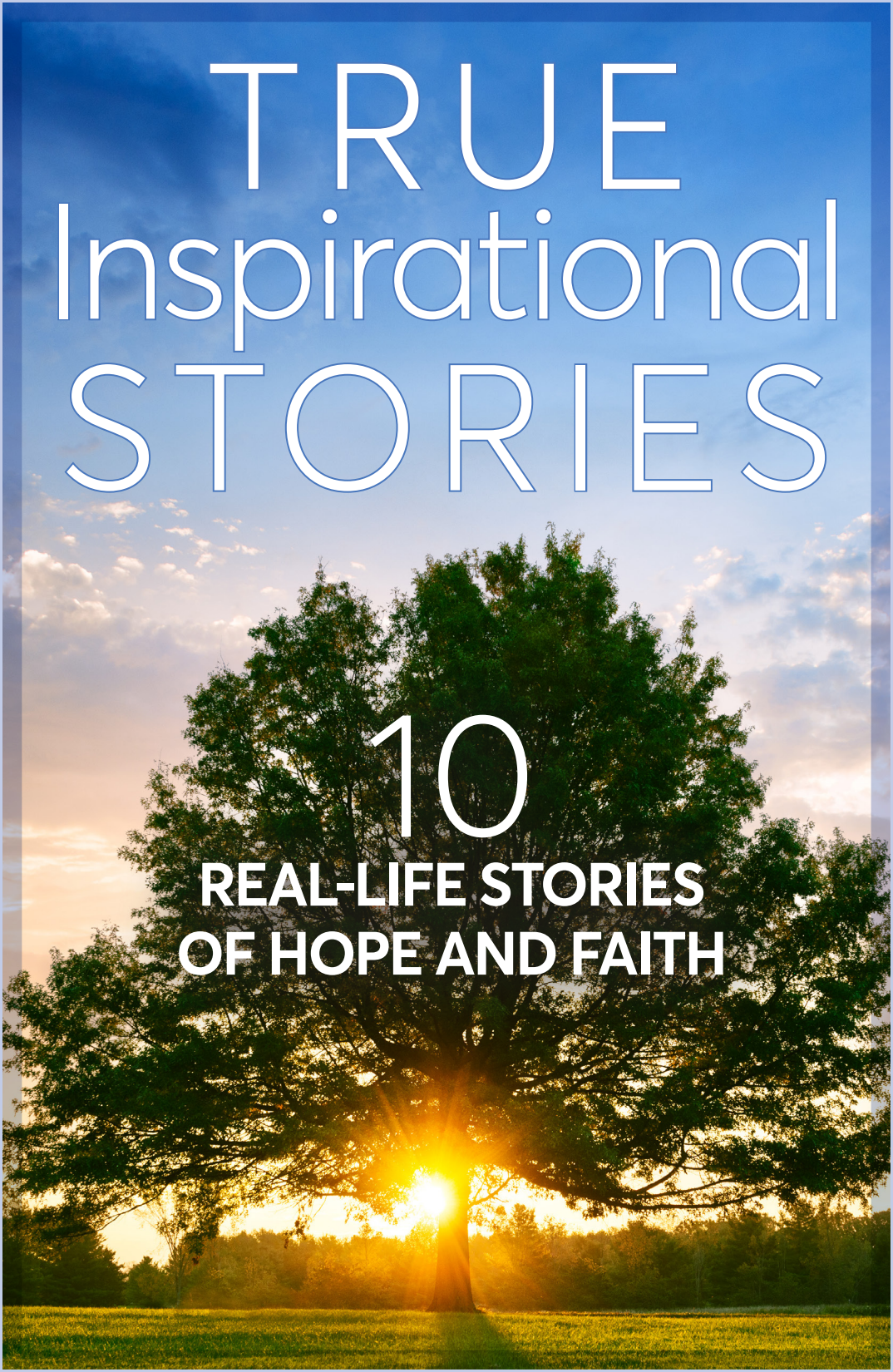
TRUE Inspirational STORIES



10 REAL-LIFE STORIES OF HOPE AND FAITH

TRUE INSPIRATIONAL STORIES

Do you need a boost of inspiration?

Guideposts has been bringing true stories of hope and inspiration to millions of readers for over 65 years, ever since the magazine was founded by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale (you might know his self-help classic, *The Power of Positive Thinking*).

Here we've gathered some of our favorite inspirational stories from the pages of *Guideposts* magazine. Real-life stories of faith, courage and love. Stories about major life-changing events and about small unexpected moments of grace.

Most of all, Guideposts stories are about people—real people like you. People who meet their challenges with an optimism that lifts them above life's inevitable rough patches. Who have deepened their love for family, friends and the greater human community.

People who have found meaning in their work and grown in their relationship with God. Who have not only discovered how to live their own lives with more hope and joy, but have also found the motivation to help someone else do the same.

Ready for some real-life inspiration? Read on!

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Annie's Soldier

"My daughter's class had written to the troops in Iraq. That would be the end of it, I thought..."

By Elizabeth Hassee, Greenwood, Indiana

"Mom!" my 10-year-old daughter, Annie, shouted as she burst through the front door after school that fall afternoon. "I just got a letter from a soldier!"

Annie's teacher had given them a project: Write a letter to a U.S. serviceman or woman in Iraq. Annie had worked hard on a big picture of a red, white and blue cat. On the bottom of the page she'd written, "Be safe, and thank you." I'd cautioned Annie not to get her hopes up too much. "There are a lot of soldiers over there," I told her. "And they're very busy. I'm sure they'll appreciate hearing from you, but you might not get an answer from them."

"That's okay, Mom," Annie had said. "It was fun making the picture."

Now Annie pulled the letter from her schoolbag and read it to me.

Hi, my name is Scott Montgomery. I am a sergeant in the South Carolina Army National Guard currently stationed in Kuwait. Two weeks ago in Iraq, on a mission just north of Baghdad, my truck was hit by a bomb. A piece of shrapnel struck me in the arm and I had to be rushed to the hospital.

I had two operations and was feeling pretty sad. While I was recuperating, someone gave me an envelope addressed to a U.S. soldier. I found a beautiful handmade card from you. It brought a big smile to my face to know that a young girl in Indiana took the time to wish good luck to someone she doesn't even know. Thank you, Annie. You really brightened this soldier's day. I hope you get a chance to write back. Take care, Scott.

"That is so cool!" Annie said. She raced upstairs to show the letter to her sisters, while the words she'd just read echoed in my head. Kuwait. Baghdad. Trucks. Bombs. Shrapnel. The kinds of words I read every day in the paper, along with another one: Casualties. I instantly liked the young man who had been thoughtful enough to write back to Annie—to make her feel so special. But to be honest, I was worried. My daughter was a sweet little fourth grader. Her world was small and, I hoped, protected. Scott was a man in the middle of a war where people were getting maimed and killed. A conflict that adults argued about every day…on TV, the radio, even in our own church parking lot. The ugly realities of war were nearly everywhere. Did I really need to expose my 10-year-old to them? Wouldn't the world find her soon enough?

"She's going to grow up fast enough as it is," I said to my husband, Jim, that night. "War is the most horrible thing in the world. Does she have to learn about it now, when she doesn't even know that Santa's not real?"

"Look," said Jim. "We're the ones who taught the girls that we need to support the troops over there. Annie's just putting that idea into action. She can learn from this. It is scary, true. But you're never too young to do the right thing."

The next day after school, Annie showed me a letter she'd written to Scott. It was short, but I could see the work she'd put into it in every carefully lettered word. *Dear Scott, I'm in fourth grade. I'm in gymnastics twelve hours a week. I like SpongeBob and using my dad's computer to play office. Annie.* "That's nice," I told her, and she sent the letter off.

Starting almost immediately, the first thing Annie did when she got home from school or gymnastics class was to check the mailbox. Three weeks passed. I figured Scott wasn't going to write back.

"Don't feel bad," I told Annie one afternoon following another fruitless check of the mailbox. "Scott's a soldier. He's got all kinds of things to think about over there. Writing you a letter right now might not be so easy for him."

"I know, Mom," Annie said, her voice upbeat as usual. "But I can still think he's going to write back. I can hope."

A month flew by and I hoped Annie had moved on. Then one day a package with a military return address showed up. Inside was a bracelet made of rope, a small stuffed camel and another handwritten note from Scott. Every guy in my unit wears a bracelet like the one enclosed, it read. Annie immediately wrapped it around her tiny wrist; it was a perfect fit. She went to bed that night with it on, and the camel tucked in beside her. I peeked in on her later. Her face, bathed in the soft pink glow of her half-moon nightlight, was peaceful almost beyond imagining, so opposite of the way our world was now. How would she react if Scott or someone in his unit got hurt or worse? I went to bed more worried than ever.

