

## Namesake

By Bo Gordy-Stith

Thursday, September 18, 1997 grabbed my attention, shouting the first day of fall. As I walked along the gravel drive, the morning breeze felt pregnant with the memories of countless past first days of fall. The cloudless sky turned the page of yesterday's Indian summer to fall's sudden chill. I winced in the dazzling sunlight as I crouched to pick up the paper, suddenly on my guard for something new.

The weather charged all my senses to a new awareness that morning. A young maple stood just off the corner of our house. For the first time, I noticed its green leaves shining with a hint of gold along their edges. After a long summer, the acrid tinge of smoke betrayed a neighbor staving off the morning cool with a fire. The still air echoed life awakening in the distance. A loon mourned summer's passing from the water below the house, and a chain saw whined in the woods. A school bus ground uphill, laden with laughter and a chorus of young voices. The smell of frying bacon nearby tasted so strong it made my stomach growl.

The morning breeze bore a clarifying chill with its final testimony to summer. Autumn had always signaled a changing of an ancient guard for me. When I was a boy, the cool air meant the excitement of football games after tortuous two-a-day August practices. Time to play ball. That Thursday as I breathed deeply the fragrant, welcome sting, I had no idea the clock had already begun counting down toward a very different kind of autumn game.

The thought of the morning air chilling my voice called me back inside to breakfast and a fresh pot of coffee. My wife and I planned to sing that evening at a country church across the bay. We sang at concerts and revivals in the area for different churches every other month or so, in addition to singing in the choir and leading the youth group at our own church.

Both of us grew up in a community of people who trusted in God. We took for granted a connection between faith and everyday life. My faith neither insulated me from life's inevitable hardships nor immunized me from nagging doubts about a growing list of unresolved questions. But every now and again I sensed a deep connection with God, a voice calling, sometimes taunting, from a place always just beyond my reach.

A bird perched on the \$40 squirrel-proof feeder that I bought at the Ace Hardware store in town. So far, it had lived up to its claim, though I knew that the squirrels would win. They wanted the food more than I wanted to keep them away. Something in me needed them to break through my Maginot line.

My job carried me into a clinical world of chemistry and commerce. I sold medical testing equipment throughout Maryland and Delaware, though I didn't typically travel a lot. The pace of technology required me to research the equipment and the people who used it. My sales were always big, resulting from countless hours of fine-tuning to get the right piece of equipment into the hands of healers.

I brought to the job both a passion for saving lives and learning what makes people tick. I was a good salesman, but a better preacher of the gospel of medical technology. Maybe that's a strange mix for a Christian. But I suppose God wouldn't have given us the ability without meaning for us to use it.

"Thanks for the coffee, Honey," my wife, Laura, said to me as I came in with the paper. "I've fixed us both a bagel. What took you so long?"

"Fall's arrived," I told her.

"Just this morning? Did it make the headlines?"

“No, I can feel it in the air.” I smiled at the woman who shared more than life with me. In college, her fiery red hair and graceful figure kindled a similar fire in me. But after fifteen years of marriage, the beauty of her spirit stoked a deeper, hotter flame. “Don’t you know what fall feels like?”

“I’m quite sure you do,” she said with a laugh. “Now give me the front page.”

We rarely made time for a big breakfast. Several chickadees fought over the best spot at the feeder outside our window. Laura managed the branch of a bank in town. One of two major sorrows I had experienced together with Laura was our inability to have children. After four miscarriages, the last one six years ago, we lost the courage to hope in new life again and shifted into high gear at work.

“Have you looked over the song list for tonight?” she asked over the paper.

“Yes,” I finished the bagel and downed the rest of the coffee, “I’ll pick you up at the bank at 6:15. Will we have time for supper?”

“Of course not!” she laughed as I kissed her forehead and plunged down the hallway and into Thursday.

We stopped for a chicken salad at McDonald’s on the way to Hopewell Methodist Church in Centreville, Maryland, eating as we drove. The words to the song “Rain Down on Me” eluded us, so we practiced the song between bites. The musty smell of the church met us at the door forty-five minutes before the concert began, and we greeted Pamela Adkins, our pianist. After setting up the sound equipment, running the starts of songs and all of “Rain Down,” we found ourselves with a little time to spare. Laura wondered off in search of some water while I strolled outside for a few minutes to collect myself.

A graveyard surrounded the church on three sides. It didn’t take me long to see it was an old one, with some headstones dating into the early 1800’s. I remembered standing in another graveyard with my brother six months before, the week after Easter, while death mocked me. At first I watched the sun set over a line of trees at the edge of a field across the street. But the evening breeze called me to attend to the names of these saints while I prepared to sing in their church.

The grass near the graves had been neglected, though a mower had cut a swath between them, here and there. More than likely, no one remembered anyone buried here in this tired churchyard cemetery, itself a relic of another time. Those who would have cared to leave flowers had long since died themselves. The sunset gilded the blackening treetops to the west, and I could hear cars crunching gravel in the parking lot. Yet something called me to remain.

I read the stones: Mary Williams, loving mother, Stuart Henry, Edward Tanner. Here was a tiny stone for an infant who lived only a month in 1913. Jonathan Debnam died two days after his wife, Edna, passed from this life, in September of 1885. How long had they been married? The stones whispered stories of and dreams realized and lost forever. The air chilled as the light faded. I could hear Pamela beginning to play. The stained glass windows shone crimson and gold in the evening air. It was time to go.

As I walked back toward the church I couldn’t resist a final look at a skewed stone illuminated by the sanctuary light. I glanced down and stopped cold. Then I crouched to touch the weathered letters, faded by time into the marble. Laura called my name from the front of the church. I stared again in disbelief at the name on the headstone: Michael Edward Lothrop. My name.

A couple of hours later, we drove home through the night in silence. As we crossed the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, Laura put a hand on my shoulder.

“I guess we didn’t rehearse ‘Rain Down’ enough, huh?”

“I’m sorry, Kid,” I said without glancing at her. I was relieved to be getting this conversation over with.

“You didn’t seem yourself tonight, that’s all. It wasn’t just dropping the words.” Only the occasional hiss of cars overtaking us broke the steady drone of the engine. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, Laura.” I held the wheel tightly with both hands. “Look, it just wasn’t my night, okay?” Something in me wouldn’t let me broach the subject of the grave, though it had been all I could think about. Cemeteries were something of a sore spot between us, since genealogy had become my latest obsession.

Six months before that September night, both my parents had died in a car accident, while driving to see Laura and me for Easter weekend. We drove to their home in Preston, Maryland, and buried them while spring arrived for the rest of the world and the church celebrated the resurrection of Christ.

Through the emotional fog of that terrible time, two realities came into clear focus for me. As my brother and I lingered at the cemetery to watch the workers lower both caskets into the ground, death suddenly frightened me, now that our generation was next in line. And as I renewed friendships with distant relatives who gathered to grieve from all over the country, I longed to know more about my parents and their family. Of course I had no way of knowing then, or six months later, how life would bring together my newfound fear of death and this obsession with genealogy.

At first, I found some family information on the Internet and started putting together what little I knew about my family history. That led to letters and phone calls to assorted aunts and uncles to find out what they knew. By the time I realized the huge scope of the project I was hooked. Family Bibles, old photo albums and letters yellowed with age led me to libraries, research centers, and, of course, weedy cemeteries.

Laura went with me at first, but soon tired of the gnats and the humidity, having avoided altogether being bitten by the family research bug. She had come to resent my Saturday afternoon “field trips” to the library or Mormon Family Center. And she especially hated my longer trips to find obscure headstones in forgotten, out of the way graveyards. She already thought I took the family history business way too seriously, so I saw no use in adding fuel to the fire by telling her all I could think about while we sang that night was the grave.

But I could think about nothing else.

Seeing my name on one of those windblown slabs of marble had unnerved me. But what ate at me more was not being able to see what else was on that headstone. I had been out of both daylight and time when I discovered the marker. When was the birth date? When was the death date? Certainly, I could return to the cemetery and find out. But what in the world did it mean? Or did it mean anything?

I knew from the little research I had already done that Lothrop was a pretty common surname. I had even come across a few ancestors named Michael Lothrop and Edward Lothrop. But Michael Edward Lothrop? What were the odds of that happening? This guy, whoever he was, had used my exact name, years before I ever existed. I don’t believe in reincarnation. But this defied the rules of chance. This gravestone had to be some kind of burning bush. A wake up call from God.

“Michael! You don’t even know what I just said, do you?” Laura called through the crowd of my thoughts.

“I’m sorry, Sweetheart,” I said as I pulled into our drive. I turned off the car and took her hand in the sudden quiet. “I got a little blown away before the concert tonight and I need some time to sort out what happened. Then I want you to help me figure out what it means.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, I think.” I tried to laugh. “I just need some time to sort it out.”

“This sounds more involved than running ‘Rain Down’ a few more times with Pamela.”

“Yeah, it will be.”

Friday dawned with a gray, cold drizzle. I finagled a late lunch meeting with a client across the Bay near Centreville. After we met, I drove through the rain to the Hopewell Cemetery. I got there a little past four o’clock. The previous evening, when the fall season had graced my senses with color and fragrance, the setting sun had bathed the churchyard in liquid gold. That afternoon as I turned into the empty parking lot and looked out over the valley of headstones, the stark trees mourned summer’s too-soon passing and the wind gusted now and then with a wail.

I am not given much to superstition. Yet an inner voice cautioned me about finding what else was carved into the gravestone I discovered the night before. “God,” I prayed in the silence as the engine died, “if you’re talking, help me listen. But if this isn’t you, then help me know an imposter when I see one.”

It took me a while to get oriented and retrace my steps in the cemetery in order to find the headstone again. For a moment, I wondered if I had simply imagined the whole thing. I almost laughed at myself, until I saw my name again. The wind gusted and turned my cheap umbrella inside out. After fixing the umbrella, I crouched down to read the old letters:

MICHAEL EDWARD LOTHROP

APRIL 17, 1860                      NOVEMBER 1, 1897

*Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth:  
that they may rest from their labours;  
and their works do follow them. Rev. 14:13*

I shivered in the cold. I read the words carefully again, but there was no mistake. My birth date was April 17, 1960, exactly 100 years after this Michael Edward Lothrop was born. I had no idea that day when I would die, but the 100-year anniversary of this guy’s death was in six weeks and one day. The aging of the carved letters distorted the dates just enough so that they almost looked like 1960 and 1997. My birth date – and the day I was supposed to die?

“Get a grip, Mike,” I said to myself. “This might be some kind of sign, but God doesn’t exactly work this way, and this guy’s life and death have nothing to do with your life.”

“Can I help you with something?” a voice called from behind me. “Are you okay?”

I scrambled up to turn around and face a man in a black raincoat and hat. His round face looked red, and I saw behind him a brown station wagon parked beside my car.

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” he grinned. “We don’t get a lot of visitors here, especially in the rain. I’m the pastor of Hopewell Church. My name’s Fred Waggoner,” he said, extending a plump, wet hand.

“Oh, that’s alright,” I said as we shook hands. “I’m Mike Lothrop. I sang here last night and wanted to take another look at one of your gravestones. I hope it’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you in your raincoat, Mike.” He smiled for the first time. “You and your wife were such a blessing to us; your singing is a gift from God.” Then he added, “Did you find someone you know buried here?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said as I blocked his view of the marker. “I wanted to get the information here and add it to my research.” The wind picked up again and I noticed that the rain had tapered off. “And thanks so much, Pastor Waggoner, for inviting us to sing us last night.”

“Please, call me Fred.” He leaned his head over to get a better look at the gravestone. “Don’t tell me your middle name is Edward.”

“Fraid so,” I told him, shrugging my shoulders and trying to smile. I felt like a boy caught for skipping school.

“That’s something you don’t see everyday.” He pushed his horn-rimmed glasses up his nose and looked at me. “It’s too cold to stand out here in the rain. If you’ve seen all you care to see of the inscription, come inside the church with me and I’ll show you the church records. I’ll bet you can find out some more about your ancestor there.”

“Thanks, Pastor Fred, I’d like that very much.”

“Please, call me Fred,” he said again, and turned toward the church.

My eyes took a second or two to adjust to the dim light of the sanctuary. The floor creaked loudly under the worn red carpet and echoed from the far walls as the wind drove the rain hard against the stained glass windows.

“I can heat up some water for tea, if you like,” Fred called over his shoulder as he led me through a side door and into a short hallway. “We have a secretary, but she goes home at noon.”

“Thanks. I’d like some tea, if you don’t mind.”

“No trouble,” he said as he opened a door into a cluttered office. “We keep everything in here, as you can see. This room is part office, part study, and part church library. Plus a Sunday school class meets here. Make yourself at home and I’ll get those records.” He cleared a stack of binders from the dark, well-worn table in front of one of the chairs. I noticed that he was sweating, in spite of the chill.

“Listen, I really appreciate your going to the trouble. I didn’t mean to interrupt your afternoon.”

“It’s okay, Mike. Don’t you know pastors cater to folks for a living?” He grunted as he reached for an old record book on a high shelf. “Besides, that’s what we keep these records for – to honor the past and to stay connected in some way.”

He laughed as he paged through the book. “You should see the lady who keeps our records. We’ve been using the same book for over a hundred years and I think she’s been entering every name and event since the start. Won’t let anyone else have anything to do with it. I love to goad folks who tell me they can’t make a Sunday because of the weather. ‘Mrs. Emma’s here, sure enough’ I say, ‘Want her to drive over and pick you up?’”

“You sure she won’t mind my looking through it?”

“Oh no,” he plopped the large book down in front of me and shook off his raincoat, “so long as you don’t smudge the entries,” he said with a wink. “There’s your Michael Edward Lothrop. Can I take your raincoat?”

“Sure, thanks,” I mumbled and slowly removed my coat, mesmerized by the ancient entry from another time. Fred took the coat from my hands as I slowly sank into the chair, not taking my eyes off the entry, as if it would disappear if I looked away.

The phone rang in another room. “Excuse me,” Fred called as he hung the coats on a hook on the door and walked out into the hallway.

Michael Edward Lothrop, buried in the church cemetery Thursday, November 4, 1897, at four o’clock in the afternoon. Died November 1, 1897. Survived by his wife of 15 years, Elizabeth Cannon Lothrop, his parents, Edward and Lucy Lothrop, of Norwich, Connecticut, and brother, Edward Lothrop, Jr., also of Norwich.

I flipped through the marriage entries and caught sight of his name again as I scanned down the page of 1882 marriages. Michael Edward Lothrop and Elizabeth Joanna Cannon, Married here Sunday, June 4, 1882, after church, by the Rev. Conrad Jefferson.

I felt my heart beating in my throat. Laura and I were married on Friday, June 18, 1982.

“It’s your wife” Fred startled me as he leaned into the quiet room. “She called here looking for you. Sounds like you’re in trouble.

“Hi, Honey.”

“Mike, do you realize we’re supposed to have dinner at Chris and Kim’s in half an hour? I called your work several times before I found someone who knew you were out for the rest of the afternoon in Easton. I took a wild guess about the church. Did we forget any of the sound equipment or something?”

“No, it’s not that. I had a lunch meeting with a client in Easton and I stopped by the church on the way back.” I didn’t want to get into this with her. I never quite knew what to say during these scenes. “I’m sorry I forgot about the dinner, Sweetheart.”

Laura sighed, exasperated. “What in the world are you doing at the church, Mike?”

“I, ah, (oh, why not?) I wanted to take another look at a grave marker here.”

“Mike, you’ve got to be kidding. I get so tired of this obsession of yours.”

“Well, this one’s a bit different, Laura.”

“They’re all different, Mike.” She spit the words into the receiver. “How long will it take you to get here?”

“I can be there in an hour. Give me the Wheeler’s number and I’ll call them, okay?”

“Sure, thanks.” She waited a second before biting. “So who’s the mystery ancestor worth snubbing our former friends?”

“Me.”

She laughed, then stopped short. “What do you mean?”

“Last night, before the concert, I saw a gravestone out here with my name on it. I wanted to see it again.”

Perhaps from the sound of my voice, she knew I wasn’t kidding. “Wow. So that’s what blew your mind last night?”

“You could say that.” A chicken feed truck rumbled by and shook the ground. “It drove me crazy last night because I saw it just before the concert and couldn’t find out anything else. Today it gets worse. The guy was born exactly a hundred years before my birth date. And I just found out he got married nearly a hundred years before we did.”

“Mike, why didn’t you tell me?”

This question departed from the usual script. I was still in the defensive mode. “It’s about graveyards, remember?”

“This isn’t genealogy, it’s... it’s... oh, I don’t know – it’s a Hitchcock movie or something. I’m afraid to ask when he died.”

“The centennial is in six weeks and a day. Want to come?”

“What do you think it means?”

“That’s what I need to talk with you about.” Pastor Fred leaned in the door and handed me a steaming styrofoam cup with a tea bag and a stirring stick in it, along with a napkin and a couple of pink Sweet and Lo sweetener packages. I tried to get his attention, but he disappeared down the hall.

I could hear Laura’s breathing over the phone. “Listen, I’m not feeling so hot.”

“Ha. Join the club.”

“No, I mean before this bombshell. Upset stomach or something. I’ll call Kim and beg off. Let’s make some soup and try to figure this out. Do they have records at the church? I assume that’s how you know about the wedding date.”

“Yeah, but there’s probably not much else.”

“Well, come on home, Mike, and be careful. You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m okay, Honey”

“I’m not sure I am.”

The inside of the car warmed me as I drove home under a darkening sky. My thoughts overwhelmed me to a state of mental numbness. At 37 years old, I had never given much thought to death, especially my own death. I felt crazy for taking this grave sighting too seriously and worried that I might not take it seriously enough. In less than 24 hours, the grave had turned my life completely inside out.

While crossing the north span of the Bay Bridge, the grandeur of the restless Chesapeake Bay caught my attention as the car climbed into the sky. “God, thank you for this view,” I prayed out loud. Ahead of me, the heavy sky lightened along the western horizon. The sun remained constant in spite of the clouds that prevented me from seeing it. Its light glowed everywhere, without piercing the darkness in any one place. I had driven this route so many times before and had always been more concerned with the traffic than the majesty unfolding below and around me in a world too beautiful to describe.

But this time I noticed. On this journey, racing home in the gathering darkness from an unsettling revelation in a graveyard, the vastness of sea and sky swallowed up my questions and placed me for a moment on the summit of the world. “Open my eyes, Lord. Shine your light on me. Help me see what you want me to see, and give me the courage to live beyond this fear. You are so much bigger than my trouble. Show me your way.”

Silence swallowed up my prayer, as always. But this silence was different. This silence was not the absence of sound, but the presence of awe. So for the rest of the drive, as I descended back to the land below, I savored the silence – and the presence.

The rain picked up late in the evening as Laura and I sat together by the fire. Every few minutes, a gust of wind rattled the storm windows, splattering them with rain.

“Now I can’t get that line from “Rain Down” out of my head,” I laughed. “*Rain down upon us like a mighty storm*,” I sang while Laura joined in and we both smiled.

“So what do you think this all means?” she asked me and blew gently over her cup of hot chocolate.

“Honestly?” I breathed in deeply and exhaled slowly. “I think it’s either the biggest coincidence in the world or some sort of sign.”

“What kind of sign? That you’re supposed to die?”

“Maybe it’s just to get my attention. I don’t know how this all works.”

“You know you’ve got a physical scheduled for Monday?” she said and ran her fingers through my hair.

I stared into the fire as the wood popped. “The thought has crossed my mind. But something tells me this isn’t just about dying.”

“I’m just not ready to let you go anytime soon. God can have you later.” She gave me a hug, and the windows lit up with lightening.

“That was on cue!” I laughed as the thunder echoed in the night.

For a moment, we watched the fire together in silence while the rain continued. Memories of my Mom and Dad flooded my mind so suddenly they took my breath away. Laura and I had enjoyed a close friendship with them, seeing them often when Dad was home. Two weekends before they were killed en route to see us, we met at the Chesapeake Inn for supper. Outside in the parking lot, Dad had asked me to ride with him on a short haul and of course I had said no. Not enough time.

“I wonder what he would have done differently had he known?” I asked the fire.

“What would anyone do? Death always catches us by surprise, even when we know its coming.”

“Do you ever think about death?”

“After this Easter, I think about Mom and Dad dying, especially when we get a late phone call.” Laura fell silent for a moment. “But I can’t think about my own death.”

“What do you mean?” I looked at her.

“I don’t have any category of experience to put death in,” she said, almost exasperated. “When I think of other people dying I think about how their death will affect my life. But my own death is beyond my ability even to imagine.”

“So you don’t ever wonder what it will be like?”

“I remember visiting my old elementary school, years after I attended there. They had torn down part of the old building to build a new school. It was late in the afternoon and I walked down the same sidewalk where I had played and waited for lunch and the memories were so real I even heard the sounds of my old schoolmates. Until I got to the point where the new sidewalk began and the memories stopped, suddenly, because I had no connection with the newer part of the building and grounds. That’s what thinking about death is like for me.”

“Maybe that’s what death is like for everyone – stepping off into a dark chasm. Like the edge of the world was for sailors who thought the world was flat.”

“Beyond this point there be monsters,” Laura said with an overdone accent.

I looked into the deep red glow of the embers. “But some of them sailed anyway.”

“No,” Laura looked into my eyes and suddenly kissed me, “that’s what life is like.”

Sunday dawned bright and colder as I readied myself for church. An upset stomach kept Laura up all night and she had decided to stay in bed. I downed coffee and a quick bowl of cereal while I paged through the Sunday school lesson when our pastor called.

“Hi, Sandy,” I said as I walked the empty bowl and juice glass over to the sink, “how are you this morning?”



"I'm fine, Mike. I wanted to let you and Laura know about a child who will be coming to your class for the first time this morning. Her grandmother called me late last night and I didn't want this to catch you off guard."

"What's the problem?"

"Mike, the girl is HIV-positive."

I stopped wiping the table and pulled out a chair to sit down. "What's her name?"

"Mary. She's in the seventh grade and she just found out this week, I think. She's in a pretty lousy family situation. Her mother's been in and out of drug rehab, with not a whole lot of success, to hear the grandmother tell it. No one knows where the father is. The grandmother's been doing most of the upbringing. She's here in Glen Burnie but the girl's mother lives in the city."

"Wow." I took a big breath and blurted out, "of course we'll be happy to welcome her, Sandy. I know that the risk of transmission is not a real problem but the other parents might be concerned if they find out. Any ideas on how to handle this?"

"We're going to need to get some information out to the parents, and I wish we could have done that before the class this morning, but God hasn't given us that luxury, so we'll probably step on a few toes. I knew you and Laura would be okay with this, although I want you to talk it over with Laura, because I have a feeling it might be tough for you two when people find out."

"We'll talk about it, of course, but I think I know how Laura feels about the issue of hospitality. By the way, she's had a stomach virus this weekend, and she won't make it this morning."

"I'm sorry. I hope she's feels better soon."

"Thanks, Sandy. I'd better let you go. God bless you this morning, and thanks for the heads up."

"Sure thing, Mike. Thanks for being okay with this. God bless you, too."

"Always does," I said as I hung up and looked down at the open Bible on the kitchen table. It was turned to the Scripture for this morning's lesson. Mark 9:36-37: *"Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'*"

After the class, I noticed Mary made no move to leave. She hadn't said a word or moved much for the last hour. We were alone in the empty room together. She looked down at her shoes. After gathering my papers and stuffing them into the Bible, I stood up and walked over to her and sat beside her.

"How'd it go today, Mary?"

"Okay, I guess," she moved to get up and then slid back into the chair and looked away from me, out the window. "Can I go now?"

"Sure. Need any help finding your way around?"

"No thanks. I don't need your help, and I don't want to be here, okay? My grandmother is making me come. My Mom is getting me back soon and you won't ever see me again."

"Well I'm glad you could be with us today, at any rate." I tried hard to smile and felt my face flushing.

"No you're not. You're worried I'm going to touch someone and kill them, aren't you? Or don't you know I've got AIDS?"

“Our pastor called this morning and told me you tested HIV-positive this week. Mary, I’m...”

“That’s great. Maybe I should wear a sign or something, so everyone will know.” She got up and walked over to the window.

“I can’t imagine what’s going on in your mind, Mary. I do know that this doesn’t mean your life is over. As long as your viral load stays low and your T-cell count stays high, you don’t even have to have treatment.”

She turned around and looked at me for the first time. “What are you, some Doctor?”

“No, I sell medical equipment.”

“Oh, a wannabe.”

“No, I don’t want to be a doctor. But I’m a pretty good salesman, and in the course of my work, I get to know a lot of medical information. I don’t know everything there is to know about HIV, Mary, but I know there are a lot of treatment options available to you, to help you live with this thing.”

“Mister, you don’t know anything.” She turned back toward the window.

A couple of kids ran past the door in the hallway, laughing and talking. I prayed silently for God to give me the words to say, to let her know she’s not alone, but nothing came. I had never felt so inadequate, although I was surprised that what Mary said about me hadn’t really hurt my feelings. “I’m sorry, Mary.”

“Look, I don’t need your pity and I don’t need anybody here,” she spat out and almost started to cry, then rushed out of the room and into the hallway.

I collapsed back into the chair, exhausted emotionally.

“Can I come in?” a tired voice called from the doorway.

I looked up to see an old woman in a flowered print dress, whose face looked unfamiliar to me. “Certainly.” I stood and walked over to her. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe we’ve met. My name’s Mike Lothrop.”

“I’m Nell Owens, Mary’s grandmother, and I just overheard the last part of your conversation.” She stopped and pulled a handkerchief out of her black handbag and wiped a tear. Her wispy gray hair framed a gentle but wrinkled face. I could see Mary’s hazel eyes in her grandmother’s eyes, which were also set apart more than normal and slanted slightly toward the nose. In spite of her tired face, her gentle eyes calmed and reassured me that Sunday morning. “Thank you so much for trying to understand. Mary’s had such a hard life, and this week has been horrible, just horrible.”

“Well, I’m sorry I wasn’t more help to her this morning.”

“You are an angel from God, Mr. Lothrop, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for trying to get through to her. You cannot know how much I’ve prayed for that precious child. And it all seems for nothing. Now this.” She paused to wipe her wet face. “I just had to bring her to church, because we can’t handle this alone.” She reached out a worn hand and lifted her face to mine. “God bless you, Mr. Lothrop.”

“Mrs. Owens,” I called to her as she turned to leave, “could I pray with you now?”

“You certainly may, young man,” she answered, smiling for the first time, and we both walked to face each other in the middle of the empty room. She accepted my outstretched hand.

“Oh God,” I sighed, looking for words, “you know Mary and you love her from the bottom of your heart. Please let Mary know you love her in these dark days, and give her hope again for her future.” I gently squeezed Mrs. Owens’ hand, “and thank you, Jesus, for the love

you give Mary through her wonderful grandmother, Nell. Strengthen them both and Mary's mother..." I paused, searching my memory for Mary's mother's name.

Nell cleared her throat. "Her name is Stacy."

"Strengthen Mary, Nell, and Stacy, Lord, and draw them closer as you show them your power in the midst of this trial. And heal this virus that lurks in Mary's body. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we make this prayer."

Nell squeezed my hand and said out loud, "Amen." Then she looked at me a moment with eyes brimming with tears before turning quickly and walking out of the room.

The stark simplicity of the examining room struck me as I waited for the doctor Monday afternoon. I wondered what the good doctor might find during my first physical in over five years, especially with a quasi-death sentence hanging over my head. Thirty-nine days. And a wake-up. Since Thursday, I daydreamed about cemeteries a lot. The stainless steel trash can in the corner of the room looked a lot like a headstone.

The fluorescent light hummed overhead while I shifted nervously in my boxer shorts, crinkling the paper on the examination table loudly with every slight movement. The gang at the clinic had finished most of the testing. Now for the final chat. I took inventory of the items neatly arranged on the green counter against the wall opposite the table where I waited. Several packages of gauze, a glass jar of long, wooden handled Q-tips, soap dispenser by the gleaming sink fixtures. An orange biohazard waste box hung on the wall, just beneath the blue cabinets.

The door opened suddenly and Dr. Walter Stedman entered the room, studying my file in one hand while absently adjusting his half glasses with the other. In spite of the glasses, Walt looked like a movie star, with wavy black hair, chiseled features and steel blue eyes. He wore the standard white laboratory jacket over gray slacks, white shirt and nondescript tie. His stethoscope hung around his neck and terminated in a pocket bristling with a couple of pens and a tongue depressor. I had known Walt since Laura and I started singing in the church choir, three years ago; he was quite a good baritone.

"Everything looks fine, Mike, so far as I can see." I nodded as he talked to the file. "How do you feel, in general?" he asked as he looked over his glasses at me, raising his dark eyebrows.

"Can't complain, Walt."

"Come on, Mike, I need you to honestly appraise your health for the last few months. I'm your doctor, remember, and I can't help you if you play games with me. Didn't I hear you talking with someone at choir rehearsal last week about not getting much sleep?" He dropped the file to his side and put the pen into his coat pocket with the others. In the silence that followed I could hear the twin hum of the fluorescent lights and the institutional wall clock.

"I guess have been feeling a little tired, lately, Walt. And sleep doesn't seem to make it any better." I took a deep breath and blew the air out of my tightened lips. I wondered why this was so difficult for me to do. Walt wasn't writing anything down. Instead he looked gently at me with a level of understanding I hadn't noticed before. "Plus my appetite seems to have disappeared. I'm never very hungry these days, but I'm always thirsty. I'm not really sure what any of that means, or if it's even connected."

Now he laid the file down on the counter and moved closer to me. "Well, that's what we're here to find out, isn't it? What kind of regular exercise are you getting, Mike?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. I know my weight is up, but I haven't been able to make time for running."

“That might have something to do with your trouble getting to sleep. I’d encourage you to make time in your schedule, Mike. Three times a week of 20 to 30 minutes makes all the difference in the world. Your weight seems fine to me; I’d simply encourage you to rethink exercise because of the many other benefits to your body and your soul. Is there anything else you can tell me about your health?”

“No, you’ve gotten more out of me than I knew myself, Doc.” I laughed, realizing the truth of that statement. I found it incredibly hard to talk about anything that might be wrong with my health, especially since my parents had died. “I’ve got to confess to you that even the thought of an exercise routine seems painful to me. I’m not only too tired, but my muscles and joints are sore, as if I’ve already been working out too much.” While I talked, Walt pulled open the chart again and made a note or two. Then he removed his glasses and shoved them into his coat pocket.

“Sounds like you’re a little depressed, pal. There’s nothing we’ve seen today that stands out to me as the culprit for anything you’ve mentioned, though. You seem to be in good health. The blood tests we’ve taken might tell us more, though, and they won’t be in until later this week. I’ll call you if there’s anything worth discussing, okay?”

“Sure. Thanks, Walt.” Something inside me wanted him to call, even as I feared whatever it might be that would be “worth discussing,” as he put it. “So we’re done for today?”

“Yeah, Mike. But can I pray with you?”

His request stunned me, but I said, “Sure, Walt.” He reached for my hand as we bowed our heads.

“God, please be with Mike, and give him a peace about whatever it is that prevents him from resting in your arms each night. You know that he needs rest to renew his body and his soul. So let him know you’re there with him, and that he’s in your capable hands, and that together with you, all things are possible for him. And if there is something you want me to know, to assist in your healing work in Mike’s life, then guide my mind and my hands, so I can be a channel of your healing power.” In the silence, I no longer heard the hum of the lights or the clock, or even the noise of the office beyond the door. Only stillness. “We make our prayer in Christ’s name. Amen.”

We were still holding hands and I found it hard to speak out loud. “Thanks, Walt. I don’t know how long it’s been since anyone prayed over me. Do they teach that in med school?”

He laughed and held my hand tighter. “You’d be surprised, Mike. I don’t do any of this alone. My work is part of something much more powerful than tests and procedures, and it pays to remember that.”

“Well it means more to me than I can say.”

He dropped my hand but continued to look into my eyes. “Don’t mention it. Now get dressed and be on your way. I’ll see you Thursday,” he said as he scooped up my file and moved toward the door.

“About the test results?”

“No,” he laughed as he stood at the door, “to sing.”

After supper Laura and I talked some more about my Sunday school encounter with Mary Mullen. Laura wished she could have been there to help. She was still not feeling very well, though she had gone back to work. Of course, the grave was never very far from our minds, so we chatted about how the physical went, and how that information might be another piece of the puzzle.

We planned to have dinner out later in the week. We needed a change of scenery, anything to scatter the clouds of gloom that had settled on our home since the night of the concert. Laura fell asleep while I slogged through some of Karen Armstrong's "A History of God" for an hour or two. Pastor Sandy had suggested it to me a couple of months before. Around one in the morning, as stillness cloaked the house, I finally drifted off to sleep.

I was shipwrecked on an island. Weeks went by without hope of rescue until one day I spotted a ship on the horizon. In order to get the crew's attention I built a huge bonfire on the shore, piling it high with brush and driftwood. Filled with a new energy that came from hope, I danced around the fire wildly.

As the ship sailed closer, I noticed the sails were tattered and one of the masts was missing. As she sailed even closer, I could not see anyone on deck. The ship was deserted. Or so it seemed to me, until I saw a small figure emerge from below decks and wave to me. Now more curious than hopeful, I charged into the water and swam toward the ghost ship. As I neared the ship, the figure on deck threw a rope ladder over the side. At the top of the ladder, I surveyed the cluttered, weather beaten deck, and then I saw that the lone figure was a young woman I already knew: Mary Mullen.

She must have sensed my ambivalence about the ship because she rushed to the bulwark where I was perched to beg me to climb aboard and join her. I told her that I knew nothing about sailing a ship and that this ship seemed like a worse fate than living on the island. She persisted, and I finally climbed aboard and accepted this unlikely rescue. Both of us were only survivors of devastating storms, and for the next few hours we traded stories of how we passed through the fire unharmed. Then Mary led the way below decks.

Two winged horses, locked in a golden stall, whinnied and pawed at the hay in their stalls as we approached them. The locks on their stalls had two keyholes, and Mary inserted a golden key into one of them. She told me that I had the other key, which would open each stall, in combination with her key, and free the horses. The horses could fly us both to safety. I remembered having the key at one time, but when I reached for it in my tattered pants pocket, it was gone. As I searched every pocket in vain, Mary began to cry.

Then the alarm rang.

The secretary buzzed my intercom on Wednesday afternoon, September 24. "Mike, the doctor's office on line two. And the Reverend Waggoner from Hopewell Methodist called while you were at lunch. Do you need his number?"

"No, I've got it. Thanks, Terri." Two days had passed since Monday's physical.

"Hello, this is Mike Lothrop."

"Mr. Lothrop, Doctor Stedman would like to schedule a follow-up appointment with you to discuss the test results from Monday."

I felt a surge of adrenaline. "Is something wrong?"

"Not necessarily, Mr. Lothrop. The Doctor just wanted to go over some of the test results with you personally. Is tomorrow morning at 10:00 convenient?"

"Ah, just a second." I paged through my daybook. "I'll be there."

"Thank you. See you tomorrow, Mr. Lothrop."

"Sure." The line hummed as she hung up.

I looked up to see my boss standing in the door. "How'd it go in Easton on Friday, Mike?"

“They balked. Actually, I balked for them. They need the MAC like they need a hole in the head.” I didn’t care if he wanted to hear this or not.

“So you took the whole day off to drop a sale.” He folded his arms across his barrel chest. Paul was a Navy SEAL in a former life.

“Paul, I need to build trust in a client. I’m not going to sell them something they don’t need. You taught me that.”

“It’s not like you, Mike, that’s all. You know we’re up against the wall this time of year. We don’t have time for field trips. What’s up the past few days? You don’t have your head in the game. We need you at 100 per cent.”

I sat back in my chair, stunned. “I’m sorry, Paul. You know I’m closing with John’s Hopkins the end of this month.”

“I thought I knew about Easton, Mike. That reminds me, I need you to fill in for me on a foursome tomorrow morning at Riverside. Some execs from Bethesda.”

“Ah, I just made a Doctor’s appointment at 10.”

“Too serious to resked?” Paul dropped his arms and leaned forward.

“I don’t know yet. The Doc wants to talk with me about some test results.” I was sweating.

“Are you okay? Is that what’s bothering you?” I couldn’t tell if he was being sympathetic or sarcastic.

“They just called me to schedule the appointment. I have no idea what it’s about.” I would never tell him about the graveyard. I started to wonder if I had been too preoccupied with Michael Edward Lothrop from Centreville.

“Okay. Forget about the golf, then. And let me know what’s up tomorrow, Mike.”

“Sure.” I exhaled slowly as I watched him walk down the hallway. Then I pulled out my wallet, found Pastor Waggoner’s card, and picked up the phone to dial Hopewell Church.

After four rings, the message machine clicked into action. “You’ve reached Hopewell United Methodist Church. Our office hours are 9 am to noon, Monday through Friday. We’re sorry we’re not able to answer your call, but if you leave a message –” the recording stopped and then I heard Pastor Waggoner’s breathless voice. “Hopewell Church, God bless you.”

“Pastor Fred, this is Mike Lothrop returning your call.”

“Oh, Mike, sorry about the recording. I was in the sanctuary and couldn’t get to the phone before the machine picked up.” He paused for a breath. “Emma Simmons wants to see you.”

“Who?”

“The lady who keeps our records. She says she has some letters from your ancestor. I thought you might be interested.”

“When can I see her?” I felt another rush of adrenaline.

“Well, she gets her hair done this afternoon. Her granddaughter comes Friday. How about tomorrow?”

“Two in the afternoon?”

“I’ll tell her to expect you.” He laughed. “I figured you’d be interested.”

“How do I find her?”

“Meet me at the church and I’ll lead the way. She lives about a mile from here.

“Great.” I had been doodling an anchor on the yellow legal pad on my desk. “And Pastor –”

“Call me Fred, Mike.”

“Fred,” I leaned back into my chair and looked out of the window at the slowly moving clouds, “thanks a lot.”

No problem, partner. I just hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Laura came up behind me and rubbed my neck. It was late Wednesday night and I was hunched over the computer, online.

“Thanks, Babe. You can do that all night long.”

“If you come to bed, there’s more where this came from, Partner.” She squinted at the screen. “What are you working on so hard?”

“Throwing out a lifeline. Trying to find anyone who might know more about Michael Edward Lothrop from Centreville.”

I censored to the top of the page so she could read the e-mail I had just sent.

```
Date: Wed, 24 Sep 1997 22:40:42 -0800
To: ROOTS-L@rootsweb.com
From: Mike Lothrop <mlothrop@erols.com>
Subject: Lothrop in Centreville, MD
```

Looking for information on the following:

```
Michael Edward Lothrop Born 17 April 1860
Died 1 November 1897 without issue
Buried Hopewell UMC, Centreville, Queen Annes, Maryland
Married to Elizabeth [Lizzy] Joanna Cannon 4 Jun 1882
```

```
Mike,
mlothrop@erols.com
Glen Burnie, MD
```

I looked at the message again. Died without issue. Just like me.

“Come to bed. I’ve got something to tell you.”

Upstairs, I found Laura sitting on the edge of the bed, holding something in her hand. “I don’t know how to tell you this, so I’ll just say it: I’m pregnant. I’ve been suspecting with this nausea for the past few days and I’m late this month, so I bought a test on the way home from work tonight and you can see the little dot for yourself.” She handed me the indicator.

I looked at the tiny, unmistakable pink dot and sat down on the bed beside her without speaking.

“I’m going to make an appointment with my OB/GYN to confirm, of course, but I’ve got a feeling this is the real thing. I’m not ready for this again, Mike. I want so much to be happy, but I’m so scared.” She looked up at me. “Please hold me.”

I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and kissed her neck. “I don’t know what to say, Honey. We’re gonna do this together, whatever happens.”

“Do you remember how it was the first time we found out?” I felt a tear drop onto my arm. “We danced around the room and jumped on the bed. Then, the next day you bought me a dozen roses and got all those silly library books on Lamaze and pregnancy and we told everybody we knew. God, I was so happy. Remember that Mexican place we went to the time

you bought me that swanky maternity dress at the place they had the pillows you could try on? And you put on one of the pillows and we slow danced in the dressing room.”

“I remember. And you were afraid about eating hot food ‘cause it might hurt the baby.” I was crying now, too.

“I tried to be so careful, Mike. I did everything right.”

“Honey, I know you did.”

“And then the bleeding started. It was a Friday, the first time, and we went to the hospital and after everything was over, that nurse said, ‘better luck next time,’ and I wanted to die. Part of me did die, Mike, a little more each time.”

“I know, Baby, I know.” We were slowly rocking back and forth, now.

Suddenly, Laura turned to me and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her nightgown. “I know what I said before, Mike. But I’ve already made this little one a promise. I’m gonna give everything I’ve got this time, just like it was the first time. I’m gonna pour out every ounce of life I’ve got, every ounce of love, and every ounce of hope. I don’t care if there are monsters beyond this boundary, I’m gonna stay with this little one every moment God gives to me.” She looked at me with eyes red with tears but wild with an inner fire. “And I’m gonna need you in this, too, Mike, giving it everything you’ve got. Stay with us both, Mike, body, mind and spirit.”

I looked down at her womb and tried to imagine a life and a hope growing there, stronger than death.

Laura’s hand touched my cheek, and lifted my face gently to hers. “Please, Mike.”

“I’m here, Laura, and I’ll always be with you.”

“Go on in, Mr. Lothrop. Dr. Stedman is waiting for you in his office.”

I followed a narrow hallway hung with large prints of racing yachts and found the door marked “W.B. Stedman, M.D.” and knocked.

“Come on in, Mike,” Walt’s deep voice called from inside. When I opened the door, I saw Walt coming around the large desk to meet me. “Can I take your jacket?”

“Yes, thanks, Walt.” I shrugged out of my windbreaker and handed it to him as the enormity of what he might have to tell me sank in. I noticed the pattern of the sunlight on the carpet by the left side of the desk, and the large globe lurking in the shadows in the corner. I wondered if the potted plant on the credenza behind his desk was real while Walt steered me to a maroon leather couch across from the desk. I noticed as we sat down across from each other on the couch that he was holding a file. Today he was wearing a gray cardigan and an open collared blue oxford. His white jacket hung beside my windbreaker.

“Mike, the lab results show an unusually high level of calcium in your blood. That indicator, taken together with the symptoms you described to me Monday, such a loss of sleep and loss of appetite, lead me to believe that you might have primary hyperparathyroidism -- essentially an over-functioning of the parathyroid glands. Parathyroid hormone plays a critical role in maintaining the blood calcium level within the normal range. When the glands release too much parathyroid hormone, the level of calcium in the blood rises.”

“What causes that over production?”

“In most cases, say 85%, one of your four parathyroid glands becomes enlarged and develops into a benign tumor, called an adenoma. In nearly all other cases, two or more glands enlarge, again in a benign fashion. We call that condition hyperplasia.” He paused.

“Parathyroid cancer is also a rare cause of primary hyperparathyroidism.”

“How rare?”



“Less than one per cent of all cases, Mike.”

“So what do we do next, Doc?”

“The next step involves a bone mass measurement using dual x-ray absorptiometry, or DXA, in order to determine the level of reduction of your bone mass. This test provides the other piece of the puzzle that helps us establish whether or not surgery is necessary.”

“What kind of surgery?”

“To remove the affected gland. I’ll be referring you to a surgeon who’s quite experienced in that procedure. The operation cures the problem in over 95% of the cases. The surgery leaves a thin scar about three inches long above your collarbone.”

I found myself involuntarily scratching my collarbone as he described the operation.

“What about my voice, Walt?”

“Hey, partner! Don’t go crossing that bridge ‘til you get there. And if surgery is necessary, it won’t come near that golden pipe of yours. That is, of course, unless you want her to make you into a baritone.”

“Too many baritones already, Walt. That’s the problem.” We laughed for a moment and I looked into his eyes. “Tell me again the chances this thing is cancerous?”

“Not worth worrying over, Mike, at any rate. I brought you in here because I wanted to ease your mind, and put this thing in perspective. Dr. Li is the best. She’ll take good care of you. Now I want you to see Linda at the front desk and she’ll set you up for an appointment for the DXA early next week at the hospital. Dr. Li will take over from there.”

“It’s just – a little unsettling, Walt.”

“I know, brother. But look at it this way: by November, this will all be over.”

A few minutes after making the follow-up appointment with Dr. Stedman’s secretary, I tried to call Laura from a pay phone.

“First Maryland, at your service, this is Cindy.”

“Hi, Cindy, this is Mike Lothrop. May I please speak with Laura?”

“Hello, Mike. Laura’s away from her desk right now. Can I take a message or do you want me to transfer you to her voice mail?”

“Voice mail is fine, thanks.”

“Have a great day, Mike.” The line clicked and then I heard Laura’s message of the day, followed by a tone.

“Hi, Honey, it’s Mike. I just got back from the doctor’s and they say I’ll need another test next week. There’s a lot of calcium in my blood and they think there might be a problem with my thyroid glands. I didn’t want to tell you over the phone but I wanted you to know and I won’t be able to talk with you ‘til tonight. I’m headed to Centreville to chase a ghost. Love you.”

After hanging up the phone, I wondered if it was such a hot idea to leave a message about the doctor’s visit. Before I had time to get too worried about it, I slid behind the wheel and headed for the Bay Bridge.

Mrs. Emma Simmons’ home presided over a bluff overlooking the Chester River, several miles north of Centreville. She and her husband had lived here for over 50 years, she told me, before he died ten years ago. After Pastor Fred introduced us and excused himself to make another pastoral call, Mrs. Simmons took my coat and ushered me into the most inviting living room I had ever seen. The comfortable chairs gathered around a huge window overlooking the

sparkling river in the valley below. There was a large stone fireplace to the left, the mantle laden with pictures of a host of family members and memories.

