

Life is *Beautiful*



Life is  
*Beautiful*

How a Lost Girl Became  
a True, Confident Child of God

Sarah M. Johnson



New York

# Life is *Beautiful*

How a Lost Girl Became a True, Confident Child of God

© 2015 Sarah M. Johnson.

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in New York, New York, by Morgan James Publishing. Morgan James and The Entrepreneurial Publisher are trademarks of Morgan James, LLC.  
[www.MorganJamesPublishing.com](http://www.MorganJamesPublishing.com)

The Morgan James Speakers Group can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event visit The Morgan James Speakers Group at  
[www.TheMorganJamesSpeakersGroup.com](http://www.TheMorganJamesSpeakersGroup.com).



## bitlit

A free eBook edition is available  
with the purchase of this print book.

CLEARLY PRINT YOUR NAME ABOVE IN UPPER CASE

**Instructions to claim your free eBook edition:**

1. Download the BitLit app for Android or iOS
2. Write your name in **UPPER CASE** on the line
3. Use the BitLit app to submit a photo
4. Download your eBook to any device

ISBN 978-1-63047-486-7 paperback  
ISBN 978-1-63047-487-4 eBook  
ISBN 978-1-63047-488-1 hardcover  
Library of Congress Control Number:  
2014919744

**Cover Design by:**

Rachel Lopez  
[www.r2cdesign.com](http://www.r2cdesign.com)

**Interior Design by:**

Bonnie Bushman  
[bonnie@caboodlegraphics.com](mailto:bonnie@caboodlegraphics.com)

In an effort to support local communities and raise awareness and funds, Morgan James Publishing donates a percentage of all book sales for the life of each book to Habitat for Humanity Peninsula and Greater Williamsburg.



Get involved today, visit  
[www.MorganJamesBuilds.com](http://www.MorganJamesBuilds.com)





*To my dad and Zachary; a part of  
my soul that will remain for eternity.*

*To my mom, I love you.*

*Finally, to Adam, Lillian, and William,  
thank you for bringing out the best in me.*



# Table of Contents

Chapter 1	The Crash	1
Chapter 2	The Secret	10
Chapter 3	Stranger in a Strange Land	20
Chapter 4	My Dad Comes Back	31
Chapter 5	Vicki	44
Chapter 6	Hospitals, Media & Coming Home	63
Chapter 7	Depression	87
Chapter 8	Falling	113
Chapter 9	Finding Pauline	128
Chapter 10	Lifting the Veil of Alcohol	140
Chapter 11	Finding Me	156
	Epilogue	179
	Acknowledgements	185
	About the Author	187



*“When you forgive, you love, and when you love,  
God’s light shines upon you.”*

—**Jon Krakauer**, *Into the Wild*







## Chapter 1

# The Crash

I remember all of the emotions, the trees whipping by, everything happening so fast, dad yelling, *Here we go*, and mom screaming, *Stop it*. I remember my brother Zachary looking back at me, his eyes bright with fear as I prayed *God please...*

I remember the sense of something coming; you know it's coming and wonder: will I live?

I remember the violence of the plane plowing into the ground as we attempted an emergency landing in a roughhewn field...*Boom, boom, boom...*and then nothing but an unnerving silence.

I don't know if I blacked out or merely paused with my eyes closed in the stillness of those first few moments. Awareness comes slowly. Then in a rushed breath of shock and revelation, *Thank God I'm alive*.

My eyes open to an eerily lit silence where sunlight and shadow intermingle, making it difficult to see into the new geography of

the plane's interior. My head and body buzz. My mind trips on the dissonance of dangling upside down, held a few inches from the ceiling of the plane's cabin by my seatbelt.

Taking stock of my body, I notice that I peed my pants and there is a small cut on my left arm. Looking up, I see that one foot is missing its shoe. My eyes squint into bright sunlight that passes through a relatively large doorway next to me that was torn open.

The only noise to break the silence is the erratic popping of electricity; the final groans of a dying airplane.

I move my arms first and then my legs, which causes small shards of glass to fall from where they're lodged in my clothes and upturned seat. I tilt my head back toward the ceiling beneath me and it is covered in broken glass.

My hair dangles down away from my face, but the position of my body and the way sunlight cuts through the cabin makes it difficult to see much of the plane. In those few seconds I realize that I am okay and begin to think that maybe we are all okay; that the crash wasn't so bad.

