

Bethany's Calendar

When God has other plans...

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BETHANY'S CALENDAR

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This book is dedicated to Bethany, who has left all who knew her with a legacy of love, compassion, faith and humor. She will always be missed, this side of heaven.

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And, as always, thanks to my Lord and Savior *Jesus Christ*, from whom all blessings flow.



Preface

This book should have been written ten years ago when the events were still freshly seared in my mind. But that's the problem — it was too fresh, too painful. It was all I could do to survive.

Even these few words that I have written so far bring tears to my eyes because allowing myself to remember this chapter in my life makes me realize that I have been unalterably changed by the events of B.C. — Before Cancer.

The disease was not discovered in my own body. It was so much worse. The cancer was found in my daughter's brain — and it destroyed my baby girl.

She was not a baby in the physical sense but, as any parent knows, even your adult child of twenty-three is still your “baby.” They are always a part of you, even after they go to college and fly away from the nest you carefully prepared to see them safely to adulthood. Then, as they spread their wings, you earnestly pray that they will be joyful, happy, find the love of their life, and one day, perhaps, bless you with grandchildren. At the very least, you pray that they will outlive you.

But sometimes God has other plans...



“It’s often quoted that every person dies but not every person lives. I want so much to live the life that God intends for me. I want to experience life to its absolute fullest. Someday I will meet my giant (or two), but that will only be the defining point of my life. It’s not something I can prepare for or anticipate... Lord, any and all battles that come my way I am confident that I can face because You are with me. Big or small, You and You alone, are my strength and my shield. Thank You, my God.”

— *Diary of Bethany Jeanne Cooper, April 19, 1996*

I used my bare hand to wipe the condensation from the inside of the windshield. My heart raced faster than my fingers, as they worked to give me some sight through a fogged window into the pitch dark at two o'clock in the morning.

Where is she?

My mind swirled with the confusion of the last twenty-four hours. None of it made sense. And now my daughter, Bethany, had fled into the cold January darkness, barefoot. I had no idea where she'd run or why.

Straining to see through the clouded glass, my older son Ben was in the passenger seat, craning his neck, swabbing away the moisture while blowing warm air into his hands.

“What happened?” His concern pierced through his sleepiness. “I’ve no idea.” My asthmatic lungs rebelled against the cold

night air. They don't take kindly to me running outside into twenty-degree nighttime air. But I had no choice. I was chasing my daughter, who was intent on running outside, alone, in the middle of the night. "I don't know what's happening." In my bewildered frame of mind, I repeated my confusion.

My jumbled thoughts replayed the events of the last several days.

First, Bethany had been involved in a car accident that was her fault. Then she arrived home with terrible and unexpected news.

"I've been fired," she said, matter-of-factly.

Our jaws dropped before we could stop ourselves. "Fired?" My husband, Steve, stood speechless.

"Why?" was the only word I could manage to eke out of my stunned lips. Bethany's explanation made no sense. Things were not going well at work — that was pretty much all we gleaned from the conversation. But she had recently rented her own apartment. She had bills to pay.

What is she going to do?

Anger surged through me and I could see it on Steve's face.

How dare someone fire our capable, dependable daughter?

The ensuing hours were quiet with confusion and concern.

What is happening?

Later that evening her boss called to speak with Steve. We couldn't make sense of what he was saying, but there was obviously some problem that we could not decipher. And why would he call us?

Then he dropped a bombshell into my husband's ears. "Bethany seems disoriented. Has she ever been involved in taking drugs?"

Steve vehemently denied any drug-use — that was not Bethany, he said. We were both terrified and stunned. Yet events seemed to be spinning out of control with no answers.

We were already focused on her car accident a few days prior.

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Her rental car would have to be returned to save money. With all that was happening in her life, I was forced to put my on-call nursing job on hold for a few days so I could drive her around to return the rental and get her over to her office to gather the rest of her belongings. That would be awkward, to say the least.

From spending time with her, I observed behavior that I attributed to stress. Her moods swung from flighty to depressed to downright paranoid. Taking a call on her cell phone, she had quickly hung up and started screaming that someone was tapping her phone calls. Her insistence was so believable, she even had me wondering if someone actually was listening in to her phone conversations.

And then on that night of January 8, 2002, events twisted out of control.

Early in the evening and exhausted from all that was going on, I struggled to get some rest. But I could hear her in the next room, singing to herself, tossing things around without a thought that others might be trying to sleep. My husband was still downstairs watching TV.

I got up to go see what was going on. Bethany sorted through her belongings and paced around like a cat looking for its nocturnal prowler.

“What are you doing?” I tried not to be irritated but I was spent from the events of the last few days.

“I can't sleep.” Her wide eyes attested to that.

“Can you try? You must be exhausted. I know I am.”

“Can you sing me my song? Like when I was little?” She grabbed my hand.

Such a strange, tight grip.

“Of course.” Stirrings of concern rippled my thoughts.

It must just be stress. Maybe she needs to visit her counselor.

I tucked her into bed and snuggled her under her floral blanket

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as I began to sing... “Bethany, Jesus loves you, Bethany. You are our sweet new baby, and we love you so.”

I repeated the verse I had sung to her off and on for the last twenty-three years. But this was the first time she had ever asked me to sing it to her.

She finally seemed to relax, and I kissed her good night. Stumbling back to my own bed, I collapsed under the covers and dropped off into a restless slumber.

What happened next still pulses shivers of dread up my spine.

I awoke to what sounded like a body falling down the steps. What actually happened was Bethany had snuck downstairs, saw her dad watching TV and, in a terrorized state of mind, she flung the front door open and ran outside. She was barefoot and the temperature had dropped to twenty degrees.