A large white cat lounged in the chair nearest the fireplace. On the floor beside the chair, I noticed a small cardboard box with a magnifying glass laid across the top.

“You’ll have to excuse the mess, Mr. Lothrop. I’m afraid I’m not as able to prepare for company as I used to be. Now, how do you like your tea?” She brought a small tray set with two china cups on saucers, silver spoons, napkins, and a matching creamer and sugar bowl.

“Just a spoonful of sugar, thank you Mrs. Simmons.”

She deftly added the sugar and rang the tea cup like a bell when she stirred. Her hands were the oldest part about her, lined with veins and withered with age. She was a wispy woman who carried herself, in spite of her age, like a queen. A white sweater draped across her slight shoulders, and her dark brown eyes sparkled as she looked up at me from the tea tray.

“Now, I don’t know what all Fred Waggoner has told you about me, but I can tell you right now most of it’s a damnable lie.” She handed me the teacup and saucer with a sly wink and picked up her own. “Scoot, Lucifer,” she ordered the cat as she moved gracefully toward the chair. The cat looked up lazily and yawned, then leaped from the chair as Mrs. Simmons sat down nearly on top of it.

“Your cat’s name is Lucifer?” I said as I sat my cup gently onto the saucer.

“Perfect name for a cat. Especially this cat. To say she’s prideful doesn’t touch the arrogant disdain with which this beautiful creature looks upon the rest of the world. Do you like cats, Mr. Lothrop?”

“Can’t say that I’ve had a whole lot to do with them, one way or another.”

“I’ll bet you prefer a slobbery pooch to the more subtle refinement of a cat, now, tell the truth.” She smiled at me as the cat jumped into her lap.

I laughed, “I’ll admit I understand dogs a lot better than I understand cats.”

“Cats have staying power, Mr. Lothrop. And Lucy can look at me any way she pleases, so long as she remains my companion.” She stroked the cat gently as it purrs. “But you didn’t come here to talk about cats.”

“Pastor Waggoner tells me you have some letters that were written by my ancestor, Michael Edward Lothrop, Mrs. Simmons.”

“He told me Sunday about your cemetery discovery the night you sang for us. I heard you, by the way, and you and your wife sing wonderfully.”

“Thank you, very much.”

“The Lothrop name stuck in my mind for some reason.” She winks at me again and smiles. “Then, Tuesday, during Ladies Circle, I was telling your story. Eula reminded me that someone had given the church some old letters and papers from the old Lothrop house a few years ago. They were selling the house and the realtor found several boxes in the attic. Thought they might be of interest or value to the church. Your Michael Edward Lothrop was a teacher, and most of what they found was related to school or college. We did find several love letters, though.”

“I have one of them here, but I can’t find the others, just yet. We stored everything during the last of the Lucille Holloway years. Lucille had a very creative filing system. Christ will come before we figure it out.” She reached into her dress pocket and carefully pulled out a yellowed envelope. “I’m sorry I haven’t found more, Mr. Lothrop. Consider this one a down payment.”

I stood and walked over to her and she handed me the letter. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your going to the trouble to find this and let me see it, Mrs. Simmons.”

“No trouble at all, Mr. Lothrop. But would you mind reading it aloud to me? I can’t begin to make out what it says, even with my magnifying glass.”

“Certainly,” I said as I pulled the yellowed pages from the delicate envelope and settled into the couch opposite the picture window. The postmark was New Haven, Connecticut. The script whispered to me from ages ago. The date was 19 January 1882.

*“My Dearest Elizabeth,”* I began to read the faded letters. *“It is so cold in New Haven this evening as I write to you by the fire, but my heart is still warmed by the sweet memory of sharing the Christmas holidays with you and your wonderful family. I can hardly believe that we are engaged to be married this summer, my Love! Let the winds howl and the snow fall – we will be together, my Darling, soon enough. I have already received an encouraging initial response to my request to the credentialing board of educators in Maryland.”*

Mrs. Emma clinked her teacup onto her saucer. “I told you he was a teacher.” She reached up to replace a strand of white hair that had strayed loose from the tight bun.

I continued reading out loud. *“How I love everything about your home. I shall never forget my first sight of the beauty of the barren wood above the Chester River, silent under the ice. Thank you again and again for sharing everything with me and for indulging my desire to see the land I shall soon call home.”*

*“While it is true that I shall always be a Connecticut Yankee by birth, my heart makes a homeland of wherever you happen to be. One of the members of your church, I think it was Mr. ...”* I paused and look up at Mrs. Emma, “I can’t make the name out.”

“Oh, do go on. Isn’t he a romantic sap?”

I laughed. *“...told me they would make a flea bitten Eastern Shoreman out of me before it’s over. Very well, then, I am ready!”*

After finishing the letter, except for a few other places where I couldn’t make out the words, I stopped and folded the paper carefully and put it back into the yellowed envelope.

“Well, Mr. Lothrop, was that worth driving all the way out here for?”

“Yes Ma’am.” I lied.

“You’re a far better sport than you are a poker player. But I appreciate your indulging my need for some company. You should know that I can’t promise much, but I’ll do what I can to find some more information for you.”

I walked over to her and handed her the letter. “Thank you, Mrs. Simmons. I appreciate all you’ve already done for me.”

“What exactly are you looking for, son?” She held my hand as she took the letter.

“I’d like to know how he died, most of all, I guess.”

“And what then, Mr. Lothrop? Have you thought of where that information might lead you?”

I paused and look out over the shimmering water below the house. “Mrs. Simmons, I believe that all these names and dates are more than a coincidence. Perhaps they are some sort of sign from God.”

“Well then, allow an old woman to give you a piece of advice. You might well want to know what you’re looking for, so you’ll know when you’ve found it. You might also want to know what it is you’re looking for so you can decide whether it’s worth the risk of finding it.”

Laura was sorting the mail when I walked into the kitchen. She looked up and dropped the mail on the kitchen table.

“Honey, I’ve been so worried since I got your message.” She hugged and kissed me for a long moment and then took my hands. Her eyes looked tired to me. “What exactly did the doctor find?”

“A lot of calcium in my blood, which means I probably have hyper... ah, hyperparathyroidism. Walt referred me to a surgeon who will do a test next week to see if my parathyroid glands are enlarged and decide whether surgery is necessary.”

“Enlarged? As in, tumorous? What are the chances of...” she hesitated and tears welled up in her eyes and she cleared her throat, “cancer?”

“Walt says less than 1% of the cases are caused by parathyroid cancer. I’m gonna be okay, Babe.”

“I know,” she hugged me again and buried her face in my chest. I could feel the wetness of her tears through my shirt. “It’s just that all this death talk lately gives me the creeps, and when I got your message today it was like I knew they were going to find something wrong. Mike, I need you.”

I caressed the back of Laura’s head gently in my hands and ran my fingers through her wonderful red hair. “Enough about me, okay. How are you feeling?”

“Lousy, and I’m sure that’s got something to do with this funk I’m in. Honestly, it’s hard to deal with all of this at once, Mike.”

“You still up for going out to eat, or can I just make something here for us.”

She suddenly looked up at me and smiled, “Let’s get out of here. Some fresh air will do us both good.”

An hour later, at the Sunset Italian Restaurant, Laura finished telling me about closing a big loan earlier at the bank. Then her eyes flashed. “Oh, what happened in Centreville today?”

“I met a fascinating woman, Emma Simmons, and her cat, Lucifer.”

“Ohh,” Laura giggled and played with my foot under the table, “the plot thickens.”

“She found a letter my ancestor wrote to his fiancée, from Yale, I think, the year he graduated. Looks like he was from Connecticut, but moved to the Eastern Shore when he married her.”

“Must have been love, huh, Kiddo?”

“Yeah, complete with all the syrupy trimmings.”

“He wasn’t writing to you, silly. And you were eavesdropping anyway.” I could tell she was feeling better.

“Well, I got no closer to finding out about how he died. It was a little frustrating.” I fiddled with my pasta and took another sip of wine.

“Tell me about her.”

“Who?”

“Mrs. Simmons.”

“Oh, she’s a woman who reminds me of how you’ll be when you’re eighty.”

“Really,” Laura smiled and took my hand.

“Yeah. Time worn but not bowed. The fire was still burning. She had my number, at any rate.”

“Well that’s not all that difficult,” Laura laughed. I loved hearing her laugh. It had been too long since I had heard that sweet sound, like the bubbling of a mountain stream over cold, shiny stones.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” my laugh blew my feigned shock.

“You know exactly what I mean. You’re beautiful face tells me all I need to know, before you even say a word.”

We stopped for a minute and looked into each other’s eyes. “She told me I’d better be clear about what it was I’m looking for, so I’d know when I find it.”

“And what are you looking for, Michael Edward Lothrop?”

I reached across the table and brushed her freckled cheek. Laura turned her head and kissed my hand. “I think I already found her,” I whispered.

“You’re pretty syrupy yourself, Rhett.” Laura winked at me. “Now take me home.”

Glen Burnie United Methodist Church presides over Crain Highway at Second Avenue. Laura and I had been members since we moved to Glen Burnie in 1991. The church congregation included an eclectic mix of blue collar and middle class, Anglo- African- and Korean-Americans. The people always seemed to us to be more interested in taking God’s promises at face value than they were at keeping up appearances.

Which is why when Mary Mullen walked into our Junior High Sunday school class, having recently tested HIV-positive, neither Laura nor I felt it would be much of an issue with the rest of the congregation. In fact, no one had really been given a chance to vote. After Mary’s first Sunday, we asked Pastor Sandy to hold off scheduling a meeting of parents. Welcoming Mary seemed more in keeping with the kind of people God called us to be than debating whether her presence was too much of a threat. We didn’t even really know if Mary would return.

Mary did return Sunday, September 27, and she seemed to connect a little more with the two of us. After church, her grandmother, Nell Owens, invited us to join them for lunch.

Nell’s house overlooked a shaded street called Lilac Lane, in Ferndale, a south Baltimore suburb, along one of the approach corridors for the Baltimore Washington International Airport. The two story brick home nestled among a stand of mature pine trees back from the street. The weather had warmed up a bit and Nell set a table for us on her screened in back porch.

“I’ve long since gotten used to the planes but Mary absolutely hates them,” Nell told us as she lifted a pot roast out of the oven. Mary played Nintendo in the living room. I picked up my glass of lemonade from the kitchen table and wondered into the living room to watch her.

“Do you really believe that stuff we talked about today,” Mary asked without taking her eyes off the screen.

“About healing? Absolutely. But on God’s terms, not ours, I guess.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she challenged as she rolled over and propped herself on her elbows. Mary’s short brown hair drooped over her eyes. She cocked her head so she could get a better look at me. For the first time, I noticed how very young Mary looked. The freckles on her rounded cheeks and her brown eyes sparkled. Her husky voice sounded so much older and world weary whenever she spoke to me that it was hard for me to put together her woman’s voice with her child’s face.

“It means that we’re in God’s hands, no matter what happens to us, and there’s no better place to be, Mary.” I knelt down beside her. I wondered if I was telling her or trying to tell myself.

“Sounds more like you’re making excuses to me. I thought the lesson today was about being healed if you pray.” A plane thundered overhead. Mary rolled back onto her stomach and resumed her game. “You ever ask God why he lets so many people die?”

“Mary...” I looked down at my lemonade. *Yeah, kid, I’ve wondered a lot since some drunk driver wrapped my parents around a telephone pole outside of Easton. But I don’t really feel like sharing that with you just now.* I listened to the silly sounds of the Nintendo game and imagined that’s what my attempts to explain the deep mysteries of life must sound like to Mary. They certainly sounded like that to me.

“I do,” her deep voice cut through my confusion. “I gave God a piece of my mind about letting me get AIDS.” She rolled over again to look at me as she talked. Then she smiled. “And since lightning didn’t strike, I’m gonna keep on asking until I get an answer.”

“You know, there’s a story in the Bible about...” I started to say.

“Yeah, I’ll bet there is, Teach,” she laughed and suddenly stood up. “Wanna see where I pray?”

“Sure, I’d love to.”

I followed Mary up the stairs and into the second bedroom on the right side of the dim hallway, passing by family pictures littering the walls on both sides. She flicked on the light and walked over to the corner nearest the dormer window, where she knelt down to remove a panel of the wall. “Take a look.”

I crouched to look into the darkness, and my eyes slowly adjusted to see a small, two-foot high crawlspace extending several yards into the darkness. “You can fit inside there?”

“I used to play in there when I was little. I still lived with my Mom then and we’d come over to visit Mimi a lot. Last week, after I found out I was HIV positive, I crawled in there and cried. Then I screamed at God. And nothing happened. So I screamed some more. Is that a sin?”

“I don’t think so, Mary.” I stood up.

“I figure God can handle it. If he hears me at all, which I won’t know until I get an answer, will I?” She put the panel carefully back into place. I noticed that the wallpaper blended seamlessly so you had to know what you were looking for to find the panel at all. “Not even Mimi can hear me when I’m in there.”

“Dinner’s ready,” Nell called to us from downstairs.

I followed Mary back downstairs and into the kitchen. As we passed through the living room, I noticed Mario jumping up and down, without guidance, on the Nintendo screen.

“The tempura here is out of this world, isn’t it?” Guy Singleton grinned at me as he carefully maneuvered a piece of shrimp into his mouth with chopsticks. I could see his bald head sweating above the rim of his glasses. He washed the bite down with a swallow of beer, glanced out the window, and then back at me. He started to fiddle with his mustache again and then took off his glasses. “Thanks for meeting me here, Mike.”

“It’s a great place. I look forward to bringing Laura here for dinner some night. But I’m guessing we’re not here to talk about great Japanese restaurants.” I leaned back in my chair and waited, holding my breath. It was noon on Monday, September 29. We were supposed to be closing a \$200,000 deal the next day. When Guy had called earlier that morning about meeting

me at The Sake Club near the inner harbor, I had been afraid to ask why. Now we had chatted each other up for nearly 20 minutes and both of us know it was time to get to business.

Guy took another pull on the Sipporo and let out a heavy sigh. “We had a meeting this weekend at the comptroller’s office and there’s been a bit of a mix up over the funds available at the end of the fiscal year. I don’t know how to tell you this, Mike, but I just got the rug pulled out from under me. We’re not gonna be placing that order tomorrow, or anytime in the near-term.”

The words stunned me. I picked up the tea cup in front of my plate and set it back down again. “Guy, we’ve come a long way with you on this one. It’s not just about a sale.”

“I know, Mike, and like I said, this just came out of nowhere. None of us had any idea in planning. You know as well as I do how badly we need this equipment.”

I looked into his eyes, “some of it’s already shipping, thanks to the verbal agreement we made Friday.” I finished the tea and place the cup back onto the table.

“I know now that I didn’t have the authority to make that call, Mike, and I’m terribly sorry. Like I said, they pulled the rug out from under me on this one.”

“Look, I’ll need to get back to the office before I can determine how much of the damage I can undo.” I couldn’t contain the rage boiling inside me. I pulled my napkin from my lap and tossed it onto the table, and stood up to leave, when I noticed a bead of sweat trickle down Guy’s forehead, into the corner of his eye, and down his cheek, like a tear. In that moment, I felt the embarrassment and loneliness he must have been feeling as he sat across from me. Then a kind of peace washed over me and I knew that God had broken the spell of my anger.

“Mike, I’m really sorry about all this.”

“I know it’s not your fault, Guy. We’re both of us caught in the middle and I’m the one who jumped the gun on placing the order before we closed. I guess when I work this close to a problem I tend to get a little too wrapped up in it. Anyway, I know we’re gonna be doing some business together down the road, Guy. We both want what’s best for the patients.”

“I can’t tell you when, but I will be getting the money for some or all of this order, Mike.” He looked relieved and out of breath as he leaned back into his seat and stared up at the ceiling.

My beeper startled us both. When I looked down, I knew immediately Paul was summoning me to the office. My boss. And now I would have to tell him I had just blown the deal that would have gotten him off my back.

The AccuTech suite of offices overlooks Baltimore’s inner harbor. The look of the water always calmed and energized me at the same time, like some deep well of ageless strength. The sun glinted off the water as I made my way into the lobby, through the revolving glass doors. I almost allowed myself to be swept back outside for another look at the serenity of the harbor. I knew that the next hour or so would be anything but peaceful.

My secretary, Terri King, gave me a hopeful thumbs up as I walked past her desk toward Paul’s office. Then she frowned when I told her in an urgent whisper, “Shut down everything we’re shipping to Hopkins. The deal’s off.”

“Watch yourself, Mike,” she whispered back. “Paul’s in rare form today.”

I thought about a party where I first met Paul Owens as I walked down the dark blue carpeted hallway to his office. The beer that night animated him and he had been entertaining a gaggle of us on his deck with Navy SEAL stories. Someone too drunk to think made some crack about the Navy and I noticed Paul wasn’t laughing with the rest of us.

“Pretty tough talk for a guy who can’t stand up to a carrot,” Paul had said in his Tennessee drawl.

“What in the hell are you talking about,” the man, who was easily six inches taller and 50 pounds heavier than Paul, had said as he laughed. This time, no one else was laughing.

As we watched in amazement on that dimly lit deck, Paul grabbed a peeled carrot from the salad tray on the picnic table and walked over to the guy, whose name I never have been able to remember. He stuck the carrot in the guy’s face and smiled as he said, “now watch carefully, sand crab.”

Not one of us saw how he did it, but we later found out that Paul had rammed that carrot into the guy’s armpit. What we did see was Paul standing over him as he dropped to his knees as if someone had hit him with a two by four. Then, just as quick as it started, Paul tossed the carrot into the yard and returned to his beer. Someone whistled. Someone else whispered, “I’d hate to see what he can do with a gun.”

I opened his door without knocking, I was so anxious to get this over with.

It took less than five seconds to tell him about the Hopkins sale. The silence for the next minute thundered about the room, making me wish he would just get the carrot and get it over with. I watched his jaw muscles tense and relax almost in time with the ticking of the heavy brass ship’s clock on his desk. He didn’t seem to be looking at anything.

Finally, he looked directly at me. “What did the doctor say?”

“You mean Guy?” The question puzzled me. “Guy’s not really a...”

“No, the doc you saw last week, when you couldn’t cover for me. What’s the word?”

“He thinks I’ve got primary hyperparathyroidism. Too much calcium in my blood. I’ve got a follow-up with a surgeon on Wednesday.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mike.” Paul picked up his pipe from an ashtray on the desk and tapped it gently against his shoe. “Got you worried?”

“Maybe a little bit. It may require surgery to remove the glands, and I’m not too wild about that. It could also be cancer. I’m even less wild about that prospect.”

Paul considered the pipe for a few seconds, then returned it to the ashtray, pushed his leather chair away from the desk and stood up. “Please, sit down, Mike,” he said as he walked around to the front of his desk and sat on it, his hands gripping the edge tightly at each side as he leaned forward a bit too much.

“Mike, I’m sorry as I can be about this health issue, and I hope you can get it resolved soon. But let’s cut to the chase here.” He leaned back to grab the pipe again and stuck it, unlit, into his mouth. “I put up with your demigod act because you pretty well hit the ball out of the park for us, Mike. You like to take your time and hold hands and that never bothers me because you generally land the big fish. But here lately, you’ve been in the worst slump I’ve ever seen. The Mother Teresa act doesn’t look so good when you’re not moving product. Now, I know it’s not a good time to be telling you this, but either you change tactics and start connecting, or I’ve got to put you back on commission.”

He fished in a pocket for a match and began the careful ritual of lighting the pipe. In the harbor below, a boat whistle moaned across the water. Paul’s eyes flashed over the rim of the pipe as the smoke curled upward toward the fluorescent ceiling.

“Paul, I just don’t buy the ‘them or us’ mindset. We can both win, if we put a product into the hands of the people who need it. Today was a tough break, but it’s the long term



relationship that's important, both ethically and in terms of the bottom line. John's Hopkins is a big customer. We lost the battle today but..."

"You're missing the point, Mike. I'm not asking you..." he drew in deeply on the pipe and I could hear the tobacco sizzle, "I'm telling you."

"Good morning, Mr. Lothrop," the nurse greeted me as I checked in at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center for testing. "Would you please fill out the white and pink forms on the clipboard and return them to the front desk when you're done?"

Thus began Wednesday, October 1. Thirty-one days left.

Routine test. Name, Address, Home and Business Phone, etc. etc. etc. I filled out the form mindlessly and glanced up now and again to take in the colorful waiting room. I noticed the *Newsweek* on the table beside me dated the current week. Well, what do you know?

What are you supposed to do when you have an idea that you're supposed to die? Of course, everyone knows they will die sooner or later, but none of us really lives with that truth. None of us plans for death, except perhaps, those of us who decide to take our own lives, and even then we're not really sure until the end.

Family medical history. Check yes or no in the appropriate boxes beside the list of ailments. No, no, no, no, no – didn't Aunt Florence have diabetes? And Papa, my mother's father, died of a heart attack. Truth is, I didn't really know much about the cards I'd been dealt. And now I wondered whether God (or someone an awful lot like God) hadn't given me a glimpse at the rest of the deck.

If so, what was I supposed to do? Spend quality time with all my family and friends? I hadn't seen my younger brother since my parents' funeral. What would we talk about? Most days, I felt like quitting my job, because I weighed everything on the "final days" scales that trivialized all but the most significant events in life. After the initial scare had worn off, I had tried to shake off the feeling of impending doom as irrational. But even if my graveyard ghost was only a spooky coincidence, the tumor growing in my neck was certainly real enough. I wondered how long I had before it was too late to give this series of events my full attention.

Laura had told me the night before that I needed to listen to the advice I gave to Mary Mullen. She lived under a death sentence, didn't she? And I confidently told her to keep her chin up. Maybe she had a right to be scared. Maybe we are not supposed to get too comfortable with a life of unknown.

I finished the questionnaire and turned in the clipboard to the nurse at the front desk.

I brought with me a little collection of poetry Laura had given me for my birthday the previous April. Some writer I had never heard of. Laura heard him give a reading at a local bookstore where she was browsing one evening and snapped up a signed copy for me. I read through a few of the poems and shelved the book when it didn't really connect with me. But this day it caught my eye as I was getting ready to leave and so I had taken it to while away the time.

As I settled into a straight-backed waiting room chair, the title of one of the poems caught my eye and I turned to read "*Descent*."

*We held fast for a day at the last plateau before the valley  
And watered the beasts, rested the young  
And looked upon the valley spread out before us like some carpet*

*For the last time*

*How different it will look to us clinging to our wet skin  
crawling upon our raw skin, biting flesh, stinging poison  
clouding our vision with the stench of decay and fetid backwater  
mocking our courage  
Thick undergrowth blocking the sun, pulling at limbs  
thorns tearing away, vines slapping faces numb with travel  
We will forget why we came this way, why we suffer so  
Sifted like wheat*

*Going where we would not go -- asking each night, pulling the  
wheels held fast by muck, if the vision persists as valid  
now that the living of its passion has long-robbed it of its flavor  
tasteless, we implore*

The Good Morning America blather on the ubiquitous TV screen hovering above the waiting room faded into oblivion as my internal antennae locked onto a signal directed to my heart. The waiting room formed such a plateau of preparation for me. Once I followed the nurse down the hallway, I would learn what was going on inside my body, and I would likely have to go places I would not want to go.

