

BLANK

CANVAS

The amazing story of a woman who awoke
from a coma to a life she couldn't remember

MARCY

GREGG

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Blank Canvas: The Amazing Story of a Woman Who Awoke from a Coma to a Life She Couldn't Remember

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FOREWORD

I haven't met Marcy yet, but after reading the pages of this book, I can imagine what our first coffee date together will be like. I can see her sitting across from me, telling me this story (the one you're holding in your hands right now), and pointing out the faithfulness of God woven throughout—like intricate golden threads that hold it all together. I can imagine her selflessness and her bravery. I can imagine the ways she'd push me to keep going on a day when I feel like giving up.

That's what it will feel like as you sit down to read this compelling, can't-put-down story about the sacredness of second chances: as if you're having a coffee date with a new-yet-trusted friend.

We talk about those second chances all the time, but it's rare that a story so beautifully illustrates what it looks like to bank on them—day after day, hour by hour, moment to moment. Marcy lives in the second chance, and she inspires her readers to step in fully to the life that is waiting for them.

In our culture today, it is far too easy to check out of our own lives and lose ourselves in the lives of people we don't know. It has never been more tempting to numb ourselves by becoming a spectator of other people's stories, or to allow our own pain to define us for the

long haul. But that's not the answer, Marcy reminds us. If you're feeling tired and just wanting to check out, these pages will give you a better route to take.

This is the kind of book that will remind you how the Lord's mercy is new each morning. It's a book that will call you to awake from slumber and look around at your one life to ask some hard questions: *How can I be present within this day? Regardless of my past, how can I show up to build into my future?*

Marcy doesn't claim to have all the answers, and that's honestly one of the most refreshing elements of her storytelling. Throughout the pages of this book, she clings to God, prays honest prayers, and finds the strength each day to keep showing up. She's always pointing to something bigger than herself, and that's the takeaway you'll find yourself wanting to pocket again and again. She takes the blank canvas given to her—as we all must—and she simply decides to paint a life upon it that is a vibrant reflection of his glory.

I pray the words on these pages will serve as a fresh cloak of inspiration draped over your tired spirit. I pray they will show you that God is present in the hard, and he's sovereign in the storms. More than anything, I pray this story will shake you awake to the life you have right in front of you. That instead of choosing to check out, you will start to ask yourself: what would it look like to relentlessly check *in* to my life? To show up and claim it, despite not knowing what the future holds?

You have a blank canvas sitting right in front of you. It might be time to do something with it.

Hannah Brencher
author of Fighting Forward and Come Matter Here

PROLOGUE

SEPTEMBER 17, 2015

I gazed around the gallery in sheer wonderment. The gray skies and gentle patter of raindrops against the windows stood in stark contrast to the warm, welcoming lights of the hall, its pristine white walls blanketed in large canvases generously layered with oil paint in various hues, some vibrantly contrasted, others subtle and ethereal—but all purposefully mixed and chosen to accomplish the final composition. The click of my heels against the dark concrete floor echoed throughout the empty space as I slowly took in each of the brightly colored works of art—*my art*.

In less than an hour, the gallery would be filled with the familiar faces of family and friends, all gathering to celebrate my first solo show: *Expressions of Joy*.

What a perfect name, I mused, picking up one of the beautifully printed cards the gallery had created for tonight's reception—thirty-five exact miniatures of the bright, expansive canvases that graced the walls—more than a year of passion, dedication, and inspiration captured in pigment and oil.

I took a deep breath and smiled. It was one of the happiest moments I'd experienced, building on the many joy-filled hours I'd spent in the studio, bringing this show to life—the crisp, slightly citrusy scent of linseed oil permeating the air, light pouring in through the windows, the soft, cushiony feel of the Berber fibers beneath my bare feet, my hands and apron flecked with various hues of yellow, blue, orange, red, and green. I never felt more alive than I did when I was painting. It was almost like a form of worship—a beautiful, pure, spontaneous *expression of joy*.

I made my way to the center of the gallery, where my favorite piece was prominently displayed—a massive 72 x 48 in. abstract called *Lost and Found*. I walked up to the canvas, reached out my hand, and gently traced one of the delicate ridges left behind by the palette knife, my lips curving into a smile at the hidden message that lay beneath the thick layers of golden ochre and titanium white, contrasted by faint hues of cerulean blue. Most striking of all was the not-so-subtle pop of deep crimson carefully placed to grab your eye. It was the heartbeat of the piece, bringing life to all the other colors.

