

PART ONE

Climbing



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June 2000

I was unbearably young when I first learned to pray. Barely a year old, sitting in a high chair before a bowl of cooked cereal at breakfast time, I offered up my hands while my mother pressed them gently together—in the position of prayer—then leaned toward me to coo: “Say your grace, precious.” Then, in my one-year-old babble, I would “pray”—just as my mother and father did before they ate breakfast and lunch and every other meal ever taken at our house.

And of course I didn’t remember any of this. What does a one-year-old remember well enough to recall when she is grown?

So I watched closely now as my mother repeated this same scene with my grandchild, a baby just barely one.

Mama at eighty-four, sitting at my kitchen table, pulled her chair close to my visiting grandbaby’s chair. She pressed this little girl’s hands together—in the position of prayer. Then my mother cooed: “Say your grace, precious.” And my first grandchild, in her little child’s babble, started to pray:

“Babba ab ba babba,” she said, bowing her head and leaning into her hands, smiling up at my mother. She wanted to get this praying thing down right. Then the baby, hurrying to finish, added with a flourish her closing touch: “Ahhh-men!”

My mother, agreeing with her, closed with her own flourish, a loud

and sturdy “Ah-men.” Then Mama, with full approval, added, “Okay, now we can eat our breakfast.” Then she handed my grandchild her unbearably small spoon.

This is how it started, my blessed journey—this unlikely quest to learn how to pray. I didn’t know of such beginnings until that summer of 2000, when my long-widowed mother was comfortably aging and I, at fifty-one, was far into life myself.

I’d always thought that Daddy, not Mama, was the teacher of everything in our house. Everything spiritual, that is, would have started with Daddy. He was a daddy in the fifties, after all, and I was his youngest child. So his word was law. His wishes were granted. His dinner was hot when he walked through the front door after work. And his table was quiet while we ate. No horseplay from my sister and me. No talking back. No childish, crazy foolishness.

But foolish me, sitting at the dinner table one Friday evening, yelled like crazy across his dinner plate at my sister, who had just given me a sly and delicious look.

I can’t remember why. But big sisters can do this. At ten years old, my sister could goad and tease and look innocent all at the same time. We both did this, in fact, eyeing each other across our family’s kitchen table, rolling our impudent eyes on the sly while our parents laughed and talked. Knowing this, I saw my older sister’s look and I responded. I yelled. “You better stop that, Laurretta!”

Daddy, still eating, said, “Stop!” He didn’t look over. Didn’t have to. He was Daddy. One word did it. So *stop* should have been enough.

But here was another look. A delicious tease. At five or six years old, I couldn’t let it pass. So I yelled again.

“You better stop looking at me like that, Laurretta!”

Daddy put down his fork—one movement.

His eyes found mine, flashing and speaking. Then Daddy cleared his throat to *really* speak.

Of course, I heard him. How could I miss that sound? And how could I *not* listen? My handsome, proper father—still wearing his starched white shirt from work, his dark silk tie, loosened at the collar—was so painfully lovely to behold. His lean brown face was always shaven, his hair always barbered, his mouth never slack, his eyes always vigilant, his diction ever perfect.

His presence alone was enough to shift my attention, to focus my awakening ears.

But listening is hard when you're just starting out to pray.

Yet Daddy had something to say.

"If you open your mouth one more time . . ."

But who can figure? I was five. I kept talking.

In fact, I said something childish and stupid, something like: "Well, if you'd just look at *her* and not be looking at me . . ." Then: *WHAM!*

Lightning! Daddy's backhand. Landing hard across my mouth. Tasting like fire. Feeling like power and truth and God in one hard blow. I flew off my chair and hit the floor, my bottom lip ballooning to twice its size and bleeding.

A five-year-old gets dramatic.

"*Waaawww . . .* Daddy!" I started to bawl. Loud and insulted. "*Waaaww!*" I cupped my bleeding lip with both hands, crawling—chastised—back to my chair. "*Wa-aa-aw!*" I was wailing, panting and snotting up, gasping dramatically for air.

Daddy was past patience, however.

His face was an inch from mine, his soft ebony eyes now hard and sharp with straining.

"Stop that racket *now*—or I'll give you something to cry about!"

He was glaring now. His look was driving home the message: In *my* house, talk right. In *my* house, don't sass. In *my* house, keep quiet. Be good. Obey. Don't question. Stay in your place. Toe the line. Rules clear?

Don't remember? *WHAM!*

Daddy didn't think twice about punishment. He just got right down to it, that backhand flying. Not all the time, of course. But enough for me to be on guard. So that's how I lived, careful and watching, always vigilant, ever keeping a healthy sense of fear.

Looking back, however, Daddy seemed fearful the most—afraid of not teaching me right, terrified that if I didn't learn how to toe every line, something bad could happen. Even to a Christian girl, bad things could happen. And with every passing year, the stakes seemed to get higher. Coming home after work to find a wild-haired daughter dancing and gyrating in the kitchen to *American Bandstand* sent him into a kind of despairing rage.

"Stop that foolishness!" he would shout. But me, I kept dancing—eyes closed, snapping my fingers, singing the Motown words—digging the thumping music. So he shouted again. "Stop that foolishness."