I take a few deep breaths and reach down to my waist and tug on the seatbelt clasp. It releases and I tumble a foot or so down onto the ceiling. More by instinct than thought, I crawl on my hands and knees toward the large, incandescent gap in the plane's fuselage next to my seat.

The plane is a Cessna Caravan with a single propeller on its nose and wings attached to its roof rather than the underside of the fuselage. The interior is tight, but there is enough room for four rows of seats with a thin aisle running up the middle. Each row has three seats, one on the left and two across the aisle. My seat is on the left, across the aisle from my parents and toward the plane's tail.

I pull myself out through the doorway onto the underside of a wing and almost immediately a blast of intense, humid Guatemalan heat scorches my back. Shifting my body to see where we've crashed, my bare knees scrape on rivets fastening an aluminum skin onto the wing.

The world outside of the plane is punctuated by waves of late August heat and a landscape and flora that are nothing like my home in Wisconsin, nor anything I have ever seen at age 19. Near the plane, which came to rest at the edge of a field, is a row of palm trees and low, thick bushes. The dirt is baked brown and what grass there is looks more like tufts of straw. In the distance, the haze is etched with lush, green mountains. The far edge of the field, probably about 250 yards away, is bordered by thick tropical rainforest.

Turning to look toward the front of the plane I see the crumpled body of one of the pilots lying in the dirt about ten feet from me. There is a male and female pilot, but I can't tell which one of them I am looking at. I recognize the white uniform shirt, but his or her body is folded in half so that the pilot's legs are twisted around the head. The face is smashed and bloody making it completely unrecognizable.

My heart races and hands tremble as I realize that the persistent unnerving silence, no human voices whatsoever, means there are more bodies. I think of Zachary, mom and dad and stand to go back into the smashed, upturned body of the plane. The strong, raw odor of airplane fuel drifts around the fuselage in a thick invisible cloud.

My legs and body are weak and unsteady. My muscles shake so that I feel as if I'm shivering. It is hard to move as quickly as my mind screams that I should. I look into the plane through a mix of light and shadow. The interior is a maze of inverted seats and the only person I see is mom dangling upside down. Her face is scratched and bloody, and she is straining to undo the clasp on her seatbelt.

My silhouette in the sunlit doorway cuts across mom's face. She looks up at me. Her eyes are wide with panic, I've never seen her so afraid.

"Sarah! Help me! Sarah...Help me..."

I climb into the plane and crawl to mom. It was a small space to begin with, but the altered configuration of the plane's cabin makes it even more claustrophobic and difficult to move around in. Her

face is near my own as I reach past her hands to pull on the seatbelt's clasp. I tug expecting her to drop down as the seatbelt releases, but there is nothing.

"Please Sarah, please..." she cries.

"I'm trying mom...I'm trying..."

I pull the clasp again and again, but nothing. With each tug mom becomes more and more frantic.

"Sarah, help me, Sarah..." she pleads over and over.

The smell of gasoline is strong. The incessant pop of electricity as the plane's heart ground down makes me afraid the plane could explode at any moment.

I move my body to reach underneath her and I look across to where dad's seat should be. Instead, there is a flattened wall with one of his legs jutting out, motionless.

"Come on dad!...Let's go...Dad, dad...Please dad!...Let's go!..." but he is silent. It is hard to fully explain the sense of loss. I love him so very much and now he is so suddenly gone and incapable of helping me ever again.

"Sarah, we have to get out of here..."

"Okay mom, I'm trying..."

I tug on mom's seatbelt over and over, but I can't get it to let go. She is desperate for me to save her and I'm desperate to save her, but I can't.

I look down at dad's leg once more and feel the loneliness of the situation hit me. It sucks the wind out of my lungs and I can't think, I don't know what to do. This day began with a dreamlike quality that is now thoroughly a nightmare; one that I never imagined as a little girl lying in bed in the dark.

I'm alone in a destroyed plane with the crushed body of my father beside me. I need to save my mother, but nothing works and the smell of fuel grows stronger as electricity continues to erratically spark and pop around me. *Where is Zach, I need to find Zach.*

I pull my body back and look down toward the front of the plane, but I can't see past the second row of seats. Beyond those seats the plane looks like a crumpled piece of paper; it is a wall of wires, cabin and fuselage. On the other side of it are the pilot, two other passengers, and my brother.