My eyes traveled across the canvas to the description of my work, just to the right of the painting:

Marcy Gregg's paintings are multifaceted explorations of the intrinsic beauty of form and color and the inherent properties of her chosen medium, fine oil paints. Gregg's creative compositions, whether representational or abstract, reflect her love of color and texture. Frequently she builds layer upon layer of paint to create a thick application that is then finished by the use of a palette knife.

I closed my eyes in the church-like silence, my heart filled with gratitude. *God . . . you did this. Thank you.* Thunder rolled in the distance. *Now, if you could do something about this weather . . .*

“Marcy!”

I quickly spun around to see Anne Neilson, the owner of the gallery, approaching. Anne and I had met in a Bible study, and our mutual passion for art resulted in an almost instant friendship. Anne had received national acclaim for her oil paintings of angels, and she donated a portion of the proceeds from each of her sales to charitable causes, which I loved. Her book had recently been featured on the *Today* show, after Kathie Lee Gifford used one of Anne’s angel paintings on her personal Christmas card. She had seen some of my work in a local fundraiser, and when I told her about my somewhat unorthodox underpainting and layering technique, she invited me to join her gallery in the trendy South End neighborhood in downtown Charlotte. And her timing could not have been more perfect because I had recently left my first Charlotte gallery and was now unrepresented and available.

When Anne offered to host a solo show on my behalf, I was both honored and slightly petrified. It was one thing to have strangers view my work online or at a charity event, but it was another thing entirely to have friends and family admiring it up close, which might have explained the goose bumps that had suddenly appeared on my bare arms.

“So . . .” Anne smiled brightly. “Are you ready?”

I took a deep breath. “I think so.” I glanced around the room one more time. “Everything looks so beautiful. Thank you, Anne. And these . . .” I held up one of the cards she had printed. “These are amazing!”

“Oh, you’re so welcome, Marcy,” she said, rubbing the goose bumps from my arms. “Come on.” She grabbed my hand and led me toward the reception area. “People will be arriving soon.”

Sure enough, as soon as we got there, Christine, our longtime nanny and housekeeper, burst through the door, umbrella first.

“Tinie! I can’t believe you came!” I could already feel the tears starting to form. This was going to be a long but beautiful evening.

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss this for the world!” She beamed, pulling me into a huge hug. Then she stepped back and scanned the room. “Where are Dev and the kids?”

“Oh, they’ll be here,” I assured her. “Dev is bringing Conner and Callie, and Casen’s flying in from Dallas. His plane should be landing any minute,” I said, glancing up at the clock. “Can I give you a personal tour?”

“You may!” She smiled back.

“You two go ahead,” Anne said. “I’ll let you know when the others arrive.”

Truth be told, I was grateful Tinie had arrived early. Having her there helped calm my nerves. She just had that effect. She had been a good friend and trusted confidante since the boys were little, before we even had Callie. I couldn’t imagine what my life would have looked like without her.

I was just showing Tinie one of my favorite paintings, a large 60 x 60 in. abstract with splashes of deep yellow ochre peeking out from layers of grays and delicate ivories, with faint lines forming a subtle cross, titled *Called by Love*, when Anne poked her head around the corner.

“Marcy, Dev just pulled up.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Tinie said, waving me off. “Go!”

I arrived just in time to find Dev, holding the gallery door open with one arm, and his blazer over his head with the other, leaving just enough space for our son Conner, our daughter, Callie, and her boyfriend, Joseph, to rush in from the rain.

“Callie, you should have a coat on!” I brushed a stray wisp of blonde hair from her eyes.

“I’m fine, Mom,” she assured me. “It’s not cold out—just wet.”

She did look beautiful in flowing black slacks and a bright orange sleeveless top that showed off her tanned shoulders. And Conner looked so handsome in his dress khakis and blue blazer. Not surprisingly, neither he nor Dev had bothered with a tie.

Like father, like son.

Conner leaned down and kissed me on the cheek. “Hey, Mom, congratulations. Everything looks great.” He smiled brightly, revealing the trademark dimple I’d always loved.

“Thank you, sweetie.”

As the kids made their way into the gallery, I turned to Dev. “I hope Casen and Megan get here on time with this weather.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine,” he assured me. “How about you? How are you holding up?”

“Nervous. Excited,” I said, brushing the wrinkles out of his white button-down shirt.

He smiled at me, his deep-set blue eyes crinkling in the corners. “Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be okay. I love you.”

My breath caught in my chest. He had no idea how much I needed to hear that.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked.

“A Diet Coke?” I suggested.

“You’ve got it.”

By the time he came back, the lightly falling rain had turned into a full-on downpour, just as more cars were lining up outside the entrance. Seeing the concern on my face, Dev handed me my drink and said, “I’ll be back.” Then, in a brand-new pair of dress shoes, he dashed around puddle after puddle to our car to get a golf umbrella, and one by one, escorted our guests up to the front door, delivering them safe and sound.

