

Ambassador

[After I wrote this story, I passed it on to a dear friend, Ann, a hospice social worker and colon cancer survivor. She loved the story and gave me some pertinent advice to make it better. Her sage advice improved the version you are now reading. Sadly, six years later, Annie lost her battle with her recurring cancer. I still miss her deeply and I dedicate this story to her memory. – T. H. Pine]

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Milt lay in his hospital bed, staring at the ceiling. He had just had his medication, so the pain had subsided for the moment. It had gotten to the point where he could barely wait for the appointed time to come, yet he tried to tough it out anyway. He knew he could have the painkillers any time he wished—they didn't deny terminally ill patients these days—but they made him feel so groggy and out-of-it he resisted as long as he could ... bad enough he had become addicted to them. Oh, the doctor and the "pain control experts" tried to dance around that word, using terms like "pain management" and "increased levels of medication," but Milt knew he craved his pain meds as surely as any heroin addict. That thought didn't disturb him at all; his terminal cancer would end his dependence soon enough and he certainly desired as pain-free a death as possible.

In a few moments, the narcotic would really take hold, so Milt thought of Jane while he remained lucid. Poor Jane. She suffered so much these days. Oh, she never came right out and told him, it just wasn't her style. Yet, Milt knew his wife well enough to read the signs. She did all she could to look cheerful around him, but he could see the facade fraying around the edges. He would have to talk to her soon. He wanted Jane to feel free to cry when around him, acknowledge his imminent death. This hellish disease had taken away his health; now it began to rob him of his wife's companionship. Worse than the pain, he missed the closeness he once knew with "Plain Jane."

"Plain Jane." It had become a pet name he used to tease her with when they first courted. Not what you'd call drop dead gorgeous, she had a durable beauty that wore well over their nineteen years of marriage. Too Milt's eyes, she stood as the most beautiful woman in the world. As much as she kidded him about his roving eye, he could honestly say that the thought of cheating on her never really had a chance to take root. She had always been his once-and-for-all wife and that was that. Dear God! How he missed what they had together before he got sick. Jane now seemed apart from him somehow. She hadn't been deliberately aloof, nothing like that, but a little distance *had* occurred. He would have to talk to her ... *about ... that ... as ... s-s-s-o-o-o-o-o-n-n-n* *asssss*

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Milt's eyes popped open. The slanting sun coming through the mini-blinds told him that he had been out for hours. He looked at the clock radio on the nightstand. Four o'clock. In an hour-and-a-half, Bill would come to see him, yet Milt viewed those visits with mixed feelings these days.

He and Bill, Jane and Alice had been close friends ever since they had met on moving day. Bill and Alice had bought the house across the street and moved in on the same day he and Jane had moved into theirs. From that day forward, the two couples had become fast friends. They were in each other's homes all the time and often took vacations together. Even their kids were friends. Both couples had three. Bill and Alice had two boys and one girl—Milt and Jane had two girls and one boy—almost at the same time. Then, something had changed to strain that friendship almost to the breaking point.

Jesus had met their wives.



Five years back, Jane and Alice had been invited to a church social by one of the other neighborhood women and had both found Jesus. They came back all red-eyed from crying, with beatific smiles on their faces. Jane told Milt, and Alice told Bill, about what had happened to them. The two women bubbled over with joy and enthusiasm, and the two men viewed all this happiness with more than a little skepticism and suspicion.

For a time, the four friends aligned into separate camps—Jane and Alice in one, Milt and Bill in the other—each camp equally resolute in its sense of “mission.” Jane and Alice would try to talk to their husbands about their newfound faith, striving to maintain patience and be the best wives they knew how to be. Milt and Bill would weather these onslaughts and retreat to their trenches, consoling each other in their united front of unbelief. They would play a waiting game, steadfast friends until the end, while the two women got over this newest craze. Things like this had happened before—with clothes, with aerobics, with health diets—and it would be just a matter of time until things sorted themselves out again.

Then Milt went over to the enemy camp.



When he thought about it, Milt had to admit that he and Bill had begun to soften. They could see a real change in their wives—not a huge thing really—for Jane and Alice were good women, but they became even better. They seemed to have a new slant on life—more confidence, more strength. If they once had patience, now they had more. If they had love, it increased. If they once had an optimistic view of life, now they became absolutely sure of it. Their lives had taken a definite upward turn. Jane and Alice still existed as flesh-and-blood women, yet they now had become *more* than mere women somehow. It seemed to Milt and Bill that something, or *someone*, had taken over their very beings—not detracting, but *enhancing*.

It became a real puzzle to the two men.



Milt found himself wanting to know more. Guiltily, he kept this from Bill. When with his friend, he maintained his stance, yet, when alone with Jane, he began asking questions. The first time he did this he could see a light come on in Jane’s eyes. He could see her eagerness, akin to a predator that had scented prey. *It’s as I suspected*, he thought, *Jane’s been waiting for the opportunity to pounce*. Then a strange thing happened. He could see something deep inside Jane contain that sharp eagerness. She *settled* and a peace seemed to well up from within. Calmly, she opened her Bible and answered his questions. More than her answers, what he had seen happen to Jane shook Milt’s resolve to its core.

He felt the tide change and his defeat loomed before him.



Secretly, Milt had wanted to go to the church Jane and Alice attended, but he didn’t want to make Bill angry. He broached the subject once and got a definite negative response. Caught in a quandary, he knew Jane had found what she called a “personal relationship with Jesus” there, yet to go there would abrogate his trust with Bill. Not knowing how to solve this dilemma, Milt contented himself with asking Jane question after question. Sometimes he would put her on the defensive, for her store of answers still remained small. Often, she would write down his query so she could get an

answer from her pastor. Milt, however, became frustrated. He wanted answers! What he didn't know at the time, the answers stared him right in the face, in the person of Jane, but he couldn't see it.

Sometimes, he would badger Jane until he stopped her cold. Then he would continue to hammer at her until he made her cry tears of helplessness and frustration. He could see she wanted so much for him to believe as she did, yet her own lack of experience and knowledge thwarted her desires. He hated himself at times like these; Jane did not deserve such treatment. She had always been a good wife, more than he deserved, and now she had become even better. Yet, to go all the way into a commitment to the faith Jane spoke of would mean to betray Bill.

Bill's leaving town on a three-day business trip, finally settled the issue. Milt approached Jane about going to her church. Overjoyed, she found out there would be a guest speaker visiting at the Wednesday mid-week service and she and Alice went with Milt. Until then, Jane refrained from saying anything, which surprised him.