Once, when I was in college, I had to go to the dentist to get my wisdom teeth taken out. As the dentist and the nurse made preparations to tear into my mouth with a pair of pliers, I thought about how I was asking them to serve up this platter of pain. Of course, I knew in my mind that it was for a greater good. But my body fought the coming invasion as the stainless steel implements of war clinked ominously in the tray next to my head.

As every nerve screamed out “no!” I had focused on a still, small voice that held fast to the vision, even though the reality of the valley “robbed the vision of its flavor.” Perhaps now was such a time on the plateau – a time to remember the vision, the purpose, before the confusion of the valley would make focus a matter of life and death. My curiosity piqued, I read on.

*Knowing, from other journeys, the lay of this path before us  
how do we make the most of this ritual of clarity before the onset  
of pain of living arrives with fury at our invitation  
we beg for it to come*

*I will feel the wind in my hair and on my brow, listen to the roar of it  
in my ears. Not that I'll remember then, what it feels like, certainly,  
but in hopes that then I'll know I spent this respite well  
I precious time redeemed*

*Not that the price will then be any easier to bear (I am not such a fool)  
but on my reverence now, my weary spirit must depend  
when patience breaks and comfort flees before me like some  
piper taunting*

*In the forest deep I'll resonate my soul to silent tunes from memory  
distant time compressed to fill the gaping chasm from this vista  
long forgot, to that present gritty fulfillment -- urging me on like the  
keep of a promise*

*And blind my eyes, then, as now, to idolatry of any fleeting presence  
deem I it "good" or "ill" -- but live it then as now  
I fill my nostrils with it, then to the camels --  
feast on sunset*

*Careful just to gather for today -- all else would rot within my sack  
E'en then, to stoop, and mop my brow with graceful piecemeal  
partaking in life -- the body and the blood*

"Mr. Lothrop," the nurse at the hallway entrance holding my file startled me. She caught my eye. "Would you please follow me?"

Late Wednesday evening, I sat at the computer, staring at the screen. Another message responding to my query on the ROOTS List. The last dozen or so had all led to dead ends. I should have known it would be a wild goose chase. I had already gotten most of the freebies I could reasonably hope to get off the Internet. Looking over the subject line: RE: Lothrop in Centreville, MD, I almost deleted the message without reading it. But something in me wouldn't let me do it. Instead I clicked on the message and read.

Date: Tues, 30 Sep 1997 02:14:23 -0800  
To: Mike Lothrop <mlothrop@erols.com>  
From: Cindy Killinger <momakay@aol.com>  
Subject: RE: Lothrop in Centreville, MD

Think I may have something about your Michael Edward Lothrop. I'm a Klan (KKK) researcher/watchdog. It's something of a passion of mine since Klansmen murdered my son in 1979 in Greensboro. I have a copy of a newspaper article about Michael Lothrop's death that I'm certain will be of interest to you.

Please send me your address and I will mail you a copy.

You have my sister-in-law to thank for the tip. She's a genealogy nut and remembered a story I told her about your Michael Lothrop shortly after I discovered it. She passed your query on to me because the date and town jogged her memory.

Sorry this is so cryptic. It's late (as you can see) and I need to go to bed. Send me your address.

Cindy

I stared at the words again and tried to make sense of it all. Was Michael Edward Lothrop part of the Klan? Suddenly, Mrs. Emma's warning about what I might find came to my mind and I wondered if I really wanted to know the secrets buried deep in time, beyond memory. This story drew me in deeper and deeper, like a flickering candlelight moving just ahead of me in a maze of darkened hallways. I knew very little about the Ku Klux Klan, save the odd story about a rally in some town or village, where angry white bigots gathered in ghostly costumes. They gathered in 1979 in Greensboro, North Carolina, apparently. They also gathered on November 1, 1897 in Centreville, Maryland. Was Michael my ancestor among them? What did he do? Suddenly, I wanted to know a lot more.

Date: Wed, 01 Oct 1997 23:47:05 -0800  
To: Cindy Killinger <momakay@aol.com>  
From: Mike Lothrop <mlothrop@erols.com>  
Subject: Lothrop in Centreville, MD

Cindy,

Thanks so much for your message. My address is  
6 Oak Creek Drive  
Glen Burnie, MD 21061

I'll gladly pay for the postage and whatever it costs to send the material to me. You cannot know how much this means. Thanks for helping me find the truth about the past, however difficult that truth may be.

I'm sorry to hear about your son's murder. It sounds to me as if your passion gives meaning to his death in some way. I pray that you will also find the truth you seek.

MikeMike

Tired and emotionally drained, I sent the message like a bottle out into a sea of cyberspace and powered down the computer. Then I flicked out the light and walked through the sudden darkness toward our bed.

A crash awakened me and I noticed the walls were glowing and undulating with the staccato reflection of a fire outside the windows. When I rolled out of bed and moved toward the window I heard the flames and the popping sound of burning wood. Then I saw the flames in the shape of a cross in our front yard, and hooded riders astride angry horses, and a brick crashed through a window downstairs. I heard the front door being forced open, and boots pounded the floor and ascended the steps toward us.

But they were not after Laura, and when they entered the room they grabbed me and tied my hands behind my back. They shoved my head into a bag, securing it with a rope tight around my neck, making it difficult to breathe as they carried me down the stairs and out into the night. They beat me in the yard and then they put me onto one of the horses and pulled off the bag. I looked up to see the rope around my neck ascending to the tree above me. The horse on which I sat seemed ready to explode.

Laura screamed from the bedroom window above and then the riders surrounding me removed their hoods, one by one, each revealing my own face. I finally found my voice and screamed out in fear and shame.

“Mike, Mike, are you okay?” Laura shook me in the night and I realized I was not on a horse, but beside her in our bed.

“I’m sorry, I just...” I fumbled for words as I tried to break through the fog of unconsciousness. “I had a bad dream, that’s all.”

“You sounded like you were in trouble. You want to tell me about it?” She ran her fingers through my hair and I realized that I was sweating.

“No. At least not now. Let’s get back to sleep, if we can. I’m sorry, Sweetheart.”

I rolled over away from her on my side and curled into a fetal position. Then I felt Laura’s body curling around mine and her warmth calmed me in the darkness. I could hear the wind rattling in the branches outside our bedroom window, but inside Laura warmed me and kept me safe. Centreville and a haunted past faded away in my mind, and thoughts of death gave way to thankfulness that for now, I was loved and cared for by the most wonderful woman in the world.

Friday, October 3 dawned cold and clear. The leaves had finished putting on their annual show. Now the curtain slowly drew down and the golden yellows and blood reds faded to a dry, earthy brown as they fell in droves to the ground everywhere. As I drove into work, the sunrise streaked across the sky with golden fire. I’d taken to getting to work a bit earlier than usual since my little pep talk with Paul. Breakfast was Dunkin’ Donuts coffee and a cranberry orange muffin, carefully consumed as I weaved through the early morning traffic into Baltimore. News and traffic droned over the radio until I finally turned it off. My mind was elsewhere that morning, as usual.

I had 29 days left.

But who was counting?

Lately, the “death thing” consumed me so much that I couldn’t concentrate on anything else. My test results wouldn’t come in until the following Friday. And what then? Since the graveyard, I’d been on a one way train toward a destiny I could not avoid no matter how hard I tried. The more I found out about Michael Edward Lothrop, the more I wished I had never stumbled onto his grave.

Hours later, I tried to put on my coat as I finished a conversation with a client in Wilmington, Delaware. “You’ve really got to see it to believe it, Tony. We can go round and round over the phone but I think keeping our meeting on the 13<sup>th</sup> makes sense.” I needed to meet Laura for her appointment with the OB/GYN in fifteen minutes. I checked my watch again. Ten minutes. I would never make it. I wasn’t even sure how to get there.

“Certainly, the afternoon works for me just as well. Two thirty, then. You won’t be sorry, Tony.” I couldn’t believe this guy. We had been talking for over half an hour.

“Yes, I’ll bring a model with me, of course. I’ll see you then. Good bye.”

Terri buzzed me as I hung up the phone. “Mike, they’re gathering in the conference room. Just wanted to remind you. It’s almost 11:00.”

Her electronic voice knocked the wind out of me. How could I have forgotten the staff strategy meeting? Always the first Friday of the month. I stared down at my desk calendar and looked at the cold, unrelenting letters, trying to will them away. This was not the week to duck out on an important meeting at work, and Laura would never begin to understand.

“Mike, are you there?”

“Yes, Terri, thanks. I had planned to meet Laura at the doctor’s at 11 today. Could you call her and...” I stopped. No way that would work. I needed to do this myself, even though I was sure I had already missed her at work.

“Sure, Mike.”

“No, I’ll make the call, Terri. Thanks anyway. Can you find the number to an Obstetrics practice named Edwards and...” I couldn’t even think of the name of the place. “It’s on Patapsco in Brooklyn.”

“I’ll find it, Mike. And you’d better let me make the call. Sorry, boss.”

“Thanks, Terri, and use some of your pixie dust; God knows I need it.”

“I’m on it.”

I pulled my contact file from the drawer and stood up. How in the world could I have forgotten this meeting? Every time I tried to show Laura some support, my intentions crashed against a more selfish reality. And for the first time since Laura had told me she was pregnant, I began to wonder if I weren’t trying to avoid dealing with it.

Supper that night was unbearable. Laura had not taken my calls throughout the afternoon. We’d spoken little since arriving home from work, going through the motions of making supper. I stared at my untouched plate and then out the window.

“Honey, I’m so sorry about not making the appointment with you today.”

Laura’s fork rang loudly as she dropped it onto the plate. Her green eyes caged a sea of trouble, ready to explode into a hurricane. “You stood me up, Mike. I waited and you never came – never even called.”

“Terri tried to call, Laura, but I didn’t even realize I couldn’t make it until it was too late. I was trapped.”

“Oh, *you* were trapped.” She wiped the beginning of a tear fiercely from her eye as she spit out the words. “I sat there in that crowded waiting room, surrounded by all those young, pregnant women, watching the clock sweep away the hope that you would come. And I tried to guess how many of those girls were having to go through this alone, because whoever knocked them up ran away when the heat turned up.”

“Come on, Laura, that’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it? Have you been keeping up with your work schedule lately? Because I certainly have. We’ve barely seen each other since I told you I was pregnan

t. You’ve been gone every morning this week before I even get up. You spend every  
u. ight on the computer. Forget about your chances of having cancer or this guy’s death  
anniversary, you’re already dead emotionally to me now.”

Through the heat of my anger and deep sadness I realized that I had not told Laura about Paul and the threat at work, but now certainly didn't seem like a good time. She was right, of course, but how could I tell her that? How could I explain the helplessness I felt in the face of this good and terrible news of her pregnancy? We had decided together a long time ago not to risk hoping again, because losing hope had hurt us so badly. Going to any of those dark places now felt like annihilation to me. I looked at my wife staring at me across the table and I felt at once a deep longing and a deep loathing. Hot tears began to well up and I willed them to stop, feeling my face flush with rage as they piled up inside.

"Damn you, Laura Ellen." I pushed the chair away from the table and threw my napkin on the table.

"Oh no, you don't, Mr. I-Want-Out-of-Here." She leaned forward as she said this. "If you walk out on me now you need to keep on walking."

"Back off, Laura. I need some space."

"I've given you nothing but space, and we're long overdue for a little talk with Jesus, Mike. I'm not much on surprises and I can't stand the suspense. You say one thing but your actions are telling me loud and clear that you're checking out."

From somewhere in the neighborhood, the smell of burning leaves reached my nose and I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. I was clearly not doing well in this argument, but perhaps this time it was not about winning. It occurred to me that Laura's appointment that day had not gone well, and I desperately needed a change of subject.

"What did the Doctor tell you today about our baby?"

This caught her off guard. I watched her shift gears as she glanced down at the table and then looked out the window. The faintest hint of a smile flashed across her face, but she hid it behind a mask of hurt and anger. "It's official, at any rate. I'm five weeks along and the due date is May 30."

I counted back in my head. "Labor Day weekend at Ocean City."

Now she smirked and looked back at me. "That's what I figure. Must have been Saturday afternoon when it rained." Then the smile disappeared as her face clouded with concern, "would you do it again, Mike?"

I leaned forward and reached for her hands, "Honey, you know I want a child. It just scares, me, that's all."

Now a tear tracked its way slowly down her face. "I thought I was too scared to want to open myself up to all this again, Mike. Life is so precious. It seems too fragile to withstand the risk of living. But life goes on, doesn't it? That's what I've been thinking about this baby and about your death anniversary. We're all living under a death sentence, when you think about it. And somehow we continue to live. That's the miracle, Mike, don't you see? It's the strength to go on, when the odds say you don't stand a chance. And if that isn't God, I don't know what is."

We held each other's hands across the table. The tears begin to roll down my own cheeks, but I didn't mind. "For what it's worth, Laura, I'm more happy than scared."

"Then why are you crying?" She laughed through her tears and wiped her face, still holding one of my hands. Then I gently wiped her tears away, as her hand softly touched my face.

"Laura, I'm so sorry for missing that appointment. I wanted to be with you and I got caught in a bind. I made the wrong choice because I didn't think."

She reached for my hand again. "Thanks. I forgive you, Mike."

“I guess I’m really struggling with feeling so helpless to be of any use to you, if I’m completely honest. And it seems like we’re up against a brutal enemy called fate.”

“Well, the doctor says I’ve got just as good a chance of making it to term with this baby as any woman my age. She says it’s very important that I keep my stress level down, and I really need you for that, Mike. You’re more help to me than you know.”

“Thanks. You keep telling me that and one day I’ll believe it.” I smiled hopefully.

“I’m serious honey. We’re a chord of three strands – you, God, and me. Death can’t even threaten us when we face it together.”

She took a bite of her food and wrinkled her face. “The food’s cold. Let’s reheat it and eat. I’m starving.”

We both got up from the table and picked up our plates. As we walked across the kitchen toward the microwave oven, I took a deep breath.

“Laura, I need to tell you about what’s been going on at work.”

When I eased the car into our garage the following Tuesday afternoon, I realized that Laura had not come home from work yet. She usually beat me by half an hour or so. Then I remembered she had a supper meeting this evening. I left the garage door open and walked back up the drive to check the mail. The day had started out chilly but had warmed up. Now, as the sun readied itself for the end of the day, the temperature was falling again and the evening breeze drove the point home. It must have been somewhere in the high 40’s. Crunchy brown and yellow leaves littered the driveway. I would need to rake the yard again.

The first thing I noticed when I opened the mailbox was the large manila envelope, folded into a U shape so that it encircled the rest of the mail, mostly bills, a magazine or two, and junk. I pulled it open and read the return address:

Cynthia Killinger  
1423 Stoney Point Rd.  
Charlottesville, VA 22911

Something wouldn’t let me open it, as I stood near the road at the head of the drive, trying to hold all of the mail while staring down at the envelope which might tell me more than I wanted to know about my ancestor. A car drove by and I waved to Charlie Evans as I remembered Mrs. Emma’s words of advice, “You might want to know what it is you’re looking for so you can decide whether it’s worth the risk of finding it.”

Slowly, I walked back to the house as a dog barked somewhere in the neighborhood.

After a salad and some heated leftovers, I still had not opened the envelope. Laura wouldn’t be home for another hour or so, and part of me wanted her to be with me, even as part of me wanted to screen the information first, to decide whether I wanted Laura to know at all. I felt ashamed about considering hiding anything from her – another frightening aspect of this graveyard treasure hunt. The more I searched, the more I seemed to be unearthing rotten things that were better left unknown. Lately, I found myself identifying more and more with this man who had lived and died a century before my own time and who had used my name.

And perhaps he had been a member of the Klan.

I built a fire and opened the envelope in the living room. After brewing a pot of hazelnut decaf, I settled down on the floor in front of the coffee table. When I opened the envelope and looked inside, I was surprised to find only two pages inside. One was a letter from Cindy Killinger, and the other was a copy of the newspaper article she had written to me about. I read the article first. Time had ravaged the original, from which a poor copy had been made. As I



scanned the page, I was grateful that none of the text was missing along the ragged right side of the original. The headline read:

### **CENTREVILLE MAN FOUND BEATEN TO DEATH**

A note scrawled across the top of the page in blue ink, giving the publication date of the story, from the *Chestertown Record*, dated Thursday, November 4, 1897.

I looked into the fire, sipped my coffee, and began to read.

**CENTREVILLE** Michael E. Lothrop, the school-teacher here, was found dead by his wife Tuesday morning in the barn behind their home near town.

Authorities summoned to the house determined that Lothrop was beaten to death the previous evening, judging from the state in which the body was discovered. Though there are no present suspects in the murder, evidence around Mr. Lothrop's body has led local authorities to surmise that members of the Ku Klux Klan were responsible for the murder.

County Sheriff Joshua Hastings said he discovered many similarities between Mr. Lothrop's death and other area Klan retaliations in recent

months. Mr. Lothrop was a vocal opponent of the Ku Klux Klan. A sign painted in blood on the side of the barn also implicated the Klan.

We will do all in our power to find and punish those responsible for this brutal murder, the sheriff pledged after the body was found Tuesday.

I will not tolerate this kind of vigilante violence, said Sheriff Hastings.

The sheriff admitted, however, that if Lothrop was killed by Klan members, we may never know exactly what happened, because of the secret nature of the society.

No witnesses to the killing have stepped forward, and Mrs. Lothrop was away from the house, tending her mother, who was ill, the

night her husband was killed. Mrs. Lothrop said that the Lothrop's had received threats from Klan members weeks before her husband's murder. Neighbors and friends expressed outrage and surprise about the Klan's alleged responsibility for killing Lothrop.

Mr. Lothrop's death leaves a hole in the small community of Centreville. He was the town's only schoolteacher, and, as a licensed local Methodist preacher, he often preached at the Centreville Methodist Episcopal Church. He delivered the message the Sunday he died. Mr. Lothrop will be buried this afternoon at 4 o'clock in the cemetery outside the church he served.

I read the article again and again, and still came up with far more questions than answers about my ancestor's death. The letter from Cindy Killinger added little more to the information in the article, beyond where she found it (a library in Salisbury, Maryland), and that she had never gotten the chance to follow it up. "Hope this helps you," she wrote at the bottom of the letter. I didn't know whether to thank her or to throw the letter and the article into the fire.

The article failed to tell me why he had been killed. Beaten to death. For what? His gravestone quoted Revelation 14:13, *“Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.”*

Just what exactly had followed after Mr. Michael Edward Lothrop, schoolteacher, husband, Methodist lay preacher, transplanted eastern shoreman, and Klan victim? What did the article mean by “a vocal opponent of the Klan”? Did Michael Lothrop, like me, have a sense of his impending death? In spite of my frustration, something told me I would soon find out. And something also told me that the reason for his death had something to do with my life.

Two days later, I traveled through the Eastern Shore of Maryland again, toward the town of Salisbury. Funny how a little threat from the boss gets you out on the road more. Now that my ace in the hole had fallen through at Hopkins, I had to chase down every possible lead. My contact at Easton, Charlie Toadvine, had called me the day before with a tip. Said he’d been talking with one of his buddies at Peninsula Regional Medical Center in Salisbury, a town another 75 miles or so toward the ocean. The guy’s name was Rankin, and it turned out he was interested in purchasing a lot of diagnostic equipment for a new cancer treatment wing they planned to add within the next six months.

The governor of Maryland had once called the Eastern Shore the “outhouse” of the state. As I had tried to get in touch with Fred Rankin the day before, I had wondered just how much business a procurement officer at a hospital in Salisbury thought was a “lot.” His secretary had set up a lunch date for me with Rankin the next day, at a place called the Pub.

When I arrived at the Royal Exchange Pub, I noticed a World War II vintage plane sticking out of the roof. It was Thursday, October 9. I had 23 days left until my date with destiny. This needed to be good.

Fred Rankin was already waiting for me in a booth, ten minutes before our meeting time. He was nursing an iced tea while poring over papers spread out over the table when I found him. He removed his half glasses and rose to shake my hand when he saw me. Rankin stood tall and had the look of an athlete; the glasses didn’t really fit the rest of him.

“You must be Mike Lothrop. Fred Rankin. Charlie has told me a lot about you, Mike, and I have to tell you I’ve been looking forward to getting together with you.”

“Well, I hope I don’t disappoint you, Mr. Rankin.” His enthusiasm put me on my guard. I was supposed to be the salesman.

“Please call me Fred.” He motioned for me to sit down. “Forgive the mess I’ve made, but I’m a little pressed for time and I needed to double check some figures before we spoke together.” He brushed a hand carelessly through his sandy blonde hair and sat down himself. “Charlie tells me you care more about your relationship with a client than making a sale. He said you talked him out of a sale a couple weeks ago that even he didn’t know wasn’t in the hospital’s best interest. I’m impressed, Mr. Lothrop, and I want to hear more. We’re about to do a great deal of business at PRMC and I need to be working with someone I can trust. Charlie brought me up in this business and his word counts for a lot in my book. Am I being clear enough with you?”

He motioned a waiter over and I ordered a glass of tea.

“It’s Mike, Fred, and I’ll try to be as clear with you. Over the years I’ve come to consider myself more a partner than a vendor. I will not promise to give you the lowest price, but I will do everything I can to make sure your doctors, nurses and patients have the right equipment. For instance, rather than working exclusively through you, I prefer to work together

with you and a representative group of your physicians and nurses, to determine the best fit for PRMC. The final contract includes not only the sale, but also a trial period, as well as a complete maintenance and upgrade package. My bottom line is the patients and caregivers, so if you're looking for a low bidder, you won't be pleased with me. I can guarantee your staff and your patients will be more than pleased."

I paused to take a breath, then waited for him to speak. Fred, who had been listening intently, smiled as he replaced his glasses and looked down at the papers on the table. Then he singled out one from the pile and handed it to me. "Salisbury is turning into a kind of mecca for the Eastern Shore these days, Mike, and PRMC has been riding a wave of success as the area's only regional health care facility." I began scanning the figures on the page as he continued. "We're not interested in finding the lowest bidder. We're interested in building the best Oncology Unit on the Eastern Shore."

The list of objectives and equipment impressed me. If we did business with each other, it would dwarf the Hopkins deal altogether. I sipped my tea and read over the figures again as the waiter returned to our table.

"I think we're going to need a lot more time before we're ready to order, friend," Fred waived off the waiter as he watched me from across the table.

Driving back along Route 50 toward home, I felt flush with a serendipitous kind of success. Fred hadn't said as much during our lunch, but I got the feeling the hospital had just canned their last supplier and had only recently been looking for another. Now, because of Charlie Toadvine, I was looking at one of the larger deals of my career. Fred wanted me to meet with a group of doctors, nurses, and hospital administrators, and present my proposal to them as soon as possible. I was already familiar with the equipment listed on Fred's dream sheet, having worked with several hospitals with state of the art oncology centers. This was one ball I thought I could easily knock out of the park. And it was being slow pitched to me.

*It looks like the best way is Your way, I prayed to God as I drove past fields and wetlands gilded by the afternoon sun. Thank You, with all my heart.*

Just ahead, I saw signs for Highway 213, the road that led to Centreville, and I wondered if Mrs. Emma was at home. I glanced at my watch, then slowed to make the turn north.

"Mr. Lothrop, what a pleasant surprise," Mrs. Emma greeted me at the door fifteen minutes later. Lucifer the cat purred next to her.

"I was driving home from Salisbury and thought I'd stop by for a visit, if you don't mind, Mrs. Emma. It looks like I remembered how to get here."

"So it does, so it does. Won't you come in." She turned and led me into the kitchen, where she filled a tea pot and put it on a gas burner to heat. After retrieving the sugar bowl from the cabinet, she turned to me and smiled, "now, what can I do for you, Mr. Lothrop? Any new developments? I must confess I've not had any success in finding more letters for you, though it's not for lack of trying."

"Actually, I just wanted to stop by for a visit, Mrs. Emma. When I met you week before last, I was sorry that all we had time to discuss was the letter. And cats, of course."

"Well, come on into the sitting room and make yourself at home, Mr. Lothrop. And don't get me started on cats, unless you're of a mind to stay for supper. You have a wife to get home to, I believe." She swept into the warm room with the fireplace and bay window overlooking the Chester River.

“Yes, ma’am, I do,” I said as I sat down on the couch.

Emma Simmons took her place in her chair, alongside Lucifer. “How long have you been married?”

“Fifteen years, last June.”

“How wonderful. And do you have any children, Mr. Lothrop?”

Why was this questions always so painful, like the admission of a great failure? “No, ma’am, we don’t. We’ve gone through several miscarriages and had really given up hope of ever having a child of our own.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, dear,” she said, leaning forward toward me.

I felt tears welling up inside me. “Laura is pregnant again. She’s only five weeks along now. It came as a surprise to both of us.” I expected Mrs. Emma to clasp her hands with joy and say something along the lines of: ‘oh, how nice,’ or another of the stock meaningless phrases with which the English language is plagued. But she didn’t say anything. Her look seemed to draw out something from deep inside me. I realized that she was the first person I had told about Laura’s pregnancy.

“I can see it’s got you worried, son,” she gently broke the silence between us.

“More than I can say.”

“And you’re afraid to get your hopes up, aren’t you?”

A tear slowly ran down my face. “Yes, ma’am, I am.”

In the kitchen, the teapot began to whistle. Mrs. Emma rose from the chair as the cat leaped to the braided rug on the hardwood floor. “Why don’t you come into the kitchen with me.”

I wiped my eyes and followed her. She moved slowly, but with an elegance and grace undimmed by many years of living. For the first time, I wondered how old she was. At her bidding, I retrieved the cream from the refrigerator and set the kitchen table with the creamer, sugar and spoons, while Mrs. Emma poured the water into thin china cups with lilacs painted on the sides and found an assortment of tea bags in the cabinet.

“We didn’t have a chance to talk about my first husband when we met last week, Mr. Lothrop. Tommy and I were high school sweethearts and in love practically from the moment we saw each other. We were married a little over a year when I woke up one morning and found his body cold and stiff beside me. He had died in his sleep. I was barely 20 years old with a two month old infant to care for and no means of providing for ourselves. I felt the whole world crashing in on me.” She sipped her tea slowly and looked over the rim of the cup into my eyes.

“I didn’t know how to hope in life again, when I got up out of that death bed while the baby cried out for me. People asked me later how I found the strength to go on. But you see, I don’t recall ever being given a choice. Since that morning, I’ve lived another whole lifetime, son. In time, I did find the courage to love again, and God blessed me and my daughter with a wonderful family.

“I’m not going to sit here and tell you it was all some wonderland of blessings, but over time, I’ve come to see both the blessings and the curses of this life sewn together into a patchwork of laughter and tears. Only God knows why, but every life involves its share of both. I can see you’ve known some of the blessings of life, as well as the curses. But if I could go back to that young woman I was, numb with grief and fear, I’d put my arms around her and tell her, ‘Hold on, Child, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.’”

“Sounds like that’s what you’re telling me now, Mrs. Emma,” I said while tracing the rim of the cup with my finger.

“Son, there’s something far bigger than hope, or even faith. Some call it grace, and I call it peace. Not the kind the world buys with power, but the kind Jesus gives to anyone with the guts to follow. Peace that passeth all understanding. We’re not responsible for that peace. It’s the ocean we swim in, the air we breathe. From what little I know about your faith – those songs of praise I heard you sing with your wife – I know that peace is your birthright.”

I laughed as I put my empty cup back into its saucer and looked outside the kitchen window. “I came here today because I thought you might need some company. I had no idea how much *I* needed it. Thank you, Mrs. Emma.”

“Well thank you, young man, for fitting me into your busy schedule. Your stock went up today, in my book. I can’t tell you how many genealogical researchers have hit me up over the years for information. As soon as they get what they want, they leave without so much as a thank you note. Two weeks ago, I classed you with that pack, but I can see you’re a different breed of dog.”

“Not a cat, though, Mrs. Emma?”

She laughed and stood slowly. “Now, I expect you need to get home to your wife, Mr. Lothrop. See that you’re on time, and see that she knows how much you love her.”

“I’ll do that, ma’am, and I thank you for the tea.” I stood and followed her down the hallway to the front door.

Emma Simmons held the door for me and shook my hand warmly as I crossed the threshold. “Good afternoon, Mr. Lothrop.”

“Good bye, Mrs. Emma, and thank you again.”

“My pleasure.” She held onto my hand. “Oh, and don’t you be ashamed of those tears, son.” She reached up with her free hand and brushed my face with her withered fingers. “They come from the heart of God.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said as we looked into each other’s eyes. Then I turned to leave.

Emma Simmons drew her white knit sweater tighter around her as she stood on the front porch and waved good-bye.

“Is it cancer?” I was almost too afraid to ask as I reeled from the shock of the news of the test results from the doctor the next day.

“It’s too early to even take a guess, Mr. Lothrop. We won’t know for sure until we test the tissue from the glands we remove. The DXA indicates that you have an abnormal reduction in bone mass. This is caused by the enlargement and overfunctioning of two of your four parathyroid glands.” Long black hair framed Dr. Theresa Li’s thin, studious face, and she played with her silver rimmed glasses as she talked to me. Even though I was afraid of what might happen to me, everything about this doctor put me at ease.

“But why are they enlarged? Don’t you call that a tumor?”

“Certainly,” her tone was that of a schoolteacher reviewing a lesson before the big test: slow but steady. “But many conditions can cause abnormal glandular growth. Your problem right now is calcium deficiency and bone mass reduction. I recommend we remove the affected glands. We can schedule you for surgery in…” she looked down at the chart in her hands, “two weeks.”

A week before my date with destiny.

“Will it affect my voice?” I asked, weakly.

“Not at all,” she replaced her glasses and smiled at me, “I won’t even get near your voice box, Mr. Lothrop.”

Half an hour later, I walked slowly to find my car, having signed the papers that give Dr. Li my consent to cut my throat.

The Rev. Sandy Rollings pulled into our drive with her bright red Jeep Cherokee and tapped her horn. I looked up from my raking and waved to her.

Saturday, October 11. Twenty-one days left.

“Sorry to interrupt your raking, Mike,” she called to me over the hood of the Cherokee. Sandy was in her mid-forty’s, an avid runner with a tender heart and a fierce intellect.

I was in the mood for a break but curious about what brought our pastor out on a Saturday morning. “No problem at all, Sandy. Good morning.” I dropped the rake and removed each leather glove as I walked toward the drive. “What brings you out our way?”

“Actually Laura called last night.” She looked down as she rounded the front of the Jeep and brushed a hand through her hair, but I could tell she was smiling. “She said you could use a pep talk.”

I stopped about ten yards away from her. I folded my arms across my chest and looked toward the front door, then back at Sandy. She leaned her head to one side and squinted as the sun shone on her face. “Laura said you’re scheduled for surgery in two weeks, Mike.”

I laughed, shoving the gloves in each front pocket of my jacket. “Actually, Sandy, it’s not the surgery that’s got me spooked.”

“Funny you should mention that.” Sandy walked up to me and stopped. “Laura said there was something besides the surgery you needed to talk about.”

I wasn’t mad at Laura for tipping my hand. She had never called a pastor about problems she thought needed more attention than I gave them. Which is why this latest move spoke volumes about how much this graveyard business worried Laura. I turned and walked toward the dock below the house, my hands still stuffed into my pockets. Sandy followed me, without speaking. I had always appreciated Sandy’s ability to know when words are not necessary, which is a rarity for a preacher, in my experience.

The water trembled now and again with a chilly autumn breeze. We stood on the dock together, looking out over Oak Creek as I told her the story of my stumbling on an omen in a graveyard. Now and again, Sandy asked a question or two, but for the most part, she listened.

“So this impending operation feels like part of a larger order of events that gets harder and harder to ignore, Sandy, and I’ll admit it to you, I’m scared.”

“Do you think God’s trying to tell you that you’re about to die?” Sandy looked out over the water when she asked.

“I thought you could tell me, Pastor.”

“Oh, Mike.” She sighed and turned to look at me, “you know better than that, don’t you?”

“Look, Sandy, don’t give me that ‘you’ve got to do your own searching’ line you trundle out at Bible studies. I need some help here. Where exactly does free will come into play with a God who supposedly has every day of our lives written down in some golden book?” Hearing the question come out of my mouth helped me to realize just how important it was for me to know.

My pastor ran both hands through her short blonde hair and looked up into the sky, as if imploring God for some help. “Mike, God created us in God’s image, as beings with incredible creative power. Along with that power comes the freedom to create or to destroy.” Then she put a hand on my shoulder, “freedom to press on or to give up.”

I looked down at the dock and laughed. “That’s the second time this week I’ve received that advice, if I’m right about where you’re going with this line.”

Her hand dropped from my shoulder. “Always trying to stay out front, huh, Mike?” Now it was her turn to laugh. “And just where am I headed, do you think?”

“Oh, I don’t know exactly. Something about choosing my destiny, I suppose.”

“How about embracing your destiny, Mike?” Her gaze fixed mine, and I resisted the urge to turn away. “Remember Christ’s prayer in the garden?”

“Not my will but yours, Father.” I remembered. I hated those words of submission to a far greater wisdom and love than I could begin to understand. I tried in vain to piece the paradox together of a loving father who would willingly send a son to die. I tried to understand the kind of son who would obey, at all costs.

“Jesus embraced death, and we celebrate his resurrection.” Sandy’s hand softly touched my forearm. “Maybe God is also calling you to new life, Mike, through a similar kind of death.”

As the words sank in, Laura’s voice floated down from the deck on the hill above us. “Hot chocolate! Come and get it.”

I turned to go, waving to Laura, but Sandy held onto my other arm. “Mike, I know all this sounds like a bunch of tired, religious platitudes. But Moses wasn’t the only one God tried to reach through a burning bush. He just happened to be one of the few willing to turn aside. And he also happened to be one of the few willing to answer ‘Yes’ to God’s call. You’ve obviously turned aside to take a closer look at this sign. I don’t believe it’s merely a coincidence, either. Now you’ve got to do the hard work of listening to God and *trusting* in God.”

I turned back to look at the water. A breeze rippled the dazzling flashes of reflected sunlight, and a pair of geese launched themselves into the pale blue sky.

“I’m not sure I know how to understand God, Sandy.”

She let go of my arm and looked up at the house. “When the time comes, you’ll know well enough. The hard part is trusting God enough to follow. But you’ll understand all too well, my friend.”

The next evening, Laura and I sat in a circle with the Glen Burnie UMC senior high youth group. We were having our regular Sunday night get-together. Tonight, we were planning our Halloween party. It had always been a tough balance for me to call the kids to keep faith in the midst of a celebration of death and fear. I didn’t want to be a party pooper, but neither did I want to give in to the cultural confusion about the power of evil in this world.

Perhaps I was being too melodramatic. Laura and I had served in a church in Ohio, fresh out of college, where the reigning Halloween tradition was a church sponsored haunted house. They mocked up a Frankenstein’s laboratory, where disembodied heads spilled streams of blood over a tabletop. It was quite popular. People lined up for hours to see it, and their kids screamed in very real terror, especially in the monster maze, which the church folk had fabricated out of the boxes in which the new organ pipes had been shipped.

Laura and I led the youth group there as well, and we did not feel comfortable or faithful participating in such an event. We told the pastor how we felt a few weeks after watching the event for the first time. I’ll never forget what the Reverend Doctor W. Taylor Franklin told us that day in his office.

“Every year, we get this kind of complaint from someone new to the congregation. This year, it happens to be you.”

How to respond? I didn't know then and I don't know now. But the following year, we spoke with enough people about how the bloody heads didn't quite go with a message of new life in Christ, and the church discontinued the haunted house and put on a harvest festival instead. It wasn't nearly as popular as the haunted house, but at least no children were scared out of their wits because of what we did. They even continued the practice a couple of years after we moved away.

The last I had heard, the haunted house was back in business, though.

Laura and I had softened our anti-Halloween stance over the years. On this Sunday night, we were talking about putting on a combination scavenger hunt and mystery night, like a living game of Clue.

Kristen, the short brunette junior who led the group, was holding forth at the dry erase board.

"Okay Mike, this year we want you to be the stiff."

"Say again, Kristen?"

"We're solving a murder, so we've got to have a body. Don't take this personally, but you're perfect for the part." She waited for the obligatory laughter, while Laura gave me a wink from across the room. I stood up and took a bow.

Caleb shouted from his perch on the folding chair that he had pushed back on its hind legs, leaning against the wall. "Mr. Mike, the perfect dead guy! And you don't even have to study your lines." More laughter.

"What we want you to do is hide, like the killer stashed the body somewhere in the basement or something," Kristen continued when the yucks begin to subside. She talked as she wrote my name and *victim* on the dry erase board in red ink. "The church house will be the last stop. The team that finds the body gets bonus points. Then we'll all meet in the fellowship hall and compare notes to see who wins and gets first shot at the ice cream.

"What if no one finds me?" I asked when she finished.

"Not a possibility," Tommy Heller called out as he tossed his Orioles hat in the air and ducked to catch it with his head.

"I ain't goin' in that basement," Carla Dawson called out. "It gives me the creeps in the daytime." She made a good point, I thought to myself. The basement of the church house was dark and musty. What a treat hiding down there alone in the dark would be.

"We're going down in teams, remember?" Kristen answered. Then she looked directly at me. "Besides, when we find him, Mike will come back to life. It's like a resurrection. We're a church group, remember?" She smiled broadly and the freckles spread across her face.

I nodded my head as her words rang in my ears. *When they find me, I'll come back to life.* Is that what I've done to my ancestor, forgotten all these years until I stumbled across his grave and resurrected his memory and his passion in my own life? But Michael Edward Lothrop, whose death centennial would be in three weeks, was most assuredly dead. And the more I searched, the more questions I found.

Kristen interrupted my thoughts. "So you'll do it, then?"

"Certainly." I nodded my head and turned to Laura, who was shaking hers and smiling.

"Great. We'll get the planning team together later this week and fill you in on the details when we work them out. Everybody else know what you're supposed to do?"

"What kind of ice cream are we having?" Tommy asked from under his hat.

"Since you're getting it, that's entirely up to you," Kristen's eyes sparkled.

"Hey!" Tommy protested, whipping off his hat.



“I’ll help you, Tommy,” Laura stood and adjusted her guitar. “Time to sing.”

Terri King greeted me as I walked back into the office Monday after lunch. “Hi, Mike. Got a couple of calls. Fred Rankin from PRMC in Salisbury and Emma Simmons from Centreville. Their numbers are on your blotter.”

“Thanks, Terri. Did you see the Hopkins letter?”

“Done. Sign it and I’ll get it in tomorrow’s mail. Are you still off to Wilmington this afternoon?”

“Yes, I’ve got to leave in half an hour. Nice work, Terri.” I noticed a small model of an old world sailing ship on her desk. “What’s with the boat?”

“It’s Columbus Day, silly, or didn’t you know?”

She laughed as I tossed my briefcase into the chair in the corner of my office. I called Fred Rankin first and found out that he had tentatively scheduled a meeting with several doctors, nurses and administrators at PRMC that Friday from 9:00 to noon. From the response to a proposal I had faxed to his office the previous Friday, it seemed like the hospital administration was all but ready to give me a blank check. We spent about twenty minutes talking about what kinds of things Fred thought the group would like for me to present on Friday. Things were moving quite fast for something that dropped out of the sky in my lap only four days before. After the phone call, I jotted the date and time into my daybook and started planning how I would use the time when I remembered that Emma Simmons had called.

A minute later she answered the phone, sounding a little tired.

“Hello, Mrs. Emma. Mike Lothrop returning your call. Sorry I was not here earlier.”

“Oh, you don’t have to apologize, Mr. Lothrop. I’ve got some good news, as far as your search for your ancestor is concerned.”

“You don’t say.” I sat up in my chair and grabbed a pencil on the desk.

“Eula Kimble and I stumbled across a little something yesterday afternoon. Seems Michael Edward Lothrop kept a journal, of sorts. The pages we found were no longer bound together, but there’s enough of it to piece together a good deal of the last weeks of his life. Mind you, it’s not a diary, but a collection of reflections and thoughts. We found some thirty pages or more. Most of them are in good shape.”

“That’s wonderful, Mrs. Emma. I can’t thank you enough for finding it for me.” I thought of what she had told me last week about her experience with greedy researchers. But I couldn’t help myself. “When can I see them?”

Emma Simmons laughed into the phone. “You can see them as soon as you can get here, Mr. Lothrop. How does tomorrow around noon suit? Care to have lunch with an old woman?”

“That’s wonderful. I would enjoy very much having lunch with you. Can I bring anything?”

“Just your appetite. I’d invite you earlier but I don’t want to miss the women’s circle.”

“Lunch will be fine, Mrs. Emma. I’ll see you at noon.”

Only after we hung up did I think about asking her about why she sounded so tired. Little wonder I had forgotten. I could hardly think straight. Of course I was nervous about what the journal might reveal about Michael Edward Lothrop. With nineteen days to go, I needed to know the truth, even if it was bad.

The intercom buzzed. “Gentle reminder, Mike. You need to get on the road for your meeting with Anthony Salerno at Christiana.”

“Thanks, Terri. I’m on my way.”

*September 16, 1897*

*School has begun with its usual fury. I find myself excited and wearied at the same time. Liz and I have enjoyed the opportunity to travel to Connecticut and to visit with friends and family this summer. At school, the same children return different each year. By now, I should be used to it, but I never cease to stand amazed at the transformation a few months of labor in the fields can accomplish. So we meet again, and may God grant me the wisdom and the courage to impart a holy wisdom to my charges.*

*I had not realized until this Indian Summer Thursday afternoon how much I long for something new on the horizon. At 37 years of age I find myself asking more and more: "Am I willing to live and to die for such a life as I am leading at this moment?" In the midst of a history lesson this morning, I found myself lost in the romantic notion of great men spending their lives for some noble cause. My life is neither great nor noble. I confine my complaints to this paper alone, but there burns within my heart a deep yearning to live for something more.*

Michael Edward Lothrop would die at the hands of murderers within weeks of setting down these complaints to his journal. Emma had graciously allowed me to take home the originals. "I know how much this means to you," she had told me over tea, which I had made for her when I visited her for lunch Tuesday. In spite of not feeling well, Emma had insisted on meeting with me to show me the journals.

She had also told me that the journals meant more to her than I could know. Pastor Fred had told me that she took her records seriously. I wondered if there was more to it than record keeping.

That evening I sorted through the faded entries from the start of the journal. While I was with Emma, we read together the last entry, dated Saturday, October 31, 1897.

*God is my refuge and my strength, a very present help in trouble. I find lately that I cannot tolerate the evil that holds our community hostage. Jesus Christ has called us out of darkness into God's marvelous light. Perhaps I have indeed found my calling here in the winter (and fall) of my discontent. Tomorrow, I will confront the devil from the pulpit and challenge his dominion in the name of Jesus Christ.*

*I am far more angry than I am frightened about what Satan might do to me. I fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. Besides, the blood of my brothers and sisters cries out to me to stand together with them as with the Lord, and to make a living sacrifice of my life and my safety.*

*The truth is, no one in this village or in this land is truly safe while any of us lives in constant fear of death in the night. I have known (as too many of us have known) that among our congregation, even, are those who ride in the night reigning terror while hiding behind masks of anonymity. Yet we all know who they are. Our silence in the face of what they do, while momentarily guaranteeing our safety, makes us their accomplices in their wickedness.*

*I am tired of their excuses about righteousness, and of my own complicity in their vigilante justice. The Apostle Paul calls us to "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."*

*The Negro is a child of God, just as each of us are children of God. And Christ has set us all free. There, I have said it. I have learned, in teaching them this season, that they are members of my own family. I will no longer cry "Peace, Peace!" when there is no peace.*

*So tomorrow, God has called me to lift up before the people the text of Isaiah 61:1-3:*

*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.*

*For too long we have been held captive by this roaring lion among us, who devours our decency. The Klan minions have threatened me to silence in the past few weeks but it is my own preference for a life of slavery to death and new life in Christ that holds me captive. Not tomorrow. I will call us all to repentance and to live free of this scourge of hatred and fear. God is my refuge and my strength. His word burns within me like a fire and I am weary with holding it in.*

*I am alone in our empty house tonight, steeling myself with Scripture promises on the eve of my declaration of independence from this tyranny of evil and fear. Liz left this morning to tend to her mother. Outside, this All Hallows Eve, an ill wind blows.*

Emma held my hand as I read words penned before the dawn of reckoning that would be Michael Edward Lothrop's last. Tears streamed down Emma's weathered face; her eyes gazed with love into a past that made its presence known in the room more and more as I read. The final written testimony spoke directly to me, his namesake.

*Yet I am no longer frightened. I know this night that I have been called for such a time as this. The battle is the Lord's. If God has placed me on this earth to come to this place to cry out a word of testimony and love, then I am truly satisfied. They could come for me tomorrow and I will die content in the knowledge that I have truly lived. And while they very well may extinguish my life on this earth, no power on earth can quench the fire of God's passion and love for the Klansmen and for the whole family of God, including the Negro.*

*"I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead."*

*Philippians 3:8-11*

He would indeed share in Christ's sufferings the following day. And he knew it.

In the hours that followed, as I read the precious pages Emma had entrusted to my care, I discovered that this unassuming schoolteacher and preacher had alone stood up to the Klan in the classroom in the weeks before this showdown in the church. At the end of September, Klansmen had lynched the only schoolteacher in the neighboring "Negro" school. Michael Lothrop secretly taught them in the evenings in October until the nightriders had burned the schoolhouse

to the ground. Throughout that fatal season, the Klan had threatened to kill him while he defiantly taught gatherings of children of former slaves in their homes.