“You’ve got yourself quite a guy there,” Anne remarked.

“You have no idea.” I smiled absently, watching Dev look after our friends.

Before long, the gallery was alive with chatter. I couldn’t believe how many people showed up, and on such a terrible night—neighbors, people from church—everywhere I looked, I was met with the smiling faces of people who, over the years, Dev and I had

come to think of as family. I was completely overwhelmed. Then, from the back of the room, I heard yet another familiar voice.

“Mom!”

I turned toward the door to find our oldest son, Casen, standing next to his girlfriend, Megan. He had the same sandy blond hair mussed off to the side and square-set jaw as his dad. In fact so much of Casen reminded me of Dev.

“Look who we ran into outside.” He stepped aside to reveal my mom, my younger sister Ann, and her son, David.

We all exchanged hugs and kisses, then Casen and Megan disappeared into the crowd with David to find Conner and Callie.

“Mom, you look so beautiful.” I stood back to admire the bright yellow, black, and white top she was wearing, impeccably set off by a double-strand of pearls and small gold hoop earrings. And as usual, her makeup was perfect. My eyes filled with tears, and I pulled her into another embrace.

“Oh, darling, your daddy would be so proud of you,” she whispered.

“I know . . .” I choked back a sob. “I wish he could have seen this.”

“I know, darling,” she said, rubbing my back. “He would have loved it.”

“And I’m sure he’d be thrilled that for once you weren’t making a mess of his driveway,” Ann joked—a well-timed allusion to my childhood penchant for covering Dad’s normally pristine driveway with massive chalk art designs.

I pulled out of Mom’s embrace and turned to Ann, who looked positively gorgeous, like a younger version of Mom, with shoulder-length mahogany-colored hair and the most beautiful hazel eyes God ever gifted anyone.

“Marcy, this is beautiful,” she beamed, taking in the room.

I could feel the tears forming again. “Well . . . don’t just stand there,” I urged, anxious to take the focus off of me. “Go take a look

around.” I shooed them off and took a deep breath, hoping against all hope my waterproof mascara would live up to its name.

As if on cue, as soon as Dev ushered in the last of the guests, the skies cleared, and I wandered throughout the gallery talking, laughing, visiting with friends, and answering questions about my art and the hidden messages behind each picture.

“This is so amazing, Mom!” Callie called out from in front of a light orange and cobalt blue composition that complemented her outfit perfectly.

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

“Hey, did you all see Mom’s bio?” Conner asked, pointing up at the floor-to-ceiling graphic Anne had placed alongside *Lost and Found*. “It’s so cool to see it written out!”

I quickly skimmed the text, though I knew it all by heart. It was so strange to see my entire life encapsulated like that. Even though I had long since come to grips with what had happened to me—to us—twenty-five years ago, I knew it was difficult for others to wrap their heads around it. How could they? Things like that just don’t happen. Until they do.

“Good evening,” Anne spoke over the crowd, and the lively chatter hushed. “My name is Anne Neilson, and I’d like to welcome you all here tonight to celebrate the first solo show of one of Charlotte’s most exciting new artists and my good friend, Marcy Gregg.”

I lowered my head as a polite round of applause filled the room. Dev squeezed my hand and winked at me.

“I know many of you here tonight know Marcy and are aware of her story—” she gestured toward the write-up behind her—“but for those of you who aren’t . . . well . . .” She smiled knowingly. “You’re in for a real treat. Marcy, would you like to come up, please, and say a few words?”

I nodded, gave Dev’s hand a final squeeze, and took my place in front of *Lost and Found*, my heart beating like a rabbit. Once my eyes

swept over the room, however, and I saw all the faces of my family, neighbors, and friends smiling back at me, my heart settled, and I found myself overcome with gratefulness.

“Well, first, I’d like to thank you all so much for coming out on such a terrible night. Seeing all of you gathered here together just means the world to me, and I can assure you, I’ll never forget it.” A few knowing chuckles echoed throughout the room.

“For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Marcy Gregg. I’m sure many of you have already met my husband, Dev, who graciously brought many of you in out of the rain.”

Dev smiled sheepishly and waved his hand as a polite smattering of applause and laughter ensued.

“I was born in a small town in East Texas. I went to Southern Methodist University in Dallas, where I majored in art. My freshman year, I met the man who would eventually become my husband.” I winked at Dev. “After we got married, I was away from art for years. I worked and then focused on raising my family. We had two little boys.” I smiled at Casen and Conner. “Then we moved to Charlotte. And, when I was thirty, I gave birth to a little girl.” I met Callie’s gaze and she smiled brightly at me.

I took a deep breath. “And that’s where my story gets a little crazy . . .”

PART 1

FACES
|
ONCE
KNEW

CHAPTER 1

OUT OF FOCUS

MARCH 1990

I opened my eyes, and pain radiated throughout my neck and skull.

I looked down and strained to focus my eyes. I was lying in a long bed with shiny metal rails. Covered in translucent tubes, my arms lay limp and frail on a heap of crumpled white sheets. My hands looked shriveled and curled into fists. Every limb felt as though it was glued in place.

I tried to raise my head a few inches but was exhausted by the effort.

I looked a couple of inches to the left, then right. A white gauzy curtain reached to the ceiling, and a series of piercing monotonous beeps punctuated the ringing in my ears. I could hear voices in the distance, but it all seemed shrouded in fog.

I tried to blink the fog away, but nothing came into focus.

Where am I?

I closed my eyes, exhausted from my few brief moments of consciousness, and everything went dark.



I opened my eyes again, and a light stench of antiseptic combined with a whiff of sweat hit my nostrils, causing my stomach to churn.

The beeping persisted. I looked to the right. A few feet from the bed, a black screen flashed lines and numbers. Beneath it, rows of knobs turned at different angles were attuned to some indiscernible frequency.

I tried to gulp down a breath, but it caught in my chest. It felt as though I had swallowed a beehive.

Water. I need water.

I tried to speak, but the words got stuck somewhere between my brain and my lips.

Can somebody help me, please?

I looked down and noticed that there were straps around my wrists—circles of Velcro fabric fastened to the sides of the bed like handcuffs. I tried to lift my arms, but the straps held them flat.

I was trapped. My heart quickened.

I need to get up. Now.

The pain in my head radiated throughout every limb like red-hot flares every time I tried to move even a few inches.

I was frightened.

I was alone.

Then . . . a familiar face.

It's a clock!

It had a white face with black hands and numbers. Plain yet reassuring. Familiar. Only . . .

What does it say? Why can't I . . . ?

I stared at its hands for what felt like hours, but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't get the numbers to focus. And inside that windowless room, there was no way to tell what time it was. It could have been a bright sunny afternoon or the dead of night. Once again, exhausted from the effort, I closed my eyes.



Something jostled me awake. I could hear muffled voices coming from behind the door in the corner of the room, followed by the sound of footsteps and the squeak of rubber on linoleum.

The door opened and two young women came in, murmuring to each other, their voices soft and low. They were wearing blue cotton V-necks and matching pants, their hair pulled back in ponytails. The first woman was carrying a clipboard. The other examined the clear tube coming from the crook of my elbow. Every time she touched it, a wave of pain shot through my arm.

Water. Please, I need water.

"Patient's name is Marcy Gregg. Age thirty," the second woman said. "She was recently extubated and woke up this morning." She turned to me and smiled faintly.

"We're so glad to see you doing better, Marcy."

Marcy? The name echoed in my mind. It was the strangest sounding name I had ever heard. A discordant note in my ears.

"Are you experiencing any pain?"

I tried to speak, but only a guttural noise came out.

"I'm sure you're glad to have that tube out of your throat."

I searched the woman's eyes for an explanation—some hint of what was going on.

"It probably hurts. You've been on a ventilator for several days." She rolled up my right sleeve. "We need to check your blood pressure, heart rate, and oxygen level, okay, Marcy?"

She wrapped a heavy band around my arm. With every squeeze,

the band became tighter until it almost became unbearable. I turned my head and tried to focus on the clock's hands. They moved like molasses.

“. . . and we're done. Blood pressure is 129 over 74. Slightly elevated heart rate—106 BPMs.” The other woman jotted down more notes. “We're going to up your fluids, Marcy. That will help bring your heart rate down. Just keep taking deep breaths. That's your only job right now. You're doing so much better than a few hours ago.”

I tried to do what she said, but every breath hurt.

“Dr. Brawley will come in to check on you too.”

The woman with the clipboard looked up from her notes. “Your husband was here when you woke up, Marcy,” she said. “You might not remember. He'll be back soon. He just needed to shower and rest a little.”

Husband? Panic bubbled to the surface. *But . . . I'm not married.*

“You've been through a lot,” she said reassuringly, “but the worst is over. You're going to be okay.”

I closed my eyes tight, fighting back tears. I was trapped, alone, in pain. Nothing in my body seemed to be working right—and nothing anyone said made sense.



When my eyes fluttered open again, every inch, from head to toe, felt tender, like I had been churned up in a food processor. I had no idea how long it had been since I first woke.