More than her expected eagerness, her calm acceptance made him uneasy.

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Milt felt even more uneasy as he entered the doors. His family had been CEO churchgoers—Christmas and Easter only—so the instances where they had darkened the doorstep of a church beyond that had been limited to weddings and funerals. Milt envisioned either a stodgy formalism or a rabid fanaticism. The thought of anything else lay beyond his ken. He frankly didn't know what to expect at Jane's church.

What he did find came as somewhat of a letdown. Jane introduced him to a bunch of quite ordinary-looking people. However, their outgoing spirit of friendliness set them apart and impressed him. Milt tried to read a note of falseness on the faces he saw, but, save for a few, he found genuine warmth there. Inwardly, he relaxed a little. *This isn't going to be too bad at all*, he thought.

In a few moments, he would change his mind.

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Milt, Jane, and Alice took their places in the main auditorium, a tasteful meeting hall with rows of interlocking, padded chairs and a podium up front on the stage. Milt wondered at the hall's lack of adornment. Save for a large, free-hanging cross on the wall behind the podium, no statues or pictures of Christ, or the saints, existed anywhere. No stained glass scenes filled the windows either, just colored glass. Except for the large cross, it looked like any other meeting hall.

Milt's attention turned to the front when the pastor entered. A youngish man in a dark blue polo shirt over tan, pressed chino slacks and loafers, he would fit right in as a pro at a golf club. He made a few perfunctory remarks, introduced himself as Wade Ingram, and requested that his audience join him in prayer. Milt complied, taking his cue from the people around him, who bowed their heads and experienced a prayer unlike any that he had ever heard. It had none of the flavor of something from a prayer book. Instead, he spoke as if God existed as another person in the room! He asked God to fill him with strength and to direct his words to needy souls. He asked for the Holy Spirit to come down and speak to each heart present, as if he fully expected it to happen. He ended his prayer by invoking Jesus' name and began his sermon.

From the very first, Ingram had Milt's undivided attention. He didn't intone like a clergyman, but spoke directly and conversationally, occasionally emphasizing a point dramatically and Milt liked his style. He evidently put a lot of stock in the Bible, which he called the "Word of God," for he opened it right away and referred to it constantly. For once, Milt began to have his questions

answered, without even having to ask them. It was as though Ingram spoke directly to him, *for* him. Every word, every illustration seemed to hit home.

When Ingram talked about sin, Milt squirmed, even as he agreed. When he described the mission and suffering of Jesus, Milt felt it deep in his heart. There might as well not have been another person in the room. Ingram paused and surveyed his audience, which brought Milt up short. Having clearly and powerfully spoken his message right from the pages of the Bible before him, he cast off his demeanor of authority and dropped his voice to a confidential level.

“You’ve heard the Word of God and heard *my* words, taken directly from the pages of this Bible.” He held it up before him. “You may even believe them, in your *head*, but unless those words make the eighteen-inch trip from your head down to your heart, then they are merely words.”

Milt sat riveted to his seat in the silence of the hushed auditorium. He could not take his eyes from Ingram. More than anything in his life, he wanted to hear what the man would say next.

“Before I end this brief message and we go to prayer, I get the feeling that there are some here who are under the conviction of the Holy Spirit,” Ingram continued. “That’s what makes God’s Word different from the words of mere men.” He laid his hand on his chest. “Without the Holy Spirit, none of what I have said about Jesus can save you. God’s Holy Spirit must prepare your heart to hear them and believe. The question now stands. *Do you believe?*”

It became evident to Milt that he could not simply listen and then leave. His heart pounded in his chest, as he heard Ingram ask those in the audience who wanted to know Jesus, in the way he had described, to get up from where they sat and make their way to the front of the room!

“If you are struggling in your seat with the urge to do something about the prompting of the Holy Spirit, that’s good! God is at work in your life. But don’t let that prompting go unheeded. Come to Him now!”

This proved a different thing entirely. Milt knew that to do what Ingram asked would be to expose himself to the eyes of everyone in the room. They would all know him as an unworthy sinner, throwing himself on the mercy of Jesus. Yet, something deep in his soul kept crying out for him to *act*, urging him to *GO!* Milt sat there for what seemed like an eternity, grappling with his own feelings, wanting to end this torment by leaving his seat, yet frozen by indecision. He then felt Jane’s hand on his arm, so he looked at her. Tears streamed down her cheeks, telling him she understood his inner war completely. Her eyes radiated the most tenderness he had ever seen there. She took his hand in hers and nodded slightly and stood, that simple gesture what Milt needed to galvanize him into action. Looking into Jane’s love-filled eyes, he lurched to his feet and stepped into the aisle with her. Hardly daring to look up and clutching Jane’s hand tightly, he turned and locked his eyes on Ingram, who had come down to stand below the podium. He had almost reached the front when he noticed how many others had joined them!

The rest of the time at the church became a blur. People shook Milt’s hand, others laid hands on his shoulders, and others said prayers over him. Instead of the scorn and derision he feared would occur at his admission of his guilt, he found acceptance and real joy over his decision. He took Ingram’s proffered hand and spoke with him. The man, who moments before had wielded the Bible with such power and authority, now warmly encouraging Milt, happy to see him come forward. Finally, he gave instructions to the group standing before him. Some cried silently, their tears mute testimony to the wars within; others cried openly. Still others, like Milt, stood dazed, their vision blurred by unshed tears, unsure of how to act, yet sure of their desire to be there—to know Jesus. Finally, his instructions completed, Ingram had them bow their heads and join him in prayer. Milt hung on every word, adding his heartfelt *Amen!* to the chorus around him.

When he and Jane got home and had paid the baby-sitter, she made coffee and they talked. Milt tried to sort out all he felt at that moment. Jane answered some questions, laughed with him, cried with him and prayed with him, until three AM. A peace began to settle over Milt, a calm assurance that he had done the right thing. He looked at Jane then, and saw her as he had never seen her before.

A warm glow seemed to radiate from her face. She never looked more beautiful to Milt than at that moment. Incongruously, a wave of desire for her swept through him. He pushed it down, for he thought it unseemly that he should have such feelings at a time like this. He got up from the kitchen table, went up to the bedroom, and readied himself for bed. He heard Jane enter the room and stuck his head out of the bathroom door, his toothbrush poised in his right hand. Jane stood facing him, waiting like Eve for Adam, her clothes piled on the floor around her feet.

Milt put the brush on the sink, rinsed his mouth, and stepped into Jane's warm embrace.