"Christmas is only a month away," Annie said the next morning at breakfast. "Let's send Scott a holiday goodie package. We can put cookies in it. The frosted cut-out kind. And Chex Mix. You can't have Christmas without Chex Mix."

Christmas in Iraq. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine it. Broiling heat. Constant danger. And homesickness. I opened my eyes and saw Annie staring

at me, a big, eager grin on her face. I looked at that innocent, completely trusting face, and decided I had to say something more than I had so far. "War isn't nice, honey. This isn't just another fun school project. It's real. And dangerous. I want you to know that."

Annie fixed me with one of those looks she gives me from time to time. A look that basically says: "Mom, how can you be so dumb? "I know, Mom," she said. "And that's why I wanted to write the letter! That's why I put Scott and the soldiers in my prayers every night."

Now I was the one being naive. I should have known Annie had thought this through, and that there was no hiding the world from her. And certainly there was no holding back her prayers. And how could she pray if she didn't know what she was praying for?

"Christmas in Kuwait!" I said to Annie. "We should put some practical things in the package too. Things he can use every day, like gum and lip balm. He can't drive down to Target like we can."

Annie nodded vigorously, as if this fact had already occurred to her.

By the time we'd gotten everything packed into Scott's holiday package and sent it off, I was as excited for him to get it as Annie was. That night I added Annie's soldier to my own prayers. *Lord, I guess Scott's a part of our family now. Please keep him safe.*

The holidays came and went. No word from Scott.

I kept my eye on the mailbox. I was as bad as Annie. Worse, probably. Finally a box arrived—a big box. Inside was an American flag. With a mix of awe and excitement, Annie and I spread it across the dining room table. It was covered with written messages from everyone in Scott's unit, like a page from a high school yearbook.

Dear Annie, Scott's letter read, *We flew this American flag in Iraq and Kuwait. As you can see, all the soldiers on my team have signed it for you. They know all about you, and it is our way of saying thank you for your support. You aren't really supposed to write on the flag, but we made an exception. I hope you like it. Take care. God bless. Scott.* I turned my head away. Wars make us cry for the right reasons too.

That spring, Annie developed an injury to her back due to gymnastics class. Her flexibility caused her to develop a hairline crack on one of her vertebra. This meant limited activities for her, and she needed to wear a back brace for several months. She told Scott all about it in a letter. *Dear Scott, I had to quit gymnastics. I hurt my back. I have a brace that I wear, and I have to do therapy. Ugh!*

Scott wrote back—in an envelope covered with some of the SpongeBob stickers Annie had sent him. *Dear Annie, How are you doing? Is your back still bothering you? I hope by now it is all better. Take it easy and be patient. I know you're upset about not being able to do gymnastics right now. Try not to get too upset. Remember, God has a plan in mind for you. When I got wounded back in October, I was pretty upset about it. I wondered why that happened to me. I now know that it happened so I could get your letter and we could become friends. Your friend , Scott.*

"See, Mom?" Annie whispered after we read the letter. "It's all part of God's plan." I couldn't say anything. I pulled her close to me, kissed the top of her head and breathed in her little girl smell. Sometimes moms forget that there are even bigger plans than their own, and how fast children grow up.

In the fall of 2005, Annie's friend sergeant Scott Montgomery came home to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, to resume duty as a police patrolman—the job he had held before shipping out to Iraq. He invited our family down in February 2006 to meet him face to face. We decided to meet Scott and his fiancée down at the beach.

Annie hesitated at first, feeling a little shy, then threw her arms around Scott like she'd known him her whole life. So did I. It was so good to see him and see that all his wounds were healed. We had dinner with Scott and his fiancée. Scott had arranged for us to attend a tribute to our Armed Forces at the Alabama theatre the next day.

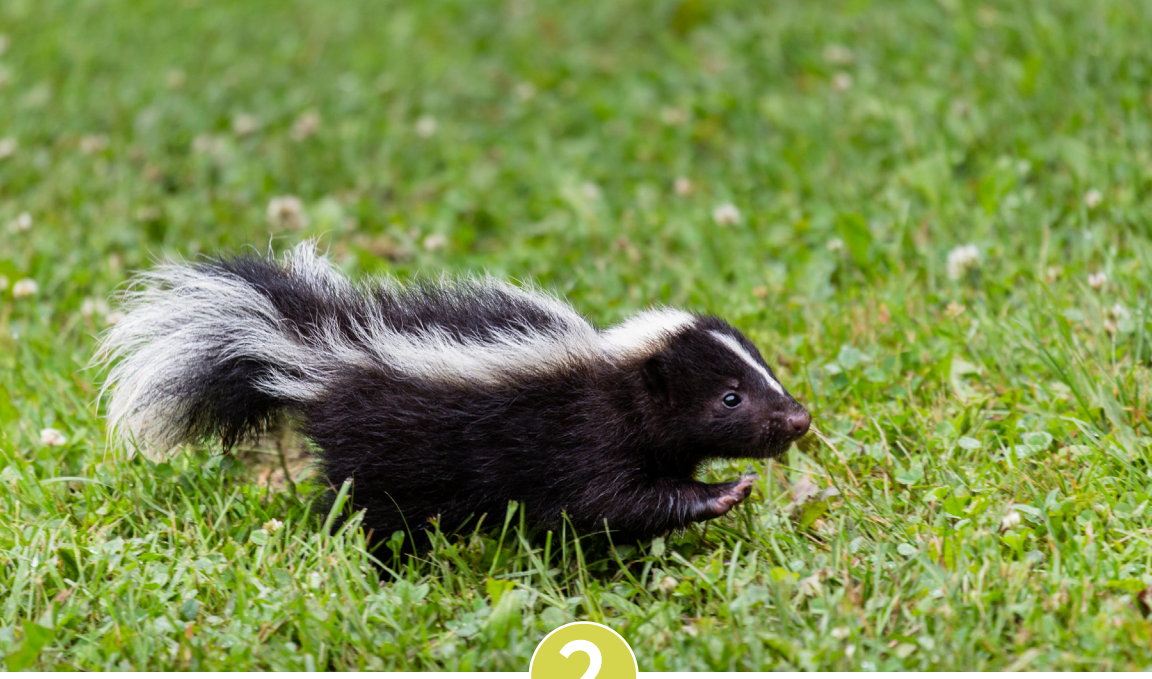
He greeted us at the auditorium and showed us to our seats. "Just to let you know," he whispered in my ear, "I have a little surprise to give to Annie, so I'll be asking her to step up to the stage with me when the time comes."

When the announcer called Scott up, he walked nervously to the stage. After the applause, Scott called to Annie, "Annie, get up here. I'm not doing this by myself." "This young lady was always there for me when I was in Iraq," he told the audience. "She deserves to share

this award." The room broke into applause as Scott handed a plaque and a bronze eagle to Annie. Someone snapped a picture. "Annie, while we're up here," Scott continued, "there's one more thing I'd like to give you." Scott reached into his pocket and pulled something out: his Purple Heart, the award wounded soldiers are given by their country. Annie's eyes widened as Scott pinned his Purple Heart on her jacket. The whole house erupted in applause. Scott's fiancée gave me a hug.

Annie made her way back to her seat, the plaque and eagle in her hands, the medal pinned proudly to her, and an impossibly huge grin on her face. "Mom, can you believe how cool this is?" she said.

"It's pretty cool all right," I said, putting my arms around my daughter. "And so are you."



2

Skunk On The Loose

On my desk I have a pencil holder that may look like an ordinary yogurt container. But there's a story behind it.

By Elizabeth Sherrill,
Hingham, Massachusetts

It was a rustling in the woods that made me glance out the window beside my computer. At the edge of the trees I caught sight of a skunk, his black-and-white pattern duplicating the dappled light. He seemed to be busy — burrowing, maybe? My knowledge of skunks began and ended with their dreadful odor.

The next moment, though, the animal emerged from beneath the trees and zigzagged across the lawn: plume-like tail, striped back and…where his head should have been, a bizarre-looking yellow helmet. As he came closer I saw what the "helmet" was: a plastic yogurt container.

The carton struck a rock, and the creature whirled in another direction, only to bump up against our picnic table. For a second he stood still, shaking his head frantically. But the yogurt carton was wedged fast. The skunk charged blindly back into the woods.

I stared after him in dismay. How long had he been running in darkness and terror?

It would be the work of a second for me, I thought, to pull that thing off. But the idea of pursuing a skunk through the undergrowth kept me immobilized at the window. How would I ever catch him? And then what? Wouldn't he spray me?