Then beyond patience, he reached down and grabbed me by the arm, his beautiful eyes boring into mine. "*Patricia! Didn't you hear me?*"



A perfect question for a prayer warrior. And this is a Christian journey. But I put off my answers, then I made peace with my daddy—so he could make peace with his God. Those backhands and shouting soon ended, in fact. So I grew to honor my father—even to revere him, maybe even to adore him. Then I launched my life, daring to move on—vowing to believe that life’s hard moments, and the problems that frame them, were over and done with, now and forever *amen*.

But here was something else, these fifty years later. Another beautiful man, my husband, Dan, this time—shouting even louder, *yelling* with all of his beautiful heart from upstairs.

“Why’d you leave this door open! Who closed this window! This house is too hot! This TV’s too loud! Who emptied the gas tank! Why can’t you fill it up! Why won’t you answer? *Patricia! Can’t you hear me calling you down there?!*”

Still a good question. But I closed my heart to my husband’s shouting, unsure how to answer hard questions. In fact, my husband wasn’t yelling hard things. But he sounded odd because his complaints sounded small. The only thing smaller was my modern life. Indeed, the soul of our household seemed to be shrinking under mountains every day.

So our oldest daughter now had a baby but had never been married. Our youngest daughter, gone from the church, was looking for God in “false” religions—or that’s how they looked to me. My aging mother’s health, meanwhile, was slowing—but so was our love. She needed my help and love, sometimes in the same hour. But “we cannot give to the outside what we don’t have on the inside,” the saintly Mother Teresa said. So I made my nightly calls and sounded cheerful. But cheerful calls to two strong-willed daughters and an eighty-four-year-old widowed mother aren’t truly love, and I knew they must have known it.

I had failed us all, it seemed. And this failing of us stung. On many nights, I sat in the dark in my bedroom and I grappled for God—falling to my knees, begging God to fix our torn, worn places—especially to fix my torn, small life.

Then I sang a small song: *Poor me*. That was my theme. So I hummed it and rolled it around in my head, tossing it about my shoulders like a wet wool scarf. And everybody knows what wet wool smells like.

Well.

Satan likes us like this.

He likes us small and tossed and groaning and weary. He likes our lights turned off and our hope turned down. He likes us reeling and fearful and cast out and empty, and pretty much useless because of it all.

But not even Satan was counting on a fifty-something woman, finally worn out on small songs and hard memories, digging up enough good common sense to call on God. That kind of woman cinches on her whole armor and gets busy working with the Master.

That sounded good, at least. The truth was something else. In truth, Satan had me mesmerized—eyes glazed over—still believing that my life was torn and small and hardly worth the time, when my life was just buried, deep under shadows.

To make matters worse, however, I did a hard thing. I turned to the head of the family—that is, I turned again to God—and I asked for help.

And God? The Big and Silent One?—at least that’s how God seemed during that long, hard summer. God seemed big and cold and distant—as silent as death, as soundless as the grave. God seemed a great and distant emptiness, saying nothing, *doing* nothing, mocking and empty and *not there*. So God was my *Deus Absconditus*—the God who is hidden, as the ancients would have called him. In fact, the words looked like I was feeling. *Deus Absconditus*.

Or as the psalmist put it in his ever-honest way: “O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer.”

Chuck Swindoll, talking on my radio, described it in a question: “Have you ever heard the silence of God?” Swindoll’s deep, confident voice rolled out of the speakers. I turned up the volume. So Swindoll asked the question again, his voice slightly lower, sounding even closer.

“Have you ever heard the silence of God?”

I nodded. Yes! I have heard that silence.

But I didn’t know that ages before Saint John of the Cross had called God’s silence “the dark night of the soul.”

For scholar Howard Macy, it was “the withering winds of God’s hiddenness.”

For preacher-warrior Renita Weems, it was the “long silence between intimacies” and the “winter months of faith” and finally “the period pulls into darkness.”

Indeed, for Richard Foster, the soulful Quaker, it was the “icy cold of . . . nothing” and “the purifying silence.” In fact, in one such eighteen-month-long trial, Foster said his great lesson was “the intimate and

ultimate awareness that I could not manage God. Neither . . . could I conquer God. God was, in fact, to conquer me.”

I wasn't as eloquent. But I understood the work of waiting on God and not getting answers. At my job, I saw a revolving door of ever-evolving students—other mothers' son and daughters, other people's lovely prayers and dreams. Often they looked beautiful and unfinished and distant, indeed. I surely looked that way to them, in turn.

But nobody was more beautiful and unfinished and distant that year than my beautiful and distant husband.

Once we had laughed and loved and whispered and dreamed. We had joked and hoped and, my goodness, we had touched. We would come home from work, put dinner on, reach for each other in the kitchen and then we just kissed. We wrapped our arms around each other and leaned in and didn't pull away.

But that feeling of closeness and warmth, of leaning in and mutual good will—of just the two of us together, bonded in life and holding on right there in our very own kitchen—had evaporated. My big fear was that we would sit across the breakfast table one day and have nothing left to say.