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The sound of the doorbell interrupted Milt's thoughts of the past. Bill had come for his visit. Even though Milt's "conversion" had driven a wedge in their friendship, Bill had remained loyal since Milt's illness. Yet, Milt sensed the air of betrayal that Bill wore like a hair shirt when he came around. Milt had tried to explain to his friend what had happened, but Bill shut off any further discussion in that area. That is, until he found out that Milt had terminal cancer.

"Hi Milt," Bill said as he entered the bedroom, "How are you feeling today?"

"Not too bad," Milt lied, asking God to forgive him.

"That's good."

Milt looked at his friend, visibly uncomfortable, ill at ease. Milt wished Bill could relax, instead of looking like he had come to do penance; then they could *really* talk.

"Why do you continue to come?" Milt came right out and asked.

Bill's head came up, a look of momentary panic in his eyes. "Because you're my friend, that's why."

"You wouldn't speak with me before about my 'religion' as you call it," Milt continued, becoming angry, relentless. "You would shut off any attempts of mine to even broach the subject and made no attempt to socialize with me; what made you change your mind?"

The look in Bill's eyes pleaded with Milt to stop. "I realized I was wrong," he said, smiling weakly. "After all, we've known each other for years."

"You're full of baloney, Bill," Milt said, "Do you want to know the reason *I* think you're here? Because I'm dying and you feel guilty for not speaking with me before."

"That's not true," Bill said half-heartedly, not believing his own protest.

"Really? Do you give two hoots for what I tell you?"

"Why are you doing this Milt? This is hard enough for me as it is."

"*For you?* What about me?"

"I didn't say that!" Bill exclaimed, "My God, Milt, I really don't know what to say to you anymore."

Bill's pleas caused Milt to see how harsh his retorts had been. He felt should ease up, so he took a deep breath and let it out. "Now we're getting somewhere," he said.

"Huh?" Bill asked, confused by Milt's new tack.

"You're finally talking with me, *really* talking."

“I don’t understand.”

Milt wanted so much for Bill to listen when he tried to talk about his faith, about Jesus, yet Bill had shut him out. Milt felt keenly the pressure of time—all of it running out for him too quickly.

“Bill, you’ve been faithful in coming by to see me, I’m grateful for that, but all I ever wanted to do was talk, *really* talk, and you shut me out.” Bill tried to protest, but Milt held up his hand and continued. “I can understand that you feel I’ve betrayed you, gone back on my word, yet you never let me explain. You just slammed the proverbial door in my face, every time I tried.”

“You’re darned right, I feel betrayed!” Bill retorted, his hackles rising, “You and I had agreed to weather this religious thing our wives were going through together. Then, the minute I have to leave town, you go and become a holy roller yourself!”

Praise God! Milt thought, *At least we’re talking.* “Bill, did you ever stop for a moment to consider what *really* happened? Does what happened to Jane and Alice seem like a phase to you? Does what happened to me seem like a phase?”

“You gave in to all that high flown mumbo-jumbo Jane was handing you; just like what Alice was handing me. Only I didn’t weaken and betray *you.*”

“I can understand your bitterness Bill. Believe me, I thought of our agreement a lot, even that night when I went to church with Jane, but you had to be there to understand how it was. I can’t begin to describe how I felt, why I found myself going forward.”

“You always were a soft-hearted sap,” Bill responded, his anger giving his words an edge.

Milt chuckled. “If you say so, Bill.”

“What do you mean, *if I say so?*” Bill spat out, his anger rising, “Look Milt, don’t try any of your goody-two-shoes religious crap on me! Okay, so you found religion, or whatever. That’s great for you! Just don’t expect me to go along with it. After all, I’m not the one who’s dying!”

Having blurted out the last sentence, Bill stopped short, his face paling in shock. Milt could see that he wished he could “un-say” the words.

“Thank you, Bill, for your honesty at last.”

Without another word, Bill turned and stormed out of Milt’s room. Milt followed his progress by looking out the window, watched as his friend stomped to his house across the street and slammed the front door.

Lord, put your hand on this situation, Milt prayed.

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In a few seconds, Jane entered the room, stood next to the bed and looked anxiously at Milt. He looked at his wife, the tears in his eyes blurring the outlines of her careworn face. Jane approached the bed, a look of concern on her features. Without saying a word, she took Milt’s hand.

“I finally got Bill to talk,” Milt said, his voice husky with emotion, “However, I guess I got in the way of the Lord—said the wrong things.”

“Maybe Bill’s under the conviction of the Holy Spirit,” Jane pointed out. “We’ve all been praying for him.”

“You’re probably right. I just wish I could have found better words.”

Milt looked up at his wife, her brow wrinkled with concern for him. Still a beautiful woman, albeit a bit ragged around the edges from the past few months, she prompted a wave of desire in him; the likes of which he hadn’t experienced in a long time. Milt reached up and placed his hand on one of Jane’s breasts. Jane looked down at it, surprised. She looked back at him, her face a question mark.

“What’s happened to us?” Milt asked, pained by her questioning look.

“I don’t know quite what you mean,” Jane replied, genuinely puzzled, but laying her hand on his.

“Somewhere along the line, we seem to have lost a part of what we had together. Oh, I know you still love me, but this sickness has taken something away.” Jane dropped her gaze. “Why Jane?” he pleaded.

“I ... I guess it’s because ... you’re sick.”

“My disease has made me repulsive, you mean.”

Jane met his gaze, a wounded look in her eyes. “No, it isn’t that,” she said hastily. “It’s just that you were always so strong, so ... so *sturdy*. I loved that about you. Even before you were saved, you were always the rock, the one to lean on. You gave me strength. Then, when you came to Jesus, you became a haven from the cruelties of the world.” Tears began to well up in Jane’s eyes. “Now you’re so”

“Weak?”

Jane nodded. “Oh Milt! I’m sorry! I hate myself for thinking that way, only I”

“Jane? Will you do something for me?” Milt cut in.

“You know I will. What?”

“Will you make love with me?”

Jane sat stunned for a few seconds, staring incredulously at Milt. Her mouth began to open in protest, but Milt laid a finger on her lips.

“Just for once try not to think of the cancer.”

He could see Jane wince at the carefully avoided word and she once again averted her gaze. It angered him how even the mention of the word drove a wedge in their loving relationship.

“Yes Jane, that’s what it is, *cancer*, and it won’t do any good to avoid that fact. I’m still the same man you married. I still feel the same way about you, Jane. I still have strong urges to make love to you. It tortures me to lie here and have a desire for you that you won’t let me fulfill. Don’t worry about hurting me. I’ll grin and bear it. Look at me Jane.”

