

1.1

by Fran Peck

"What's that beeping sound?" Grace mumbled to herself as she rolled over to find the source of the irritating noise that had awakened her. It took her a moment to gain her bearings and as she did every morning, she reminded herself that she was in a hospital bed and that 'beeping' noise meant that her heart was still beating and she was still alive. Sometimes she wished that noise would go away, but then again if it did, the alternative would not be so good. Grace tried to rub the sleep out her eyes while trying not to jerk the tubing that was connected to her bony little arms. She knew if she pulled too hard it would tear her oh so delicate skin and then another stick in the arm would be required.

"Slow motion", she said out loud, not really knowing why she said it, other than to make herself aware of the damage that she could do if she made any sudden movements. She thought she saw a shadow walk past the door. "Hope! Is that you?" she cried out from her room, but the shadow did not appear, and she wondered if Hope had remembered to grab her lunch from the kitchen counter. Grace was thinking if she had to drive that bag down to the grade school one more time, then Hope would be grounded for a year. She laughed at that thought and wondered what Hope would do if she told her she was grounded.

Another beep, but louder and more irritating than the other one this time. Grace tried to lean over the edge of the bed to check the catheter bag. Yes, it was full as always this time in the morning and then the shadow appeared at her bedside. "Good Morning Grace", Charity said, as she squatted beside her bed to change the bulging bag. "Looks like you are doing pretty good, your urine is just the best shade of yellow."

"Oh, yes" said Grace. "I think I will enter that into the county fair, might get a blue ribbon." Charity burst into laughter as she carried the golden bag into the bathroom for disposal.

"Yes, this one is a prize winner for sure!" she said. The daily routine between the two had become so familiar that sometimes Grace didn't even know what day it was. "What is today?", she asked, but before the nurse could answer, Grace piped up- "No, wait, let me guess...I think it is Sunday". "Well, there's another winner!" said Charity. "How did you know it was Sunday?"

Grace shut her eyes and started praying to herself. "God, I thank you that I made it to Sunday. I know that you see me. I thank you for people taking care of me. I thank you for the life that I have lived and for all the good things you...."

"Grace, how did you know it was Sunday", Charity interrupted her conversation with God.

"you always amaze me, woman, I hope I am as feisty as you are when I am 97."

Grace opened her eyes and looked at the middle aged woman in front of her. Charity was the kindest, sweetest, most patient person that Grace had ever known. There were many years that others had taken care of her, and some of them Grace wanted to forget. But there was something different about Charity. She touched Grace in such an easy, caring way. The others were more like the military police, barking orders and rushing through the day, just to hurry and get away from her. But not Charity, she was there all the time. She even lived in Grace's house. Grace didn't mind, she knew that Charity had had a hard time in her life and needed a place to stay, so it was convenient for both of them.

"What!", Grace yelled and tried to sit up in bed. "I didn't know I was 97!!!" Oh My God! I don't remember being 96..." Grace laid back down on the bed, as Charity pulled back the curtains to let the morning sun shine in.

1.2

The sun was beaming through the huge window and laying stripes across the white sheets on Grace's bed. She noticed a few swirls of dust in the air as she slowly breathed in and out. Charity tilted the blinds in the window and the stripes disappeared from the bed. "Well sweetie, what do you want for breakfast today?" Grace quickly turned to her with the most serious look she could muster up and replied, "Can I see a menu?". Charity smiled as she turned her attention to the beeping machines, and the tubes and the medicine bottles. Grace noticed she didn't laugh her usual belly laugh when she asked for the menu as she had done so many times before. "Well, let's see now-" said Grace, "will it be the oatmeal, or the oatmeal, or what about the oatmeal? You know what ma'am, I think I will just have the oatmeal, well done, with a twist of milk and dash of sugar. And you can put it on my tab." Charity finally quit fighting the feeling and grinned so big her teeth showed.

"Grace, I can't feel sad at all when I am around you. I swear, will you please stop carrying on and let me wallow in depression once in awhile. Now behave your self while I am in the kitchen and I will tell the chef exactly what you want." Grace slumped back in the bed and picked up the medicine and the glass of water that was waiting by her bedside table. "You know life is short", she said, "I think I will have dessert first." Then she picked up the rainbow assortment of pills one at a time and swallowed them like she was eating peanuts at the ball park. "and tell the chef, I will have that oatmeal to go!"

Charity walked slowly toward the cabinet and opened the door. Sometimes she felt like Grace in that every day was melting into the next one. At least Grace knew what day it was. It was Sunday. But in their world time was turning into their enemy. They didn't even look at the clock any more. There were no appointments, no parties, no special events in their lives. They went to bed when they wanted to and they got up when they wanted to. She wondered about how some people planned and prayed and wished for this time in their life for years. She herself had wanted that very same thing. Now she was standing in front of the cabinet looking for the oatmeal. "How can Grace be so cheerful?", she sighed to herself, as she prepared the "special of the day" for her patient.

Grace took advantage of being alone for a few minutes. She shut her eyes again and picked up her conversation with God that she was having before she got interrupted. "God, like I was saying before, I am so thankful for everything. I am really thankful that I knew what day it was. I am thankful that you decorated my room with sunshine. I thank you for the life that I have lived and for all the good things you...." "Breakfast is served, ma'am", said Charity as she sashayed into the room carrying the serving tray with the hot steaming oatmeal and some juice. Grace opened her eyes and tried not to show the disappointment of being interrupted again. Oh, well, she knew that God knows her thoughts, so she better be thinking good ones. She tried to sit up and get situated so she could eat her "breakfast of champions", but sudden darkness overcame her and she slumped back into the bed.