And here is something:

It didn't matter that we were a good Christian family; living our earnest lives; going to our good, earnest church. It didn't even matter then that we were black, or African American as folks say now. In fact, we were a modern American family—a bit tossed about, a bit uncertain, a lot unglued. But mostly we were broken—and we couldn't figure out how to put ourselves back together again.

Even the Oprah book I bought at the grocery store warned this was a problem. “The tragedy,” said a preacher in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, “is not that things are broken. The tragedy is that they are not mended again.”

To top off my tragedy, however, I was aware of the oddest feeling—not of anger so much, but of betrayal. It was as if God himself had stopped my mending. Then God had dropped my case, and to seal the deal, God had stopped, closed and locked a door.

And God?

God was there, standing behind the gate, inside the shadows, just out of sight, enormously quiet.

Silent as a coffin.



It struck me that way halfway into summer, as the skies in Colorado went dark with dry lightning and sparse rain. Then a kind of thunder roll rumbled with a crash and I threw off my wet wool and I sat straight up. I was aware, that is, of a ridiculous understanding: God was real. But God was waiting. Waiting on *me*. So God wasn't moving. If anything, to get to God, *I'd* have to make all the adjustments. Not God, but *I* would have to shift *my* position. Is that what Jesus meant? When you pray, pray like *this*—that is, get in the right position? Or as the straight-shooting Frederick D. Haynes III put it: “When our hands are tied, *then* they are positioned for prayer.”

So here I was now:

Family unraveling. My hands were tied. In position. So the prayer words just eased from my mouth.

“I want to pray.”

I was on the phone, talking almost in a whisper to my oldest daughter, Joi, not sure I should say such hard words out loud.

“You want to pray? Is that what you said, Mom?”

Joi sounded busy. Her hands were full, raising a baby and running the small bookstore she owned in a struggling black part of town. And now I wanted to *pray*?

“I want to *learn* to pray,” I said. “I want you to get me some books—on prayer.”

“By black authors? Is that what you need, Mom?” she asked.

“No, for once, this isn't about race,” I told her. Joi is an angel daughter. But she didn't get it just yet. She didn't see that her good mother's Christian life had buried me, even while a great Christian life had eluded me. She didn't really know that her mother wasn't living right—that I still hadn't learned enough hard, smart lessons.

I was in a standoff with a marriage gone dry, with a life drained empty. But this go-round, instead of pushing back, I would look up to heaven and surrender. Finally now I vowed to learn, as Richard Foster put it, the *real* way to pray:

Pray so things healed.

Pray so things stopped.

Pray so things started.

Pray so things changed.

I was desperate, indeed, to learn all of prayer's little secrets, to master all of its hidden methods.

But prayer isn't a skill, as Andrew Murray said. Prayer is an art. And maybe more than that, it is a calling.

"The highest part of the work entrusted to us, the root and strength of all other work," Murray declared. Nothing, he insisted, should we study and practice more than the work of praying. And this praying, he said, which at first "appears so simple," turns out to be the hardest thing of all, because it's about developing a relationship.

So praying would be tough. For me—who found relationships tricky and so dismaying—real praying would be maybe impossible. Or something far beyond what I had been doing. I had always prayed, from my little child's Now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep prayers, right up to my O-Lord-help-me-Jesus prayers.

Not only that, I'd heard a lifetime of prayers. In the black church, on any given Sunday, a preacher might moan one of those James Weldon Johnson kind of prayers: "Oh Lord . . . we come this morning, knee bowed and body bent."

Or as only Johnson could put it: "Bow our hearts beneath our knees, and our knees in some lonesome valley."

Well, yes. I knew about *those* kinds of prayers.

But even that kind of groaning, longing, desperate praying wasn't unlocking God's delicious silence.

But I was ready to be schooled. Just put me in your school, Jesus. That's all I asked now. Then I'd be like Andrew Murray, whose challenging treatise *With Christ in the School of Prayer* was praised as a classic prayer guide. Jesus has opened a school, Murray wrote, "in which He trains His redeemed ones, who specially desire it, to have power in prayer."

I didn't necessarily feel redeemed, whatever "redeemed" actually meant. I'm sure I didn't know then. But I knew this: My prayers lacked power. When I prayed, I sometimes got a little portion of peace, but it was fleeting. When I prayed, my daughters' lives sometimes changed, but not by much. When I prayed, my husband's love sometimes warmed, but it didn't burn.

And I missed the burning. Even a Christian can miss the burn of good married love.

I also missed laughing with my daughters, as we did when they were girls.

I missed my mother's touch and whatever closeness we once knew.

In contrast, I also realized, from years of sitting in Sunday school lessons—or maybe from some fresh new awareness—that when Jesus prayed, *big* things happened.

Sick folks got well.

Blind folks got sight.

Lame folks walked.

Dead folks found life. Even cold and moldy Lazarus, already four long days in the grave, got up from death when Jesus prayed. The Bible didn't lie.

Jesus wept. "Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me.'"

Thanking God *before* the miracle of Lazarus. That was Jesus—the schoolteacher—thundering and confident, crying and shouting at the grave.

"Lazarus! Come out!"