She looked up to meet his gaze again and Milt smiled. “Okay?”

Jane’s composure began to crumble, but she nodded, her lip quivering, and began plucking at the buttons on her blouse. Milt’s heart ached with desire and love as he watched his wife perform that simple act. When she had finished undressing, she climbed into the bed and stretched out next to Milt, reaching up to stroke his hair. She could see the desire in his eyes as he surveyed her. Tears began coursing down her cheeks.

“Oh Milt!” she sobbed, leaning forward to hug him, “I love you so much! Why is God taking you from me?”

Milt’s arms went around Jane. He could feel her shaking from the force of her sobs. He thanked God for having allowed him to know such a fine woman. “I don’t know, my love. I don’t know. At least he’s given us these years together and he even saw fit to save me. I’m grateful for that.” Just then, a bolt of pain shot through Milt. He tried to squelch it, but Jane felt him tense and sat up.

“Oh Milt! I’ve hurt you!” she exclaimed.

“No!” Milt blurted out through clenched teeth, fighting the wave of pain, fearful that it would rob him of his conjugal rights yet again. “Just let me take some of my medicine. I always feel euphoric just before I nod off. It’ll be okay.” Milt tried to smile convincingly.

Jane smiled weakly, gave him his medicine and waited a few moments until it took effect. When they did make love, with Jane taking the superior position, it proved to be all Milt had hoped

it would be. Although he felt funny about praying at that moment, he kept thanking God for this blessing. He could tell by Jane's response that she had missed expressing their love in this way as much as he did.

When they had done, Milt lay totally exhausted, in a medicinal fog, yet feeling better than he had in weeks. The medicine had begun to take hold and he felt himself slipping away. Jane snuggled alongside him, just as before. Things felt right again, if only temporarily. As he drifted off into the blissful realm of painless sleep, Milt found himself thinking of Bill. *Please let me talk to him again*, he prayed, *I'll try not to get in the waaaaaayyyyyy*

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Milt did a lot of soul-searching in the next few days. He realized he had been feeling sorry for himself, retreating to his bed in a funk. One day, after he had finished the breakfast Jane had brought him, he struggled out of bed and got dressed. He then took his Bible and went to the rocker by the window. He spent about a half-hour reading, meditating and praying, until Jane, coming in for his breakfast dishes, saw him.

"Milt!" she gasped, "What are you doing out of bed!"

"I decided something. If I'm going to fight this thing, I have to get out of that bed. I've been spending too much time there, waiting for the pain and counting the minutes until it's time to take my pain medication. As long as God gives me the strength, I'm going to be up and around, even if I have to *drag* myself." Milt motioned toward the bed with his head. "I want you to call the medical supply house and send this thing back. We don't need the extra expense. I'm moving back to *our* bed."

"Are you sure about this Milt? Perhaps you should call Doctor Parvamaty."

"For what? I already know I'm dying." When he saw the look on Jane's face, he regretted his bluntness.

"Okay Milt, if that's what you want. I'm just concerned for you."

Standing there in her housecoat, Jane still managed to look beautiful. "Come here, please," he beckoned. Jane walked to the rocker and stood behind it, resting her hands on Milt's shoulders. He reached up and took both her hands.

"I'm sorry if I was too blunt, sweetheart; I know you're concerned for me. You've done all any wife *could* do and more than most. After our lovemaking yesterday afternoon, I don't want anything to separate us again until I want to be with you, sleep with you and share as much with you as God allows me to. Heaven knows, my time's short enough as it is and I want you near me, to lend me your strength, your *love*." Milt craned his neck so he could look up at Jane's face. Tears shone in her eyes. "I'm sorry, honey; I seem to be making you cry a lot lately, but can you help me do that?"

"Don't be sorry Milton," Jane said softly, reverting to his full name, which she used as a term of endearment during intimate moments. "I'm not crying just because I'm sad. I think you're the bravest person I know. God has blessed me for letting me know you."

"Any bravery I have comes from our Lord," Milt responded. "I'm the one who's been blessed; to have a wife such as you. I love you *so much* Jane."

"I love you too, darling," Jane said, as she bent to kiss her husband.

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That afternoon, Milt called Doctor Parvamaty anyway and asked him if he could prescribe another medication take that wouldn't knock him out so much, for he wanted to be up and about, and the narcotic he now took put him out so fast.

"Any drug powerful enough to deal with the amount of pain you're experiencing will tend to make you drowsy," the doctor began. "I can suggest a couple we might try, but I made no guarantees. You're going to have to continue *some* of the narcotic because of your ... *dependence* on it."

Since Milt had expected no promises, he accepted what Doctor Parvamaty had said. "Then I'll have to learn to deal with some pain until later in the day. I don't want to be in a constant haze."

Happily, his doctor enlisted the help of "pain control experts" and they prescribed a non-narcotic that gave the desired result, though not quite as effective at dampening the pain as his narcotic. Milt decided that some pain would be the price he would have to pay for being active. Since they arranged to have him self-medicate, he would control the dose, as well as what painkiller to use.



When the kids got home from school, Milt called them into the den. He had them sit down on the couch and pulled up a chair, facing them. Thirteen-year-old Juliana, so solemn and serious, sat looking at him with her big, sad eyes. Already, she looked so like her mom, such a good girl—a straight A student in school—hardly a problem at home. Ten-year-old Lacey sat next to her, every inch a tomboy—bright and enthusiastic—a joy to him and Jane in her own right. Finally, Todd, an outgoing seven-year-old—who had adapted well to his role as the youngest—sat at the end. Having two older sisters did not seem to affect his self-confidence in the least; he approached life with the directness of a charging bull. His escapades caused some anxiety, but much happy laughter too.

All three kids looked at Milt attentively. Milt noticed that they sat, left to right, in age order, like stair steps and it made him smile. It had been a long time since they had seen their father like this. Usually, they only got glimpses of him through the doorway and when they said good night. Milt realized that his sickness had robbed them of a daddy. He hadn't intended it to be that way, but his preoccupation with the cancer had caused the rift. Now, he sat facing his children in an attempt to change that.

"I suppose you're all wondering what's happened to your Dad, why I've been so apart from you," Milt began, taking note of the nod of Juliana's head. "Well, you know I'm sick, but I selfishly became so wrapped up within myself that I excluded you." Milt's voice tightened with emotion, but he fought it down and continued. "Things will be different from now on; I promise you that. With God's help, I'll spend more time with my family ... with *you*."