Flying down the stairs, I saw my husband’s confused expression. “She ran outside! She claims I’ve been abusing her for years.” The hurt at this out-of-the blue and horrific accusation was evident on his face. He had started to pull on her sleeve and she slipped away. He dared not run after her after she had screamed these charges at him.

I raced after her, shouting her name. She was wandering across the street and stopped at the sound of my voice.

I barely recognized her terrified look. “Bethany, come inside. It’s freezing! What are you doing?”

She had stopped but seemed unsure of what to do.

“Come inside.” I approached her cautiously, afraid she’d run away again.

Run away from what?

My mind reeled. She looked like a frightened child. I wrapped my arms around her.

“Let’s go inside.” I steered her carefully toward the door and guided her into the house.

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She began to scream and was terrified if her dad got close to her. She twisted her torso and tried to escape. I carefully drew her to the floor and put my arms around her. Her legs pedaled in an odd, rhythmic fashion. I rocked her like a baby while she cried out, "My name's not Bethany, it's Elizabeth." She repeated this over and over.

By now Ben was awake and he groggily came into the room. "What's going on?" The look on his face showed how shocked he was, seeing his younger sister in such a state.

"Ben!" She reached her arm out for him as if he were a lifeline to safety. "Ben." He took her hand and held it. "Ben, I love you."

"I love you, too. What's wrong?"

"My name's not Bethany, I'm Elizabeth."

Eventually her rhythmic motions calmed and my benumbed thoughts focused on one thing — getting her to the hospital.

"Bethany, I need to go get dressed. Stay here while I do that. I'll be right down and I'll take you to the hospital so a doctor can check you, okay?"

"Okay."

I regretfully let go of my girl so I could hurry upstairs to get out of my pajamas and whisk her to the hospital. But what happened next sent the evening into overdrive and panic.

My husband told me later that she had slowly scooted across the floor, hoping he wouldn't notice, as she headed towards the front door. When he went towards her, she started to scream and ran out the door again. He raced after her but the closer he got, the more she screamed and fled into the darkness.

I heard her from upstairs and flew downstairs. "What happened?" Now I was screaming.

Ben, who had gone back to bed, was now up again and throwing his own clothes on.

I ran outside after grabbing a jacket and ran after her. That

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cold night air narrowed my lungs and I began coughing uncontrollably. I had enough adrenaline filling my system that it quickly subsided, but I could not find my daughter anywhere.

I raced back to the house. “I can’t find her!”

We quickly decided Steve would stay home and call the police. Ben and I lunged into my car, hoping to discover her whereabouts. The cold air had the windows fogged up and I kicked on every possible outlet of the defroster but it could not work fast enough.

Straining to see, checking block after block, we searched but could not find our lost lamb.

We headed back home feeling defeated and desperate, but noticed something odd as we turned onto our block — flashing lights of a police car were in front of our house.

As we approached, we could see my husband speaking with two police officers. Steve saw my questioning look and said, “They found her.”

Approaching the patrol car, I saw a young officer rubbing a scratch on his face. He had found Bethany sitting on someone’s porch and when he approached her, she responded in terror. According to the officers, she had attacked the young policeman and was screaming at both of them. Expletives poured out of her mouth at them. One officer had put her in handcuffs and placed her in the back seat of his patrol car. The younger patrolman wanted to arrest her. The more experienced officer could see there was something else going on. “We’ll take her to the county hospital. They have a psych ward there.”

I looked at my daughter with unbelieving eyes. She had calmed down when she saw me and would have grabbed my hands except that she was handcuffed. I will never forget the look of confusion on her face nor her childlike words: “Mom? Was I bad?”

Fighting back fear of unimaginable proportion, I touched her

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arm. “No, you weren’t bad. We’re going to get you help.”

Steve and I got into our vehicle and followed the officers to the hospital. After a brief verbal exchange about what had transpired, we stopped speaking. Our silence screamed a thousand questions as our hearts shook with emotional eruption. The only sound was my returning bronchospasms. I inhaled some asthma-relieving albuterol — and prayed.

Arriving at the hospital, we had to pause in the waiting area while they examined her. I was soon called back to be with her.

Her dilated eyes sought mine as she grabbed my hand with relief.

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I managed to squeak, “Are you okay?”

“I’m so glad you’re here. When I saw the nurses with their purple gloves I felt better because it reminded me of you.”

I smiled bravely for her sake. The nurse came in, and we introduced ourselves.

“I’m a registered nurse,” I said, “and I know that you’ll need to test her for drugs. But I want you to know, I’ve been with her for the last twenty-four hours. I really don’t think you will find anything.”

The nurse smiled sympathetically. I’m sure she had heard that a thousand times before.

I stayed with Bethany while the tests were run.

The nurse came in looking surprised. “You were right. Everything was negative. No drugs.”

Of course, now the question was, what *was* wrong?

A psychologist came in and introduced himself as “John.” A pleasant man, he spoke with her for some time and then left.

Bethany looked at me with eyes I did not recognize. They were dark, fearful, and alien to me. “I don’t think his name is John.” Her voice reverberated with suspicion and distrust.

I swallowed with difficulty again. “Well, his name tag says ‘John.’

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So I think that's probably his name."

She shook her head. "No, it's not." She gripped my hand with an intensity and strength that can only be described as terrifying. I never knew that holding someone's hand that I love could ever be so frightening.

Lord, what is happening? This is not my daughter! Where is my daughter?

Note to self: "You will not fear the terror of the night..."
— Psalm 91:5

Note to others: What your eyes observed does not always tell the whole story. "Stop judging according to outward appearances; rather judge according to righteous judgment." — John 7:24