1.3

Hope rolled over to look at the clock and was instantly mad when she saw the time. Her first thought was to go in the closet, get her gun and walk over and shoot the neighbor's dog. His incessant barking had woke her up every day for the past year and she was just about on her last nerve. She tried to talk herself out of being angry, knowing that starting out with that attitude would just ruin the whole day. Oh well, she may as well get up, maybe if she hurried, she could still make it to church on time and then go visit her mother. She hadn't seen her in a couple of weeks and during her last visit her mom had barely recognized her. Charity said it was probably the medication and to not worry about it. It may have just been an off day for her. It was tough walking into the room and not knowing what to expect. There used to be a happy reunion every time they saw each other even if it had only been a couple of days since they had spoken. But now it was kind of strange. Hope would walk in and talk to Charity first just to see how things were going before making an entrance. She never will forget the day that she came to visit and her mom told her that she didn't wear makeup any more and told Charity to see her to the door. Later that day her mom had asked where the Avon lady had gone. Hope walked out of the bathroom toward the closet when the phone rang. "Is she okay?", Hope asked with a break in her voice. "I will meet you there". She dropped the phone where she stood and grabbed the first thing she could find to put on. Within minutes she was racing toward the hospital to meet Charity with the ambulance. She didn't notice that it was a beautiful day outside. She didn't see the beautiful flowers lining her sidewalk. She didn't see the neighbor's dog run back on his porch when she walked to the car. She hadn't seen the couple holding hands walking across the road at the stop light. She didn't hear the church bells ringing announcing it was time to gather together to worship. She didn't feel the sun on her face when she ran from the car to the hospital entrance. She didn't see the people in the waiting room watching her run to the front desk to find out where her mom was. One thing she did see was Charity standing in the hallway and she was not alone. Hope froze in her tracks and stared at the person that Charity was talking to. "Oh my God, what is she doing here?" was her first reaction. "I can't believe it, not here, not NOW!". She was just about to turn around ever so quietly as to not be seen or heard, but it was too late.

"Hope, please," Charity said with an almost begging tone in her voice. Hope noticed that Charity looked so tired, not physically, but tired of a situation that had been long overdue. "You know I had to call her, please don't go, we need you here, with us." The woman's head was bowed and she hesitated to look up. It was as if she was in death row waiting for a pardon from the governor. Hope looked down at the floor too, trying to decide what to do next, in this split second in time, right here, right now. She had every right to make her point and declare judgment, but something inside her told her to just keep looking down. All of a sudden she started laughing as she realized what she was seeing. Her hot pink jogging pants, neon green socks and sandals were more than she could take. Her two companions put their arms around her and laughed too. They knew that although the "pardon" had been granted, they would work out the details on another day. Right now they had something more important to focus on in the room ahead.

1.4

They didn't notice that a nurse had opened the door just enough to stick her head out to see who was there. "Excuse me, ladies, we are getting our patient settled in, you can have a seat in the waiting area and we will come get you just as soon as we can and let you know how everything is. There is coffee and snacks in there and a phone if you need it." She didn't wait for them to reply as she shut the door tight in their face. Charity turned to walk in the direction of the waiting room and the other two followed her. She had worked in this hospital for over 20 years before taking care of Grace so she knew where everything was. The waiting room was empty and Hope was the first one to take a seat, a single seat, by itself, off in the corner. The other two sat on a couch closest to her.

"Well, Hope, I can say that I have never seen a shade of pink like you are wearing today," the voice was soft, low and kind of shaky. "but I know you must have gotten ready in a hurry, I did too, but I was lucky, I had just gotten home and was already dressed." She didn't look Hope in the eye, but did glance her way while she was speaking. "How have you been? Other than the clothes you look great as always."

Hope leaned back in the chair as far as she could and wished she had more time to select her words more carefully. She finally breathed out a big sigh and decided to just let it go. She knew this wasn't the time or place to hash out what was wrong between them, and she didn't want her prayers for her mother hindered by bitterness. "I am doing okay, tired I guess, there is this annoying dog next door that barks all the time and it is really driving me nuts." She knew they were only chit-chatting, but at least it was some communication. "How have you been? You say you didn't get home until this morning?"

"Yea, my flight was cancelled in Charlotte and I had to wait for the next available one. I could have waited until Monday and traveled home that afternoon, but I wanted to try to visit mom today, so I caught a midnight flight instead."

Hope looked at her older sister and noticed that she had aged a lot in the past year that she had not seen her. They didn't live that far apart, but the distance between them had grown and for some reason they could not get that closeness back.

Charity stood up and walked across the waiting room to the coffee pot. "Want a cup?" she asked them. Hope nodded yes and waited for Charity to bring it to her. Just as she handed Hope her coffee, the waiting room door opened and an attendant popped her head in - "Is there someone named 'Faith' here? There is a phone call at the front desk for Faith?"

"That would be me." Faith said, as she walked toward the door, "It's probably Jim, I left him a message on his cell phone on the way. I'll be right back." She followed the attendant out the door.

Charity knew what coming next. Hope gave her this 'I can't believe what you did' look and sipped her coffee in silence.

"Hope, please just look at this different. God gives us opportunities in our lives and sometimes we miss them. Haven't you been praying for you and Faith to come together and stop this 'whatever it is' that you both probably don't even remember in the past year and start being a family again? You told me that was what you wanted. You even admitted some of it was your fault to begin with. I had to call both of you, you know that. I love you both and don't make me choose sides, because I won't. Faith has her issues, she works too much, she talks too much, she is scatterbrained sometimes, but listen, when the going gets tough, and you need someone you can count on, then Faith's your girl. And I can't avoid Grace's questions anymore about why you two are never there to see her at the same time. God has answered your prayer. He is giving you an opportunity to get your sister back. Don't let it slip away,,,,,just say in."

Hope put her head down and started digging in her purse. She wasn't looking for anything, she just wanted a reason not to look at Charity while she was preaching. "I hate it when she's right", she thought.

1.5

Faith followed the attendant to the front desk and picked up the waiting phone. "Hello?" she said in a half question tone, not really knowing who it was on the other end of the line.

"Faith, I was just wondering about your mom, have you been in to see her? What's the diagnosis?" It was Jim, just as she suspected. Her husband of 30 years loved her mom like she was his own. "I haven't even seen her yet. They took her straight into the ER when I got here, then put her in a private room. I bet she is throwing a fit. We are waiting for the nurse to call us back there." "Us?" Jim asked. "Uh, yea, Charity and Hope are here with me."

Jim's silence said it all. He had been hearing Faith cry and complain about her sister for a year now and he was just waiting for it all to come to an end. He didn't want it to happen this way, but he knew Faith had been grieving the loss of intimacy with her sister. "Well," he said. "Do you want me to come to the hospital? I can be there in about an hour." "No, that's okay, I will call you just as soon as I find out something. Keep your cell phone on and just say a prayer for mom....and uhhh....me."