Milt had to pause a moment to swallow the lump in his throat. "But it won't be easy. There will be times when I don't act the same because of the pain. I want you to understand that I'm very sick and, unless God chooses to heal me, I won't be with you too much longer." He noticed tears on Juliana's cheeks—Lacey's too. He suspected that it would take time to sink into Todd's young mind that his dad would die soon.

"I'm moving out of this room, and back with your mother. As much as possible, I want things to be like they were. I don't want any of you to be afraid of me. When I react to the pain, I'm still your Dad. I need comfort from you as well as from Mom. Hugs will help a lot, okay?" Three solemn faced heads nodded in unison.

As though on cue, a wave of pain in Milt's midsection doubled him over. *No! Not now!* he thought. Then he felt a hand on his back. He looked up to see Juliana standing next to him, a

concerned, tender look on her face. *How like her mother she looks*, Milt reflected, straightening to hug his oldest daughter. Emboldened by their sister, the other two joined her in Milt's embrace. Milt sat there, hugging his three children, enjoying their hugs, imagining their combined warmth helping to fight back the pain inside him in a united attempt to vanquish this invisible enemy. The pain gradually lessened and he rejoiced at this victory. He had reached out to his kids and they had rallied to help him, coming through with flying colors!

Not all the tears on Milt's face were from the pain.

∞ 5 ∞

For the next week, life went fairly smoothly as Milt integrated his life around the limitations of his terrible sickness. He experienced episodes when he lay totally out of it, both from the pain and from the narcotics. Yet, it hadn't been as difficult to fit his family in as he had imagined. They seemed to understand instinctively how to react. Milt found that he had only impoverished himself when he had shut out his family. Now, they were a source of strength and encouragement—he had been the one who had to change.

One thing kept nagging at Milt—Bill had not visited him since their argument. He had hoped Bill would have come around after he cooled down, but it had not happened as he had hoped. Since time was the one thing Milt could not squander, he decided to take the bull by the horns and visit Bill.

∞@∞

On an evening later that week, Milt waited until he saw Bill's car pull into the driveway and saw him enter the house. He gathered his resolve around him, took a dose of his new painkiller, and made his slow way across the street. Breathing heavily, he pressed the doorbell. Alice opened the door.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her hand going involuntarily to her mouth. "Milt, how good to see you! Come in, come in!" She stood to one side so Milt could enter. "Come, have a seat," she said, indicating one of the armchairs in the living room, "Bill's in his office. He brought some work home. I'll let him know you're here."

Alice hurried out of the room to get Bill and Milt looked around the living room, grateful for the seat, since he fought a wave of nausea. The familiar furnishings brought back many happy memories of the good times they had shared. He also remembered some of the hard times they had experienced together—Alice's miscarriage; the death of Bill's father; the time little Scott had been hit by a car—all of these faced together as best friends. Yet, now a void had occurred. Jesus—who had said in his word that he would cause division even among families—had come into Milt's life to become a wall to separate him from his best friend. Just then, Scott came down the stairs from his room. He paused on the steps.

"H-Hi, Uncle Milt," he said, his voice low and uncertain.

"Hello Scotty, how are you?"

"Fine, Uncle Milt, how are ...?" he stopped, his query into Milt's health aborted by the realization of what it implied.

Milt smiled. "I'm as well as can be expected. As you can see, I'm up and around. Thanks for your concern."

"Yeah," Scott replied lamely, lowering his eyes.

Just then, Bill entered the room with Alice. Scott took the opportunity to scoot down the hall.

“Bye Uncle Milt!” he called over his shoulder.

“Bye Scotty!” Milt called back.

“What are you doing here?” Bill asked, a hostile look on his face.

“Bill!” Alice began, but Milt held up a hand to quiet her.

“I’m here to see you,” he said to Bill.

“Why? I thought we said all we had to say the last time.”

“Perhaps *you* did ...” Milt started to say, anger rising in him, but he stopped, realizing where this would take them. “Look, I came to explain, to apologize. Can’t we talk?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Bill!” Alice said again. “There’s no reason for you to treat Milt this way. I’m ashamed of you!”

Bill looked at her sullenly, then back at Milt.

Please God, help me, Milt prayed in his mind. He certainly didn’t want to cause an argument between Bill and Alice. Hastily, he spoke up.

“I won’t bring up any religious stuff, if that upsets you Bill. I just want us to remain friends.”

“We have nothing in common anymore,” Bill said, some of the anger gone from his voice, replaced by sadness. “You’ve changed. I see now that you were right, I was only visiting you because I felt guilty about your I’m sorry Milt; I’m afraid it won’t work out. Ask Alice.”

Milt looked at Alice. Put on the spot by her husband, she had a look of utter helplessness on her face. Just then, Milt felt a wave of pain begin. *No Lord, not now! Why now?* He tensed, waiting for it to peak. He heard Bill speak, his voice coming as if from a great distance, but he could do nothing but double over, his face set in a grimace, his eyes closed against the terrible pain. When it slowly began to loosen its grip and fade, Milt sat up, preparing to apologize, but saw Bill squatting in front of him, looking up at him, his face a mask of concern and tears brimming in his eyes.

“Are you all right Milt?” Bill asked, his voice high and shaky with fear.

“Yes, I’m fine ... now,” Milt responded, while in his mind he was shouting *Praise God! Now I know why!*

“Look, Milt, I ... well, I’m sorry we argued. I was mad at myself for getting so riled. You were being so ... so *decent*. For some reason it infuriated me.”

“Thanks for your honesty, Bill. I came here to see if we could still be friends. Time is too short for us to be enemies. I’ll try not to make you angry by beating you over the head, or—”

“Don’t worry about that,” Bill interrupted, “Seeing you in so much pain just now made me realize how selfish I’ve been. If your religious views are that important to you, who am I not to listen? I won’t try to con you though. The fact that I’ll listen to this Jesus stuff shouldn’t give you false hope. I’ve heard it all before, from Alice. It just isn’t for me. I’ll listen, but I make no promises.”

“Okay Bill, it’s a deal,” Milt said to his friend. *Thank You Lord!* he said to his God in silent prayer.

∞@∞

Milt’s health went steadily downhill over the next three weeks. The pain came more frequently, and Milt spent more time heavily drugged. At times, he tried to fight it, to pray, to read his Bible, to talk to Jane—*anything*—but it got to the point where he could only think of the pain. He would take his narcotic, enjoy a few moments of relative comfort, and drift off into oblivion. He had stopped using the other drug, for it hardly made a dent in the pain, which had become a

towering giant, a cruel dictator that controlled his life—driven by the cancer to abandon its former role of protector and sentinel, to transform into a tormentor.

