God’s Joyful Surprise
Finding Yourself Loved

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DECEMBER SUNLIGHT streamed through the window, creeping across the kitchen table where I huddled over one of my things-to-do lists. The list was long and ragged. The week before I had dived into Christmas, and today I noticed I was to begin decorating the house. I pushed the list aside, washed the breakfast dishes, then dragged the paint-splotched ladder to the fireplace, intending to drape the mantle with cedar. But as I started up the ladder, the most astonishing thing happened. A sudden pain sliced across my chest—gripping, searing, frightening pain.

It vanished, and I took a deep breath, blinking at the room. Then without warning it came again, all across my chest. My heart meanwhile seemed to leap in my ears and beat against my eardrums.

Instinctively I reached for my pulse, as I had been taught to do in nurse’s training, glancing at the second hand sweeping around the clock—160 beats a minute. That couldn’t be right. It should be half that! I slowed my breathing and counted again...162! My heart thundered, blocking every other sound from the room. The pain swelled, faded, returned. A thread of panic threatened to unravel in me as I walked to the phone and called the doctor.

“Come to the office immediately,” I was instructed.

I hung up and dialed my husband at the college where he works as chaplain and religion teacher. I hesitated to drive myself to the doctor—what if the pain came back ... only
worse? The phone in his office rang and rang. Please, Sandy, an-
swer. Once again I could feel the odd sensation rising in my chest,
could hear my pulse beginning to hammer in my ears faster and
closer. Dear God … I gave up and grabbed my car keys.

Minutes later I was lying on the table in the doctor’s office
attached to an electrocardiograph, wondering how such an
incomprehensible thing could happen to a healthy young woman.
I’d never been sick, not really. As the doctor squinted at the
squiggly lines on the EKG, all the sights and sounds swirling
around me seemed strange and ominous—the cold metal
stethoscope on my skin, the syringe drawing blood from my arm,
the network of wires attached to my chest and ankles, the rustle of
EKG paper scrolling onto the floor. Never mind that I was myself
a registered nurse. None of that prepared me in the least for being
on the table myself. None of it made any difference now as the
fear rose in me.

I tried to think of other things. Sandy, my husband. Our two
children. I could see Bob, the oldest at eight with his straight,
peny-brown hair and easy grin. Ann at four with curling hair
and darkly fringed blue eyes. Suddenly I tried to sit up. Who was
going to pick up Ann at play school at noon? And what about the
Christmas cookies I was supposed to bake for Bob’s school party
tomorrow? Oh Lord, what am I doing here?

I simply didn’t have time to get sick.

Somewhere in my head I harbored an image of myself
holding up a big round sphere of family, career, home, church,
community, and self—like a smaller version of Atlas, the Ti-tan
who bore the earth on his shoulders. Unfortunately, the world I
carried around had gotten bigger and heavier, and I’d been
spinning it as fast as I could to keep everything going the way I
envisioned it should. I seemed to think if I stopped, if I let go,
everything would tumble down and break into pieces, or at the
very least develop a few cracks.
I wanted to be supermom, superwife, successful career woman, church pillar, community helper, and fulfilled person, all at once. The past couple of years especially had been spent trying to accomplish all that. If I’d been inclined, perhaps I could have looked back over those months and seen how I was defining my life around those herculean expectations. But I was too busy, too lost in all my doings.

Don’t miss what happens next,

I Will Be a Writer…

A typical glimpse into that period of my life might be the morning a couple of years earlier when I had made an announcement at the breakfast table: “I’ve decided to become a writer.” Sandy’s eyebrows lifted slightly. No one said a word. Only the cereal popped in the bowl. “But Mama, you’re already a nurse,” Bob finally said.

“I know. But I’m going to be a writer, too,” I replied, trying to convince myself as much as him. Even as a child I had always wanted to be two or three things when I grew up. I had no idea how I would manage it. I was working three evenings a week at the hospital, caring for the house and children during the day and trying to carry on an array of other activities. But writing was something I had to do.