I sat down and tried to pick up the thread of the story due in the mail that afternoon. But I could think only of an animal running till he dropped from exhaustion. Hadn't this sort of thing happened before? Might animal experts know what to do?

I dialed the local SPCA. "We only handle domestic animals," the woman told me. "You want the Department

of Wildlife." She gave me a number in New Paltz, New York.

By now the skunk was probably a long way off. Maybe someone else would see him. Someone braver and more athletic.

I dialed the number in New Paltz. A man in the Department of Wildlife listened to my story, then held a muffled conversation. "If skunks can't see you," he said, "they don't spray."

Well…that sounded all right, as long as the skunk's head was inside the container. "What happens after the carton comes off?" I asked.

"Make sure," the man advised, "that he doesn't feel threatened."

I wondered how one went about reassuring a terrified skunk.

"You could throw a blanket over him," the wildlife man suggested, "then run while he's finding his way out."

"That might work," I said, but I must have sounded as unsure as I felt, because the man asked where I was calling from and began looking up names of conservation officers in my area.

How long would it take, I wondered, for someone to get here? Where would the skunk be by then? I was ripped by a sudden strange urgency. I thanked the man, hung up and ran outside. Without stopping to change

out of my next-to-best slacks, and forgetting about the blanket theory, I ran up our driveway to the road.

Of course the skunk wasn't there. Nor did I know why I was. In his frenzy, when I had seen him last, the animal had been heading the opposite way, straight down the hill into the woods. But my feet never slowed. I turned left and dashed down the street as though rushing to a long-ordained appointment. I had run perhaps a hundred yards when a black-and-white streak emerged from the bushes beside the road and ran straight at me, the carton bumping the pavement with each step.

I stooped and grabbed hold of the yogurt carton before the astonishment of finding the skunk hit me. The animal was tugging and twisting, unexpectedly strong, to get away. His front claws scrabbled against the slippery yellow plastic, his body strained backward, and still he could not wrench free of the carton's vise-like neck. It took both of my hands tugging the other way to hold on—until a small black head suddenly popped free.

And there we were, facing each other, two feet apart. I don't know what he saw, and how threatening or not the apparition was, but what I saw was a sharp quivering nose, two small round ears, and alert black eyes that stared straight into mine.

For fully 10 seconds we held each other's gaze. Then the skunk turned, ran a few yards and vanished into a culvert that goes beneath the road. I stood there, looking after him. Three minutes could not have passed since I had hung up the telephone.

But a timeless parable had played itself out, I thought as I headed back down the drive. The skunk was all those

needs I hesitate to get involved in: Involvement takes time and I have deadlines to meet. I probably can't do anything anyway. Somebody else can handle it better. Besides, involvement can be ugly, and the stench may rub off on me.

And all these things, of course, may be true. But I've got a yellow pencil-holder on my desk, a rather scratched and battered one, to remind me that every now and then God's answer to a need is me.

3

The Last Tape

My patient was a young mom who thought she would have a lifetime to raise her three girls

By Nan Pinkston,
Stone Mountain, Georgia

The bustle of the hospital was a welcome distraction as I opened my new patient's chart and headed for her room. My son, Eric, had just brought home a disappointing report card, and my daughter, Shannon, and I had argued again about her getting a driver's license. For the next eight hours I wanted to throw myself into helping people who I knew had much more to worry about than I did.

Rebekah was only 32, admitted for chemotherapy after breast-cancer surgery. When I entered her room it took me a moment to spot her amid the bouncing forms of three giggling little girls.

I told Rebekah I would be her nurse and she introduced her husband, Warren; six-year-old Ruthie; four-year-old Hannah; and two-year-old Molly. Warren coaxed the girls away from their mother with a promise of ice cream and assured Rebekah they would return the next day.

As I rubbed alcohol on her arm to prepare it for the intravenous line, Rebekah laughed nervously. "I have to tell you I'm terrified of needles."

"It'll be over before you know it," I said. "I'll give you a count of three."

Rebekah shut her eyes tightly and murmured a prayer until it was over. Then she smiled and squeezed my hand.

"Before you go, could you get my Bible from the table?" I handed her the worn book. "Do you have a favorite Bible verse?" she asked.

"'Jesus wept.' John 11:35."

"Such a sad one," she said. "Why?"

"It makes me feel closer to Jesus, knowing he also experienced human sorrow."

Rebekah nodded thoughtfully and started flipping through her Bible as I shut the door quietly behind me.

During the following months I watched Rebekah struggle with the ravages of chemotherapy. Her hospital stays became frequent and she worried about her children. Meanwhile I continued to contend with raising my own kids. They always seemed either out or holed up in their rooms. I missed the days when they were as attached to me as Rebekah's little girls were to her.

For a time it had seemed Rebekah's chemotherapy was working. Then doctors discovered another malignant lump. Two months later, a chest X-ray revealed the cancer had spread to her lungs. It was terminal. Help me to help her through this, I prayed.

One day when I entered her room, I found her talking into a tape recorder. She picked up a yellow legal pad and held it out to me. "I'm making a tape for my daughters," she said.

I read the list on her pad: starting school, confirmation, turning 16, first date, graduation. While I worried how to help her deal with death, she was planning for her children's future.

She usually waited until the early hours of the morning to record the tapes so she could be free from

interruptions. She filled them with family stories and advice—trying to cram a lifetime of love into a few precious hours. Finally, every item in her notes had been checked off and she entrusted the tapes to her husband.

I often wondered what I would say in her place. My kids joked that I was like an FBI agent, with my constant questions about where they'd been and who they'd been with. Where, I thought, are my words of encouragement and love?

It was three o'clock one afternoon when I got an urgent call from the hospital. Rebekah wanted me to come immediately with a blank tape. What topic has she forgotten? I wondered.

She was flushed and breathing hard when I entered her room. I slipped the tape into the recorder and held the microphone to her lips. "Ruthie, Hannah, Molly—this is the most important tape." She held my hand and closed her eyes. "Someday your daddy will bring home a new mommy. Please make her feel special. Show her how to take care of you. Ruthie, honey, help her get your Brownie uniform ready each Tuesday. Hannah, tell her you don't want meat sauce on your spaghetti. She won't know you like it separate. Molly, don't get mad if there's no apple juice. Drink something else. It's okay to be sad, sweeties. Jesus cried too. He knows about sadness and will help you to be happy again. Remember, I'll always love you."

I shut off the recorder and Rebekah sighed deeply. "Thank you, Nan," she said with a weak smile. "You'll give this one to them, won't you?" she murmured, sliding into sleep.

A time would come when the tape would be played for her children, but right then, after I smoothed

Rebekah's blanket, I got in my car and hurried home. I thought of how my Shannon also liked her sauce on the side and suddenly that quirk, which had annoyed me so many times, seemed to make her so much more precious. That night the kids didn't go out; they sat with me long after the spaghetti sauce had dried onto the dishes. And we talked—without interrogations, without complaints—late into the night.

4

The Zumba Cure

We bonded over exercise in grad school. Now we were empty nesters who needed to get back into shape. Who knew dancing was the answer?

By Edwidge Crevecoeur-Bryant, St. Augustine, Florida

Friday afternoon. The YMCA was packed. At 48, I felt out of place in the sea of twentysomethings working out. I had no intention of joining them. I couldn't remember the last time I exercised! I was only here to cancel my younger son's membership. "He's off to college next month, so he won't be around," I told the trainer at the front desk.

"Let me get the paperwork for you," she said.

I wasn't sure I was ready for my husband, Thomas, and me to have an empty nest. After 25 years of marriage, we still adored each other, yet our lives had revolved around our two sons for so long that the sparks that once flew between us were just embers now. Besides, when we weren't working—I was a college professor, Thomas was the director of the research institute at the state health department—we were busy helping my mother, who was recovering from a stroke, or visiting Thomas' father at the veterans' care center with his mother.

Honestly, we could've used some stress relief. Like exercise, which was what we'd bonded over when we met in grad school. I had run track in high school, Thomas played basketball, and our dates usually involved getting moving together. Long walks. Bike rides. Dancing. We could always liven up the dance floor, get any party started.

Even after we married and our boys came along, Thomas and I carved out time to stay fit together. Then, two years ago, Thomas tore up his knee playing basketball. Ever since, we'd both taken it easy on exercise ...too easy. We weren't into fast food (I'm a vegetarian, and Thomas doesn't eat red meat), but we'd have big

portions or go for an all-you-can-eat brunch after church. And sweets! After a long week, we'd sink into the couch Friday night—and into a tub of ice cream. No wonder we'd both started to look like the couch. My cholesterol shot up and I needed medication. Thomas had high blood pressure. I knew we needed to make a change, but how?