And there came Lazarus, stumbling from his tomb, wide-eyed, shocked to be breathing again—pulling in the fresh, good air, blowing out the stale. Stunned at suddenly hearing the crowd's raucous roar, shocked to smell the unwashed crowd's earthy smells, dumbfounded to be back in the land of the noisy living, and maybe not too happy about it.

Death to life. It was incredible, but when Jesus prayed—wiping the tears from his sad, indescribable eyes—I believe heaven opened.



Well.

I'd never prayed like that in my life. Odd to be past fifty and finally really see that. Crazy, indeed, to waste not just months but *years* praying with little ever changing. Odd, indeed, to see that the problem wasn't just in the effort, it was in the praying. I had been doing it all wrong.

I was a beggar at prayer. *Please, Jesus, please.* But begging wasn't prayer. With prayer, surely more was at work—especially the first thing: that prayer isn't about getting things; prayer indeed is about getting changed.

"We work, we pull, we struggle, and we plan until we're utterly exhausted," Evelyn Christianson wrote. "But we have forgotten to plug into the source of power. And that source of power is prayer."

That sounded right. So around midsummer, I took the plunge. I ordered Joi's books on prayer, and I read them. Well, I underlined the good parts and pondered the hard parts. I got off my knees. Instead I *wrote* down my

prayers. Then I studied my prayers, looking at their shape, listening to their sounds. Then sure enough, over time, the prayers were less like cold lists and more like warm letters. Then they were more like love letters.

“Our dear heavenly Father,” I wrote, “thank you for being who you are.”

So they were praise letters.

“You are magnificent and sovereign and wonderful and great. You can do the impossible. . . .”

I began to feel that God not only expected this adoration. In fact, God needed it. So I felt, for the first time ever, my heart growing warm and soft toward God, the Creator of the universe. He *was* big, in fact. But he still needed something from me: my praise.

So I gave it.

“Our wonderful heavenly Father: You are Love. You are wise. You are perfect. You are gracious. You are matchless. You are just. You are everything. . . .”

So July ended and August came.

Then slowly, as September rose and then waned, I began to perceive—ever so slightly—that God was hearing me. That is, I felt that if I took the time to be still with God, that this was prayer. Indeed, to pray was to be still. As prayer scholar Steve Wingfield said, prayer primarily is “enjoying the presence of God.” And here it was—God’s presence.

So I luxuriated in it.

I closed my bedroom door. I tuned out my husband’s trouble, his hammering irritations, his odd complaints—and I moved inside with God.

And it was true. Prayer was to sit and to listen, to wait with silent joy for the Most High God. Prayer was to approach the Holy of Holies and to *enter*. Prayer was to sit down, not at the feet of the Creator of the universe, but to sit in his lap and rest.

So I went in and I rested. I laid my head on his big chest. I leaned back. I felt the big embrace, letting it hold me up, letting me lean, inviting me to rest, encouraging me to stay.

Then the big thing would happen—and this *was* big—God would deem to speak.

The Big Silent One would talk, spirit to spirit, heart to heart, the way a caring, patient parent communes with a beloved but unruly child. This was Father-love, as Andrew Murray described the presence of God. And I was astonished by it—that *he* had been there all the time. Our Father God was just waiting for me to turn from the irritable chaos of my empty, weary life and to sit down long enough to hear him.

So we sat, God and I, as summer turned to fall. I listened to God's presence. Then I dared to tell God everything he already knew: about my husband's complaints and my mother's aging distance and my daughters' hard choices and their busy and seeming indifference, and I was astonished. I could feel God listening.

The more I focused on God, in fact, the less I worried about my household's ongoing and never-ending dramas and irritations and problems.

That seemed to be a big prayer principle: Magnify God. Make him bigger than any problem by focusing not on the problem but on him.

Then pay attention while he told me what to do and how to pray.

Pray long enough, indeed, to stop talking and start listening.

God's still, small voice would break into the chaos. I could hear it. Spirit to spirit. A whisper. Divine breath barely glancing my soul. Not often, but enough to know that it was there and it was real. The silent God does speak.

This was a breakthrough.

Cool. Very cool indeed.

By October, I was pleased with myself, to tell the awful truth. I was ready now to soar with the great and almighty God, because finally it seemed—at long last—I had discovered the keys to the Kingdom. I was ready now to claim my abundant and problem-free and peaceful and redeemed Christian life.



Then this: "Where's the Excedrin?"

My husband.

Dan was sixty and a few heartbeats past retirement. It was mid-October. There had been parties, at least three, just a few weeks before. There were presents and photographs and a fancy ice sculpture some four feet high and a live jazz combo and speeches and flowers and kisses.

And then: "Where's that Excedrin?" Dan asked again. "My back is killing me." He grimaced. "And my neck." He grabbed the nape of his neck, which did actually look—oddly, in fact—as if something was pulling it off center toward his left shoulder, which was also aching horribly, he said.

"Stress," I told him. "You're just struggling with retirement. You need to relax. You have to adjust. It just takes awhile."

That's what I said. But what I thought was that my husband had turned

into a whining, self-absorbed malcontent, and his retirement was going to be a test and a trial.

But instead of saying such things, I got the aspirin. I even rubbed his neck, although there wasn't much love in the aspirin or in the rubs.

Then, of course, the hurting didn't go away. Then it got worse. Then it got hard. Then it got evil. Then on a cold, blustery day in late October—the night before Halloween, in fact—my malcontented husband's face turned an odd gray and his eyes went dull.

Then, looking a bit confused and surprised, he said: "I can't walk."

I looked at him.

"You can't walk?"

Dan was leaning into the doorframe of our hotel room in Grand Rapids, Michigan. We had traveled there to present a series of workshops at a state university.

Now on a bitterly cold evening, he had returned from his evening workshop after struggling to give the program from a folding chair.

"I tried to stand," he said. "But my legs . . . they wouldn't hold me. They wouldn't work."

In fact, following the workshop, after getting dropped off at the hotel, he'd had trouble walking from the hotel lobby to our room.

"I had to hold on to the wall the whole way down here," he grumbled. He leaned for a desk near the door, then reached for a chair, finally letting his body fall onto one of the double beds.

I watched him struggle. He was crumpled and kind of sweaty. His necktie, loosened, dangled around his neck. He asked for help taking off his coat, pulling off his shoes, shrugging out of his sweater vest, one of dozens he routinely wore.

He started barking instructions.

Get me the Excedrin. Plug in my heating pad. Stop fumbling with that bottle. *Can't you just open it?*

I did those things, then turned away from him and shut my eyes, inhaled a deep breath. Here we go—another grouchy, nitpicky, self-absorbed night. Yet more proof that Dan's retirement-stress "thing," whatever it was, had finally hit the limit.

Now he couldn't walk?

It was ridiculous. And I'd had enough—enough of his grouching, complaining, griping dramatics. As soon as we got back to Colorado, we'd have to have a long talk. No, a hard talk.

Dan turned with some theatrics on the bed, then groaned a bit.

I shoved the Excedrin back in his briefcase, plugged in his heating pad and positioned it around his back, thinking the whole time that not only was he lousy at playacting, he didn't even sound all that sick.

It was all I could do not to mimic his pathetic moan.



So—no, I wasn't a good wife. A good wife thinks *emergency*. She rushes her husband to a hospital. At the very least, she summons a hotel doctor.

But I will just tell this truth.

That night I did not feel much compassion or pity—or hardly much love—for my husband.

He had picked and pushed and put me down all summer. He did this, I would learn later, when he couldn't explain that something in his body was very wrong, and he rarely got sick. But now his back was rigid and hot, burning and angry with pain. Sometimes he could barely move. Often the pain drove him to his knees. Once he lay all night on the hard bathroom floor, trying to get relief. But it wasn't just back pain. Something terrible was happening. But he didn't know what or understand why.

So he was terrified.

But he wouldn't admit it. Instead, he barked at me. And I was sinking under his disdain, more weary with every put-down. I only noticed that my husband wasn't himself anymore—no longer his joking, carefree, husband-boyfriend-best-friend, regular, everyday self—enjoying his blessed life. Instead, every day the temper tantrums got worse. Who left the dryer on? Who drank all the milk? Stop moving all my pens. I can never find a pen. *Who took my pen?!*

The irritable griping of a terrified, sick man. Dan, once my prince of shared dreams and big hopes, had become an angry stranger. And now he couldn't walk?

Here is the short version: A rushed flight home from Michigan after an early morning emergency-room visit yielded no answers, just more questions. Then, back in Denver, a scramble to University Hospital prompted an MRI, followed by an angiogram. Then a long consultation with neurosurgeons and cardiologists and radiologists and other sober physicians in white coats and somber shoes ended a hard day.

Then too soon the neurosurgeons had a name. But it didn't matter that it was arteriovenous fistula—because I'd never heard of arteriovenous fistula.

I only understood that it was a problem with the blood flow in Dan's

spinal cord—right next to his brain stem. A tangle of malformed veins—in place since birth but never troubling him before—now were engorged like a tourniquet and were hemorrhaging. This mess of swollen vessels was pressing without mercy inside Dan’s spinal cord. His spinal canal was ablaze with inflammation. So from his head to his feet to his calves to his waist he couldn’t feel anything. His pants were wet because he couldn’t control his bladder.

He also looked horrible. He was gray and clammy and undeniably sick. Worse, he looked afraid. He also looked surprised, as if this odd thing was happening and he hadn’t seen it coming.

We called my mother. I held the phone to Dan’s ear while my husband whispered to his mother-in-law that something was wrong. *I can’t walk.* And to make matters worse he still didn’t exactly understand why.

Arteriovenous fistula.

Of all the ridiculous things.

Months would pass before I fully understood what an “a.v. fistula” meant, that the malformation on the spinal cord was rare, and that its location meant the results could be catastrophic. His breathing could stop. With the brain stem involved, he could lose his speech or his memory, or suffer irreversible paralysis.

I didn’t know this. Moreover, I couldn’t find an easy way to talk about it.

“Well, is it a stroke?” our friends would ask.

“No,” I’d mumble, trying to explain about malformed connections involving veins *blah blah blah*, which was a mouthful but didn’t seem to help anybody understand.

