. They'd been arguing about something—I was too little to understand what had triggered that fight—but it got heated as we pulled into a

gas station. When my dad got out to pay for the gas, my mom jumped into the driver's seat and hit the accelerator. She smashed into my dad and pinned him against a wall. Both of his legs were broken, and the doctors told him he might never walk again. He did walk, although from then on he had a limp.

My dad had to face a bigger health challenge when I was about eight years old. That's when he was diagnosed with colon cancer. I still remember the two men in suits who came all the way from Riverside to our house in Blythe to deliver the test results to my dad. I listened to them talk to him. I didn't know what cancer was, but it sounded scary. I started screaming and hollering, and my dad had to throw me out of the room. Soon afterward, he began a long journey of battling cancer and enduring many hardships that would last the rest of his life.

My parents separated when I was in fifth grade. My dad stayed in Blythe, and the rest of us moved to a beat-up house on the east side of Riverside, nearly 175 miles to the west. The simple, carefree life I loved was no more.

I really missed my dad. One time I ran away from home and caught the Greyhound bus to Blythe to be with him. When I showed up, I told my dad that my mom had sent me. Sometimes I'd pray and ask God for my dad to come pick me up and take me home with him. If he didn't show up right then, he'd pull up the next day in his white pickup truck. That's how I knew the Lord was hearing my prayers.

At least, that's what it seemed like to a little girl who felt loved by her father and rejected by her mother. If I wanted to see my dad, I'd pray, and then I'd see him. The same thing seemed to happen when it rained. If I prayed for it to stop, it stopped. As a girl, prayer seemed like magic to me.

During this time, my dad continued his battle with colon cancer. He'd undergone one chemotherapy treatment, but it made him sick, so he wouldn't do it again. He tried his best to carry on with his life, and he continued to work and handle his business. He never complained even once. If he was feeling bad at any point, he sure didn't show it.

By the time I was eleven, I had taken on a lot of responsibilities. Once again, I just wanted to make my mom happy. I'd get up around three or four in the morning and hear her say, "Aq, I know you're up!" Then she'd let me know what she needed me to do that day. Usually I'd help my little brother Ernest throw newspapers on his paper route and then I'd come home and help some of my other siblings get ready for the day. I'd fix them something to eat and walk them to school.

I'd also help my mom handle her finances by writing checks and paying bills for her. My older sister, Diane, became a mom at fifteen, and I'd sometimes take care of my niece and nephew. I did everything, but it was fun. I had the energy to do it, and I never got tired. I think I'm hyperactive. To this day, I can still go and go on just a few hours of sleep.

As busy as I was at home, I managed to earn straight As. I was very outgoing and always wanted to help people. I remember one girl in my class who always came to school looking dirty. She'd have spit caked in the corners of her mouth, and

she wore dirty pants with holes in them. That made her an easy target for kids who wanted someone to pick on.

One day a boy kicked her books over. I didn't like to see people picking on others, so I stepped in and said, "You better leave her alone! Who do you think you are?"

Pretty soon I started beating up that boy and gave him a bloody nose. Our teacher broke up the fight and sent him straight to the principal's office. The teacher said I had to go to the office too. He didn't want to send me, but he had to because he saw the whole thing.

Getting in trouble was new to me. But I'm glad I stuck up for that poor girl and taught that bully a lesson. Looking back now, I see why the Lord gave me a feisty spirit. I'd need to tap into that as an adult when my son Ben had to deal with his own school issues.

My grandparents had moved from Blythe to Riverside several years before we did. Now we lived just a few houses down from them. Although my grandfather was mean like my mom, my grandmother was one of the most giving people I've ever known. She sowed a lot of love, and poor as she was, she always seemed to have enough to give away. I never saw her turn anyone away from her table.

We weren't a churchgoing family in those days. Since my grandparents didn't grow up in church, I guess that's understandable. But when I was about twelve years old, my sister Denise and I went to a summer youth program at a local university. One day the counselor who led my sister's group, a lady named Andrea Jones, invited us to Riverside Faith Temple. I started going to the church every Tuesday night,

to Bible study on Friday night, and to services on Sunday morning and Sunday night. A church bus would pick me up. Man, that church was an awesome place!

As you can probably tell by now, I've always been competitive, and I want to come in first in anything I try. Well, the church had group competitions to encourage students to memorize Bible passages. That's how I learned many of the Scriptures that never left me, even in my darkest times. I always loved Psalm 23 and that sense of the Lord as my shepherd, guiding me. I also memorized the Beatitudes from Matthew 5:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit,
> For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
> Blessed are those who mourn,
> For they shall be comforted.
> Blessed are the meek,
> For they shall inherit the earth. (verses 3-5, NKJV)

I'm so grateful to Andrea Jones for inviting me to Riverside Faith Temple. By the time I was fourteen, I knew how it felt to be loved and held close by God. I didn't know all the stories and teaching in the Bible yet, and I still had a long way to go in my faith journey, but I believed that God was real. Whenever I prayed, I knew He was right there listening. For me, going to the Lord in prayer would be a refuge throughout my life, even when I made poor choices and strayed from God's path. There would be times when I felt far from Him because of what I'd done, but He was never far from me.

■ ■ ■

My dad's health started to slip in the summer of 1976, about five years after his original diagnosis. He could no longer get out of bed and had trouble controlling his bowels. Even so, he still found joy in the little pleasures of life. When he was able, he made us kids our favorite iced tea with lemon. It was so good! He'd find ways to give us spending money. That's the kind of man he was.

I was by my dad's side on his deathbed. His last wish was to see all of his kids one final time. It was hard to see my strong dad so frail and suffering so much, but he didn't complain. We gathered around as he asked us to feed him cool chunks of watermelon. He died that same day. He was sixty-eight years old. I was fourteen.

Losing my dad was devastating. We were all close to him, but I always felt like I was special to my dad. After he died, I became terrified that I'd get cancer too. If I got a little bump or a knot on my wrist, I'd think, *Oh no, I've got cancer!*

I'll always carry the grief of losing my dad at such a young age, but I did my best to keep going strong, just like he wanted me to. During eighth grade at my junior high in Riverside, I was straight As all the way, and physically strong too. There wasn't a boy who could beat me in track, kickball—absolutely anything.

I was a star student that year, but when I graduated, the school gave the honor roll award to a popular white girl. I'd run for class secretary and didn't get it, even though I knew I'd gotten the most votes. That broke my spirit. I mean, it just broke me. Part of me didn't even want to care anymore.

I'd always been a go-getter kind of girl, but I couldn't help feeling alone and like all my hard work didn't matter. I had too much pride to let my grades drop, but I no longer gave my all at school. I remember watching a girl run track one spring day, knowing inside that I could run circles around her but not even caring enough to try.

I wasn't angry—just discouraged. I wanted to achieve, to break through the dysfunction in my family, but I had no one to show me how. I'd have to figure out life on my own, relying on trial and plenty of error. But in the meantime, I was sixteen, and like a lot of teen girls, I was suddenly interested in boys. I let go of a lot of dreams and a desire to better myself. I even stopped going to Riverside Faith Temple.

It would be easy to look back and cry about what could have been. Instead, when I got older, I channeled my hurt into the determination that no one would ever discriminate against my kids or tell them what they couldn't do. I would back up my own kids 100 percent and always be willing to fight for them.