"Sarah, Sarah, Please!" mom gasps in feverish bursts as she tugs on the belt with one hand and attempts to push her body upward to relieve some of the weight with the other.

Although I hear her, there is nothing I can do. Not only is the front of the plane completely collapsed on my brother and the others, but there is a fire and the flames are beginning to burn Liz as she emerges from unconsciousness.

We'd first met Liz and the other volunteers the night before for dinner and then we gathered that morning on the tarmac to leave Guatemala City for the small village of Sepamac in eastern Guatemala. The flight was only supposed to be about an hour and once we landed, our small crew was to begin building a school for the people of Sepamac. For me, this trip is a step away from failure in college, while for dad it is another stride in his path to redemption.

Liz is one of the leaders of our small group and I really only know a few scant details of her life. One is that she is in her late 30s and the other is that she is married with young children waiting for her at home.

I remember her excitement, which was shared by all twelve of us, as she entered the plane and took a seat directly in front of mine. Throughout our brief flight she explained what we would be doing, described the people we were to help, and did her best to make us feel comfortable in this new and very different place. She also shared that she was teaching her children Spanish and had flown around Mount Everest in a plane similar to the one we were in. It was amazing to me to hear all that she'd done and was working on in her life; far more than I expected I could ever do.

Now she's dangling upside down, held by her seatbelt, and will soon burn to death if I do nothing. I crawl through the broken glass littering the ceiling of the plane toward her.

"Sarah! Where are you going! Sarah come back!" mom pleads as I move away from her.

"I have to get Liz mom..."

Liz doesn't seem to recognize me. Her face is bloody and raw, she is in shock and confused. Fighting against the pain, she tries to speak, but all she can manage is to mumble incoherently and rock her head back and forth.

"Sarah, come back..."

"I can't, I can't help you right now mom..."

The fire is burning Liz's legs. I pull on her seatbelt, but it won't come undone. I move my body to gain more leverage and tug as hard as I can, but nothing happens. The fire is burning against my skin. No one else is coming to help. Other than my mother's frantic pleas and the popping of flame and electricity there are no other sounds of survivors or any other people. It is horribly quiet.

I feel like I am being enveloped by the strengthening fire and the destroyed interior of the plane. I turn slightly to my right and lying only a couple feet away is a member of our group. I don't know who it is. I can only see his motionless body from the neck down. His head disappears under a wall of wreckage.

The smell of fuel grows more pungent and a deep black smoke emanates from the fire. I turn to Liz and give her seatbelt one last try, but the fire is too hot and there is nothing I can do for her. I turn in the cramped space and go back to mom.

Again I tug and pull on the clasp to mom's seatbelt, but I just... *God, I can't do this, I can't do this on my own...* A voice inside my head said, *Be calm...*

“Mom, I have to get help. I can’t do this,” I say, working my way toward the doorway. “It’ll be okay.”

“Sarah, don’t go...get me out...where are you going...Sarah...”

Out in the bright Guatemalan air, I’m once again hit by scorching tropical heat. I step toward the back of the plane and there is a shot of pain from my ankle. It doesn’t feel broken, but the pain is distracting and slows me.

I limp past the twisted body of the pilot. Near the tail of the plane, I see that fuel is pouring out onto the ground from a large gash in what must be a fuel tank. I have no idea where I’m going or what I hope to find. My mind is simply focused on saving mom.

I come around the back of the plane and look up toward a row of palm trees. In the distance I see two dark skinned men pulling Dan, one of the volunteers I met the night before, away to safety. Dan is alive, but grimaces as they pull on his shoulders and drag him over the rough ground. His legs are twisted and one foot points out at an odd angle, they look lifeless as they drag across the rough ground.

I can’t remember seeing or hearing the two men in the plane and I have no idea how they managed to get Dan out. I try to call out to them, *Come back...help me save mom*, but before I can gather my breath to yell there is a man standing beside me speaking Spanish.

He is very short, I feel like a giant next to him. He is wearing a white hat and shirt, jeans, cowboy boots and belt. I reach out and try to grasp his body with my hands and push him toward the plane, “My mom, my mom, you have to get my mom...”

I can see his wide brown eyes so clearly as he calmly says in heavily accented English, “No... nonono... no...” