

## A LESSON IN FORGIVENESS

The call came in at midnight. I held my breath as I lifted the receiver.

“Melissa’s in the hospital again,” he said. “It’s peritonitis.”

Oh, God, my baby. My heart sank. He, being my daughter’s significant other, gave me the details. We’re a thousand miles apart; I couldn’t just drive to the hospital. I remembered her childhood prayer: *Angel of God, my guardian dear*—please watch over her through yet another ordeal.

Melissa is the gift I received in my thirty-ninth year, the youngest of my four children. I’d been praying for direction, a sign I could understand, and God sent me a baby. Not the answer I expected. My eldest was a senior in high school, her brother, fourteen. My youngest was twelve. My husband was fifty years old—and *we were having a baby*.

Unfortunately, Melissa was not blessed with good health. Her ailments began when she contracted bronchial pneumonia at five weeks. Respiratory and allergy problems followed. Doctor visits routinely occurred every three or four weeks. She endured endless shots of cortisone; seventy-six punctures on her back to test for allergy. She endured all with patient acceptance.

By the time she was five, her siblings had left the nest and her father was gone. It was just the two of us. We did everything and went everywhere together.

When she was nine she contracted Scarlet Fever.

“A strep throat with a rash,” her doctor said. She recovered, but something had changed. She seemed more tired than usual and a little mopey. When queried, she said, “I’m fine.” But she wasn’t fine.

During a visit to my mother’s home, Melissa made repeated trips to the refrigerator for iced tea. Mom commented, “That child drinks a lot. Are you sure she doesn’t have diabetes?”

I pride myself on keeping up with symptoms and warning signs, yet in this case; I didn’t apply them to my daughter. “She likes your iced tea, that’s all.” I dismissed it. When we went to church, she’d have to leave in the middle of the mass to go to the rest room. I thought it was just a kid thing. She needed a break. For a reasonably intelligent person I didn’t connect the dots.

A few months after the Scarlet Fever she had another bout with sore throat. We went immediately to see her doctor. When she undressed I could see she’d lost weight. Every vertebra stuck out. I put her on the scale. She’d lost nine pounds. Something was radically wrong. Her appetite hadn’t suffered. If anything, she was more hungry than usual.

When her doctor came in I said, “Melissa’s lost nine pounds since her last visit.” He immediately sent her to “pee on a stick.” When she returned he looked at the result and asked,

“Does anyone in your family have diabetes?”

“Not that I know of. Why?” The icy fingers of a tangible fear gripped my heart.

“I’m not 100% sure, but I’m 99% sure that Melissa has diabetes.”

Oh, God. I was sucker punched. All the air leaked out of my body; I couldn’t catch my breath, yet I couldn’t let Melissa see my fear. “I guess we’ll have to change our diet.”

“Yes, and I want to put her in the hospital.”

“When?”

“Right now.” Melissa began to cry. We were scared. Her blood sugar level was 550. Way over the limit. She spent eleven days in the hospital while they regulated the amount of insulin she would need. Her brother, sister and I attended classes learning how to give shots and to live with a diabetic. I informed her teachers of her condition and gave them informational packets from the ADA.

I was frequently called from work to pick her up because she “had a spell.” She rebelled against the disease. I’d find stale peanut butter crackers hidden in the back of her closet.

As part of our education, we’d learned that 50% of those children afflicted with diabetes might be dead of kidney or heart disease in twenty-five years. Melissa’s attitude back then was,

“I’m not going to live long anyway, so what’s the difference?” The school threatened to expel her if we didn’t get it under control because she was disruptive to the class.

In desperation I contacted the American Diabetes Association. They located a counselor at the University of Miami Hospital. We drove from Ft. Lauderdale to Miami once a week. It was the best thing that happened to us. Dr. Jay Skyler was her endocrinologist. He requested that he take over her diabetic treatment. Her pediatrician was in accord and our relationship began.

Her counselor, Gary Kleiman, was also a diabetic. He understood the children’s dilemma. He suggested she go to the two-week camp the ADA sponsored once a year at Camp Eagle’s Nest in Pisgah Forest, NC. Being a single mother with a new job I couldn’t afford it. He assured me that Melissa could go and I should pay whatever I felt I could afford; the ADA would take care of the rest. How blessed we were to have found these caring people. So many times in my life there have been warm, empathetic people who have seen us through one disaster or another, always pulling us back from the brink. God’s angels at work.

The years flew by peppered with emergency visits to the hospital. Coping was a skill I had to master. Complications set in one by one. First, gastroparesis, a condition that causes pain, nausea and bloating.

After I’d lost a business, a home and a marriage, we moved to Atlanta to share a home with my younger son. I registered with five temp agencies, working one day here, three days there. On weekends I flea marketed the inventory from the business while looking for a permanent job.

Melissa complained about her vision. “Mom, I can’t see to cross the street.” She’d had warning before we moved. Laser treatments, but now her eyes were hemorrhaging. She went to Emory Hospital down the road from where we lived. Dr. Capone, the retinal surgeon, said she needed an immediate vitrectomy. We’d lost our insurance; I was flat broke. Dr. Capone said he’d make arrangements. It couldn’t wait. We were informed the Knights Templar would underwrite her hospital stay and Dr. Capone waived his fee. More of God’s angels at work.

One month later the other eye hemorrhaged. The routine was repeated; and yet again the following month. When it occurred in the fourth month, Dr. Capone told us that the Knights Templar could not underwrite a fourth hospital stay. He enlisted the help of the Lions Club.

We moved back to Florida to be near my parents. Melissa's condition worsened. Neuropathy; an infected toe; gangrene requiring amputation of the toe. The pain in her feet was diagnosed as Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease, an incurable neurological disorder. Melissa underwent a surgical "shaving" of the bottom of the foot to relieve the pain. Her feet developed a "rocker" effect. Diabetes was ravaging her body.

Finally, kidney disease laid its claim on her. Last November her kidney function dropped to 8%. Time for dialysis. She opted for self-administration as being the least intrusive on her life and her ability to go to work. Melissa is a server, a paradox for one with problem feet and rheumatic wrists. Anemia fatigues her. Yet she goes and she doesn't complain. Each night she comes home and hooks up to the cyclor. This process takes eight hours during the night. Only six days after she received the machine she became violently ill. Peritonitis. She was so ill she couldn't speak. I called the hospital repeatedly, could never reach the doctor. I was frantic. Should I fly up there? I prayed—I asked my friends for prayers. Total strangers joined the prayer chain.

While she lay fighting for her life, her significant other caved under the pressure and succumbed to his addiction. He drained her meager bank account, racking up a number of O.D. charges. I was furious. How could she handle this additional burden? When she found out she was upset, but quickly reverted to her capacity for understanding. She explained,

"Mom, I have an illness and he stands by me. He has an illness too. I have to stand by him."

"But, "

"Everyone deserves a second chance. The Bible says you must forgive seventy times seven. It's the Christian way."

I knew that, but had focused on my anger. My child was teaching me a lesson in forgiveness. I had to forgive also. She said goodnight; I prayed it would be.

The following night the phone rang at 10:55. I said a silent prayer before I picked it up. *Her* voice, thank God.

"Guess who came into the club tonight." She was ecstatic.

"Who?"

"Barry Bostwick—the *Barry Bostwick*. Isn't that exciting?" There was a lilt in her voice.

"Are you feeling okay?"

“I’m fine,” she said. “Everything’s fine.” *Fine*—such a beautiful word.

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Postscript: Melissa’s kidney function has now dropped to five percent. The dialysis has been increased to twelve hours daily. Her function will continue to drop until it hits zero. She needs a kidney transplant, the one gift I can’t give her. There are 92,000 on the list. The odds are not in her favor. Designating yourself as an organ donor on your driver’s license could give someone another chance at life.