A week before they murdered him, he backed down in the face of their withering fury. Yet something inside him would not let him retreat. As he and his wife Lizzy licked their wounds, God steeled him to walk directly into the lion's den Klansmen had made of his church and confront them directly from the pulpit.

No more hiding. What Christ had told him in the dark he would indeed tell in the light. He was not afraid to die, this gentle man of letters. I yearned to be worthy of his name. Michael Edward Lothrop had lost his life for the sake of Christ. In so doing, he had certainly found his life in Christ.

A life not even the Klan could take from him.

As the weathered pages unlocked for me the story of that final autumn season in his life, I envied this simple, doomed schoolteacher. Michael Edward Lothrop had found the answer to his question: "*Am I willing to live and to die for such a life as I am leading at this moment?*".

I wanted to know the answer as well.

Friday, October 17, 1997, I sat in my Ford Taurus in the Peninsula Regional Medical Center parking lot. Beyond my windshield, through the light rain, the Pocomoke River wandered through the small town of Salisbury, Maryland. Beside me on the passenger seat, a pile of papers stuffing my briefcase told the tale of the biggest sale of medical equipment I had ever made in my life.

Throughout the morning, as the doctors, nurses and staff who had gathered in the bright conference room shared their excitement about my part in the new oncology center at PRMC, I realized that everyone there had decided to do business with our company. They had already signed several parts of what would be an open contract. Fred Rankin, who had been so enthusiastic at our lunch meeting the previous Thursday, had nearly shaken my arm off after walking me to my car.

This huge contract had to be the crowning moment of my career. No more arguments with Paul about the best way to approach a client. Yet as certain as I was that this contract vindicated me in Paul Evans' steel blue eyes and assured my lofty status at AccuTech, I realized as I sat in the car that God was calling me to something higher.

*Am I willing to live and to die for such a life as I am leading at this moment?*

With a day over two weeks before my showdown with destiny, I understood more than I really wanted to know about why God had gotten my attention. The pensive rain tapping the windshield reflected my own mood on what should have been a day of celebration.

What had I told Mary that day after Sunday school? "In the course of my work, I get to know a lot of medical information." What did God want me to do with that information? Sell more and more medical equipment? The information had given Mary a shred of hope. I had seen the hope shine in her eyes as she peeped out of her fortress of sadness. Having settled on the biggest sale I could imagine, I knew sales would never satisfy my desire to connect with people like Mary.

Now that I held in my hands the documents that would get my boss off my case, I no longer cared about satisfying him. In fact, as I sat at the expansive conference table with people who were passionate about saving lives, I felt a similar passion and kinship with them. The deal could have been much sweeter had I not urged them to do business with one of our competitors

with far more expertise in newer radiosurgery and particle beam equipment. Throughout the morning, I had concerned myself only with what pleased God.

I turned left out of the parking garage and navigated my way back to the main highway that cut through the center of town. At the next traffic light, I watched a mother steer her two daughters across the street in front of me. She hovered over them with a blue umbrella while their pigtails bobbed in time with their exaggerated steps. They wore matching pink Barbie raincoats and were each carrying a load of books. I followed them with my eyes as they jumped onto the sidewalk to my right and bobbed into the library.

The Salisbury library. Where Cindy Killinger found the article about Michael Edward Lothrop's murder.

When the light turned green, I turned right and parked along the street next to the library.

Rosemary Evans caught my attention through a gap in one of the stacks as she reshelfed some material.

"May I help you?" she whispered to me. Her jet black hair drawn tightly into a bun seemed to pull the smooth caramel skin of her face. When she smiled at me her high cheekbones rose even higher.

"I'm looking for some information on a family named Lothrop in Queen Annes County. And I'd like to see if you have any archived copies of the, ah..." I glanced back down at the three by five card in my hand, "*Chestertown Record*".

"Honey, we've got most everything recorded about every family on the Eastern Shore. You're in one of our general research sections here. The Queen Annes County collection is across the room," she said as she pointed with her free hand to a section framing a window. I recognized the hospital presiding over the hill above the river.

"Let me show you how to use our computers to zero in on that family and anything we might have in the newspaper archives." She finished shelving the books in her arm and motioned for me to follow her. "I'm Rosemary Evans, but everyone calls me Rose."

"Well, Rose, I'm Mike Lothrop and I'm grateful for your help," I said as I followed after her.

Half an hour later, having found little about the Lothrop family, I squinted up at a microfilm reader and slowly cranked the dials. "I see you've done this before," Rose commented from over my shoulder. "You know where to find the other reels if you need them. If you need anything else I'm always near the front desk."

"Thanks, Rose." I mumbled as I slowly cranked the reel to center the article about the murder.

### **CENTREVILLE MAN FOUND BEATEN TO DEATH**

"My Lord," Rose put a hand on my shoulder. I could tell she was scanning the article. "Why didn't you just tell me you were looking for the Klan. Press the green button to print that page while I get a book that I know you'll be interested in."

The book Rose retrieved for me, "Klan Activity on the Eastern Shore", by Edna Phillips, had just arrived the week before. I sat down at a honey colored round table in the middle of the research section and paged through the index pages to see the Queen Anne's County entries. There were several. I didn't find a Lothrop entry.

The pages were filled with stories of lynchings, burnings and midnight meetings. Many Klan members were dedicated Christians, as the organization cloaked itself in a righteous zeal. Besides murdering and terrorizing African Americans, the Klan meted out its peculiar form of justice to wife beaters and drunkards as well. They opened their meetings gathered around a burning cross, singing “The Old Rugged Cross”.

Just as the details of Klan crimes began to run together, a summary paragraph jumped off the page at me.

The story of the Ku Klux Klan in Queen Anne’s County stands in stark contrast to the rest of the Eastern Shore, where Klan activity flourished, especially in the first thirty years of the early twentieth century. The turn of the century marks a rapid decline of Klan involvement and the number of Klan related incidents in the county, especially when compared to the surrounding counties.

No single factor accounts for this apparent community resistance to the Klan’s message and mission in Queen Anne’s County. Local law enforcement efforts were not especially opposed to Klan activity in the area. There is no way to reconstruct whether white church congregations divorced themselves from the Klan in Queen Annes County.

Clearly, however, the number of reported lynchings, beatings, and other typical Klan crimes in Queen Annes County falls far short of the norm for the rest of the counties in the Eastern Shore, particularly after the turn of the century.

I glanced at my watch and realized I needed to head back to Baltimore. After copying the page about Queen Annes County, I thanked Rose for her help and told her I looked forward to returning. Then I folded and stuffed the copies into my jacket and headed out into the light rain back to my car.

Sunday, October 19, dawned clear and cooler than usual. The thermometer outside our kitchen window hovered slightly above the 50 degree mark, and a mist hug tenaciously over the water behind our home. Laura and I looked over our Sunday school material as we nursed cups of coffee and picked over bowls of raisin bran. The Bible lesson came from Mark 10:35-45, where Jesus responds to James and John’s request for places of honor by exhorting the disciples to be servants of everyone.

When James and John confidently assure Jesus that they will be able to “drink from the cup he must soon drink from,” he assures them ominously that they will indeed drink from the cup from which he must drink. Little do they know the full impact of that prophetic warning. Their belief will lead to violent death, like Jesus’ own crucifixion.

It’s a heavy lesson for the kids, or for anyone, for that matter. Laura and I have spent some time talking over how to best approach such an intense lesson. I wonder again, as I sip my coffee across from the woman I love, just what kind of cup our own discipleship will lead us to drink.

In the end, of course, James and John marched confidently into a dark future, knowing God marched with them. Their false bravado gave way to a new appreciation for the presence and power of God’s Spirit. I felt no false bravado. How I wished for more of a sense of God’s presence and power, though. How could I teach something I barely believed in (and had so rarely experienced) myself?

Looking back, we should have been more prepared for how Mary would respond to such a difficult lesson.

“I thought baptism was a good thing,” she said, hours later, as we sat in a circle with our Bibles perched on our laps.

“Baptism is ultimately good, Mary,” Laura offered, “but the kind of rebirth it symbolizes for us comes through death.” The kids in the circle were getting that glazed look on their eyes that suddenly came over them whenever the theological talk got too thick.

“In English?” Tommy asked, always the court jester.

“The Bible is talking about two kinds of death. When we confess our sins, we die, in a sense, to the kind of life we try to live without God. A lot of things have to change. Some things have to change forever.”

Now it was Kristen’s turn to jump in. “But it doesn’t always work out that way, because church people are such hypocrites.”

“Speaking from experience, of course,” Caleb jabbed, then ducked to avoid Kristen’s swat. While everyone else laughed, I noticed the frustration clouding Mary’s dark face.

Laura didn’t even break her stride. “That’s right, Kristen. We’re not able to realize God’s healing in our lives completely until we pass through that other kind of death, the kind that leads to resurrection with Christ.”

“And everyone lives happily ever after,” Mary’s voice trailed off. She spoke so quietly that she got everyone’s attention. No one knew what to say, so she continued after a beat of silence. “That’s such a cop out, isn’t it? The truth is that it doesn’t make any difference whether you believe in God or not. Everybody dies, no matter what they believe or how they live. The life we know is too painful, so we create a life that doesn’t exist, to make us feel better about how crappy our life really is.”

“Oh, Mary,” Laura whispered in the wake of stunned silence that followed after Mary’s harsh words. Mary turned away when Laura reached touched her shoulder.

Tommy Heller dropped the bomb. “Give it a rest, Mary. You come in here every Sunday and play Miss martyr.”

“Tommy, that’s enough.” I tried to stop him.

“She walks all over you guys, Mr. L, with the biggest chip on her shoulder in the whole world. What’s so special in your life that you’ve got to dominate every conversation about how tough you’ve got it?”

He had to ask.

Tears were streaming down Mary’s face. “I’ve got AIDS. How’s that for special?”

When Mary rushed from the room, Laura glanced at me and then followed her. A couple of the kids fumbled with their Bibles while the silence suffocated us all. Tommy’s voice cracked as he said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Kristen whispered from across the circle, “Why didn’t you tell us?”

Then the bell pierced our collective shock, and everyone grabbed their stuff and scrambled out of the room, knocking chairs as they went. All alone, I sat in my chair and could not summon the energy to move. I tried to replay the conversation over again in my mind to find a way to prevent what had happened, but my mind would not let me look ahead to assess the extent of the damage.

No matter. All hell was about to break loose on a scale I never would have been able to imagine.

“Tough day in Sunday school, eh, Kiddo?” Sandy’s New Jersey accent deadpanned over the phone. She was keeping a lid on her emotions, but her clipped greeting gave away the strain

she had been under in the wake of Mary's revelation. I had seen a couple of the parents of kids in our youth group corner Sandy after the service. Laura and I had told Sandy about Mary's bombshell that morning, but we had not anticipated the gathering firestorm of parental dismay at the news that Mary was HIV-positive.

"How bad is it, Sandy?"

"Bad enough. Tom and Ellen Gardner have insisted on a meeting this afternoon with you, Laura, me, and as many parents as they can get in touch with this afternoon. I told them I could meet at three. How's that time for you?"

"We'll be there, Sandy. I don't know what to say. We didn't even see it coming. I'd rather the kids have found out some other way, but I can't really understand where all this hysteria is coming from."

"Same place as always, Mike. People fear what they don't understand. Maybe we should have held that meeting a couple of weeks ago, but I really wanted to try to protect Mary. Now it looks like we're throwing her to the lions. How's she doing?"

"Laura got a chance to talk with her a little bit after class. She's a tough kid, but today's class shook her up a lot. We've tried to call her this afternoon but they're not answering."

"Just keep loving her, Mike." Sandy's quiet voice conveyed her own compassion for Mary.

"You know we will, Pastor. Thanks for bringing her into our lives."

"I hope you still feel that way this afternoon. Something tells me we're in for some tough sledding."

"You have got to be kidding me!" Tom stood up so fast he knocked his folding chair down. "I'm not believing you knew all along and put our kids at risk."

Laura and I had just stood before the group of angry parents and told them that we had known that Mary was HIV positive before she came to Sunday school.

"Why didn't you at least tell us, Mike, and give us a chance to deal with that kind of information?" Terri Dawson pleaded as she wrung her hands in her lap.

"Maybe I was afraid of just this kind of overreaction." Laura glared at me as I spit the words out.

"Overreaction!" Tom bellowed from across the room, where he was still standing. "How would you know how it feels to a parent anyway?" he shot at me and turned to pick up his chair.

From some pit deep within my soul a fire-breathing dragon awakened and snorted with rage.

"Tom, you're out of line," Sandy spoke up as Tom sat heavily into his chair and folded his arms across his barrel chest.

"Oh, I'm out of line, Pastor?" He paused while everyone in the room winced. "What about your part in putting every child in that classroom at risk, without so much as warning a soul?"

"Tom, we made a decision to welcome Mary..." Sandy struggled to answer his barrage.

"You made a decision to put our kids last, Pastor." Tom cut her off.

"Tom, please," Laura began softly. "You're at greater risk of getting infected with HIV when you eat lunch downtown than any of those kids in our Sunday school room. Honestly, we were planning to have a discussion with all of you about the extremely low transmission risks in casual contact with people living with HIV, but we didn't want to make Mary a spectacle."

"How did she get it anyway?" Lloyd Webster broke in.



“That’s really none of our business, Lloyd,” Sandy answered. “God calls us to love her.”

“That’s all well and good, Pastor,” Tom snorted as he stretched out his arms, “but the safety of our children is damn well our business.”

“Tom, please!” His wife, Ellen grabbed his knee.

“You’re right, Tom.” Silence engulfed the room again as Sandy stood up from her chair and spoke. “I apologize for not working out a way to cut you and the other parents in on this decision. You know that I love Jennifer and the other children in the youth group with all my heart.”

“That’s where we’re different, Pastor.” Tom stood up and pulled Ellen beside him. His eyes glistened with fear and anger. “You love this stranger with AIDS enough to risk Jennifer’s life, and I won’t stand for that.”

Having unleashed the storm inside him, Tom snatched his coat from over his chair and pounded out of the room with Ellen in tow.

Sandy quietly followed them.

Laura broke the gauzy silence that had enveloped the room.

“We never meant to put any of your children at risk. We love each of them as if they were our own.” She paused to wipe a tear.

Terri Dawson spoke quietly to the floor. “We know you do, Laura, and we all appreciate what you and Mike do for the kids. It’s just...” she leaned back in her chair and searched the ceiling for words. “It’s just different when they’re your own.”

No Laura’s face glistened with tears. “You’re right, Terri. It is different. Mike and I don’t choose any of your children over the other. We love them all, in a way that none of you can love them all. And we love Mary...” she balled her fists on her knees and fought back tears. “We love Mary because God loves her. And if she can’t experience God’s love in our church, then everything we believe in is a lie.”

The rest of the meeting passed in a fog. Sandy walked us to our car and prayed with us in the windy parking lot, wrapping her arms around our slumped shoulders. It was a short prayer. But something she said about following in Christ’s footsteps even toward the cross and persecution stayed with me. When we got into the car, she knelt by Laura’s window. “Hang in there, you two. God will be with you.” In an odd sort of way, I knew already God had been with us with those angry parents. The meeting had been tortuous, but somehow, *necessary*.

When we got back to the darkened house, several of the kids in our Sunday school class had left messages on our machine.

“Hi, Laura and Mike, this is Kristen. I don’t know how it went this afternoon but I think our parents are overreacting to this whole thing. We just want you to know that Mary is always welcome in our group. Mom and Dad and the other parents will get over this. We know why you didn’t make a big announcement about Mary. Hang in there, guys. We love you.”

The machine tone echoed across the kitchen while we enfolded each other in a hug and listened to several others. Tommy Heller’s message was the last one.

“Mr. and Mrs. Lothrop? This is Tommy. I’m really sorry about what happened in Sunday school this morning. You’re always telling us about being more understanding and I guess I’ve got a long way to go. Can you give me Mary’s phone number? I’d like to apologize to her. Thanks.”

After the machine shut itself down, we savored the sound of Tommy's voice in the fading light of the kitchen and held onto each other. Outside, the wind tossed golden leaves across the yard.

"How do you feel?" Laura whispered with the wind.

"In love with you."

The clock above the mantle in Nell's living room hammered out the passing time with the unrelenting drone of a metronome. The sound washed over me like the waves on the seashore. It was Monday, October 20, and I had come to see Mary after school. The iced tea Nell had given me sat in its crystal coaster on the rosewood coffee table at my knees. Every now and again a plane thundered overhead. I couldn't see how anyone would ever get used to that sound.

Nell returned from the kitchen, carrying a plate of tollhouse cookies. "I appreciate your stopping by, Mr. Lothrop. Mary drops a little lower every time someone else finds out. Yesterday morning was very hard on her."

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Owens."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, stop, Mr. Lothrop. You and your wife have been angels from heaven to us both. I don't know what your wife told Mary after what happened in that classroom, but I could tell it hit home. Hard as it was on her, she couldn't stop talking about 'Mrs. L.'"

Suddenly, the door opened and Mary shuffled into the house, tossing her backpack onto a tan chair. When she saw me she stood still, slowly raised her hand to her mouth and began biting her nails. Nell walked over to her and brushed the hair from her forehead to clear a space for a kiss. "Hello, Sweetheart."

Mary looked at her grandmother and dropped her hand to her side. "Hi Mimi." She slumped into the chair, disregarding the backpack. She wore an oversized Baltimore Orioles sweatshirt and dark blue jeans that flared at the bottom to swallow up her thick soled black shoes.

"Afternoon, Teach. Bet I know why you're here." Nell Owens left us alone in the living room.

"How was school, Mary?"

"Better than yesterday." She studied the nails of her left hand before baring her teeth and biting one of them again.

I prayed as the clock pounded out its sad refrain from the mantle. How could I let her know it would get better?

"How are you feeling about what happened yesterday, Mary?"

"Like I never want to see any of those jerks again." She tossed the hair away from her eyes and slumped lower into her chair.

"I can understand that. Things will be different now that your secret's out." The clock ticked while I consciously tried not to count. "That took a lot of guts, Mary." She let out a husky laugh and switched hands. "What made you do it?"

Now she really looked at me for the first time. Her brown eyes shone as the afternoon sun dappled her face with light.

"I couldn't be a part of the group unless they knew. And I can't be part of the group now that they know. Mimi said she wouldn't make me go back."

The clock marched onward. How many days left? It was odd. With less than two weeks left until my date with destiny (and less than a week until my surgery), I had barely given the countdown or my death a thought.

Life was too pressing.

“You are a part of the group, Mary. We can carry your secret together now.”

“No, I still carry it alone. Now they all know why I’m so weird.”

“Laura and I have known since before we met you, Mary, and we love you.”

Now a tear carefully made its way down her freckled cheek. *God, she’s too young for this.*

She brushed her face with her sleeve and looked back up at me. “Yeah, I know, Mr. L. I haven’t quite figured that one out yet.” For the first time I noticed the silver pendant she wore around her neck. It was a dolphin, leaping over a crescent moon.

Suddenly, I felt a rush of love for Mary wash over me like a sudden rainstorm. I didn’t want to force her back into that Sunday school classroom. I only wanted to protect her and to take her away from the sadness that shrouded her life.

“Do you like fish?”

“What?”

“I’ve got a couple of tickets to the Aquarium next Saturday. Not this Saturday but in two weeks. They give them out at the office all the time. They’re doing a special exhibit on seahorses. Want to go?”

She sat up in her chair and brushed the hair from her eye. “This a youth group thing?”

“No. Just you and me.”

The phone rang. We could hear Nell’s muffled voice in the kitchen as she answered it.

“Sure, I’ll bite.” Mary smiled for the first time since her Mimi had kissed her softly on the forehead.

Nell Owens leaned into the living room. “Excuse me you two. Honey, it’s for you.”

Mary got up and walked across the room. I drank some tea and settled back into the sofa, listening to Mary’s voice in the kitchen. Then I turned toward the kitchen and realized Nell was staring at me. She blew me a kiss. “Eat those cookies, Mr. Lothrop. I made them especially for you. And take the rest home to your wonderful wife.”

Mary walked slowly into the room and stood over me, with her hands on her hips.

“Who was it, Dear?” Nell asked.

She looked back at her grandmother, then at me. “It was Tommy, from the church. He called to tell me he was sorry about yesterday.” A smirk worked its way across her face. “Did you and Mrs. L have anything to do with that?”

I took a cookie from the plate on the coffee table. “He asked us for your number and we gave it to him.”

Now she looked surprised. “He called you.”

“Yes.” The cookie melted in my mouth.

“Well, what do you know?” She walked over to the chair, grabbed her book bag, and slung it over her shoulder. “Hey, Teach.”

“What, Mary.”

“If I come back to Sunday school, can I still go to the Aquarium with you?”

Laura met me at the door when I burst into the house, still excited about what had happened at Nell's. "You'll never believe how the visit with Mary went. Tommy Heller called while I was there."

When I kissed her, I knew something was wrong.

"Fred Waggoner called from Hopewell a few minutes ago."

"What is it, Laura?"

"Mike, Emma died this morning of congestive heart failure. I'm so sorry."

A fierce sadness cut through me like a chilling fall wind. It took me a moment to get my breath while Laura held me. Emma had piloted me through this darkness. Now she was gone.

"Fred said she left a letter for you, Mike. Her funeral is Wednesday at two in Centreville." I could see Laura's eyes brimming with tears through my own. "She wanted us to sing."