The Y's schedule caught my eye. Zumba at 6:00 P.M., Zumba at 8:00 P.M., it read. "What is Zumba?" I asked the trainer when she returned with the forms.

"It's a high-energy dance-and-fitness class," she said. "It's a lot of fun. Check it out!" She pointed to a class where a dozen women swayed in unison to a samba. It's been a long time since I moved like that, I thought.

"Beginner's Zumba is tomorrow afternoon," she said. "You should come."

"I'll think about it," I said. I did, the whole drive home.

"While I was at the Y, I saw this thing called Zumba," I told Thomas. "It's a mix of dancing and cardio. There's a class tomorrow. Want to come with me?"

"Zumba? Isn't that for ladies?"

The class I'd peeked in on was all women, but I wasn't about to tell him that. "Remember the fun we used to have dancing at weddings?"

Thomas shrugged. "Gyms aren't my thing," he said. "Don't worry about me, sweetie. I got this." What he had was a can of salted peanuts. He popped the top. End of discussion.

Fine. I went to the beginner's Zumba class by myself the next day, almost as if a little voice whispered that I'd be sorry if I didn't.

"Ready to Zumba?" the instructor shouted over a catchy Latin beat. "Five, six, arms up and kick!" I mimicked her moves. My knees cracked. My calves burned. I breathed hard. But after the first song, I got into a groove. Our empty-nest blues, our health, our parents—all my worries fell away in a rush of Zumba energy. It was like a door into a whole new part of my life.

Zumba gave me something to focus on after the boys left for college. In a month, I dropped 10 pounds. I showed off some of the moves for Thomas one Saturday night. Maybe I could entice him into doing Zumba with me. "You look great," he said. "But it's not for me."

That's when my next move came to me: prayer. All my prayers had been focused on our boys and our parents. Somehow I hadn't prayed for us. Lord, you've given me the chance to get healthy, to feel great. I want that for Thomas too. I want us to grow old together. Help me to get him moving again.

Eight months later, I was at Zumba, totally in the zone. As I kicked my left leg, I noticed a pair of men's dress shoes in the doorway. They looked familiar. I glanced up. I know those khakis, I thought. And that oxford shirt.

There was Thomas, in work clothes. Had something happened to one of our parents? I relaxed when I saw his foot tapping to the beat. Why was he here?

"Come join us!" the instructor called. Thomas shook

his head. I felt his gaze on me. Our eyes met. He gave me a slow smile. I smiled back, my cheeks flushing. Fifteen minutes later, he waved and left.

"I wish my husband looked at me like that," one of the ladies said to me.

"It was good to see you," I told Thomas later.

"I just wanted to see what Zumba was all about," he said, his tone nonchalant. I didn't push.

Thomas showed up at my next class. The following one too. Each time, he watched from the sidelines. I have to admit, his admiring gaze made me put extra zing in my moves. Sometimes I felt like I was dancing just for him.

The class after that, I looked to the doorway. No Thomas. The music started and there was a tap on my shoulder.

Thomas...in workout clothes!

I threw my arms around him. Everyone applauded.

From all that watching, Thomas knew the routines. He didn't miss a step, showing off his silky smooth moves. The ladies were impressed. Me most of all.

Back home, though, I played it cool. I didn't want to scare him off. "Thanks for coming tonight," I said. "Did you have fun?"

"I did," he admitted. "Working up a sweat helped worked off my stress. I feel great!"

"What have I been trying to tell you?" I said, laughing.

"There's something else," he said. "I love how you

move. You're really good."

This time when our eyes met, sparks flew. And they've been flying between us ever since.

We're so into Zumba now that we teach classes together. I've lost 40 pounds and Thomas has lost 55. I don't need my cholesterol medicine anymore. We take better care of our parents now that we're taking care of ourselves. God didn't just get us moving again, he got us moving even closer together. Why else would every night feel like date night?

5

The Gardenia Corsage

If only Dad could be here.

By Edith Patterson Hill,
Rockford, Illinois

My father was an astute observer of human character. Within seconds of meeting someone, he could sum up their strengths and flaws. It was always a challenge to see if any of my boyfriends could pass Dad's test. None did. Dad was always right—they didn't pass my test either. After Dad died, I wondered how I'd figure it out on my own.

That's when Jack arrived on the scene. He was different from any other guy I'd dated. He could sit for hours on the piano bench with my mother, discussing obscure composers. My brother Rick loudly announced that Jack wasn't a turkey like the other guys I'd brought home. My sister, Denise, belly-laughed with him over old Danny Kaye films. And Jack was great with my brother Chuck, who has a mental disability. One time, Chuck put his greasy hands, just dislodged from a cheeseburger, on Jack's shoulders, kissed his cheek with ketchup-covered lips and called him by the wrong name, shouting, "Ah, Jeff, I luv ya!" Jack didn't miss a beat. "I love you too, George!" Jack passed my family's test. But what about Dad's?

Then came the weekend of my mom's birthday. Jack was coming down from his home in Milwaukee to Chicago. The day he was supposed to drive, I got a call: "Don't worry," he said, "but I've been in an accident." His car had stalled; when he pulled over, another car careened into it. "I'm fine—but I need you to pick me up."

Thank God he's okay, I thought, as I drove up to Milwaukee. When I got there, we rushed to a flower shop for something for Mom. "How about gardenias?" Jack said, pointing out a beautiful white corsage.

"You never see those this time of year," I said. The florist put the corsage in a box.

The entire ride, Jack was unusually quiet. "Are you all right?" I asked. We were pulling onto my mother's street. "I've been doing a lot of thinking," he said. "I might be moving."

Moving? When was he going to tell me this? After he packed?

Then he added, "Moving in with you."

I nearly put the car on the sidewalk. "What?" I asked.

"I think we should get married," he said. He told me he'd planned his proposal for a fancy restaurant, but after the accident, he decided to do it right away. "Yes," I whispered. We both sat stunned, tears running down our cheeks, unable to speak. I'd never known such a tender moment. If only Dad were here to give his final approval.

"Oh, let's just go inside," Jack said, laughing. We got out of the car and he walked up the driveway, carrying the corsage. My mother opened the door. "Happy Birthday!" we shouted. Jack thrust the box at her. She opened it up. Suddenly, her eyes brimmed with tears. Jack and I looked at each other. "Mom, what's wrong?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping her eyes. "This is only the second gardenia corsage I've ever received. I was given one years ago, long before you kids were born."

"From who?" I asked.

"Your father," Mom said. "He gave me one right before we were engaged." My eyes locked on Jack's as I blinked away tears. Dad's test? I knew Jack had passed.

6

A House For Katherine Red Feather

I couldn't forget the headline:
"Native Americans Freeze to Death."
How could a society allow that?
How could I?

By Robert Young, Bozeman, Montana

Ten years ago, if you told me I'd give up the business I spent my life putting together to go build houses on Indian reservations instead, I'd have said you were nuts. The Seattle-based loungewear company I started with a partner was cranking out a profit. At 33, I had just married my longtime sweetheart, Anita. I wanted to slow down, have a family, savor life and the rewards of success.

Then I saw that headline.

I was in New Mexico on business and picked up a local paper called *Indian Country*. There it was on the front page, like an epitaph: "Elders Freeze to Death." How could such a thing happen here in America, the richest country in the world? I tore out the article and stuck it in my pocket.

That night in my hotel room, meetings done, I read the story again. It seemed so tragic. Somebody—the government, the tribal council—would no doubt do something to make sure it did not happen again. Still, I tucked the clipping into my briefcase instead of throwing it away. Why, I had no idea.

Two weeks later, another business trip. Another headline staring at me from the local paper. "Taos Woman Starts Adopt-A-Grandparent Program for Aging Native Americans." According to the article, on reservations across the country, thousands of elderly Native Americans struggled not just to make ends meet but simply to stay alive. At the end of the piece there was a number for people interested in volunteering to call. I didn't stop to think. I just picked up the phone and dialed.

Soon I was matched with a "grandparent"—Katherine

Red Feather, of South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation. I dropped her a note introducing myself. "I am 78 years old," Katherine wrote back, "and blessed with thirteen children and seven grandchildren. I am so happy to learn I now have another grandchild! Do you have a wife and children of your own? I hope so, as they are one of the most wonderful gifts the Great Spirit can give a person in this life."

I told her about Anita, and how she was indeed a godsend. Then I asked Katherine if there was anything I could send her. "Yes," she wrote. "If it's not too much trouble, I would very much appreciate a bottle of shampoo and some aspirin. Thank you for your generosity, Grandson."

Grandson...Katherine was really taking this program seriously. But shampoo? Aspirin? Why wouldn't she have such basic items? I decided to visit the reservation after my next business trip and look in on Katherine.

;Pine Ridge Reservation encompasses the two poorest counties in the United States. So the letter from the Adopt-A-Grandparent program had informed me. But I was not prepared for the reality of that poverty. Rutted dirt roads, dilapidated shacks, rusted-out automobiles with entire families living in them…. The dwellings I passed wouldn't keep a person warm on a chill fall night like this. In the Dakota winter, temperatures sometimes plunged to 60 degrees below zero. How could people freeze to death on a reservation? The answer was right before my eyes.

Katherine's "house" was a small, busted-up trailer pushed against the body of an old school bus. The trailer door opened and a delicate-looking woman wearing slacks and a simple patterned sweater emerged.

"Grandson! Come in out of the cold."

The trailer was dark and barely big enough to turn around in, but the three people sitting by the wood stove stood when Katherine led me inside. "This is Robert," she announced. "My new grandson. Robert, these are my children. They are your family now too."

Katherine must have seen my confusion. "The Great Spirit has chosen you to be a part of my life," she told me. "We are one family in his eyes." We sat down to a simple meal of white bread and beans heated on a propane stove.

There was no running water, so Katherine needed to carry it from a well out back. It was next to an outhouse with a black flag flying overhead. "To scare away the rattlesnakes," she explained. "They think it's a hawk." Katherine took such pains to make me feel at home that it was only at the end of my visit two days later that I could bring myself to ask her, "Isn't it hard for you to have to fetch wood and water every day?"

Katherine took my hands in hers. "I know how my life must look to you, Grandson, but all of us here live this way. I'm no different than anyone else."

I couldn't stop thinking about Katherine once I got home to Seattle. The days grew shorter and colder. I looked out the window of my cozy apartment and imagined my new grandmother in that tiny trailer,

huddled over her smoky little stove.

"She needs to be in a place that will keep her warm," I told Anita one night. "A place where the wind doesn't blow through the chinks in the walls. Katherine needs a real house."

A real house. The moment those words left my lips, I knew what I had to do. At the end of that summer I took two weeks off and went back to Pine Ridge. Anita and a handful of friends came with me. We were going to build Katherine a house. None of us had built so much as a doghouse before, but I figured that with a simple floor plan and plenty of enthusiasm, we could get the job done.

Word got around the reservation. Dozens of Katherine's neighbors and family members pitched in. Toward the end we worked round the clock, my car headlights trained on the site. Finally the last nail was driven. Katherine's tribal chairman said a prayer of thanks, and there was a big celebration. It was the first time Katherine had all her relatives together since the Red Feather clan had been divided and made to live on two different reservations years back. She welcomed them all into her house, her eyes brimming with tears of joy.

Anita squeezed my hand, and I knew what we had done here was bigger than anything I could ever hope to achieve with my business. At last I understood what Katherine meant about all of us being one family.

Back in Seattle, I tried to concentrate on my work. Katherine would be safe and warm this winter. But

what about all the neighbors who'd pitched in to build Katherine's house, only to go home to ramshackle trailers? America has about two million tribal members, and some 300,000 of them are without proper homes. What about all those people?

Building frame houses like we had done for Katherine was impossible. Too expensive and labor-intensive. I had to come up with a design that was warm, inexpensive and easy to build. A little research and I came across straw bale houses. Built from blocks of straw covered with stucco, they're ideal for reservations. The straw is plentiful on the Great Plains, and provides extremely effective insulation.

Getting straw bale houses built on a large scale, though, would take organization. A huge investment of time and energy. Time and energy I wouldn't have if I kept my day job. I sold my half of the business and started a new venture, the Red Feather Development Group, to help Native Americans get decent housing. Eventually Anita and I moved to Bozeman, Montana, in the vicinity of half a dozen reservations.

To think, none of this would have happened if I hadn't seen those headlines 10 years ago. Even then I'd known someone would look after elders like my grandmother Katherine. I just never expected that person to be me. But that is how the Great Spirit works.

7

Rainbow To The Rescue

Arthritis had really slowed me down. Then the right medicine came along.

By Mary Hansford, Watkinsville, Georgia

"Donald, can you get that?" Where was my husband when I needed him? I'd just gotten settled in my recliner and now the phone was ringing. I braced my feet against the floor and gingerly pushed against the armrests to stand. Spasms knifed through my back.

Lord have mercy. This arthritis was going to be the death of me yet. Years of working as a secretary—all that sitting—had done a number on my lower back. I'd taken to sleeping in my recliner. It was more comfortable than my bed. Medication had helped dull the pain. But then I'd started having intestinal issues. "It may be a side effect from the pills," my doctor told me. "Try going without them. For now, your best option is to keep moving, even if it hurts. It'll help in the long run."

Keep moving? It hurt like the dickens just to stand up! It was so much easier not to get out of the recliner at all. I had everything I needed with me—a good mystery novel, my devotions, my puzzle books, the TV remote. Lately my hands had been aching too. The weather—it was pouring—wasn't helping any.

I shuffled to the phone. "Hi, Mom." It was my daughter, Jill. "I found a darling little kitten behind the grocery. It looks just like the cat we had growing up and, well, I couldn't leave it out in the rain. I thought it would be perfect for you."

"You know I can't take care of a cat," I said. "Don't you bring it here." Jill had two dogs. She wouldn't be able to keep the kitten, but I wasn't going to let her guilt me into this.

"Okay," she said. "I'll be here at work for a few more hours if you change your mind."

I hung up and made my way back to the recliner. Donald—now he shows up!—was watching TV.

"Of all the crazy ideas," I muttered. "What would make Jill think I'd want a kitten?"

Donald was glued to the TV. I eased myself into the chair and picked up my puzzle book. But all I could think about was that kitten. Drenched. Hungry. Abandoned. I sighed. Donald looked over at me.

"Mary, if you want the kitten, then get it," he said.

"I don't want it, but...oh, all right."

Jill sent our granddaughter over with the kitten and a bag of litter. It was a girl, a tan tabby with black stripes. A cute little thing, I had to admit. So tiny. I didn't hold her too close, for fear of fleas. I stroked her fur, still wet from the rain.

"I'll call you Rainbow," I said.

I opened a can of tuna and filled a bowl with water. I stooped to put them on the floor, holding on to the counter for balance. Rainbow sniffed at the tuna, then walked away with a swish of her tail. "You're a picky little thing, aren't you?" I said.

A second later she leaped onto the curtains and scampered up. "Rainbow, no!" I shouted. I cupped her in my hands and sat down to inspect her fur for fleas. Rainbow nestled against me and purred.

"Looks like you've made a friend," Donald said.

I just shook my head.

The next day I bought some cat food, flea shampoo and two catnip mice. Rainbow went crazy over those mice, batting them. She got them stuck under the china cabinet or the couch. Then she'd meow until I retrieved them for her, using a stick to slide the mice out. And fetch. That, she loved more than anything. She was like a dog. She'd bring the mice to me and demand that I toss them for her. Over and over and over. She couldn't feel the shooting pains in my back. What did she care?

I had to feed Rainbow twice a day, make sure her water bowl was filled. Every couple of days I changed her litter, carrying the pan to the woods near our house and dumping it. Donald helped some but mostly he left it to me. "You're the one who wanted the kitten," he said.

Rainbow constantly got into things. She knocked over my aloe plant, scattering dirt all over the carpet. I, of course, had to clean it up. She broke two vases that I'd had for years. My back and my hands ached with all the ups and downs—literally!—of trying to keep up with rambunctious Rainbow. But what was I supposed to do? I couldn't bear the thought of taking her to the pound.

One night, after dinner, I collapsed into my recliner, ready to go to sleep. Rainbow hopped into my lap. "You're gonna be the death of me," I said. I hadn't had even 10 minutes to sit down that day. I was going to pay for it in the morning.

The next thing I knew, there was something wet on my cheek. Rainbow, licking me, wanting breakfast. "Okay, I get the message," I said. I braced my feet against the floor and pushed against the armrests to lever myself up. I winced reflexively, expecting pain to radiate from my

hands through my body. But it didn't. Just a little soreness was all. I felt better than I had since I stopped taking the medication. Maybe better than I had in years!

I don't know who made it into the kitchen faster, me or Rainbow. I bent down and picked up her bowl—without having to hold on to the counter. She looked up at me and mewed, as if to say, "See? I'm just what the doctor ordered!"

Three years later, Rainbow still keeps me moving and keeps my arthritis at bay. I didn't want a cat. But Someone knew I needed one.