I poked a spoon of oatmeal in Ann’s mouth and hurried Bob toward the bathroom to brush his teeth. “When will you have time?” Sandy asked. “You’re already carrying on two jobs.” I hated it when he sounded so sensible.

“Organization,” I proclaimed. “If you’re organized, you can do just about anything.”
He grinned a little.

After breakfast I phoned and signed up for a weekly night class in writing. Then I made out an organization chart. I drew a circle on a sheet of paper and divided it into five parts labeled family/household, career, church, social, and self. For me life always fell into categories. My only control over the influx of demands seemed to be sorting and organizing it into form and order. Next I penciled inside each section my responsibilities in that area and a time schedule for activity. By the time I was through, I had written over the sides of the circle and up and down the page, listing a bewildering array of things I had to do.

Robert Johnson wrote in his book, She, that the ego is like a goblet that we dip into the full, thundering river of life. A woman is “flooded by the rich vastness of possibilities of life and is drawn to all of them, usually all at once.” We need to develop, he said, the capacity to view the river from above with eagle vision, then dip the goblet in at one meaningful place. Without this ability we tend to wade out into the river from the banks and become overwhelmed. That was me. I was splashing about from one part of the river to the other, scattering myself in countless endeavors. Focus. What a fragile and elusive thing it was for me! I had not caught onto the power contained in focusing at all.

Despite my organization chart, I couldn’t find a spare block of time in which to write, so I made a pact with myself to write two hours every day in snatches of time—fifteen minutes here, twenty there. It was an up-and-down experience in more ways than one. That first morning I sat down with pen and paper, wrote two sentences, got up and poured grape juice for Ann, sat down and wrote one more, then got up to mop the juice she had spilled. Two years old at the time, Ann’s demands were constant. Absorbed momentarily in my writing, my mind drifted away. When I
“came to,” Ann had squeezed the tooth paste onto the bath mat and dunked the toilet paper roll in the toilet. By bedtime I had seven sentences.

At mid-morning Ann and I walked the neighborhood collecting for the heart fund. Her legs got tired at the second house and I carried her the rest of the way, writing receipts and making change with her in my arms. Please God, let this be over soon, I kept repeating.

As we trudged back home, she fretted, late for her nap. When I laid her down on the bed, I felt an overwhelming need to lie down, too. I stared at the pillow, then turned abruptly and left. Merely thinking about lying down in the middle of the day, when I wasn’t even sick, made me feel guilty. There was too much to do.

While she napped, I hurriedly put together a slide presentation for a church group about our year in Africa, jotted a few notes for the devotional I was to give at the faculty wives club, and mixed a batch of cookie dough for Bob’s after-school snack. I didn’t buy cookies—good mothers “made” cookies.

Then as Ann and I ate lunch, I quickly pushed a needle and thread through a piece of cross stitching for a hobbies display at church. It seemed unlikely I would complete it on time, though I’d set aside lunch times for getting it done—it was even penciled on my calendar.

I lived by the lists and scribbles jotted there. I may have had a lot of clutter in my life. But it was organized clutter! Glancing over the day’s page as I tried to sew and eat, I noticed a 1:30 appointment for the spaniel’s rabies shot. How had I over looked that? It was 1:20. I tossed the dishes in the sink, grabbed Captain, and raced out the door. I lived with a chronic sense of being behind, trying to catch up.

In fact, the vet took longer than expected and I was ten minutes late picking up Bob at school. There he was standing
all alone in the school yard, holding his Luke Skywalker lunch box. “Where were you, Mama?” he asked with the slightest tremble in his throat.

Throughout the afternoon we sped from one errand to another as I followed my list—groceries, the cleaners, Bob’s soccer shoes, a quick visit to the Home for Abused Children where I was helping remodel the nursery. Finally the three of us hurried home, so I could cook dinner, get to exercise class and still make my first writing class. I fell into bed exhausted, feeling vaguely unraveled inside. “There has to be a better way,” I muttered to Sandy from my pillow.

“What are you referring to?” he asked in a puzzled voice.

“What?” I answered and fell fast asleep.