*Tuesday, October 14, 1997*

*Dear Mr. Lothrop,*

*How I have enjoyed our little chats now and again these last few weeks. Seeing you has been like glimpsing the past for me, in many ways. You have been a gift from God to me, in the winter of my life, and I thank you for taking the time to allow God to smile on an old lady.*

*I need to make a confession to you.*

*For many reasons, some of which I cannot begin to explain, I have been less than honest with you about what I know about Michael Edward Lothrop. Of course I did not know him, as I was born on Christmas Day, 1900, three years after his murder. But his widow, Lizzy Lothrop, was my Aunt. And from the time I was five, she raised me as her daughter.*

*When my parents died in a buggy accident, Aunt Lizzy became my Mama. She was my mother's older sister, and we had always been close. She and Uncle Michael had no children of their own, unless you count the dozens of children in the town who gathered in and around the Lothrop home to hear stories or play in their shaded yard. I didn't understand death then, and it seemed natural for me to stay with Aunt Lizzy while my parents were away on a trip.*

*As I grew up, I not only learned about my parents' tragic accident on a dark bridge, I also heard stories of my Uncle's life and death from the woman who loved him beyond the grave. Unlike me, Liz Lothrop never remarried.*

*Lizzy Cannon Lothrop had always been an independent woman. When she was 18 years old, she took a train north to hear Frances Willard speak in New Haven in the Fall of 1880. The Women's Christian Temperance Union had formed six years earlier. That fall, Uncle Mike was just starting his sophomore year at Yale. He met Liz Cannon at the rally.*

*From the start, the two of them were made for each other. They were two prophets born ahead of their time, driven by a vision that the world could be different. Eventually, their passion killed them both. You already know that Uncle Mike died at the hands of the Klan. Aunt Liz died December 11, 1933, the year the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment marked the failure of the "noble experiment" of Prohibition, one of the causes to which she had devoted her life.*

*I have always admired my Aunt Liz for her courageous stand in the face of society bent on destroying itself. She always believed and hoped for the best in people. In the end, she underestimated the power of evil, but she did not let the magnitude of that power stop her.*

*Though a similar evil made a martyr out of her husband, the years following his death vindicated Michael Edward Lothrop. After his murder, the Klan could never gain a foothold in our community, or in the surrounding communities, for that matter. In murdering him, the Klan stepped over a boundary the people could not tolerate, whether they agreed with my uncle or not about his relationship with the black people or not.*

*The people who killed my uncle were never brought to justice, but the organization they served was brought to its knees. I don't want to create the impression that racial prejudice ended in Queen Annes County, but a measure of civility did prevail, because people got the chance to see the ugly brutality of the Klan behind its veil of righteous respectability.*

*As you can see, I have always looked up to my aunt, who became my mother, and to my uncle.*

*You are his namesake, Michael Edward Lothrop. I've watched you struggle with the meaning of your connection with this man and his story. His is a legacy of faithfulness in the face of great odds. I have no idea what God is calling you to accomplish, but I do know that if you hold fast to your faith and obey God's gentle urges, you will find your own unique calling.*

*For my uncle, and for my aunt, following that call meant hardship and death. But they stand tall in my humble estimation, having truly lived lives worthy of God's gift of life. They were not afraid to die. Their courage has given me the strength to go on when all seemed lost (I have shared with you only one of many such stories in my life). Even now, as I approach my 97<sup>th</sup> birthday, I know that God preserves my life for a purpose. I can truly live because I am not afraid to die.*

*The same is true for you, Michael Edward Lothrop.*

*Your Sister,  
Emma Cannon Simmons*

I slowly read the letter out loud as Laura drove home from Emma's funeral under heavy overcast skies. When Fred Waggoner had given me the delicate envelope inscribed with my name in Emma's ornate hand, I had resisted the urge to tear it open immediately. First, I wanted only to honor her request to sing over her body.

People had thronged little Hopewell Church for Emma's funeral earlier that Wednesday. Many stood outside in the parking lot when the sanctuary could hold no more. Each of us came with a story of how Emma had graced our lives with her gentle touch. We were her legacy: generations privileged to have been in her company, even for a little while. Her funeral gave us all the chance to show our gratitude.

As I watched Pastor Fred preach over the simple casket to the throngs of people who packed the church, a sense of joy and peace filled my heart where I had expected to find the usual morbid dread. Since my parents' funeral, death had taunted and goaded me like a brutal taskmaster. Today, at Emma's funeral, and at the potluck feast that had followed it, death had not even been able to get in the door. It had to slink around in the windy parking lot with the rest of the latecomers.

Pastor Fred preached on Proverbs 31. A knowing smile crept over our faces as he read the closing verses:

*"Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all. Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates."*

Laura and I sang Emma's favorite hymn, *In the Garden*, while her best friend, Eula Kimble, accompanied us on the piano. Later, as Laura and I held each other at the graveside, the words of the chorus echoed in my ear.

*And he walks with me, and he talks with me,  
And he tells me I am his own;  
And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
None other has ever known.*

The letter made a lot of things clear for me. A month before, I would have jumped at the chance to read it and unravel more of the mystery. Now all I wanted to do was spend some more time with Mrs. Emma. I missed her and sensed her peaceful presence all at the same time. I didn't need a letter to tell me how to live with the mystery of being Michael Edward Lothrop's namesake. Emma had shown me how to thrive when time is short. Certainly her time had been short. But she rarely seemed to notice how old she was.

A pattern had begun to emerge for me as I counted the days down to the anniversary of Michael Edward Lothrop's death. I was not exactly living on the edge, but my life had taken on a spicier flavor. Only two days before the surgery that would determine whether I had cancer or not and three days after our Sunday school disaster, I found myself unaccountably at peace. I had actually enjoyed the pace of events since my graveyard encounter with a brave schoolteacher. Though I couldn't tell just what God might have in mind with this series of signal events in my life, I felt ready to do something vastly different than I had ever done before.

I felt a part of something larger than my life.

Laura drove me to the hospital in Friday's early morning darkness. I was scheduled to check in at six o'clock. My stomach growled in protest of having to skip breakfast. We drove through the dry cold of the early morning in silence while the news and traffic droned over the radio. Laura reached down and turned it off as we waited at a traffic light behind a Baltimore Sun delivery truck.

"I love you," she said softly as she stared ahead. Her hand hovered across the seat to brush against my leg.

"Enough to let me have just a tiny cup of coffee?"

"Not funny." She laughed.

We moved slowly forward in the wake of the lumbering truck. Laura weaved her way through the light traffic and into the parking garage. It didn't take long to find a space. When she turned the key and let the engine die, neither of us moved as we listened to the muffled sounds of tires screeching on the concrete in the garage and the traffic moving on the street below us. I turned to see Laura staring at me. Her hand reached up to touch my neck.

"We won't know today will we?"

"Not for sure. Dr. Li said the test results will be in next Wednesday at the earliest. One step at a time, huh?"

"Yeah. Sure." She stopped running her fingers through my hair and turned to pull the door latch. "Let's go, Partner."

Laura pushed open the door and then turned her head back to me. She stopped when she saw that I wasn't moving. I stared at her. She was wearing her long white coat with a dark blue muffler. Her beautiful red hair spilled over the wide collar and the green pools of her eyes radiated more hope than fear.

Now I reached for her hair.

“What are you doing?” She laughed. “You’re stalling, Mister.”

“How are you feeling this morning, Love.”

“Not as nauseous as usual, I guess.” She sighed. “I can’t tell if it’s getting any better or if I’m just getting used to it.”

“I’m sorry about all the hassle. You’re awesome.”

“It’s worth it. Every day I thank God for the morning sickness. It means I’m still carrying a life inside me.”

“Kind of like this morning.”

“What do you mean?” She tilted her head that way that still drove me a little crazy inside.

“Being together.”

“We should do it more often.” She leaned forward to kiss me. “Without the hospital part. Now c’mon. We haven’t got much time.”

*No, we don’t, I thought as I opened the door and stepped out of the car. Not this morning, or any morning.*

I felt Laura’s delicate gloved hand in mine and thanked God for the moment. Then we walked together toward the hospital.

I awakened a little over 48 hours later on Sunday, October 26, 1997 to the sound of Laura’s shower. Bright winter sunlight streamed into the room. The magic of daylight savings time had given us another hour of blessed sleep and it felt strange to sleep past the sunrise. The painkillers and ice packs Dr. Li had prescribed had held the soreness in my neck at bay. The surgery had been such a breeze they discharged me Saturday morning.

Now all I had to do was wait until Thursday to hear if either of the tumors was cancerous or not. That would be two days before D-Day.

Now there were six.

I reached over to the night table beside the bed for a glass of water. In spite of Dr. Li’s reassurances, my voice was a bit sore following the surgery. The good doctor had attributed it to the swelling, which would go away in a few days. After I finished what was left of the water, I opened the Bible again to today’s Sunday school lesson, from the end of the book of Job.

The gossamer pages slipped through my fingers to the first six verses of chapter 46.

*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*

*‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”*

I already knew what Mary would say. “Cheesy ending, Teach.” It was a cheesy ending, for that matter. After suffering intolerably for the crime of being “blameless and upright,” Job lives happily ever after (complete with a new family). Lately, I had been reading a new interpretation by Jack Miles in his Pulitzer prizewinning bestseller, *God: A Biography*. Miles read a great deal of irony in Job’s final statement.

While Rabbi Kushner (*Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*) had ultimately chosen God’s goodness over God’s omnipotence, Miles interpreted Job to argue for God’s all-powerful nature at the cost of God’s goodness. Both seemed to agree that God could not be just and all-powerful.

None of this, of course, would play very well in the Sunday school class at Glen Burnie UMC. After the AIDS flap, all Laura and I needed was a bit of heresy to send us to the stake. Yet I could not get Mary's struggle with HIV out of my mind, nor could I stop thinking about my own predicament. Had God destined us both for doom, regardless of our actions (or because of them)?

Through this theological fog, Laura and I had chosen to focus on Job's statement, "*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.*" The trouble always comes down to asking the right questions. Just what does Job see in God?

I thought of a story my brother, Tom, had told me shortly after the birth of their first child, Hannah. Tom's wife had taken a much-needed break one evening and had left him alone with the baby for the first time. Everything had gone fine for an hour or so, until the baby began to cry. Tom had gone through his short list of correctable problems (diaper change, milk, check for fever) while little Hannah wailed and moaned. "Mike," Tom had told me a few weeks later, "I never felt so powerless in all my life."

"What did you do?" I had asked.

"At first I was angry," he had told me as we talked in our parents' back yard after Thanksgiving dinner. "But I knew that my anger could only make the situation worse." Then his eyes had filled with tears as he recalled that miserable night with his daughter.

"I collapsed into the couch while I held her in my arms, Mike. And I cried like a baby. We cried together for the longest time. I came to the end of my rope and I gave her the only thing I had left: myself. That's how Elle found us, Mike, rocking back and forth on the couch, crying together."

"Was she upset with you?" I had asked.

"No, not at all, that's the strangest part." He had laughed suddenly and wiped his face with the heel of his hand. "She put her arms around us, actually. And after she got Hannah to bed, she hugged me and told me, 'That's all you can do sometimes: just hang in there with Hannah and resist the urge to run away.'"

I remembered being frightened at the prospect of having kids, then, and drawn to it at the same time.

I wondered whether God experienced a similar kind of limitation in relationship with us. When Jesus went to the tomb of his friend, Lazarus, for instance, instead of rushing into the miracle of raising him from the dead, he did something we never think of as very god-like.

He wept.

At the opening of the Book of Job, the devil's taunt proves irresistible to God: "Does Job love God for nothing?" The question haunted me as well. What if God could do nothing for me in the way of blessings and miracles? What if God relinquished the power to impress or force me to believe or obey? Would I love God for God's sake alone?

Laura's shower suddenly stopped and I heard the door moving across the track. Just before I closed the Bible and got out of bed, I closed my eyes and whispered a prayer: "No matter how all of this turns out, you are good enough for me. I love you. Thanks for hanging in there with me."

Mary did not come to Sunday school that morning. Neither, for that matter did half of our normal class. Jennifer Gardner was not there, of course. I would not have been surprised to learn that she and her parents, Tom and Ellen, had left the church, after Tom's tirade the previous Sunday. (They had not left the church; we saw them later that morning in the worship service.)



Part of me still hoped that people would rise above their fears and realize that God was calling us all to something higher than our base instincts in spite of the harsh reaction the week before. Yet the empty chairs mocked my hope that Sunday morning, and I felt a bit like Job as Laura and I tried to concentrate on the lesson. After the class, Tommy Heller apologized to us again for stumbling into the whirlwind.

“I’m really sorry, you two. I feel like I caused all of this.”

“You know that’s not true, Tommy,” Laura reassured him. “Your call meant a lot to Mary. And to us. We’re very proud of you.”

“Thanks. Actually, she’s okay. Now that I know what she’s going through, I really have a lot of respect for her.” He stopped short and looked down at his Nikes. “I just hope she comes back.” Then he looked back up at us and grinned. “I hope everyone comes back. They missed a great discussion.”

I thanked him as his words washed over my soul. He was a good kid. They were all good kids. As he walked down the hallway he turned suddenly and shouted back to us, “God’s hanging in, so I’m hanging in!”

I couldn’t have said it better myself.

After the service, Laura and I decided to go out for brunch, although she said she wasn’t very hungry. As we drove to the Holiday Inn, Laura began to complain of stomach cramps. By the time we had gone through the buffet line and started eating, the cramps had gotten worse. I had dismissed the first few complaints as belated morning sickness. It seemed to me that Laura’s entire first trimester had been a series of rotten mornings for her. When we sat down to eat though, the spasm of pain in her face told me that this was no ordinary pain.

And another wave of fear washed over me like a sudden tide.

My fork rang out as I dropped it onto the plate. I reached for her hand. “Where is it, Baby?”

She pulled away her hand and pressed both hands into her stomach and winced again. She couldn’t answer me at first. “Here, on the right,” she whispered as she looked down toward her stomach.

Her womb.

After I let myself believe we might actually have a baby, I had ventured to the library to get a few books on pregnancy and birthing. This had been a few weeks before. I struggled to remember the lists of symptoms and early warning signs of trouble as I sat across from my lover at that Sunday brunch table. An older woman dressed in a pink dress leaned over and whispered, “Excuse me, are you all right?”

Laura looked up at me as a tear rolled down her face, “I don’t know. Help me get to the bathroom. I feel like I’m going to throw up.”

I moved around the table and helped Laura out of her chair. As we walked toward the entrance of the dining room where we had passed the restrooms, I could feel her leaning on me for support. After several steps, she had to stop again while another wave of pain passed. By the time we got to the bathroom, the woman in the pink dress pushed the door open and took Laura’s elbow to guide her in.

“Let me help you, dear. Son, I think you might need to call an ambulance.”

As she spoke, my mind raced through the memories of symptoms I had recently read in the pregnancy books.

Then I remembered.

*Colicky, crampy pain with tenderness, usually in the lower abdomen – on one side initially. Vaginal spotting or light bleeding. Nausea and vomiting. Dizziness or weakness.*

Laura hadn't said anything about spotting this morning, but I ticked the other symptoms off in my mind as fear began to hammer away at my heart.

The symptoms I remembered that Sunday morning were the signs of an ectopic pregnancy, when the egg implants outside the uterus, usually in the fallopian tubes. The book had said that women with high-risk pregnancies should be especially familiar with the symptoms. When they occurred, the book had said to see your physician immediately, or to "go at once to the hospital emergency room."

While quick medical attention could save the mother's life, and perhaps the fallopian tube, the baby would be lost.

"Can I help you, sir?" A waiter put a hand on my shoulder.

"Show me the nearest phone, please." I could hear water running in the bathroom as I turned to follow the waiter across the lobby entrance to a courtesy phone.

"Just dial 9 to get an open line." He told me before turning to leave.

I looked in my wallet for the card with Laura's OB/GYN on it. Her answering service took down the information and said the Doctor would call back as soon as possible. I thought about calling 911, but wasn't ready to admit that this was that much of a medical emergency yet.

Then I saw Laura come out of the restroom on the arm of the woman in the pink dress. I ran across the lobby to her and she cleared her throat. "Let's get to a hospital now, Mike. I'm spotting as well."

Her face looked pale and worn.

Numbness crept over me as the thought of losing our baby and of losing Laura screamed suddenly in my head. "I'll get the car."

"You'd better get an ambulance, son," the woman said as she guided Laura gently to a sofa along the wall.

Another Holiday Inn employee walked up to us and offered to call for an ambulance. I knelt down in front of Laura and looked up into her face. "Honey, do you think it might be..."

"Don't say it!" She hissed at me through clenched teeth and leaned forward as another wave of pain passed through her body. "I'll die before I lose this baby."

When I stood up the room began to swim around me and I leaned against the wall to steady myself. "I've got a call in to your doctor. I left my pager and the phone over there. The guy at the desk is calling for an ambulance. Hang in there, Babe." I felt helpless and unsure of myself. A great sadness swept over my soul but I was too shocked for tears.

The woman in the pink dress stood up from beside Laura and smiled at me, "I'm sorry, I'm in your place, aren't I?"

I sat beside Laura and held her in my arms. She leaned against me, shuddering. I heard an older man's voice say, "Is everything all right, Harriet?" amidst the muffled sounds of the restaurant and lobby. But as I sat beside Laura, the world compacted to our baby and the two of us. I tried to pray but could not find the words.

"Thanks for being here, Mike. Please don't leave me," Laura whispered.

"Mr. and Mrs. Lothrop, there's a call for you on the courtesy phone," a different Holiday Inn employee stood over us and pointed across the lobby to the phone I had used to call the answering service. I noticed her name tag said "Manager."

"It's Melissa Toliver, honey. I'll be right back."

"I'll be with her," the woman in the pink dress said to me as I stood up from the couch.

“Are you Harriet?” I asked her.

“Yes I am, and you must be Mike.” She said with a smile.

“Thank you so much, Harriet.”

“It’s no trouble, young man. You’d better get to that phone.”

Dr. Melissa Toliver confirmed my fears by agreeing to meet us at the hospital. So it wasn’t just my imagination. Another wave of fear-laced adrenaline shocked my system as the doctor told me the symptoms sounded a lot like a tubal or ectopic pregnancy. “Whatever it is, the ambulance is a good idea,” she assured me.

“North Arundel is the closest hospital. I’ll call ahead to get Laura admitted and meet you there. If it’s different just page me at 690-2335, okay?”

“Okay, and thanks so much, Dr. Toliver.”

“I’m sorry, Mike. We’ll take good care of Laura and the baby.”

“Thanks.” I tried not to sound hopeless.

“Just remember it could be one of several different things. I’ll see you at the hospital.”

I walked back over to Laura as the wail of an ambulance siren rose and fell near the lobby entrance.

We held hands as the ambulance raced Laura to North Arundel Hospital, five miles south of the Holiday Inn along Ritchie Highway. Laura had begged the paramedics to allow me to stay at her side. Every time the driver braked suddenly, Laura’s face contorted in pain. Neither of us spoke. My left hand hovered over the place where she clutched her waist. An ectopic pregnancy meant that our child was lost.

Through the fog of noise and fear, I tried to concentrate on her fingers weaving through my own. And I prayed a feeble prayer. Too shocked to know what to pray for, I thought of a verse from Ezekiel 37, the story of the Valley of the Dry Bones. When God asks Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Ezekiel answers simply, “O Lord GOD, you know.”

*You know God. In a way I’m glad I don’t, because the more I discover this morning the more I don’t want to know what’s next. But You know, and I have to believe You are with us both.*

*With all three of us.*

An hour later, I fumbled with the little paper cup the vending machine had just filled with steaming black coffee. As I lifted the cup to my lips, I saw Dr. Toliver walking down the hallway toward me. Her face refused to give me advance warning of what she might have to say, one way or another.

“First of all, it’s not ectopic. We did an ultrasound and the baby is fine, Mike.”

“Thank God. So what’s wrong with Laura, Doctor?”

“I’m betting it’s appendicitis. Her white blood cell count is up and she’s running a fever. We’re going to watch her the rest of the day and see. I think we’re looking at an appendectomy tonight or early tomorrow morning.”

“What about the anesthesia and the baby?”

“They’ll do an epidural the same as they would for a C-Section or vaginal delivery and the baby will be fine.” She put a hand on my shoulder. “They’re both gonna be fine, Mike.”

“Thanks, Doctor. Are you doing the surgery?”

“As long as that’s okay with you guys. Or I can make a referral.”

“I’m sure it’s okay with Laura, and I’m happy for her to be in your hands.”

She smiled. "I'll take good care of Laura and the baby, Mike. Want to see her?"

"Of course!"

I turned to toss the coffee into a trashcan and followed the Doctor down the hallway to be with my wife.

Later that evening, as I sat at Laura's bedside, I called Paul Evans to let him know I wouldn't be in on Monday. As I spoke quietly into the phone, I watched Laura's chest rise and fall while she slept.

"Sure, Pal, after that mega sale at PRMC, you can take off all week if you like."

"Thanks, Paul. I knew you'd understand." I hadn't realized until that moment just how much I could not stand working for this man.

"By the way. How'd that health issue you mentioned a few weeks ago ever turn out? Wasn't the surgery Friday?"

"Yes, Friday. Thanks for asking. The surgery went fine, Paul. They won't know the results of the biopsy until Thursday, the Doctor told me."

"Well, you're on such a roll, I'm sure it's benign. Let me know what they tell you, and I hope things go well with Laura."

"Thanks, Paul. I'll let you know." I never knew what to expect from the guy. How ever the wind blew with him, though, it always blew gale force.

He laughed on the other end of the line. "What a difference a month can make, huh, Mike? I'm eatin' crow over here and lovin' every minute of it. 'Back on commission' I told you, didn't I? Then you go and knock down a giant with that little slingshot of yours. I gotta tell you, Chief, that was one hell of a sale."

I looked out the hospital window at what was left of the moon, creeping above the horizon in the early evening.

"It may be my last, Paul."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"We need to talk. A lot of things have been going on in my life the past few weeks. It's not just the health issue. I've been thinking more and more lately that God is calling me towards another vocation."

"Well, I'll be damned," he said and cleared his throat. "You're always the one in the office with the direct line to God, aren't you?"

"I'm not sure about that. It's just a lot of things coming together that start to make a pattern for me. I'm still not sure about the exact direction but I know my sales days are over."

He paused on the other end of the line, though I could still hear his heavy breathing. "Look, Mike, if this is about an apology, God knows I owe you one."

"No, Paul, I think it's more than that."

Another long pause. "You call the shots, Mike. Let's talk this week. Just tell me you're gonna stay with PRMC. That whole deal depends on you."

"I'm not interested in leaving anyone in the lurch, Paul. Let's talk Wednesday, when Laura gets back on her feet."

"Okay, Wednesday it is. Give my best to Laura."

"Thanks, Paul. I will."

I placed the phone back into its cradle and saw the nurse standing in the door. "Is she still asleep?" she asked in a half whisper.

"Yes. The Demerol does a number on the pain."

“Doctor Toliver just called. We’re going to prep her for surgery at 10:00.” The surprised look on my face prompted her to continue. “She says there’s no sense waiting until morning, and it would have to be early anyway.”

In the last couple of hours, I had almost forgotten why we were here. “Okay, I’ll let her know the good news.”

Monday afternoon, I sat quietly beside Laura in that same hospital room. Flowers sent by the youth group and by Laura’s parents perched on the windowsill. I dozed off and on between snatches of an article in *Life* magazine while Laura rested. She had breezed through the appendectomy the night before and the Doctor told us we could probably go home Tuesday morning. As the full impact of the reprieve we had just been granted dawned on us, peace flooded the room so completely that we didn’t do much talking.

While I cat napped, I dreamed of playing ball with our child, or of enjoying a family picnic together. The day fairly filled with possibilities I had not yet allowed myself to imagine. Now I did imagine them, and when consciousness interrupted my reverie, I waited impatiently until I could return to those blessed daydreams of a new kind of future.

It was after a particularly intense dream about a camping trip along the Appalachian Trail that I awakened to a sense of being watched. Often that Sabbath day, that feeling had led me to meet Laura’s eyes with my own, and I would find myself intoxicated with love as she held me softly in the embrace of her gaze. This time, however, her eyes were closed in sleep.

I turned with a start toward the door, beyond the divider which separated our side of the room from the other bed, which had been unoccupied since we arrived the day before. My eyes adjusted to the lower light until I could make out the figures of two people standing in the doorway.

Mary, and her grandmother, Nell.

Slowly, I rose from the chair and waited until a sense of balance returned to my legs. Then I walked slowly toward the door to meet them. As I passed the foot of Laura’s bed, Laura woke from sleep and stretched her arms above her head.

“Laura, Mary and Nell are here.” I half whispered to her.