Faith thanked the attendant then walked back to the waiting room. Before she got there, the nurse met her in the hallway and told her it was okay to see her mother, but the doctor wanted to talk to them first.

"Your mother is a tough woman, she may have had a mini stroke, but we are not totally certain, so we may keep her for a few days. She doesn't remember exactly what happened, only that she passed out. But she is resting, and has already mentioned she wants to go home. Do you have any questions?"

Charity asked the doctor if he had a few minutes to go over the medications that Grace had been taking at home, so they proceeded to his office. Faith and Hope stood there for a little while, waiting to see who was going to move first. Hope finally took the first step and headed down the spic and span hallway. Faith followed along, and was anxious to see her mom. It had been a couple of months since she had been to see her, and she felt a little guilty, but it was kind of difficult to schedule her visits at a time when Hope was not there. She was determined to change all that, she just had to figure out a way to make it all better.

Grace was laying back in the bed with the cover pulled up to her nose. She had told the nurse she wanted an extra blanket and she didn't know what was taking so long. "Hospitals are so cold," she thought, "if you are not sick when you get here, you will be before you leave." She tried to relax and closed her eyes. She thought this would be a good time to pray. She was so thankful that she was still alive and that God had pulled her through another day. She took a deep breath and whispered into the air, "God, I am so thankful that I am healed and you brought me through today. I am thankful that I can count on you to bring the people in my life to help me. I thank you for the life that I have lived and for all the good things you...."

Grace opened her eyes as the door opened to her room. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes were big as saucers. "CALL THE NURSE!!!!!" she yelled, "CALL THE NURSE!!!"

Hope and Faith ran to her side and both asked the same questions at exactly the same time, "Mom, are you okay what's wrong? Are you in pain, are you hurting anywhere?"

Grace closed her eyes slowly and then opened them again,,, "I just wanted the nurse to take my pulse. I saw the both of you together and I thought I had died and gone to Heaven."

Hope and Faith let out a big sigh of relief as they realized their mom hadn't lost her sense of humor.

1.6

Faith rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Mom, you scared us to death, we thought something was wrong." "Well, there is something wrong, and it is not with me," spouted Grace. "You can't hide things from your momma like you think you can. We always find out somehow." Faith hugged her mother and stepped back to allow Hope to do the same.

"How are you feeling?" said Hope as she squeezed her mom tightly. "I am feeling like I am in the hospital when I should be home. I am missing the 'Price is Right', and I am starving." Grace tried to rise up out of the bed, but the gadgets and beepers were acting as temporary restraints. "Where is that doctor? He needs to let me go home, I feel fine now and everything is going to be okay. Where's Charity?"

"She is with the doctor now, going over your medication," said Hope. "Charity said you took everything this morning right before you passed out, so she was worried that something in the meds may have caused this. She should be here any minute."

Faith stood beside the bed and tried to think of something to talk about. What she really wanted to do was tell her sister that she was sorry for some stupid thing that had caused this riff between them. But instead she continued the small talk, not wanting to upset her mother.

"Mom, you need to wait and see what the doctor says", Faith piped in, "they may want to keep you overnight for observation, just to make sure everything is okay."

Hope agreed with her sister on this one, "yes, mom, please do what the doctor says, ...do it for us."

Grace looked at her two daughters standing on either side of her. A flash of days past zipped through her mind of them when they were small, so sweet, laughing, playing, not a care in the world. She had to hurry and shut that door before it overwhelmed her. "okay, she said, I will stay if they need me to, but they better get that tv working before Wheel of Fortune comes on. I have already wasted a good part of my day. And do me a favor, I need both of you to stay at my house tonight. I don't want to have to worry about the house or Miss Kitty."

"mom, I don't think that is necessary " said Hope, almost stuttering. "well, I think it is, said Grace, "and you should leave your car here for Charity, and drive back with Faith."

Hope couldn't argue with her mother and laid her keys on the table. "well, Faith, I guess we better get a move on, looks like you're driving."

1.7

Charity sat down slowly in the chair across the desk from the doctor. She was going to ask him about Grace's medicine just like she had planned, but all of sudden she just blurted out, "How long does she have?" The doctor leaned back thoughtfully in his chair trying to soften the words he was about to speak.

"I can't really say, Charity. You know yourself she is a very sick woman. She really must come to terms with her illness and discuss everything with her two daughters. I was kind of shocked to see them both together, so I didn't really know how much to disclose about just how sick Grace is. This last episode really took a toll on her heart. Her kidney and liver function has decreased significantly and I am not sure if any change in her medication would do any good. But you know how Grace is, she will look you straight in the eye and tell you she is fine."

Charity tried to look up but the tears blurred her sight. "I don't know what to do, " she looked down at her hands, and folded the tissue in squares while she talked. "I love Grace

so much, she has let me be her nurse all these years, not to mention, gave me a place to stay and I.I..”

“Hey,” the doctor said while standing up, “you have been the best thing for Grace and you know that. If it weren’t for you, she would not be here today. You know we will do the best we can for her, and right now, that is to make her comfortable and keep her in good spirits. I am going to keep her overnight so I can run some additional tests, so you better get ready for a fight down the hall when she finds out.”

Charity unfolded the tissue and wiped the tears from her eyes. She got up and walked toward the door. “thanks, doc, I know I have to be strong for her, then again, she has always been the strong one for me.” She walked down the hall toward Grace’s room slowly, trying to regain her composure. She didn’t want Grace or the girls to see her crying. In the back of her mind, she knew that she wasn’t the one who had brought Grace this far, it was the other way around.

1.8

Charity glanced at her watch as she approached Grace’s room and realized that her patient must be really hungry by now. After all, she didn’t get to eat her breakfast earlier that morning and now the afternoon was almost gone. She stopped by the nurse’s desk to see if they had planned on bringing Grace something to eat. The nurse assured her that as soon as the doctor said it was okay, they would bring her a tray. Charity took one last deep breath as she slowly entered the room where Grace and her daughters were. “Oh, Charity, thank God,” said Grace, with a huge sigh of relief. “Are we ready to go home now? I am so hungry, I think I will pass on that oatmeal and take a big bowl of mashed potatoes and gravy.” Charity tucked Grace’s sheets under the mattress and straightened her pillow behind her head.

“Now Grace, I just left the doctor’s office and he wants to keep you overnight, just to check on you and maybe run a couple more tests, just to make sure everything looks okay. And don’t argue, because you know I will win this one...” Charity didn’t dare look her in the eye, because she didn’t want Grace to see through her sadness. “Anyway, I will just stay here with you, I can cancel my date for the evening.” Charity did look at her this time and grinned real big, knowing that Grace was well aware she hadn’t ‘dated’ in years. “And, I asked the nurse on duty to bring you something to eat. I don’t have any idea what you will get, though.”

“Well, okay, I was one step ahead of you anyway. I have already asked Faith and Hope to stay at the house tonight to watch over the place and take care of Miss Kitty. But you can’t blame a girl for trying. I do feel a little tired right now, maybe I should take a little nap before I eat.”

The three visitors took that as their cue to leave her alone, so Faith and Hope gathered up their purses. They all kissed Grace lightly on the head as she laid back and rested, her eyes shut tight. Out in the hallway, Hope gave Charity her car keys so she would have a means of transportation in the event that Grace would get to come home.

“Well, I didn’t intend to get you two so tied up today,” said Charity, as she

slipped the keys into her scrub shirt pocket. "Grace seemed to have it all figured out, though." I was wondering what to do about Miss Kitty in case we had to stay. And you know I would never have left her here alone. The cat food is in the cabinet under the sink, and help yourselves to whatever you want to eat, well, what am I telling you that for? It's your mother's house, for goodness sake, it's not mine, just make yourselves at home and I will call you if there are any changes."

Faith and Hope gave Charity a quick hug and walked away toward the exit. They didn't speak the whole time they were walking, and both looked straight ahead. Each wondered what the other was thinking and both were praying that the ride to their mother's house would be quick and painless.

Grace was alone and the room was silent with only the machines making their usual sounds. She had gotten used to them by now and somehow she welcomed the noise. Since the TV was still not working, she decided to say a little prayer, or at least try to finish the one she started.

"God, I thank You so much that You are watching over me. I thank You that my two daughters were here right in the same room with me. I thank You that You heal all wounds, no matter how deep. I thank you for the life I have lived and for all the good....."

"Excuse me, sweetie," said the nurse aide as she opened the door to Grace's room. "Were you the one that asked for an extra blanket?"

1.9

Charity was still at the hospital exit watching Faith's car pull out of the parking lot. She chuckled just a little bit at the way Grace had so easily forced her daughters to be in each other's presence. She didn't know who was more relieved though, herself or Grace. It had been a struggle over the past year trying to be friends with both of them and all the while trying to keep Grace from being heartbroken about the situation. But Grace was wiser than all three of them put together. Grace was right. You can't hide anything from your momma.

Charity headed back to check on Grace and as she turned the corner of the hallway she ran full force and headlong right into a maintenance employee. He dropped his tool box, lost his hat and tried to keep Charity from falling backwards all at the same time.

"Oh, God!", Charity said as she was trying to catch her balance. "I am so sorry. I should have been paying more attention to where I was going. Here, let me help you pick that stuff up." The man looked at her and stared for just a moment, she looked so familiar, but he couldn't remember her name.

"Oh, that's okay lady." He finally managed to speak. "It's my fault. I was in a big hurry to fix a TV. Don't bother with that stuff, I can get it, now look, you have gotten your hands all dirty."

Charity stopped what she was doing and raised up to look at the man face to face. She didn't recognize him at first, but as soon as she heard his voice, she knew who he was.

"Chad, is that you? I haven't seen you in years, not since I left this place. Do you remember me?"

"I am Chad, yes ma'am, and you look so familiar, but I can't seem tono wait, Charity! Yes I remember you. Gosh you worked here forever didn't you? How could I forget you? I think we were the oldest ones here. Where did you go? I just came to work one day and you

were gone, and no one seemed to know where you disappeared to. How in the world have you been? Are you working? I bet you are retired now, right?

Charity looked down at the floor, not wanting him to see her dread about discussing the past. "Well, I had a job offer for private duty, so I jumped on it. I was really burned out with the hospital politics, so I was ready to leave. And did you say you were going to fix a TV? That's why I am here, my patient is Grace, and she is in room 110 and if you don't hurry and get that TV fixed, 'You' may be a patient here. She is missing her favorite shows and she has to stay here tonight, so please do what you can."

"Hey no problem," said Chad, while he gathered up his equipment. "Come on, lady, you lead the way."

1.10

Faith pulled out into the freeway for the trip to her mother's house. She was glad it wasn't too far away, knowing that a longer ride would have been very stressful for her and her sister. Hope sat leaned against the passenger door, with her face almost touching the window. Charity had told her the truth and she knew that they needed to end this strife before it got so out of hand that neither would want it to be fixed.

"Do you think mom is going to be okay?" Hope asked, still having her face pressed up against the window.

"I hope so, but she is so sick. There is something that she is not telling us. Every time I try to find out just what is going on, she won't discuss it, and Charity is just about the same. Mom must have her sworn to secrecy. But I am glad that she is there with mom. I know that I couldn't do the job she is doing."

"I can't bear the thought of losing mom, what would we do without her? She is our rock and has always been there for us. I don't know what to say. And then there's you..." Hope finally turned around to look at her sister. "I have been so stupid. I have almost lost you too, by being stubborn and selfish. I know you were just trying to help me get through a bad time in my life, but I guess I took it as you being bossy. And you have to admit you are a little bossy."

Faith chuckled just a little. "Hope, you know me, I talk too much, and I shouldn't have said all that I did. I don't know what it is like to lose a spouse the way you did. I just didn't want to see you wallow in self pity and not go on with your life. You are a beautiful young woman and five years is enough time to let go of the past. I just wanted you to get out and see other people and have fun."

"Faith.....you fixed me up on a blind date with one of your financial analyst friends and all he talked about was his 401k and his investments."

"Hope....he was good looking and rich, what else could you ask for?"

"Uh....excuse me, at dinner, we couldn't even hold a conversation because he kept checking stock quotes on his iphone. I went to the restroom and when I got back he was telling the waiter what to do about his retirement plan. I was so embarrassed I just left."

"Yeah, I know, and now he won't even look my way, and he asked for a transfer

to another office. I guess he thinks I am as crazy as you are.”

“Are you calling me crazy? Crazy is hooking up your sister with a robot.”

“What?...” Faith thought that last comment was hilarious and she started laughing so hard that she almost missed her mom’s driveway. She pulled into the carport and stopped the car. She looked over at Hope and kept laughing. Hope was trying so hard not to smile, her face hurt. Then she realized that the robot comment was just too much, that and the fact that she was still wearing the hot pink jogging pants and the neon green socks.

Faith leaned over and grabbed Hope around the neck hugging her tight. “ I wish he could see you today!” she said. Hope relaxed under her sisters arms and hugged her back. “I guess I will just have to find you someone more down to earth next time.”

Hope jerked away at that statement and as she got out of the car, grinned at Faith. “I don’t think there is going to be a ‘next time’,” she said as she walked toward the house.

Faith didn’t know who or what or where Hope was going to find someone special. But she knew in her heart that God had it all planned out.

1.11

Charity was grateful that Chad had been so quick to fix the tv for them. Grace had Chad laughing till his belly hurt, and the two of them chatted away like she wasn’t even there. Grace had that way about her. Making everyone feel as though they were the most important person in her life, and at that moment, Chad probably was. He finished up with the connections just about the time the nurse aid brought Grace her food tray.

“Oh, Mercy Sakes”, piped Grace. “Here I thought I was going to have to starve to death and not get to watch tv, but once again miracles do happen.” She turned her attention to the aide, standing there with the tray. “You look like an angel sent from heaven, just bring that right on over here and let me see what you got.”

Grace lifted the plate cover slowly, peeking inside, as the aide stood nervously waiting her approval. “Oh my goodness! Mashed potatoes and gravy! Honey, you have made this old girl one happy camper this evening. God bless you! Charity, did you tell her I wanted mashed potatoes and gravy?”

Charity looked at Chad and Grace and shrugged her shoulders. “No, wasn’t me. I told you I didn’t know what they were having today. I guess you just got lucky.”

“No, I aint’ lucky,” Grace said in a more quiet tone. “I am blessed”

“I won’t argue with that,” said Charity. Chad began to gather up his tools and walked toward the door.

“It’s break time for me girls, you enjoy your meal now Miss Grace,” Chad turned toward Charity as he opened the door. “You are probably hungry too Charity. Wanna go down to the cafeteria and get a bite to eat? You can tell me what you

have been up to for the last ten years.”

“Well, I don’t know, I should stay here with Grace...”

“Nope, you get on out here,” said Grace, wiping her mouth with her paper napkin. “I am fine and this taste so good, and Chad’s got this tv humming so I am set for the evening. Go on now”

Charity’s stomach had been growling a bit, so she decided she would accept the invitation.

They proceeded down the ‘all too familiar’ hallway to the cafeteria without speaking much. Charity noticed that Chad was not wearing a wedding band. Not that she made it a point to check out every man’s ring finger, but for some reason, she did notice this time. Charity had made up her mind that her companion days were over. She had had enough heartbreak and tragedy that she decided to keep that door to her life closed. But the thought of having a conversation with someone different for a change was a little exciting. She only hoped that Chad would not remember too much about her history at the hospital. Chad opened the door for Charity and she stepped into the cafeteria. Just the smell of the place brought back so many memories. The same table was still there by the window where she and her husband sat every day for lunch. The same tile on the floor, the same napkin holders on the tables, the same trays stacked at the cafeteria line. The room just about overwhelmed her and just for a second, she thought she might be sick but Chad interrupted.

“Charity, you look you are about to faint.” He grinned real big. “I told you that you were hungry, come on, pick whatever you want. Dinner is on me!”

1.12

Hope reached the back door to her mother’s house and retrieved the key from its secret hiding place. She slowly opened the door knowing that Miss Kitty would probably try to bolt for freedom. Faith followed behind her and laid her purse and keys on the counter. Sure enough Miss Kitty was glad to see them. She purred and purred and did figure eights through their ankles as they decided wh

at to do next. It was evening now, and they hadn’t eaten all day.

“I will feed Miss Kitty and see what mom has in the fridge if that’s all right with you,” said Hope, taking the cat food and pouring it into the bowl.

“Sounds good to me. I think I will run upstairs to Charity’s room to see if I can find something to lounge around in. I am sure she wouldn’t mind if I borrowed some jogging pants and tee shirt. I have had this suit on since I left the airport.”

Hope finished filling Miss Kitty’s bowl and petted her while she ate. For a moment, she thought she would like to have a cat, then she remembered the annoying dog that lived beside her and decided that might not be a good idea. Life was too complicated as it is, why bring another problem into the picture. She opened the refrigerator door to find it neatly stacked with food supplements, a gallon of milk, some orange juice and a few vegetables. Well, it looked like pizza would be a good choice, so she started looking for the phone book.

Faith reached Charity’s room and opened her closet to see if she could find something comfortable to put on. She didn’t see much in the way of comfort. Just scrubs and more scrubs. She was going to close the closet door when something caught her eye. A piece of newspaper was hanging over the edge of a box on the overhead shelf. It was faded and old

and looked like it needed to be tossed in the trash can. She reached overhead to pull it out and the whole box came crashing down right on top of her.

"Faith! What are you doing up there?" yelled Hope from the kitchen. "Are you alright? I hope you are not making a mess because I don't feel like cleaning today."

Faith sat down in the floor to straighten the newspapers and pick up the contents of the box. She couldn't help herself but to look through the items that were there. In the pictures she recognized a younger Charity and a handsome young man standing beside her. The tiny box that housed two wedding bands was faded yellow. An old wallet, some keys, and a hospital ID tag were sealed in a small plastic bag. Faith turned her attention to the old newspaper and began reading. The headlines on the front page showed a picture of the hospital emergency entrance with police caution tape all around the exits. The windows in the front were broken and glass was all over the sidewalk. There was a wreath lying on the ground beside the hospital curb.

Faith read further down the page and was saddened by what she saw.

"Hope! Come up here! You got to see this!"

1.13

Chad pushed the dinner tray to the center of the table and leaned back in his chair, holding his stomach in his hands. "One more bite and I think I will explode. I can't believe I ate all of that. You know the food in this place is not that good, but sometimes it beats opening a can of spaghettios. I am sorry I ate so fast, you still got a lot left on your tray."

"I guess I wasn't really that hungry after all," said Charity. "And you are right it's not that good anyway." She hesitated for a moment, then couldn't resist the temptation to find out more about why he was eating spaghettios. "And just why are you eating spaghettios? Doesn't your wife like to cook?" She knew that was a nosy question, but it wasn't like they were best friends or anything, so she didn't have anything to lose.

"Well, no actually she doesn't like to cook, and I hope whoever she is cooking for now knows how to order Chinese or they will starve to death." He chuckled and leaned forward on the table. He took his fork and turned it over and over in his hand.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Charity felt her face turn a little red. "I didn't know, I just assumed..."

"Yea, well, it's a long story" Chad laid the fork down. "You know when we were dating Kelly was so excited that I worked in a hospital. She kept talking about how someday I would be a doctor and we would have this big house and go on trips and well...she had it all figured out. I love this hospital, but I didn't have the money or time to become a doctor. I did take some classes and got my EMT license. I even substitute some times for the ambulance drivers. But that wasn't enough prestige for Kelly. She was embarrassed to tell someone that I was in maintenance or transport. She bought me some scrubs to wear around the house in case we had company and she told everyone I was working on my 'degree'. I loved her so I let her do whatever made her happy. But after a few years, she realized that I loved my job and I make good money here. It's not a

fortune, but it pays the bills. Anyway, I came home from work one day to find a note on the bed saying that she was leaving because we had different 'views' on what we wanted out of life. The next week I received divorced papers. We sold the house, the furniture-everything except Max, the dog and I have him with me. After we settled everything, I moved over to Elkview and I really like it there.

Been there about a year now"

"Elkview? Grace's daughter lives in Elkview, do you know her? Her name is Hope Wingate."

"No, I don't guess I have run into her, but I work a lot just to keep my mind busy. After I get finished here, I go over to the ambulance station and help them for a few hours, then get home, go to bed, get up and start all over. Well, enough about the boring life of Chad. What is keeping you busy these days besides Grace?

Charity looked at the floor. She had tried to forget all the bad things that had happened to her in the past, and she had been careful to avoid any conversations that would lead that way. But since Chad has been so gracious to spill his guts, she knew she owed him something in return.

1.14

The brittle newspaper was stretched out on the floor and Hope and Faith were hovering over it. They began reading about the events that happened at the same hospital where their mother was now. A man had charged into the emergency entrance late one evening and opened fire at several doctors and nurses and then shot himself right in front of the police who had just arrived on the scene. One male nurse was killed and six other men and women were injured. The whole thing was chaos and all the hospital staff was stunned. They later learned that the killer's child had died four days earlier in the emergency room. His young son had been hit by a car and had a severe head injury. They tried to save him but there was nothing they could do. The man was so distraught and hurt that he went into a tirade and the hospital security had to make him leave. After the child's funeral, the man came back to the hospital evidently to release his anger and pay them all back for not saving his little boy. "Such a sad story," said Faith, "you know, now that I am reading this, I remember that happening. Wasn't mom admitted into the hospital a couple of months after that? I remember them working on the hospital doors and we had to enter the back side for a long while."

Hope kept reading, "Did you see the name of the person who was killed here? It was Clint Evans. Wasn't Charity's husband named Clint? You know she never talks about her past and we really don't know that much about her. And it was right after this that she came to work for mom. Remember? Mom liked her so much while she was there she wanted to take her home and that is basically what she did."

"Well, I tried to get mom to let us interview some more nurses, but she had her

mind set on Charity, and you know, mom was right about her. She has been a blessing to mom and us for these past ten years. I don't think either of us could take care of mom the way she does."

Hope folded the newspaper and kept looking through the rest of the papers in the floor. She noticed a court document and some legal papers. She didn't feel right about snooping in other peoples' stuff, but she couldn't help herself. The papers had Charity's name on them and they were bankruptcy filings.

"Oh, wow," Hope spoke slowly, while she read, "Charity had to file bankruptcy right after that. I bet when her husband was killed he must not have had much insurance or something. This petition says she gave up her house, her car,everything. She had nothing left. I don't know how she survived all that. You know, this makes me think of my own situation. When Tom passed away he already had everything all taken care of. It didn't take away the grief, but at least I didn't have to worry about a place to stay. She is one tough lady, and I guess that is what mom picked up on while she was in the hospital."

The doorbell rang and the pizza man was waiting for his money. Faith looked at Hope with a puzzled look like "who is that?" Hope got up off the floor and headed toward the stairs.

"There wasn't much in the fridge, so I ordered some food. You want to pick all this up and put it back where you found it?"

1.15

The cafeteria was almost empty now, as Charity looked around the room. Chad was still leaned back in his chair waiting for some feedback from her. He hadn't really talked about his personal life to anyone since his divorce, but Charity was easy to talk to. She was at least ten years older than him, so he felt safe in sharing his woes with her. She kept staring at the table next to the win

dow where she had spent many days eating lunch with her husband.

"Well, Chad, I know you remember what happened here at the hospital before I left. You hadn't been here that long had you?"

He looked at the floor, and then back up at Charity. He could see the sadness in her eyes as she spoke. "I think I had been here about a year, but I wasn't working that week. I had taken off a few days to visit some family. And when I came back it was all 'hush-hush'. But I know that was a tragic day for you. I didn't know you that well, but everyone else did. All I remember people saying was that you were a wonderful nurse and everyone loved you here."

She blushed at the flattery, and in a way that made the conversation a little easier.

"Well, I don't know about that, but I do love being a nurse. My husband and I both worked here and I was supposed to work that day, but I didn't feel well, so we changed shifts. If I would have just worked that day instead of him, he would still be alive."

Chad reached over and touched her hand just for a moment. "Charity, you can't say that. You know you can't change anything or torture yourself with 'what-ifs'."

Charity stood up and pushed her chair under the table. "I know, I shouldn't have said that, I'm sorry, I better get back to check on Grace. She is probably watching TV and wondering where I am."

Chad followed her and kept talking as they walked down the hall. "That Grace is some kind of lady isn't she? Have you been working for her since you left here?"

"She is a life saver-literally. When I came back to work a couple of months after the incident, she had been admitted here and I was assigned to her room. From the first moment I walked in the door, something changed. She didn't know what had happened or anything about me, and she didn't ask. But as I was caring for her, she was really caring for me. I was a real mess after I lost my husband and I thought I couldn't make it. But Grace told me every day that she was praying for me to find peace with it. She told me that God had a way of placing people in our paths just at the right time we needed them. And she was sure right about that. She had to stay in the hospital for a couple of weeks and the day she was going home, she offered me a job. I couldn't believe it. I met with her daughters and then the next thing you know I had moved in with her. That was ten years ago and I still love her dearly. I guess you can say, 'I was saved by Grace.' "

1.16

Faith tossed the empty pizza box in the garbage and plopped back down on the couch. Hope was petting Miss Kitty who had settled down in her lap and began purring.

"You know, I was just thinking about something," said Faith as she tried to get comfortable.

"When mother doesn't need this house any more we should just give it to Charity. I don't think she has anywhere else to go and this has

been her home for a long time. I don't think she even has any family close by. I have never heard her mention anyone. You know while she was taking care of mom in the hospital that time, I was kind of worried about her. She was really quiet and didn't talk much. But you know mom, you can't stay sad or mad around her. She will pray that bad mood off of you every time. So, what do you think? About the house?"

Hope picked up Miss Kitty and put her down in the floor and tried to wipe the cat hair off her hot pink jogging pants.

"That is fine with me. I agree, we are both settled in our own homes and I know that is what mom would want. She has said in the past that she wanted to give Charity something special before she leaves this world. She might as well do the paper work now and make it all nice and legal. We can talk to her about it when she gets home. I really love the house I am in now, except for the barking dog. I have tried to catch the owner home, but there is never anyone there. Sometimes there is a light on late at night, but I wouldn't dare try to walk across that yard with that monster dog on the loose. He stays on his side of the fence, but he starts barking just as soon as I pull in the driveway."

Faith tried once again to get comfortable on the couch. "You know, we really don't have to stay here tonight. The only reason we are here is because mom wanted us to stop our little cat fight and be friends again. I think we already made up didn't we?"

Hope threw a pillow at Faith and stood up. "Yes, I am sorry I got so upset over something so stupid, and I promise I will try to keep an open mind about my social life."

Faith threw the pillow back at Hope. "And I promise not to fix you up with any more robots. Come on, I will drop you off at your house and go on home myself. This suit is killing me and if I have to look at those pink pants of yours for ten more minutes, I might just lose it. Not to mention I haven't seen Jim yet since I got back in town. I missed him so much. I'll go start the car and you can call Charity and tell her where we are if mom needs us."

They gathered up their purses, made sure Miss Kitty was okay and headed for the door.

1.17

"It's been great seeing you again Chad," said Charity as she stopped at Grace's door.

Chad turned his maintenance phone back on checked his note pad for his next project.

"Hey you take care and tell Miss Grace it was a pleasure meeting her. I guess I better get back to work. I just have a couple of more things to do and then I think I will head home. I don't really like working on Sundays, but since I don't have much of a life anyway, it keeps me busy. I don't like to have too much time on my hands. It was good seeing you too. I am glad that everything has worked out for you. If I can ever help you guys out in any way, just holler."

"I will keep that in mind, and thanks for dinner, next time we will have spaghetti's,"

Chad grinned real big and shook his head as he continued on down the hallway. Grace was sitting up in her bed watching TV. "Oh there you are," she said to Charity. "Did you have a nice dinner? That Chad is so nice and handsome, don't you think?"

Charity began checking her meds on the IV pole and fixing the covers on her bed. "Yes, Grace, he is nice and handsome and 'young'. We had a good little chat and now he is on his way. End of story, so don't be doing no praying for me a man or anything like that. You know I don't want one."

Grace chuckled a little and didn't tell her she had been praying for someone to find a man, but it wasn't her.

"Okay, I will just pray for you to be happy, peaceful and successful. Where are my girls? I thought they were coming to see me?"

Charity stopped what she was doing and looked at Grace and spoke softly to her. "Uh, Grace, they were here right after we got you in your room. Do you remember talking to them? You told them to go on home to your house to take care of Miss Kitty."

"Oh, yes.... I remember," she said slowly, "what was I thinking. Is today still Sunday?"

"Yes, it is still Sunday, but not for long, it is getting a little dark outside. I bet you are worn out from all the tests and these nurses running in and out. How about you getting settled down and try to get some sleep. I will just get situated in this recliner right here beside you in case you need anything. Do you want something to drink?"

"No, I think I will just rest my eyes for a little while. If I snore too loud, wake me up."

"Grace, you don't snore," Charity said, laughing a little at the old sweetheart.

"Well, if 'you' snore, I will wake 'you' up, how's that?" Grace grinned and stretched out her frail little body as best she could. Charity leaned over Grace and gave her a soft hug and kissed her on the forehead.

"See you in the morning sweetie, you will be home before you know it," said Charity. She stepped away from her bed and sat down in the chair. She was a little worried that Grace had forgotten about her daughters being there. She decided to speak to the doctor about it in the morning before they went home. Before too long, the room was quiet, except for both of them snoring lightly in the dark.

1.18

Faith and Hope chatted like the sisters they were all the way to Hope's home in Elkview. They had even made plans for Faith to pick her up so they could go to the hospital the next day to see their mother and let her see for herself they were pals again. They knew her illness was more serious than she had been letting on and they didn't want to upset her any longer. It was already dark by the time they approached Hope's neighborhood and they were still chatting when Faith turned in the driveway.

"Hey, Wait!", yelled Hope, "Where are you going?"

"What?" said Faith, "We're here right?"

"No, this is the wrong driveway! Mine is the next one. This is the house where the big dog is. Hurry and back out!"

"Oh it's okay, no one is home. Hope, I bet you a hundred dollars that a single guy lives here. Look at this place. No plants on the porch, no lawn ornaments, no outside decorations of any kind. You need to check this guy out."

"Faith, you are crazy, I told you that I would keep an open mind about dating again, but I am not going to stalk my neighbor, now let's get out of here."

Hope was just about to panic, and before Faith could back up and turn around, a truck pulled in the driveway right behind them. The dog ran off the porch to the gate and started barking at them.

"Oh no! Now what do we do. These people will think we are trying to get in their house or rob it or something. Keep moving a little bit backwards. Maybe they will think we are turning around and let us out."

"Hope, calm down, you wanted to talk to them about the dog, so now is just a good a time as any. Just sit tight, let me do the talking"

The truck stopped behind them and they heard the engine stop. Faith and Hope waited in the car as the driver got out of the vehicle and walked slowly toward them. Faith rolled the window down just enough to see the person who had them blocked in.

"Uh,,,,Hello sir," Faith said. "My name is Faith and my sister Hope lives next door and she is here with me and I was trying to pull into her driveway, but somehow I ended up in yours." Faith chuckled with embarrassment and Hope slumped down in the passenger seat trying to hide her pink jogging pants.

"Did you say your sister lives next door? And her name is Hope? Would it be Hope Wingate?"

Hope's eyes widened and she looked at Faith and shrugged her shoulders, as if to say, 'I don't know?'

"Well, as a matter of fact, yes, it is Hope Wingate. She is right here." Faith rolled the window completely down and the gentleman leaned down to look at both of them. They saw his hospital ID tag and saw the name Chad on it. Faith continued, "and how did you know that?"

"I work at the hospital and I ran into Charity. She told me that her patient's daughter Hope lived out here in Elkview and she asked if I knew her. I told her I didn't think we had met. And to think all this time, Hope, you lived right next door. Small world, huh?"

1.19

Hope leaned over the console and looked up out of the window so she could see his face. His eyes were the bluest she had ever seen. His curly blond hair was barely visible under the ball cap. He was a little older than her and she felt her face get flushed. She was glad it was dark in the car and hoped he hadn't noticed.

"Well, uh, um, I was going to come over to say hi, but you are hardly ever home." Hope's voice sounded like a school girl.

"Uh, Chad...that's your name right?," Faith smiled as she pointed to his id tag.

"Hope was wanting to talk to you about your dog. You see..."

"OH, Chad!, Yes, I , Uh..." Hope interrupted. "I just wanted to tell you that is the prettiest dog I have ever seen. What breed is that?" Faith gave her a puzzled glance, but then turned around and went along with her 'socially open-minded sister'.

"Yes, that is a great dog," said Faith, "he greets Hope every day when he sees her. He barks and jumps up and down and..."

Chad stood up straight and looked at Max on the porch. He was sitting still now that his owner was home. He was waiting there patiently like he always did and Chad felt a wave of guilt come over him.

"I'm so sorry about Max. He is a great dog. He is a full blooded German Shepherd and he is just a big baby. I know he barks a lot, and I know it is my fault. He is used to having someone with him here during the day, but since I am here alone now, he just wants attention. I have been thinking about trying to see if I could find him another home. I know it's not fair to him."

Hope could hear the remorse in his voice and felt kind of sorry that she had been so angry about the poor animal.

"Well maybe I could come over some evening and throw him a stick or something," Hope let out a giggle and Chad leaned back down to look at her through the window.

"You know that probably wouldn't be a bad idea. Maybe if he got to meet you, he would quit barking at you. But I know you will probably be busy, with your mom still in the hospital."

"Yes, we are going back to see her first thing in the morning. We stopped by her house to feed the cat and check on things, but there is nothing like sleeping in your own bed."

Faith cut in the conversation. "We will probably be there all day tomorrow. Maybe we will run into you."

Chad looked right at Hope this time making sure they made eye contact. "That sounds great, how about having lunch in the cafeteria and we can work on a plan to get this dog under control. The food's not that great, but it's better than

spaghettios.”

Hope smiled and sat back in the seat, “Sounds like a plan! See you tomorrow.” Chad kept standing there looking at the both of them and Faith put the car in reverse.

“Oh, I better let you out,” he chuckled, “yea, see you tomorrow.”

The truck backed up and Faith backed out into the street and pulled back into Hope’s driveway. She turned off the engine and put her hands on the wheel. They both turned to each other at the same time and started giggling and laughing like teenagers.

“Oh my goodness,” said Faith, “maybe there is hope for you after all!”

1.20

Grace opened her eyes to see Charity sitting in the lounge chair next to her bed. Charity was snoring and Grace remembered what she had told her, but she didn’t go through with waking her up. Charity worked hard and any bit of rest she got was well deserved. Grace smiled and pulled the blanket up close to her neck. For some reason she could not get warm, and wished she had another blanket, but she would not wake up her companion just for something like that. She rolled over on her side as much as she could without assistance and looked out the window. The night was clear and the stars were out in full view. She looked into the sky and immediately thought about the heavens. What a grand place the earth is, but she realized that her eyes hadn’t even seen the best part yet.

{The heavens were busy in preparation. Excitement filled the vast expanse and a thousand voices of joy filled the air. Praises rang out loud and soft at the same time and every joyful and praise worthy song that had ever been created was being sung simultaneously and in harmony by generations and generations. The light from the center was so great and heavy that it covered the heavens from top to bottom. A voice came through the light and said, “You are coming home today.” Angels were standing at attention to greet the new arrival with their arms open wide. Peace and happiness was flowing from their faces. Everything paused and was silent for just a moment, just for a breath of time.....}

Her mind drifted in and out between consciousness and sleep and the most peaceful feeling came over her. She knew it was special times like this that she felt God’s presence so she took advantage of the moment.

“God, I thank you for this wonderful day you gave me. I thank you for caring people that have made my life comfortable and productive. I thank you that my two precious daughters are doing well and that you have your hand upon their lives. I pray that you keep them strong and close together for all times. I thank you for the life I have lived and for all the good things you have placed in it to help me be a servant to you. There is nothing too hard for you and I trust you

with everything I have. I thank you that I get to go home today.”
She closed her eyes once again and as she drifted off, she realized that the beeping sounds didn’t bother her any longer. As a matter of fact, she didn’t hear them at all.

THE END.