“That’s like an aneurysm?” somebody would ask. “Or like a heart attack?”

The questions came and I would stumble over my explanation.

A sick husband is one thing. A sick husband whose condition is hard to explain is even worse.

This a.v. fistula sounded like some made-up, frivolous, psychopathic, TV talk-show disease. And when I said the words to people, they’d get a strange look, as if I enjoyed spouting medical terms that sounded sort of important instead of just telling them what was going on.

Maybe that’s why I kept smiling.

In the emergency room at University Hospital in Denver, the neurosurgeons gathered at the foot of Dan’s bed. And while they looked more sober than any doctors I’d ever seen in my life, all I could manage was a smile.

A nice wife’s grin. We smile when we want to scream. Christians do this. Christians who are wives may do it best.



A sixty-year-old husband on a hospital bed looks small and cold and thin under a white sheet. Dan looked all of that and less on that dank first day of November.

His retirement year, the beginning of a new life—*our* new life. That's what I had hoped for: A life without complaints and griping, maybe with peace and perhaps a portion of occasional joy. But now he was dying.

This, as one doctor deftly put it, "is a serious situation."

His name was Dr. Breeze. An unlikely name for a man wearing such a grave look. Not once during the examination did a "breeze" or anything like it cross his face.

Dr. Breeze, in fact, insisted that I go home—to get some "real rest."

Real rest—for what?

His stoic look said it all: For the ordeal of trying to keep your husband alive.

And still this truth did not register.

So I asked: "Are these surgeries serious?"

Dr. Breeze looked at me, solemn. The surgery would take all of the next day, he answered. Then, as he put it: "We'll be working around expensive real estate."

He pointed to the back of his skull. Just a hair from the brain stem, he said. As he pointed with one graceful finger, I had to catch my breath.

This doctor's hands were exquisite. Small for a man's. Refined. Graceful. Smooth and so delicate they could have been a child's, wrought from fine porcelain.

He was saying that the surgery couldn't be more serious. And so was my husband's condition.

But while he was talking, I stared at those hands. I pictured the lovely refined fingers moving across my husband's exposed brain. These hands would fight to unravel vascular, microscopic outlaws and make everything okay again. They would do this, I knew, even as Dr. Breeze said the challenge was dire.

Then the doctor looked at me, seeing the wife's smile. He had seen it before.

He was going home to rest, he said, to prepare for a long day of surgery. So rather than camp out in your husband's hospital room, you should consider going home yourself, he said again.

This was a perfect moment for him to smile. I don't think he did.

Maybe a man with graceful hands, who puts such hands onto the moist, fragile tissues around the human brain, couldn't afford to crack jokes, even if his name was Breeze.

So I smiled at him again. I wanted him to know that he had been clear. Then I myself turned breezy.

"Be back first thing in the morning," I sang at Dan, "before . . . well, before everything."

Dan barely nodded his head. To tell the truth, he didn't even really look at me. It wasn't like the TV movies where the husband grasps the wife's hand. Then their eyes meet and the music rises.

Instead, my husband turned his face and was silent. So I gathered up my keys and purse. I said good-bye to the doctors. I clomped down to the hospital parking garage. But I was moving by some force outside my own. Finally, I understood. Dan was *dying*.

The doctors' hands made it so. So did the doctors' sober looks. They were grave, almost like a funeral was waiting to start. But only their solemnity and skill could put the funeral off.

A light snow was falling, like sugar, melting the instant it touched the windshield of my aging Nissan.

Driving home, I was aware of moving through traffic and passing familiar streets and avoiding familiar potholes and stopping at red lights and proceeding at green ones. But every mile of the thirty-minute trip passed like an odd dream. Roads passing beneath me. Snowflakes dissolving in front of me, the car heater blowing warmth onto my chilled wife's smile. All a dream, except I couldn't wake up.

Dan was *dying*?

Was this how a marriage ends? With bickering and sparring, then somebody gets sick and dies?

I pulled into our garage, next to my husband's old blue convertible—a hunk of blue-metallic junk he'd planned to restore during his retirement. Then the truth broke in.

I collapsed into wailing sobs. *Oh God! Oh God!*

My body was shaking, giving in to hopelessness. But I didn't bang my fist against the steering wheel because what good would that do?

I sat in the old Nissan, turning off the engine. The tears raged in sheets. With one foot, I pushed open the car door, forcing my body from the car, almost crawling now through the garage. But every step took me on a parade past my husband's beloved "car stuff": his balled-up T-shirts for car buffing, his Simoniz wax tins, his jars of nails, his wrenches, and his

other garage tools. At the sight of each thing, I sobbed harder, crying out to God.

Dan was *dying*. But his junky car and his junky nails and his Simoniz wax were still here. Waiting for what—a man who might not come back? I groped my way through the garage, still sobbing from my insides out.

Inside the house, it was worse: His faded jacket, waiting on a hook across from the washing machine. His teacup, cold and half-empty on the kitchen counter. His beat-up sneakers, lumped at the foot of the stairs. Our house was an archive of my husband's artifacts. But the truth was he might not return to them.

And no chance to make things right again. To work our way back to the place where we'd started together, whispering and hopeful and believing.