8

Second Love

We were young when
we got married…the first time

By Michelle Stewart,
Claremont, North Carolina

Any minute now Michael would be over to pick up the boys for their weekend with him. I gave the house a once-over. Not bad. I'd dusted every room. It smelled lemony-fresh. Hardly any dirty dishes in the sink. Laundry done. What will Michael think of all this? I thought, with a chuckle. He'd probably wonder where I'd gotten the money to hire a housekeeper.

Our marriage had been over for seven years. We were civil to each other, but that was mainly for the sake of our sons, Johnny and Cameron. I had no regrets, though. Michael hadn't known what he was getting into when he married me. He deserved better. I saw that now. And though I'd changed a lot since the divorce, especially recently, I was content to be on good terms with my ex. I certainly wasn't foolish enough to think things could ever go back to the way they'd once been, when we were two kids crazy in love.

I met Michael in high school. I was hanging out with my sister and some other kids when Michael drove by in a cool car. My sister dared me to call out to him, and I was never one to back down from a dare. Our first date wasn't long after that.

We fell in love hard and fast. That love had been real; It was so intense. All these years later, I could still recall that feeling. We married in 1991. A big, beautiful wedding, like I'd always fantasized about, and a real blowout of a party afterward. I didn't want it to stop.

It wasn't long till I realized the party was over. Married life was a different story. I liked going out, seeing and being seen. I mean, I was still young! Michael? He came home from work, had a bite to eat, watched some TV and crawled

into bed early. Way too early for a night owl like me. Then our sons came along, two years apart, and another realization: I wasn't made to be a stay-at-home mom.

I told Michael I needed to get out in the world. I got a job at a bank. I made a bunch of new friends and started going out after work.

Well, Michael wasn't very happy. One night we had a huge fight over my partying. Michael wasn't one to lose his temper, but that time he let it rip. We got into a shouting match that ended with him yelling, "You're just jealous of how I grew up! You're afraid of marriage!"

That stopped me cold. I thought about Michael's family—kind, supportive, loving, always there. After my dad died when I was nine, I'd never really felt stability at home, even though Mom eventually remarried. Michael was everything I wasn't. Steady, low-key, dependable. Was that what drove me toward him in the first place? "Maybe I am jealous, Michael. Maybe I am afraid. But I'm still going out." And out the door I went.

We talked less and less, fought more and more, and slept in separate bedrooms. One day Michael had to go out of town on business. He would be gone for several days. I felt so free, like that daredevil teenager I'd once been. Free to go out into the night, where anything was possible. I could get a sitter and not have to come home to Michael's angry, disappointed face. He called me the next day from his hotel and made small talk. Just be quiet already, was all I could think. "I miss you, Michelle," he said.

Something snapped. An awful feeling came over me. It had been simmering ever since Michael accused me of being afraid of marriage. "I don't care, Michael," I told him. "And I don't care about you. I want a divorce."

Michael drove right home. But he couldn't talk me out of it. Anything was better than this—for Michael, for the boys, for me. A couple of weeks later we sat on stools in the kitchen. Michael made a list: "hers" and "his." We talked about everything we had and he divided it all equally. Organized and responsible to the end. That was my Michael. I felt a twinge of shame, but I pushed it down. I was determined to do this with no regrets. I moved out in 1996 and the divorce was finalized a year later. We shared custody of the boys, and when we saw each other we were civilized.

I worked hard, was a good mom to the boys and kept up my social life even after those nights out started feeling stale and lonely. It was, after all, what I'd wanted all along. Wasn't it? So where was the fun?

A few years after the divorce Johnny and Cameron announced that their dad had started taking them to church when he had them on Sundays. "We like it, Mom," Johnny said. I guess it made sense; Michael had grown up going to church. I went with him a few times, but didn't like it. The people all seemed like goody-two-shoes. I told Michael I wasn't going back. So we didn't.

One day I struck up a conversation with a couple of coworkers. They weren't in my party crowd, but they

always seemed pretty upbeat. I asked what they did for fun.

"I guess the most exciting thing in my life is my church," one said. "It really changed my life." "Me too," the other girl said.

Sorry I asked, I thought, groaning inside. But the next Sunday morning I woke up with an overwhelming desire to go to church. I drank a cup of coffee, thinking the crazy urge would go away. Come on, you're still young. Too young for a midlife crisis. Yet the urge stayed, as persistent as any urge I ever had to go out into the night.

I flipped open the phone book and found the nearest church. Then I got the boys up—sleepy, a little confused, but very much willing to go along with this.

We walked into the sanctuary and part of me wanted to run back to the car. But I grabbed my sons' hands and found us a spot in the back row. *Close enough,* I thought. *I don't even belong here anyway.*

Oh, but I did belong. That's what I discovered. The preacher talked about how Christ made a sacrifice.

For every single person on earth, not just for the people in that sanctuary. And, by the way, those people turned out to be pretty nice, when I gave them a chance. The boys and I kept coming back. I even tried reading the Bible in the evenings instead of going out.

Before bed one night I had another irresistible impulse: Pray for Michael. Pray for him to find the good,

godly wife he deserved. A fine, churchgoing woman who took good care of her kids. Every night after that I prayed the same thing. It made me feel like I could finally close that chapter of my life with a clean conscience. There's always that one raw nerve that even a divorce decree cannot deaden. Now I felt at peace.

The bell rang and snapped me out of my reverie. Michael was here for Johnny and Cameron. "There's something I need to talk to you about," he said.

I ushered him in and—just as I'd predicted—he looked shocked at the gleaming kitchen floor and the fresh zinnias on the table. I poured us both glasses of fresh iced tea and cut up a lemon for his.

We sat and stared at each other for a long time. What's up, Michael? I thought. Finally he spoke. "I don't know how to say this. I've been praying a lot lately. For a godly wife. Then, well…I talked to my pastor—"

"Oh, Michael! I've been praying for the same thing for you!"

"But listen to what my pastor said," he continued. "He thought I should ask you if you'll, if you'd consider counseling. Us. Maybe we could…reconcile."

The last word was spoken so softly I almost missed it. But for some reason the words shot out of my mouth: "Okay. Sure."

That first night I was terrified. Michael's pastor was a huge man, towering over me. I sat in his office, unable to say a word. "I'm not here to force you two to do anything," he said. "I just want you to give it a try, see how things go." Michael and I both had scars from

our marriage. Talking with a wise and non-judgmental counselor helped. "Are you two open to dating again?" he asked us. "By which I mean a non-intimate, non-physical relationship. Not even holding hands."

We agreed.

Those "dates" took place over six months. Movies, dinners, shopping. I felt like a teenager all over again, thrilled to be out with such a nice guy. Michael was still steady, low-key and dependable. The same man I'd fallen in love with all those years ago. I felt myself falling for him all over again. But what did he feel for me?

One of the very last things we were told in our counseling sessions was to write letters of gratitude to each other. We had to sit down and list all the things we were grateful for in the other person. And no negatives. We were to read them out loud, then pray together. That's what happened on our very next date.

Michael came by my place. I peeked out the window and saw him with letter in hand. He came inside.

The boys were sitting on the sofa. They would be part of this too. Michael plopped down on the floor. So did I.

"I'll start," I said. I scrunched my feet up under me. "Dear Michael," I began. But I didn't have to read the letter; I'd already memorized it. "I'm so thankful for you. You're doing an excellent job raising our sons. I don't know how long I have on this earth. But however long, I want to spend it with you."

Michael read me his letter. "Dear Michelle," it started. "You're the only woman I've ever loved…" It went on from there, but honestly it didn't have to. Afterward, he took my hands. First time in seven years. Michael's grip was firm and true. "Lord, we want to do what you want us to," he prayed. "Just help us understand what that is."

Right then I felt two more pairs of hands on top of ours. I opened my eyes and there were Johnny and Cameron, who had a bit of peanut butter on his hand. To this day, the smell of peanut butter reminds me of that moment.

"Michelle, will you marry me? Again?" Michael asked. "Yes," I said. "Yes." But this time I knew what I was getting into. Whatever I needed wasn't out there somewhere in the night waiting for me to find it. No, it had been here all along, with Michael and our sons. It just took time for God to change me into the woman—and wife—I was meant to be.

9

A Dog Named Cheeseburger

How a homeless man and his faithful companion helped me beat the spiritual blues

By Marion Bond West, Watkinsville, Georgia

I couldn't put my finger on why, exactly, but I had been feeling far away from God lately, like he wasn't really hearing me. A case of the spiritual blues, I guess. The sweltering heat didn't help—August here in Georgia can get pretty unbearable. It was 100 degrees today, and really sticky. I turned up the air conditioner in my car full blast, ready to head home from my errands. That's when I saw the dog.