I need to get out of this bed.

I peered up and saw the clock staring back at me. I still couldn't read it—the numbers and hands just would not come into focus. Just then, the door clicked open and the woman with the clipboard poked her head in.

“The doctor is here to see you, Marcy.”

An older man wearing bifocals sauntered into the room. A blue

collar and red tie peeked out from beneath a sharp white coat that hung to his knees. There was small writing in stitching above the breast pocket.

He walked to the end of the bed. He looked confident, like he was in charge of the place. “Hello, Marcy. It’s good to see you finally awake.”

There’s that name again.

“I’m one of the doctors who has been working with you. You wouldn’t remember me, but I’ve been monitoring your progress for several days.” He reached down into the pocket of his white coat and pulled out a small black flashlight. “Tilt your head up a bit if you can and look straight ahead.”

I strained to hold my neck up.

He moved the flashlight slowly back and forth between my eyes.

“Good. Just keep looking straight.”

Is there something wrong with my eyes? I held my gaze on the clock, the clock that was a blur of grayish numbers.

He clicked the flashlight off, put it back in his coat pocket, and I let my head fall back on the pillow.

“Good. Your pupils are dilating and constricting—that’s a good sign.”

But I can’t move or talk.

“And can you move your fingers and toes for me?” the doctor asked.

I looked down at my hands, which were still clenched in fists. With effort, I moved my pointer fingers a few centimeters, then looked down toward my feet. I could see small movements under the sheets.

“Good. Now, you might be a bit confused about how you got here.”

I looked at him pleadingly.

“Several days ago, you gave birth to a baby girl.”

What?! That couldn’t be right. There was no way I could have given birth. I wasn’t even married.

“It was a normal delivery. The baby is as healthy as can be. She’s being taken care of in the nursery downstairs, but during the delivery, some bacteria got into your bloodstream and infected the membranes in your brain. We believe it was pneumococcal bacterial meningitis . . . a severe, potentially fatal brain infection. We did everything we could to intervene, but the infection became so severe that you slipped into a coma.”

Coma. The word sent a chill down my spine.

“We had to drill a hole in your skull to relieve the pressure in your brain.”

A hole in my skull? Is that why it hurts so bad?

“I know it sounds alarming,” he said calmly, “but it’s a normal procedure to relieve swelling on the brain. Nothing out of the ordinary for someone in your situation.”

I tried to process what the doctor was saying, but the pain in my head made thinking difficult.

“We’ve been working day and night to stabilize you. Right now you’re probably a little disoriented.”

I nodded, and pain shot down my neck.

“But we’re going to do all we can to make sure you continue to improve, okay?”

I nodded again, more gently this time.

“Good. I’m just going to ask you a few simple questions. Do you know your name?”

I blinked. Everyone kept calling me Marcy. I rolled the word around in my mind to see if it rang a bell, but nothing about it was familiar. I stared back at the doctor blankly.

He reached up above my head, pulled down a white sheet of paper, and flipped it around so that I could see the big red script on it. I couldn’t make out the words. It looked like scribbles.

“Here it is,” he said. “See? It says PATIENT GOES BY THE NAME MARCY.”

Nothing.

“Okay. Can you tell me your date of birth?”

I couldn’t even hazard a guess. For some reason 1960 felt right, though why, I couldn’t say.

I shook my head.

“That’s okay,” he smiled reassuringly. “Let me ask another way. Do you know how old you are?”

The last thing I remembered was starting my freshman year of college at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. That meant I must have been . . .

I opened my mouth and croaked out a single word. “Seventeen.” The word burned my throat.

The doctor furrowed his brows. “No, Marcy. You’re thirty.”

Thirty? That couldn’t be right. How could I be thirty?

“That’s enough for now,” he said. “Don’t worry, Marcy. As the swelling in your brain goes down, things will begin to make more sense. For now, just get some rest. The worst is behind you.”

As the doctor left the room, I slumped back even farther into my pillow. *What in the world is happening to me?*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Writing a memoir when you suffer from memory loss poses a unique challenge. In sharing my story, I have worked hard to ensure that all of the events are accurate. I have reconstructed scenes and conversations to the best of my ability based on my own and others' memories as well as notes, records, photos, and journals from that time. In a few cases, I have changed or omitted certain names and details out of respect for people's privacy.

There are two ways to look at a blank canvas: you can look at it as empty and become paralyzed by what's not there, or you can see it as a starting place to create something new and beautiful. As I've written in these pages, living with the blank canvas of memory loss has required a great deal of trusting the Lord with all my heart. And yet through it all, I see him painting something beautiful in my life.