Upstairs in our room, I opened the linen closet where he kept his clean socks and undershirts and fresh towels. At the sight of them I literally collapsed—tears still raging—onto this pile of clothes.

I pressed them to me, inhaling my husband's laundered-underwear smell and crying even harder while I bunched his clothing to my face.

What else to do, indeed, but cry? Our life together had spiraled downward, and now he was sick unto death. And I was angry about it because I still loved him.

But I hadn't acted like I loved him. And now he might die. And death would ruin everything by taking him away.

So gulping back tears, I curled up in a ball on our bed, pulled up the covers. Then still hugging one of my husband's clean undershirts, I fell asleep.



Then 3 A.M.

In November, of course, the house was dark but also cold. I opened my eyes in the dimness and suddenly sat up straight, shivering.

God was talking.

That is, God's Spirit was talking to my spirit and I recognized the voice. Not an out-loud voice, of course. But I could *hear* the words in my head—or in my heart?—as if they were spoken aloud. That is, my spirit could hear the words. They were as plain as plywood. Simple and even and plain, and there were four of them: Stop crying. Start praying.

Stop crying? Start praying?

I yanked the covers back and sat still in the dark.

I heard it again.

Stop crying. Start praying.

I had not been shaken by the shoulders or drenched in cold water. But these words penetrated my heart as if I'd been thrown headfirst into a cold, deep lake. And I can't swim.

I was wide-awake.

I switched on the lamp on the nightstand next to the bed.

A pile of books, each one on prayer, was stacked there helter-skelter, just as I had left them days earlier.

"Jesus," I said out loud.

My husband needed prayer. *Real* prayer. His side of the bed was empty, and it would stay empty if I didn't get up right now, wipe my tears, and get to *work*.

God was ordering me to get moving, to start praying, and to believe that he would hear and that he would answer. Not only that, God was ordering me to be the big and good and and substantial person that I longed to be, and to believe that he would help me do it.

I grabbed a book. It had a yellow jacket, and the author was Richard Foster.

I read the title to myself: *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*.

Such a nice Christian title.

But right now I needed something flashy and dramatic and real. I needed *How to Pray for Your Dying Husband at Three O'Clock in the Morning*.

But the yellow book was there. So I flipped quickly to the table of contents and stared at the longest list of prayer categories I'd ever seen in my life.

"Simple Prayer." Wrong one.

"Formation Prayer." Wrong one.

"Covenant Prayer." Wrong one.

"Meditative Prayer."

"Contemplative Prayer."

Foster listed twenty-one different kinds of prayer. But finally, way at the bottom, there it was. Chapter 17: "Intercessory Prayer." I fumbled for the page and started reading out loud.

"If we truly love people . . ."

"No, no!" I groaned out loud. Then: "Yes! Yes, God, I love my husband," I shouted at the book, probably looking and sounding foolish. Then I got quiet.

Calmly, I said out loud: "Yes, heavenly Father, I love my husband, Dan,

and he's sick and he needs me to pray for him and he needs you to hear it. So, dear God, help me tonight to pray right."

I asked for forgiveness, indeed, for being so unloving.

Then I scoured the chapter, reading out loud but looking for what—advice? The right words? The right method? I wasn't sure. But finally, after searching page after page, I turned one more page and there it was. A chapter called "Healing Prayer."

I took a deep breath and started to read. "Healing prayer is part of the normal Christian life."

The calm, sure words of a faithful man rose off the page. They seemed to reach out and embrace me, leading me page by page—not to a method or a technique—but to a calm assurance that God was there.

So the calm words took me by the hand, and I sat on the side of my bed, reading. Listening.



Four A.M.

I rushed down the hall to my office and flipped on the light.

Within seconds, I had booted up my computer and started typing, fingers flying, as I searched for e-mail addresses for friends and family and even coworkers—anyone I suspected of being a believer—to join me in praying for Dan.

So like the prayers I had written out just weeks before, I wrote out a prayer for Dan. Only this time it felt like a gift. It felt as if God, who had shown himself to me so beautifully in the past weeks—when I was hungering to learn to pray but didn't know why—was now here with me.

I talked to the Father. I wrote for an hour. Maybe longer. And during that time, I stopped to be still. I listened. I praised God, knowing that if I had ten thousand tongues, they wouldn't be enough to thank him for hearing these words of prayer.

By 5 A.M., the prayer was finished. I pasted it into the e-mail space, then hit the Send button and propelled a prayer for my dying husband into eternity. It was a prayer but maybe it was also a song:

Oh dear God, in the name of Jesus, your healing Son, and by whose stripes we are healed of every infirmity, we pray right now.

That's how it started. I didn't know how the words were coming, but I kept typing, daring to list *by number* the things we should pray for.

Number 1: The complete healing of the fistula at the base of Dan's brain stem. Number 2: The restoration of every function and sensation in his body. Number 3: The discernment and skill of every medical person involved in Dan's case. Number 4: The reversal of any inflammation and swelling in and around Dan's spine. Number 5: The cessation of any pain in his shoulders and neck.

The prayer went on for pages as I asked people to *visualize* Dan's healing:

. . . seeing in our minds and believing in our hearts, Lord, your powerful reordering to correction of every problem in his body right now!