He lay on top of a lumpy Army-green duffel bag right on the walk outside Applebee's restaurant. No shade. Sleeping, or at least I hoped he was. Why, he could be dead in this heat! I pulled in and found a parking spot. Then I hurried over to the dog. I bent down. "Hi, fella. You thirsty?"

I love dogs and they like me. But this one—he was medium-sized, black, graying around the muzzle—opened one eye, then shut it and turned his head away from me. Deliberately. His tail didn't budge.

He had a collar, and by the way he was guarding the duffel bag, I figured he was waiting for his owner, who was no doubt sitting inside the restaurant in air-conditioned comfort!

I stormed into Applebee's, ready to do battle. Right away, I spotted the owner. He sat alone at the counter, a tall glass of iced tea in front of him. Longish wavy blond hair and a goatee. Thin, like he didn't always get enough to eat. He was wearing jeans that had seen better days, but they were clean, though his hands had what could have been faint paint stains. He seemed to sense me coming and turned on the stool to face me.

"That your dog?" I demanded.

"Yes, ma'am, he is."

"He's in the sun and has no water. I imagine he's hungry too." I must have raised my voice because some people stared at me. "Dogs like me, but he wouldn't even open both eyes when I spoke to him."

The man broke into a slow, easy grin. He slid off the stool. "That's because he hasn't been properly introduced to you. Come on. I'll do the honors."

Introduced? I followed him outside.

He squatted down next to the dog, who sat up and fastened his eyes onto his owner. His tail came alive.

"Ma'am, I don't know your name."

"Marion." I bent close to them.

"Marion, I'd like you to meet Cheeseburger. Cheeseburger, this nice lady is Marion." The dog looked right into my eyes and offered a paw.

I took it. "Hi, Cheeseburger," I said.

He licked my hand and his tail shifted into high gear. "And I'm Johnny," the man said.

"Johnny, I'm afraid he's thirsty."

"Oh, he's okay," he said. "This spot was shady when I left him here just a few minutes ago." Johnny picked up his duffel bag. "We've been together for nine years. See,

his collar has my cell phone number on it, and he's been vaccinated." Johnny moved his bag beneath a Japanese maple tree and Cheeseburger settled down there beside it, in the shade.

"How far do you live from here?" I asked.

"Not far," he said. "Back in those woods across the street. We have a good tent."

"But couldn't you go to a shelter?"

"They won't take Cheeseburger, and I don't go anywhere without him," he said. Each time he said Cheeseburger, the dog's tail flopped back and forth joyfully.

"Johnny, I'm not going to be able to drive off without getting Cheeseburger some food and water," I said. "It's not you. It's just, well, I have this thing about dogs…"

"Okeydoke, if it'll make you happy," he said. "I'm going back in now and finish up my drink. It was nice to meet you, Marion."

I zipped into Walgreen's and came back with a bowl, a big bottle of cold water, a small sack of dog food and a bone. Then I went in and fetched Johnny from the restaurant. "I thought you should be with me when I give the food and water to Cheeseburger," I told him.

"Okeydoke," he said. Cheeseburger stood as Johnny and I approached. I set the food down and he nibbled at it— mostly to be polite, I think. He did lap up quite a lot of water.

"I guess he was thirsty," Johnny said. "Thanks. I'm not

going to start giving him bottled water, but don't worry, I take really good care of him."

"And who takes care of you?" The words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them, and I knew they sounded sharper than I intended.

Johnny didn't seem to mind. "Here's the way it works," he said gently. "Every morning me and Cheeseburger step out of our tent and look up at the sky. And I say, 'Lord, we belong to you. We trust you. Take care of us another day. Thank you.' And then at night when we lie down to sleep, I look out at the stars and say, 'We still trust you, God.'" He smiled again—that slow, easy grin.

I smiled back. There was just something about his eyes I liked. "Maybe I'll see you and Cheeseburger again some-time," I said.

"Okeydoke. Me and Cheeseburger come here or head over to McDonald's most mornings. Then we walk down toward the post office. I'm a painter by trade, hoping to find some work."

There was a genuine peace about Johnny, even in the face of my unkind accusations.

I fished around in my purse and found a twenty. "Could I give you this?" I asked hesitantly, not certain how to go about it.

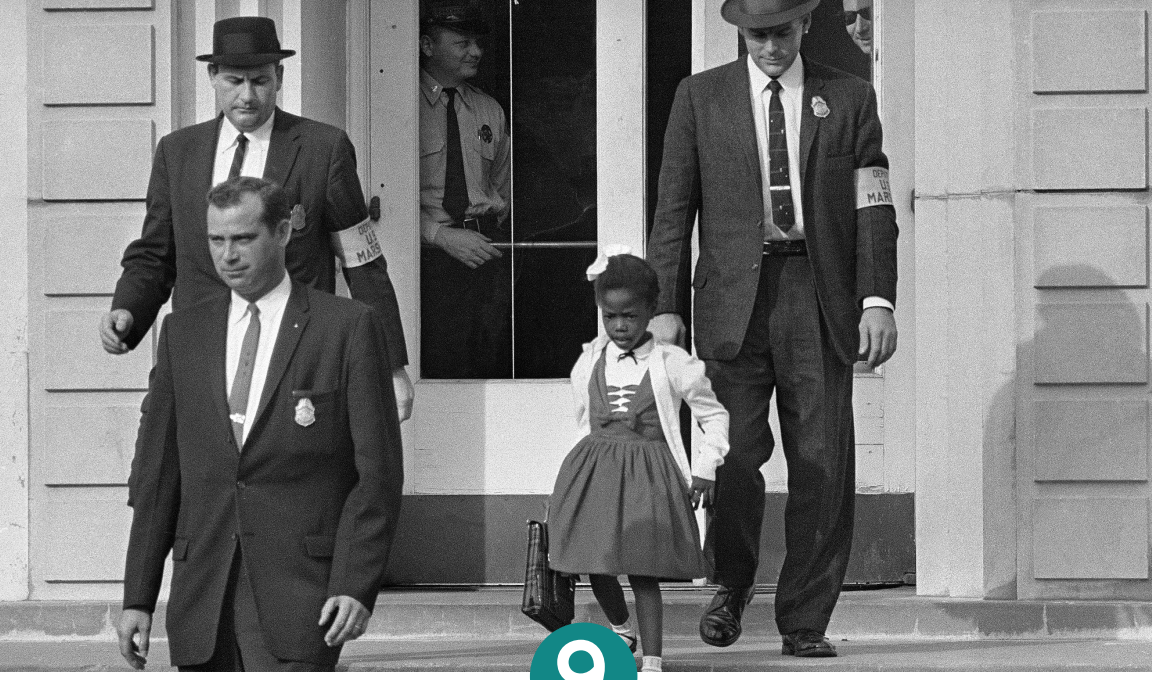
He didn't reach for the bill, just kept looking at me with that contented expression. "You don't have to. We're doing pretty good."

"I'd like to. Very much."

"Then I thank you, Marion. God bless you."

I got back in my car and turned on the air conditioner. At the red light, I leaned forward and gazed up into the blue cloudless sky. "Lord, I belong to you. I trust you. Take care of me today. Thank you."

The light changed. I pulled out onto the highway, feeling refreshed, not so much by the cool air but by an unmistakable peace, the same peace I had seen in Johnny's eyes.



9

The Education Of Ruby Dell

She was six years old in 1960 when the nation watched her lead us into a new era

By Ruby Bridges Hall, New Orleans, Louisiana

In November 1960, I walked up the steps of William Frantz Public School in New Orleans, the first black student at the formerly all-white elementary school. Today I am married and a mother of four. Many years have passed since that historic day and today. Those years have brought incredible changes in our country, forged in the crucible of the civil rights movement and the battle to end segregation. Years that changed me as well.

I was born in Mississippi in 1954, the oldest child of Abon and Lucille Bridges. That year the United States Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision ordering the integration of public schools. Not that I knew anything about school at the time. What I knew and loved was growing up on the farm my paternal grandparents sharecropped.

It was a very hard life, though, and my parents heard there were better opportunities in the city. We moved to New Orleans, where my father found work as a service station attendant, and my mother took night jobs to help support our growing family.

As I got a bit older, my job was to keep an eye on my younger brothers and sister, which wasn't too difficult. Except for church and the long walk to the all-black school where I went to kindergarten, our world didn't extend beyond our block. But that was about to change.

Under federal court order, New Orleans public schools were finally forced to desegregate. In the spring of 1960 I took a test, along with other black kindergartners in the city, to see who would go to an integrated school come September. That summer my parents learned I'd passed

the test and had been selected to start first grade at William Frantz Public School.

My mother was all for it. My father wasn't. "We're just asking for trouble," he said. He thought things weren't going to change, and blacks and whites would never be treated as equals. Mama thought I would have an opportunity to get a better education if I went to the new school—and a chance for a good job later in life. My parents argued about it and prayed about it. Eventually my mother convinced my father that despite the risks, they had to take this step forward, not just for their own children, but for all black children.

A federal judge decreed that Monday, November 14, 1960, would be the day black children in New Orleans would go to school with white children. There were six of us chosen to integrate the city's public school system. Two decided to stay in their old schools. The other three were assigned to McDonogh. I would be going to William Frantz alone.

The morning of November 14 federal marshals drove my mother and me the five blocks to William Frantz.

In the car one of the men explained that when we arrived at the school, two marshals would walk in front of us and two behind, so we would be protected on both sides.

That reminded me of what Mama had taught us about God, that he is always there to protect us. "Ruby Nell," she said as we pulled up to my new school, "don't be afraid. There might be some people upset outside, but I'll

be with you."

Sure enough, people shouted and shook their fists when we got out of the car, but to me it wasn't any noisier than Mardi Gras. I held my mother's hand and followed the marshals through the crowd, up the steps into the school.

We spent that whole day sitting in the principal's office. Through the window, I saw white parents pointing at us and yelling, then rushing their children out of the school. In the uproar I never got to my classroom.

The marshals drove my mother and me to school again the next day. I tried not to pay attention to the mob. Someone had a black doll in a coffin, and that scared me more than the nasty things people screamed at us.

A young white woman met us inside the building. She smiled at me. "Good morning, Ruby Nell," she said, just like Mama except with what I later learned was a Boston accent. "Welcome. I'm your new teacher, Mrs. Henry." She seemed nice, but I wasn't sure how to feel about her. I'd never been taught by a white teacher before.

Mrs. Henry took my mother and me to her second-floor classroom. All the desks were empty, and she asked me to choose a seat. I picked one up front, and Mrs. Henry started teaching me the letters of the alphabet.

The next morning my mother told me she couldn't go to school with me. She had to work and look after my brothers and sister. "The marshals will take good care of you, Ruby Nell," Mama assured me. "Remember, if you get afraid, say your prayers. You can pray to God anytime,

anywhere. He will always hear you."

That was how I started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at me didn't seem to touch me. Prayer was my protection. After walking up the steps past the angry crowd, though, I was glad to see Mrs. Henry. She gave me a hug, and she sat right by my side instead of at the big teacher's desk in the front of the room. Day after day, it was just Mrs. Henry and me, working on my lessons.

Militant segregationists, as the news called them, took to the streets in protest, and riots erupted all over the city. My parents shielded me as best they could, but I knew problems had come to our family because I was going to the white school. My father was fired from his job. The white owners of a grocery store told us not to shop there anymore. Even my grandparents in Mississippi suffered. The owner of the land they'd sharecropped for 25 years said everyone knew it was their granddaughter causing trouble in New Orleans, and asked them to move.

At the same time, there were a few white families who braved the protests and kept their children in school. But they weren't in my class, so I didn't see them. People from around the country who'd heard about me on the news sent letters and donations. A neighbor gave my father a job painting houses. Other folks babysat for us, watched our house to keep away troublemakers, even walked behind the marshals' car on my way to school. My family couldn't have made it without our friends' and neighbors' help.

And me, I couldn't have gotten through that year without Mrs. Henry. Sitting next to her in our classroom, just the two of us, I was able to forget the world outside. She made school fun. We did everything together. I couldn't go out in the schoolyard for recess, so right in that room we played games and for exercise did jumping jacks to music.

I remember her explaining integration to me and why some people were against it. "It's not easy for people to change once they've gotten used to living a certain way," Mrs. Henry said. "Some of them don't know any better, and they're afraid. But not everyone is like that."

Even though I was only six, I understood what she meant. The people I passed every morning as I walked up the school steps were full of hate. They were white, yet so was my teacher, who couldn't have been more different from them. She was one of the most loving people I'd ever known. The greatest lesson I learned that year in Mrs. Henry's class was the lesson Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to teach us all. Never judge people by the color of their skin. God makes each of us unique in ways that go much deeper.

From her window, Mrs. Henry always watched me walk into the school. One morning when I got to our classroom, she said she'd been surprised to see me talk to the mob. "I saw your lips moving," she said, "but I couldn't make out what you were saying to those people."

"I wasn't talking to them," I told her. "I was praying for

them." Usually I prayed in the car on the way to school, but that day I'd forgotten until I was in the crowd. Please be with me, I'd asked God, and be with those people too. Forgive them because they don't know what they're doing.

"Ruby Nell, you are truly someone special," Mrs. Henry whispered, giving me an even bigger hug than usual. She had this look on her face like my mother would get when I'd done something to make her proud.

Another person who helped me was Dr. Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist who happened to see me being escorted through the crowd outside my school. Dr. Coles volunteered to work with me through this ordeal. Soon he was coming to our house every week to talk with me about how I was doing in school.

Really, I was doing fine. I was always with people who wanted the best for me: my family, friends, and in school, my teacher. The more time I spent with Mrs. Henry, the more I grew to love her. I wanted to be like her. Soon, without realizing it, I had picked up her Boston accent.

Neither of us missed a single day of school that year. The crowd outside dwindled to just a few protestors, and before I knew it, it was June. For me, first grade ended much more quietly than it began. I said good-bye to Mrs. Henry, fully expecting her to be my teacher again in the fall.

But when I went back to school in September, everything was different. There were no marshals, no protestors. There were other kids—even some other black students—in my second-grade class. And Mrs. Henry was gone. I was devastated. Years later I found out she hadn't been invited to return to William Frantz, and she and her husband had moved back to Boston. It was almost as if

that first year of school integration had never happened. No one talked about it. Everyone seemed to have put that difficult time behind them.

After a while, I did the same. I finished grade school at William Frantz and graduated from an integrated high school. I went to business school and studied travel and tourism. For 15 years I worked as a travel agent. Eventually I married and threw myself into raising four sons in the city I grew up in.

I didn't give much thought to the events of my childhood until my youngest brother died in 1993. For a time, I looked after his daughters. They happened to be students at William Frantz, and when I took them there every morning, I was literally walking into my past, into the same school that I'd helped to integrate years earlier.

I began volunteering three days a week at William Frantz, working as a liaison between parents and the school. Still, I had the feeling God had brought me back in touch with my past for something beyond that. I struggled with it for a while. Finally I got on my knees and prayed, *Lord, whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing, you'll have to show me.*

Not long after that, a reporter called the school. The psychiatrist Dr. Robert Coles had written a children's book, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*; now everyone wanted to know what had happened to the little girl in the famous Norman Rockwell painting that had appeared in *Look* magazine. No one expected to find me back at William Frantz.

Dr. Coles had often written about me, but this was the first book intended for children. To me it was God's way of keeping my story alive until I was able to tell it myself.

One of the best parts of the story is that I was finally reunited with my favorite teacher, Barbara Henry. She reached me through the publisher of Dr. Coles's book, and in 1995 we saw each other in person for the first time in more than three decades. The second she laid eyes on me, she cried, "Ruby Nell!" No one had called me that since I was a little girl. Then we were hugging each other, just like we used to every morning in first grade.

I didn't realize how much I had picked up from Mrs. Henry (I still have a hard time calling her anything else)— not only her Boston accent, but her mannerisms too, such as how she tilts her head and gestures with her hands when she talks. She showed me a tiny, dog-eared photo of me with my front teeth missing that she'd kept all these years. "I used to look at that picture and wonder how you were," she said. "I told my kids about you so often you were like a part of my family."

We have stayed a part of each other's lives ever since. It turns out that because of what I went through on the front lines of the battle for school integration, people recognize my name and are eager to hear what I have to say about racism and education today. I speak to groups around the country, and when I visit schools, Mrs. Henry often comes with me. We tell kids our story and talk about the lessons of the past and how we can still learn from them today— especially that every child is a unique human being fashioned by God.

I tell them another important thing I learned in first

grade is that schools can be a place to bring people together—kids of all races and backgrounds. That's the work I focus on now, connecting our children through their schools. It's my way of continuing what God set in motion all those years ago when he led me up the steps of William Frantz Public School and into a new world with my teacher, Mrs. Henry—a world that under his protection has reached far beyond just the two of us in that classroom.

ABOUT GUIDEPOSTS

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