This came as no surprise to Milt. He had enjoyed his brief period of remission, where he felt like he always had, free of pain and the steady decline. He had even felt that he had beaten the cancer, that God had healed him. He could not fool Doctor Parvamaty however, for he could see in the doctor's eyes what he didn't allow himself to see. The doctor let Milt have his own way, so he wouldn't develop a negative attitude. Milt would leave the doctor's office, convinced of Doctor Brice's error and pessimism. After three months, he too knew what the doctor knew.

He would be gone soon.

∞@∞

Since Milt's moments of consciousness were brief, precious things—like jewels to use wisely—he tried to spend them with Jane, or the kids, or Bill and Alice. He would talk out the things he most wanted to say, or read the Scriptures aloud. He would have prayer times with his family around him. He would discuss the future with Jane until it became too painful for her and she broke down.

Milt discovered how much of his life had been nonproductive, how much time he had squandered, doing things that paled in significance when put up against the stark reality of his imminent demise. He had needed to cut his activities to the bone, pare off the fat, and make each moment count.

All his life, up until this point, he thought he had all the time in the world, that the really bad things happened to the other guy. He felt that being a conscientious driver, a safety minded person—prudently providing for contingencies—would stave off evil and spare him and his from the worst.

Now, this fight with cancer brought him face to face with another, stark reality.

∞@∞

True to his word, Bill came to talk with him as much as possible. Milt tried to keep the conversation on as neutral a plane as possible, but he soon became frustrated and would witness fervently to him. Bill would express his objections, and, when brought to a standstill by the weight of Milt's apologetics, lapse into the "It's okay for you, but it's not for me," mentality. Sometimes both couples would get together and he, Jane, and Alice would pray, while Bill sat quietly and uncomfortably to the side.

Milt began to feel a sense of panic about Bill. Time ran by quickly for him and he wanted more than anything to see Bill saved before he died. He prayed for it, hoped for it and pleaded with God to let it come to pass, but Bill remained resolute in his unbelief.

Often, alone with Jane, he verbalized his frustration. "I don't know, Jane. Am I doing something wrong?"

"In what way?"

"With Bill. I try my best to present the Gospel to him, think he might be giving it some serious thought and then he shuts me out. It's maddening!"

"Perhaps he *is* giving it some serious thought," Jane offered.

"You think so?"

"The Bible says we all come under the conviction of the Holy Spirit at one time or another. Perhaps Bill is wrestling with it."

"I hope you're right," Milt agreed. "It's just that time is so precious, we can't afford to waste it!"

Jane walked over to the bed and sat on its side. She reached for Milt's hand and took it in both of hers. "Don't torture yourself with guilt over Bill. It's *his* decision to make; you can't make it for him."

"Oh, if only I could."

"But you can't. Please don't think me preachy, but no one has done more in the way of trying to witness to him than you. With all the pain, you've been patient with him, explaining every question, listening to his objections. You've done all you can. The rest is up to God."

"But time is so short," Milt said, looking at Jane's compassionate face. "Sometimes I want it all over with. Then I feel guilty and hope I can hold out for just another day—another *week*—for Bill's sake."

Tears began to well up in Jane's eyes. "Just let God have His way, darling. His timing is perfect."

∞ 6 ∞

After all the painful waiting, the end came relatively quickly. During the last week, Milt declined rapidly, the pain now so bad that he spent most of his time under the influence of the narcotic. During his brief times of lucidity, Milt wanted Jane to read from the Bible. His face would relax into a small smile and he would drift off. They had already discussed his passing and he wanted no heroic measures taken to prolong his life. He had made peace with his Lord and just wanted to be at home with his family when he slipped from this plane of existence.

∞@∞

Jane, tuned to the smallest difference in her husband's condition, came instantly awake from a touch on her arm. She turned on the light and saw that Milt lay on his back, his eyes wide open.

"What's wrong?" she asked, a look of fright on her face. "Do you need anything?" To her surprise, Milt smiled.

"It's going to be all right," he said so softly she almost couldn't hear him.

"*What's* going to be all right?"

"I'm going to be healed after all."

Milt took a deep, shuddering breath and let it out slowly. He didn't inhale. The smile slowly faded, as his face relaxed in death.

"Goodbye for now, my darling," Jane said with tears streaming down her cheeks. She reached over, closed his eyes for the final time and sobbed out her grief over her husband's passing. A thought crept into her consciousness.

Milt's pain had ended and he now looked upon the face of his Lord.

∞@∞

Jane grieved deeply for the next few months, not the God-blaming grief some experienced, but acute grief over the void in her life the passing of her soul mate caused. Right after Milt's death, she handled all the details and various arrangements so well that her friends and relatives all marveled at her strength. Jane merely smiled, thanked them and changed the subject. Once she had seen to all the details, however, things seemed to fall in on her. Every little thing around the house reminded her of Milt's absence. All at once, the reality of permanently being without him loomed over her like some daytime bogeyman. True, she had the kids, and she did her best to comfort them in their own grief, but she could always "feel" the gap at her side where Milt had once stood. She burst into

tears at odd times and would just sit and cry until the emotional storm had passed. At those times, the realization of Milt's absence hit her the hardest.

He had really gone—*GONE!*

∞@∞

The nights often proved the hardest. With the kids asleep and the house quiet, the loneliness became almost a tangible thing, looming out of the darkness to torture her. Jane sometimes spent the entire night on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket—her Bible, with its tear-spotted pages, open on her lap—until the first light of dawn awoke her. Even though she had time to prepare for Milt's death, she could never quite bring herself to imagine what it would be like without him.

Now, the reality of it stared her in the face with unblinking eyes.

∞@∞

Alice helped Jane a lot. Long after the concern of her many friends at church had faded, Alice stayed with her, always including her in her activities, listening when she needed to talk, crying with her and praying with her during her darkest moments. Jane found herself thanking God more and more for her dear friend and sister in the Lord.

The kids helped as well. In some ways, they dealt with the loss better than Jane did. With their young wisdom, they seemed to know when she needed them, even when she wanted to send them away, to make them leave her alone. They would often sit together with her and talk of their father, sometimes crying together with her. Jane marveled at how well her brood did in dealing with the loss of their father and her heart swelled with pride over them. Knowing that gave her strength, sure in the knowledge that grieving together helped the kids as much as it did her.

∞@∞

Over the long weeks, the raw wound of Jane's grief slowly began to heal. The pain lessened to the point that life began to take on a semblance of normality again. The old routines began to reassert themselves and she felt a desire to get on with her life, not that she missed Milt any less.

Sometimes, the smallest thing would set her off, some tiny reminder of Milt would send her into a flood of tears. Yet, thankfully, even those times began to happen less frequently. Slowly, Milt moved from the raw wound in her heart to become enshrined in the museum of her memory; someone to cherish, to think of with warmth and fondness and not with pain and anguish. God had given them fifteen good years together and three wonderful children. Jane realized more and more, just how much God had blessed their union—this she would always have. No matter what happened in the future, she would always be Jane, wife of Milton, mother of Juliana, Lacey, and Todd, a fact, a *heritage* to hold onto when the loneliness got tough. In addition, as a bonus from God, she had one more thing to hold in her heart.

She would see Milt again in Heaven.

∞ 7 ∞

A year-and-a-half after Milt's death, Jane got a call from Bill. His voice sounded panicked, frightened, a half-octave higher.

"Uh, hello, Jane?"

"What's wrong, Bill?" Jane asked, concern in her voice.

"It's Alice!" he said hurriedly, "I'm at the hospital. They had to bring her in."

"Oh, dear Lord! Why?"

“They don’t know yet. Everything was fine. We got up as usual; you know, puttering around in the morning, when Alice fainted dead away.” Bill paused; the line was silent for a long moment. “I thought I lost her, but, thank God she was still breathing. I’m worried Jane. Could you come down to the hospital?”

“Certainly, I’ll be right there.”

∞@∞

Jane arrived at the hospital a half-hour later. She went to the emergency room waiting area and saw Bill sitting on one of the brightly colored, molded plastic chairs. How incongruous they seemed to her, to look so cheerfully, McDonalds colorful in a place where so much pain and anxiety existed. Bill leaned forward, his head in his hands. Jane walked quietly to where he sat and placed a hand on his shoulder. His head jerked up.

“Jane!” he said, standing, “Thanks for coming.” He hugged her fiercely.

“Has the doctor told you anything yet?” Jane asked.

“No, not yet. What could be taking so long?”

“You know doctors,” Jane said, trying to sound as matter-of-fact as possible, “always doing tests, checking this and that.”

Unconvinced by her reassuring words, Bill looked her square in the eye, his own expression dead serious. “It’s something bad, isn’t it?”

“How could I possibly know *that*?”

“You’ve been through it all. You know how it is. I trust your gut on this.”

Jane sighed. “Let’s go get a cup of coffee and we can talk.”

“What about?”

“We’ll let the nurse at the desk know where we went,” Jane said, ignoring Bill’s question and sending up a quick prayer.

∞@∞

The Bill Jane saw across the coffee shop table look at all like the man she’d known. He looked shrunken somehow, unsteady, unsure, as though someone had pulled the proverbial rug out from under him. She knew the symptoms, for she had experienced them all herself. Now, it seemed God seemed to be calling upon her to offer help to another. She thought of the verse in Second Corinthians, chapter one, verses three and four: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”*

“Jane, do you think God is punishing me?” Bill asked.

“Why do you ask that, Bill?”

“Well, for all the times I refused to listen to Milt, to Alice too. He was my best friend. He wanted me to believe like he did.” Bill paused and ran his fingers through his hair. He sighed deeply and went on. “He was the bravest man I’ve ever known. Even though he was dying, he never once blamed God for his condition. Sometimes, when we talked, the pain got so bad he’d have to stop in the middle of a sentence, his face screwed up in pain, tears squeezing out of his eyes. I wanted so much to help him, but all I could do was sit there and watch a good man like him suffer. It made me angry at God.” Bill raised his eyes and fixed his gaze on Jane. “When it subsided, do you know what he would do?”

Jane shook her head, not trusting her voice at that moment.

“He’d bow his head for a second and pray!” Bill’s voice cracked and he paused.

Jane reached across the table and laid her hand on his. He looked back up at her.

“I even heard some of it. He’d say, ‘Thank you Lord.’ Can you imagine? How could a man in such pain thank the God who let him suffer so? *How*, Jane?” Bill’s composure crumbled and tears began to run down his cheeks. He brought his hands to his face.

Jane looked at Bill through a haze of tears. “Because it wasn’t Milt, the man, who said those things,” she said softly, laying her hand on Bill’s head. “It was Jesus, saying it *through* him. He was thanking God for being able to continue witnessing to you. He once told me he just wanted to go to God, but that he bore the pain to be able to witness to you.”

Bill raised his head. He looked like a small child, lost and alone, his face shiny with tears. “Was that what he meant? He suffered for *my sake*?”

“Yes, just like Jesus suffered to save us from our sins. It’s what Milt, and Alice, and I have been saying all along; knowing Jesus transformed our lives. If you let Jesus in, you become another person and when things get really bad, God gives you all the grace you need to rise above your circumstances.

“Believe me, Bill, I know from experience. I saw Jesus remake Milt into a saint, right before my eyes. By the time God took him home, I loved him more than ever.” Jane swallowed hard to force the lump from her throat. “I felt unworthy to be in the same room with him.”

Bill reached across the table to take Jane’s hand in his. “I miss him Jane. That’s why I feel God must be punishing me, for not listening to him when he was here.”

Jane prepared to say something to counter Bill’s incorrect assessment of the reason for Alice’s illness, when a doctor walked up to their table.

“Are you Mister Rehnquist?” he asked Bill, who nodded. “I’m Doctor Trueb. I’m treating your wife.”

“How is she doctor?” Bill asked, his attention riveted on the doctor’s face.

The doctor smiled. “I’m sorry you had to wait so long, worrying. She’s doing fine; resting comfortably. She’s had a mild stroke.” Before Bill could interrupt with another question, he held up his hand. “There’s no motor or speech impairment. It’s not common for one as young as your wife to have a stroke, but it’s not unheard of either. Most probably, it was a weak vessel in her brain. Her blood pressure is somewhat elevated. Sooner or later, it had to happen. Because she *is* relatively young, and the vessel wasn’t too near a vital area, the damage was minimal. The bleeding has stopped and as soon as the leakage has been absorbed, she’ll feel like her old self again. We spent most of our time doing a complete battery of tests and a CAT scan. Everything looks good. When she’s better, we’ll give her medication to lower her hypertension. She should live a long, productive life.”