God, we see the swelling and inflammation going down and going away. We see the veins and artery connections returning to normal. And we even see Dan healed, restored to his feet and walking again with total normal function, with joy, and without pain—all for your glory! Hallelujah.

Going on like this, I urged the prayer circle to pray for every patient in the surgical ICU to be healed.

I can't remember them all, Lord, but you know them—even the number of every hair on their heads.

I went on, insisting:

By the blood of Jesus, we hold captive every negative thought around these and Dan's situations—especially any well-intentioned but ineffective, wrong-centered, or wrong-minded prayers by any of us for Dan, and especially any fears or any evidences of faithlessness in you by any of us.

Then I prayed for us to loose in heaven—by the power and authority that raised Jesus from the dead—*every positive and heavenly power to heal Dan completely.*

Oh, God, we see it!

We believe it, and like Bartimaeus in the good Gospel of Mark, we receive Dan's healing on his behalf, and in Jesus' mighty and precious name, by faith—itself a marvelous gift from you.

The sum of it all was this: We were inside the secret chamber with God. We were praying by faith. We were praying with authority. We were

praying with insight. And this was the crazy but holy thing—we were praying God’s prayer for Dan back to God.

In fact, Jesus himself, the Bible promised, “ever liveth” to pray for each of us.

Jesus—praying for Dan?

I’d had maybe four or five hours of sleep, but I was riveted by the promise that Jesus, not to mention my sleepy, ragtag band of prayer warriors across the country, was praying for my husband.

Praying together. Praying in faith.

Praying to cheat death.

Praying to heal our own souls.

We prayed over the next critical days, and then the beautiful and the unlikely: Miracles began to happen.

First, before the sun came up that night, the peace came. Peace that flooded my spirit. I’d never felt such peace, as if the peace itself was a real, physical entity, holding back some torrent of terror and anxiety that threatened to pour in and overwhelm everything. There was enough happening soon, a nearly eight-hour surgical ordeal that could kill my husband or leave him permanently paralyzed and speechless. And these things should have terrorized all of us. But the peace that came had its own presence. I could have reached out and grabbed it.

Then came the second round of unexpected miracles. Within a day, the prayer circle began to report back with miracles.

“I’ve been blessed so much by praying for Dan. I can’t explain it. . . .”

“Just wanted to tell you that the changes in my life while I’ve prayed for Dan have been remarkable. . . .”

“Thank you for inviting me to pray. What a blessing it has been. I can’t tell you how much.”

“Something has happened! This prayer time has changed so much in my life, and the lives of my family around me. . . .”

The stories kept trickling in, phone call after phone call, e-mail after e-mail.

It seemed miraculous. Then it seemed crazy. How could I, a run-down Christian—with just a few weeks given to the study of prayer and a lifetime record of *unanswered* prayer—inspire this?

Or as one of the prayer members asked: “How did you learn to pray like that?”

The question stunned me. What did I really know of the deep secrets of prayer? I was just a scratched-up, middle-of-the-road Christian, working halfheartedly at a state university, where the very idea of praying to an unseen God, let alone the act of praying, could get me laughed off my campus if not out of a job.

But this prayer journey had already started.

That's what the pages of this book would become: a walk through half a life that started with innocent and rote and mimicking prayer—*Now, I lay me down to sleep*—a life that took many detours, that traveled many roads, then ended with me back on my knees.

I'm there on my knees tonight as I think about my beloved husband who would face the biggest hurdle of his life: the fight to stay alive.

I'm there on my knees as I think about my younger daughter—who, at the moment of my husband's surgery, had left our Christian faith to embrace another. Her choice had sent me reeling. So I pray.

I'm there on my knees as I think about her sister—a single mom, struggling on that morning to run her own small business, even while she believed that the Lord would strengthen and keep her. So on her behalf, I pray.

I'm on my knees, to be sure, as I think about my widowed mother who had already survived the worst—the death of my father, the loss of all her siblings and many friends, a cancer diagnosis, and the frustration of a daughter (that would be me), who, no matter what I did, seemed to keep failing to honor her and help her through her graying days.

Indeed, I'm on my knees, trembling indeed, as I dare to believe that a prayer memoir like this might move others to vow to learn to pray.

So this can't be an idle journey.

Prayer, as Richard Foster said, "is the deepest and highest work of the human spirit." In real prayer, Foster added, we think God's thoughts. We desire the things that God desires. We love the things that God loves. We will the things that God wills.

But there is more, I learned. Isn't there always?

In real prayer, we go places we don't want to go. We learn lessons we don't want to learn. We tell secrets we don't want to tell. We walk bridges we don't want to cross. We face battles we don't want to fight.

Then we change the world.

We stand at the door to heaven and then we rush in.

But as we go, we change ourselves. "To pray is to change," wrote Foster, and with those few words he pulled together the deep essence of it all.

Renita Weems said the point of a journey is the going, “the movement and the traveling, not just the arriving.”

I just wanted to save my husband’s life and then get a life that mattered.

But as I travel, I get ahead of myself. Like real prayer, real journeys take time.

Mine can start here.

Mine can start now.