“Oh, how sweet. Please let me see them.”

“We didn’t want to disturb you.” Nell said as she stood motionless in the doorway.

“Mary insisted we come when she got home from school today. We heard last night about what happened to Laura.”

“Please come in. It’s so good to see you both.”

“Go ahead, Dear,” Nell encouraged Mary, who slowly shuffled into the room until she stood at the edge of the edge of the curtain dividing the room.

“Hello, Mary. Hello, Nell.” Laura smiled. “I’m so glad you stopped by to see me.”

Nell moved past her granddaughter and stood at the foot of the bed. “We can’t stay long, and we don’t want to interrupt, but Mary wanted so much to tell you herself.”

They were both silent. Then Nell urged Mary on, “Go ahead, Sweetheart, it’s okay.”

“I wanted to pray for you,” Mary started in a whisper. Then she cleared her throat, “actually, I’ve been praying for you, and I wanted to pray with you.” She looked over at her grandmother and smiled. “I thought it would work better that way.”

“I’d like that very much, Mary,” Laura said as she pushed the button that elevated her head. “Thanks for keeping me in your prayers.”

When Laura reached out her hand to Mary, the girl shrank back to the end of the bed and looked at the floor.

“It’s okay, Mary. I want you to hold my hand,” Laura reassured her.

“No, Mrs. L, it’s not okay. I’m not safe and you know it. Can we just pray without holding hands?”

“Sure, Mary.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. “God, it’s Mary again. I know I ask too many questions but you don’t seem to mind. Please take care of Mrs. L, God. She’s been good to me when lots of people have turned their backs on me and she doesn’t deserve to be in a hospital. I’m not going to get into why she has to be here with you right now, ‘cause we never seem to get anywhere with that one, God.”

“Mrs. L teaches me more than words about you. I can see you in her somewhere, so you need to keep her well. There’s a lot of people who need to hear what she says, God, and you can make her better so she can keep up the good work.

“Thanks for listening, as usual, even though I’m never quite sure you’re really out there. Maybe if I keep talking, you’ll get tired of listening all the time and do some of the talking yourself for a change. But I’d be satisfied if you made Mrs. L better soon. They say that it could have been worse, so we owe you one already. While you’re on a roll, God, maybe you can finish the job and help her get home where she belongs. And don’t forget everyone else who needs your help today, even if they don’t have time to ask you.

“You can do it. I believe in you, God.”

There was along silence, broken now and again by the sounds of people passing in the hallway outside the room. Finally, Mary said, “I’m done now.”

“Thank you so much, Mary. It feels good to be prayed over.” Laura wiped a tear from her eye.

“No problem, Mrs. L. We called the pastor to find your number yesterday afternoon and she told us they had taken you to the hospital. I wanted to tell you why I wasn’t in class yesterday.” She stopped and looked at her grandmother. “I just wasn’t ready. But I think I’ll be okay by next Sunday.”

“Tommy Heller told us he was sorry you weren’t there,” I told her.

“Did he, now?” she smiled and twirled her hair a couple of twists. “Well, that’s a start, I guess.”

The room fell silent again.

“Come on, Sweetheart,” Nell gently nudged Mary, “we need to give Mrs. Lothrop some rest.”

“You’re gonna be fine, Mrs. L. And thanks again for wanting to hold my hand. Even though we couldn’t, I felt your hand anyway, okay?”

“Okay, Mary.” The bed murmured as Laura lowered her head back down.

“I’m sorry you have to be in the hospital.”

“Thank you, Mary. Please know that we pray for God to heal you as well.”

“Yeah,” she almost laughed. “You keep that up, Mrs. L.”

Mary waved at us both, than she turned and walked out of the hospital room, while her grandmother followed, blowing a kiss to Laura. When they got as far as the door, Mary leaned around her grandmother and called to me, “Hey Mr. L, are we still on for Saturday?”

Saturday – ground zero of my death countdown. “I wouldn’t miss it, Mary.”

The call came Thursday afternoon, just after Paul Evans and I discussed the timetable for my leaving AccuTech. Though I had no idea of where I might be going, I felt relieved of a

burden I had been carrying around for longer than I cared to remember. Laura had been the one to open my eyes to something that had been right in front of me for too long. The night after our fight, when I told her the story of Paul's recent threat, she had looked into my eyes and said, "Mike, why are you staying?"

With that simple question, Laura had given me permission to consider a future course radically different from the path I had been following. I enjoyed my work, but I had long been aware of a small voice calling me to that part of my work that touched a passion deep within me. For too long I had ignored the voice, unable to imagine a destiny that seemed too good to be true. For the past few weeks, I had given the voice in my heart freedom to sing and to shout a message of God's calling to me to a mission and a purpose. Though I still did not know the particular expression of that calling, I felt at peace about breaking my ties with a past of confinement in order to open the way for a new vocation.

When Terri King told me that Dr. Li was on the phone, I breathed a prayer and sat down at my desk. When I picked up the phone, I swiveled the chair to face the view of the open harbor.

"Mr. Lothrop, I have some good news for you. The biopsy shows the tumors are both benign."

"Thank God."

"I want to see you in a couple of weeks to see how you're healing, but I'll turn you over to Dr. Stedman to do the follow-up with your calcium level maintenance. How are you feeling after the surgery?"

"Great, Doctor. You do good work."

"Thank you, Mr. Lothrop. Your voice sounds fine over the phone."

"There was a little soreness at first, but I feel great. I appreciate your calling to share the good news with me."

"I'd rather share the news myself, however it turns out, so I can answer any questions you might have. My office will be in touch with you to make that appointment. Did you have any other questions for me?"

"No, I think you've said it all, Dr. Li. I can't thank you enough."

"I'm glad to have been able to help you, Mr. Lothrop. I'll see you in a couple of weeks."

I let the phone drop into my lap as a wave of gratefulness passed over me. *Thank you, Dear God.*

Then I turned to dial Laura's office and share the good news. As I looked at the calendar on my desk and waited for Laura to answer, I remembered there was only one day left until Michael Edward Lothrop's death anniversary. Let it come, I thought. I'm ready.

Halloween night. I drove our dark green Taurus to the church by myself, since Laura was not quite up for the rigors of the youth group so soon after her surgery. The kids had already started the mystery scavenger hunt for clues all over town. We had decided earlier that I would play the part of the dead body, hiding myself in an out of the way place in the basement of the church house.

I looked in the parlor, where some of the youth had set up the murder scene. A couple of chairs had been knocked over and a lamp was on the floor. They had spilled some blood on the hearth. My blood. A deep sense of sadness invaded my heart as I surveyed the scene. There had been a fight, and someone had paid with his life. The murderer had hidden the body.

I turned from the crime scene in the parlor and pushed open the door that led to the musty basement below. It took a couple of attempts with my hip. No one used the basement anymore. The stairs creaked as I descended into the darkness where a naked light bulb tried in vain to beat back the darkness. Outside, I heard the church chimes toll the hour. I needed to get set, but the kids probably wouldn't be back for at least a half an hour. That would leave a lot of time to be alone with my thoughts.

Pulling a flashlight out of my coat pocket, I walked toward the fuse box and shut off the power to the entire house. The beam from the flashlight had even less of an effect on the bleak darkness of the basement than the light bulb. I entered a tiny room off the main hallway and followed the yellow beam around a cabinet blanketed with dust. I opened the door and panned the beam across the empty space inside.

It would be tight, but it would do.

I lowered myself onto the gritty floor and reached into the cabinet with my legs, gauging the space as I went. When the cabinet had swallowed my hips, I turned my shoulders and wedged the rest of my body into the small box, pulling the cabinet door shut behind me. The weak flashlight beam flickered and winked out. It returned for a second when I shook it against my hand; then it died for good.

The space was small but not terribly uncomfortable. The darkness enveloped me like a shroud, blinding my eyes. The soft hiss of the silence drowned out all outside noises, even the sound of my breathing. I relaxed as well as I could in the cramped void and gently lowered the spent flashlight to the cabinet floor.

The murderer had hidden the body, Kirsten said, where no one would find it.

My widened eyes searched the inky darkness surrounding me in vain. Here in this place of hiding and darkness, on the eve of my collision with death, I felt as close to nothingness as I had ever been in my life. Did this total loss of all sensation approximate death? I wondered in that no-man's land where no distractions competed for my attention, save the ambient hum of my thoughts and memories.

Without sensory input, even the memories would fade to static noise and then to soundless silence, like the spent energy of my flashlight battery. Then the waiting darkness would swallow me whole. I wondered whether the darkness would be waiting for me the moment I passed from life into death.

Certainly the darkness of death had swallowed my parents whole, without a trace of their existence. I knew the promises of life after death we spoke about in the church and read about in the Bible. But now, only six months later, I struggled to resurrect the sound of their voices in my mind. Without pictures, I would forget at times the features of their faces. One moment they were traveling to meet us for a reunion. Then they vanished forever. Every day they died a little more in my memory. My heart ached for them both, and I felt a tear move slowly down the side of my face and neck. There wasn't room enough to wipe it away with my hand.

A stone rolled from a well deep within me and I wept in that place of silence. As the wetness of my tears bathed my face and neck, I refused to hold them back. I had wondered where my tears had hidden when my parents died. Now they came in a rushing, sobbing torrent of sadness and longing. For months now, I had not wanted to admit how frightened and alone my parents' deaths had left me because I did not want to know the extent of the damage.

After releasing these twin monsters from within me, I marveled as they spent themselves quickly in a headlong flood and disappeared into the void. In their turbulent wake, a clearing opened within my soul for the first time since the funeral. The wetness on my face cooled as a



gentle breeze wafted into that clearing. At that moment I knew that I was not alone in the darkness. I knew then why the fear had not consumed me the moment I released it; something (or someone) had banished that fear and filled the clearing with peace.

I had not looked forward to carrying out this assignment in the basement. Of course I kept my fears to myself. Yet now that I lay quietly in this hidden grave, I marveled at the sense of peace that filled the darkness.

*Even the darkness is light to you.*

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it.*

*I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*

I knew in that silent peace what would happen the moment of my own death. Instead of finding myself shrouded in the void of nothingness, God would fill me with peace and light. What was it the angels were always saying to God's people when they had a message to deliver? *Fear not.* Even in the valley of the shadow of death, the Psalmist sang, *Thou art with me.*

In the midst of the darkness of that pretend grave, where no one could find me, God had never left me. Once I emptied myself of my fear, God had filled my soul with peace beyond my comprehension. For the first time in my life, I felt I was living in the midst of a prayer, where God dwelled, beyond the need of words to conjure up God's presence or convey my desires. God already knew the deepest longings of my heart in that holy place. In the womb of that deep darkness, God held me.

"Found him!" Carla and Caleb shouted as they opened the door and blinded me with the light of their flashlight. Carla knelt down to get a closer look. "How did you get in there, Mr. L?"

"Ice cream time!" I heard someone yell in the basement as I wiggled my shoulders out of the cabinet and pulled my legs out gently. One of them had fallen asleep.

Caleb pulled me up with his hand. "Nice work, Mr. L. How does it feel to be alive again?"

"Like I'm ready for some ice cream." I brushed myself off and kicked my leg to reestablish the circulation.

"Let's get out of here," Carla said as she moved carefully around the cabinet. "This place scares me."

"Watch your eyes everybody!" Tommy Heller called out as he stood near the fuse box. "Here come the lights!"

Only after I got home and prepared for bed did I realize that I had forgotten the flashlight.

D-Day. Saturday, November 1, 1997. Michael Edward Lothrop had died one hundred years before. I woke up with the dawn and turned to face Laura, who was staring at me.

"So this is the big day, huh?" She stroked a casual hand through my hair and smiled. "After all we've been through this week, it's anti-climactic, wouldn't you say?"

I yawned and crossed my arms behind my head. "I'll tell you tomorrow morning, when we can laugh about the whole thing."

"Still got you worried? What's on your schedule for today?"

"After serving you breakfast in bed, you mean?" I sat up and looked at the clock while Laura laughed. Six thirty. I still couldn't get used to life without daylight savings time.

"Three days in a row, Mr. Wonderful. This is starting to become a trend."

"All I've got planned today is my little outing with Mary."

"Oh. I'd forgotten about that."

“So had I, until Nell called last night to find out if we were still on. I’m picking her up at nine.” I rolled out of bed and looked back at Laura before going downstairs to the kitchen. “You’re the one who needs to be careful, remember? I’m a cancer-free man.”

“I’ll be careful,” she called after me. “But I’ve still got a life.”

I burned myself on the stove while cooking the eggs. After we ate together on the bed and I cleaned the dishes, my wrist still hurt where the edge of the frying pan had seared my flesh. I would need to be more careful. Especially on D-Day. Seven forty-five. Time to shower, shave, and dress.

The paper called for cold rain later in the day, so I pulled a brown sweater over a white turtleneck. Laura made some crack about my failure to wear black as I leaned over to kiss her good-bye. Then she reached for my hand and held it tight.

“Please be careful, Mike. I love you.”

“Ditto.” I hurried down the stairs, glancing at my watch. It was 8:30. More than enough time to make it to Nell’s to pick up Mary at nine. I started the car and a flurry of leaves blew into the garage as the door slowly opened. The sky shrouded the world in a pale overcast. It looked like the perfect day for an aquarium trip.

Saturday morning traffic along Ritchie Highway was non-existent. I stopped at a Dunkin’ Donuts for a coffee but it took a lot longer than I had planned. Now it was 8:50 and I was pressed for time.

As I made the left onto Wellham, I noticed the smoke for the first time. A column of thick, black smoke billowed above the tree line ahead and just to the right. My heart quickened a bit. As I passed the George Cromwell Elementary School, the smoke moved to the passenger window. Then I turn right onto Charles and the smoke moved back to the passenger side of the front windshield. I began to pray. A block later as I turned onto Lilac Avenue, I knew the smoke was pouring from the back of Nell’s house. It was 9:02.

Several people had gathered on the front lawn. As I stepped out of the car, the smoke stung my nose and eyes and glass shattered amidst the roar of flames behind the house. Two men held Nell by her shoulders. She saw me as I ran across the lawn toward her and screamed out, “I can’t find Mary. I can’t find her anywhere! I think she’s still in the house! Please, God, somebody help her.”

“Now Mrs. Owens, we just called 911,” the man in the blue flannel shirt on her right tried to console her. “The fire department will be here soon. You can’t go back in there now.”

“My baby, my baby, please, God help us.” Nell Owens slumped to the ground, sobbing uncontrollably while the men gently but firmly held her. Someone behind us said that the fire must have started in the kitchen.

It was 9:04. I didn’t hear the distant sirens over the increasing roar of the fire. On the second story, I tried to remember which dormer window belonged to Mary’s bedroom. Five weeks before I had followed her up the stairs and we had turned to the right, if I remembered correctly. And suddenly I knew where Mary was. *Not even Mimi can hear me when I’m in there.*

D-Day. D was for death. And a little girl would burn to death today over my dead body.

No one stopped me as I ran toward the house and climbed onto the porch. No one called out a warning or “stop!” as I inhaled deeply and plunged into the dark, smoke-filled front hallway. The sounds of timber cracking and groaning above the roar of the flames drowned out all other sound as I pounded up the stairwell through billowing clouds of smoke. The smoke

disoriented me on the second floor landing, and I opened the wrong bedroom door. My lungs burned with the pain of holding my breath while running. Every time I opened my eyes, the smoke ate at them and clouded my vision. Waves of heat boiled up the stairwell as I passed it again in search of Mary's room.

The second door I opened led into Mary's room, which was surprisingly smoke free, and I slammed the door behind me and gasped for breath. After rubbing my eyes, I surveyed the room. The bed sheets were turned down, as if someone was getting ready for bed. There was no Mary, dead or alive. Wisps of smoke pushed under the door. Across the room, in the corner near the window, I saw the panel.

I rushed over to the corner, pulled the panel off, and looked inside. Mary was curled on the floor, still in her nightgown. "Mary!" I cried out to her, shaking her arm. She startled, and hit her head against one of the studs. "Mary, let's get out of there. The house is on fire!"

Mary rolled over in the tight space and looked up at me, still holding her head. "Nana!?" "Nana's okay. She's outside. We've got to get out of this house, Mary." I reached in for her but she wiggled deeper into the crawlspace. "What are you doing?" I screamed after her.

"Go away, Teach. I'm as good as dead anyway."

I turned my shoulders sideways and pushed myself into the dark, hot crawlspace. I reached out as far as I could, but Mary had moved beyond my reach. "You're alive, Mary. Only God knows your time. That's not for you to decide."

"Maybe this is the answer from God I've been asking for after all." She coughed just beyond me in the darkness. I struggled to move towards her. This time when I reached out, I touched her hair, and she began to sob.

"Why did you come?" she wailed.

"Because you told me where to find you, Mary." I brushed her hair with my hand. Sweat dropped into my eyes and over my nose. The crawlspace was unbearably hot.

"I hate living when I know I'm going to die."

"Mary, God gives you life now. It's up to you to live it. I'm not going to leave you here."

The house groaned and the cracking and popping noises intensified. Somewhere in the distance, I heard sirens whine. They were too late. For the first time I began to think we would not be able to get out of here alive. I was past praying words. My entire body prayed desperately to God as I shuddered in the heat. Suddenly I felt Mary's hand in mine.

"Mr. Mike, God answered my prayer, just like you said he would. And I'm not afraid anymore. I'm not afraid to die, because God won't run away."

"Please, Mary, we have to get out of here."

"No, you have to get out of here. I'm not leaving. I was praying this morning. And I smelled smoke."

"Mary, God doesn't work that way."

"You don't know how God works, do you, Teach? It didn't take me long to figure that one out. You talk about how you think God should work, but there's no way to know for sure. So all you can do is guess."

"I love you, Mary. I want you to live. Please, God." The smoke in the narrow passageway was suffocating and hot. We were yelling at each other in order to compete with the roar of the fire.

"I'm too tired to live any more, Teach. But I love you too, so you'd better get the hell out of this attic. Do you love me that much?"

“It’s not in me, Mary. Not when I can help you.”

“Not even God can help me, Teach. Now get out of here and save yourself.”

In the darkness, smoke and heat boiled all around us. I reached out for Mary’s hand but could no longer find her. My reaching wedged my body so tightly in the cramped crawlspace that I could not move forward or backward. I was trapped. All at once, I knew we both would die in this attic, and the certain knowledge washed over me like a great ocean wave. What had Mary said to me? “I’m too tired, Teach.”

The roaring faded into the thick darkness around me. I opened my mouth to speak again but nothing came out except a fit of violent coughing. Each gasp of air seared my lungs. I could neither see nor hear Mary any longer. Both of us were lost in the profound darkness.

So this was death. I welcomed it, after all this needless worry. The appointed day had arrived and I could not complain that I had not been adequately warned. The last thing I remembered, or maybe just imagined, was Mary’s hand clutching my own in the darkness.

I awaken suddenly to a profusion of light and sound, while faces hover over and around me. When I try to speak a plastic mask muffles my weak voice. My lungs burn and my muscles ache, but I realize with a profound satisfaction that I am alive.

Laura holds both of my hands and leans close to me, her eyes brimming with tears. “Welcome back, Sweetheart. Once you made it through last night, I knew you would come back to me.”

In spite of the bags under her puffy eyes and her disheveled hair, she looks more beautiful to me than I can ever remember. I open my fiercely dry mouth and manage the words, “What time?”

“It’s Sunday afternoon, November the second. You’ve been mostly out of it for nearly 30 hours.” She wipes a tear from her face. “It looks like you missed your appointment yesterday.”

I smile up at Laura and close my eyes, savoring the satisfaction of life on the other side of a grave. Then I think of Mary and adrenaline surges fear through my body. A voice deep inside warns me not to ask about her. But I must.

“Mary?” I manage hoarsely through the mask. Laura’s silence thunders in my aching heart. Tears well up and sting my eyes. Laura looks across the bed and I follow her eyes to Pastor Sandy, who hovers over my left side. Now she clears her voice and gently places her hand on my shoulder.

“Mike, Mary didn’t make it. The firefighters got her out of the house alive when they found you, and they rushed you both to the hospital, but Mary died late last night. She never regained consciousness. I’m so sorry, Mike.” I focus on a simple wooden cross dangling from Sandy’s neck as her words pierce my heart. I failed.

“She lost...” I have to swallow to moisten my parched throat to continue. “She lost her hope in life.”

“We know, Mike.” Sandy looks up at Laura, then back to me. “Nell found a journal Mary had been keeping for the past few weeks. Actually, the firefighters found it, going through the room after they put out the fire. It was in the passageway where you found her. Mike, you did everything you could for her, you know that. You and Laura showed Mary a new hope. But life had broken Mary’s heart. After last Sunday, she got lost and couldn’t find her way back home.”

“I failed her,” I confess as hot tears course down my face and onto the pillow.

“You laid down your life for her, Baby,” Laura whispers fiercely into my ear, brushing her fingers through my hair.

“That’s the last thing she knew, Mike,” Sandy reassures me. “Her life was worth dying over. You were holding each other’s hands when they found the two of you. All the words in the world couldn’t have communicated to her the gift you gave her in the attic.”

Now Sandy and Laura look up at each other, and then turn to the back of the hospital room. Then Laura looks back into my eyes. “There’s something else, Mike.”

Laura and Sandy step back from the bed to allow me to see Tom and Ellen Gardner sitting against the wall beyond the foot of the bed. They stand up and walk to the bed as if prompted. I cannot begin to know why they are here.

Tom begins.

“Mike, I know now what a mistake several of us made because of our fear and misunderstanding about Mary. We’re truly sorry about the way we treated you both. We ask your forgiveness, Mike.” His eyes fill with tears and he turns his head away from me to his wife.

Ellen puts a hand on Tom’s shoulder and continues, “Sandy invited everyone in worship today to confess where we have failed to carry out God’s call to seek and save the lost. You and Mary both were with us all in spirit. This morning, everyone in the congregation committed ourselves to becoming a welcoming place for strangers and outcasts, like Mary.”

“We know we can’t bring Mary back, Mike,” Tom says as he places a hand on my bed, “but we can let her life and death change us all for the better.”

“A resurrection,” Sandy smiles over me. “Mike, they want you to lead a ministry for people living with AIDS in our community.”

“And we’ve got a group of youth and adults ready to stand with you, Mike.” Tom wipes his eyes and puts his arm around Ellen. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to say, Tom ... Ellen.” A wave of peace and fatigue passes over me all at once. “You know I forgive you. I’m so sorry for my arrogance. You know I want to reach out to others like Mary.”

A nurse leans into the room and quietly announces, “That’s enough for tonight, gang. He really needs to rest.” She turns to Laura. “You can stay, Mrs. Lothrop.”

Tom mouths the word “thanks” and Ellen blows a kiss as they move toward the door. Sandy squeezes my hand and turns to walk around the bed to the door.

I can barely keep my eyes open but I turn my head to face Laura, who has leaned close enough to kiss me, softly, on my forehead. Just before I drift away, I hear her whisper, like a summer breeze.

“This is day one, my Love.”

No more counting down.