Jane could see the relief wash over Bill’s countenance as he thanked Doctor Trueb, tears of uncertainty turned to tears of joy. She only hoped the tender heart Bill had evidenced would not go back to its original complacency.

“Can I see her?” Bill asked the doctor.

“Yes. She may seem a little unresponsive from the sedative, but she’ll recognize you. Just don’t stay too long. What she needs now is plenty of rest. It’s the best medicine for her now.”

Bill turned to Jane. “Would you like to come in too? She’ll be glad to see you.”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

When they entered the room, Alice turned her head to look their way. Her eyes looked glassy, but she smiled. “Bill ... and Jane. It’s good to see you both.”

“You gave us all a scare,” Jane said.

“I have no idea what happened. I hope I didn’t cause too much of a fuss.”

That’s so like Alice, Jane thought. “Don’t you worry about that. You just rest and get better.”

“The doctor says you’ll be fine in no time,” Bill added.

“I was nice of you to be with Bill,” Alice said to Jane. “Did he worry much?”

“He was concerned for you, of course, but we had a long talk. I think it helped.”

“Was it about Jesus?”

Jane nodded. “And about Milt.”

Jane looked at her husband. “When I was unconscious, I prayed for you,” she said.

“I ... I don’t understand,” Bill replied.

“I saw Jesus and it reminded me to pray for you.”

“You saw *Jesus*? How did you know it was him? Did he say anything?”

“No, but I just knew. I think he was there to take me home, if that was what I wanted, but I didn’t want to leave you yet. So, I prayed for you instead.”

Bill sat on the bed and took one of Alice’s hands in his. “Oh, Alice! I was so afraid I’d lose you!” He brought her hand to his forehead and cried softly. Alice reached over to stroke his hair.

Jane, not wanting to disturb the tender scene, left the room.

∞ 8 ∞

Almost a month passed since Alice’s stroke and she had pretty much gotten back into the swing of things, only at a much slower pace. Jane got together with her in the mornings again, talking, praying, and studying their Bibles together. Aside from a little weakness, Alice seemed her old self. Jane told her about the conversation she had had with Bill, but cautioned her not to mention it—best to let the Holy Spirit do his work.

They did spend much time in prayer for Bill, however.

∞@∞

One night, around midnight, Jane got a phone call. Though she had gotten to bed an hour before, she didn’t fall asleep. She lay in bed, on her back, staring at the patterns of light and shadow on the ceiling, thinking of Milt; happy ones this time. She began to cry, but not the hot tears of grief. These tears streamed from her eyes as if from some inner fountain in her very soul, as if God had reached down to remind her of his presence. When the phone interrupted, she almost resented the intrusion into such wondrous and intimate fellowship.

“Hello?” she asked tentatively, expecting a wrong number, or a hang-up.

“Jane, this is Alice.”

“I-is anything the matter?”

“No, it’s actually wonderful news!” Jane could hear the excitement in her voice. “I know it’s late, but could you come over, Jane?”

“Of course, I’ll be right there.”

As Jane toed into her slippers, she paused a moment. She looked at the picture of Milt she kept on the nightstand, took it up and held it before her. “Milton, I get the strong feeling our prayers have been answered.”

∞@∞

When she rang the front doorbell, Bill answered. Curiously, his cheeks shone with tears. “Hello, Jane; I hope we didn’t wake you. Come in, come in.”

“No, actually. I was lying there awake, thinking of Milt,” Jane replied, crossing the threshold, into the house.

“Really? *Milt*? Man, that’s something!”

“How so?” Jane asked, genuinely curious.

Alice walked over, her face wreathed in a huge smile, as she hugged Jane and kissed her on the cheek. “Let’s go into the kitchen and talk there. I made coffee and put up some hot water for tea.”

When they had grouped around the kitchen table, Bill spoke. “I wanted you to be the second person to know I just decided to take Jesus up on his offer.”

“Oh, Bill!” Jane exclaimed. “That’s wonderful!” She reached across the table and laid her hand on his. “Praise God! Tell me all about it!”

“Well, I couldn’t get what we talked about in the hospital coffee shop out of my mind. No, it goes back further than that, since Milt and I reconciled. I guess I was able to squelch it until Alice had her stroke, but that made me realize how out in the cold I really was, that and the way Alice took her stroke in stride. I thought of how it was with Milt ... *and* you. Seeing how both of you hung in there really spoke volumes to me.

“Still, I had a hard heart and I now feel bad about how much grief I caused Alice. But, tonight, I couldn’t sleep and got to thinking about Milt instead. I lay there, staring at the ceiling and remembered all the good times we had together, some of them even after he got sick. I found myself crying, but it wasn’t tears of grief, you know? They were happy tears, just like you women always say. It was then I wished it didn’t have to end like it did.

“Then I remembered what you and Alice said about seeing Milt again in Heaven. Suddenly, I wanted that more than anything. I wanted to see Milt again, to never lose Alice, or the kids, or you and your kids.” Bill’s voice cracked, and he stopped to get his emotions under control. “So, I asked Alice if she would spell it out for me one more time. I could hardly wait for her to finish. We bowed our heads and I prayed to Jesus to save me.”

At this point, Bill could not continue, so Alice continued. “As you can imagine, I was floored and deliriously happy at the same time. Bill and I are now united in the Lord!”

“I’m so happy for you both,” Jane replied “Our prayers have been answered.”

“I just wish Milt could have been here to see it,” Bill said, his expression somber.

“He does see it, Bill,” Jane assured him. “He’s listening to the angels rejoice over your salvation.”

“Do you think so?”

“We have God’s word on it.”

∞@∞

By the time Jane had hugged and kissed Alice and Bill, the clock read four a. m. She re-crossed the street, rejoicing in Bill’s salvation, marveling at how God worked in their lives. Both she and Bill had lain awake, staring at the ceiling, unknowingly united in his quest for faith, thinking of Milt.

Thank you, Lord, for your patience with us and for saving Bill, she said as she went up to her bedroom. Just before climbing into bed, she took up Milt’s picture. “Well Milton,” she said, fresh tears streaming down her cheeks, “I know I don’t have to tell *you* what happened; you *did* make a difference in Bill’s life, an ambassador for Christ. I’ll have to wait until God unites us to rejoice with you in person, but, for now, you enjoy your celebration with the angels.”

Jane kissed the picture, put it on the nightstand, climbed into bed and pulled up the covers.

“I love you, Milt,” she said to the darkened room and sunk into a deep, dream-filled sleep.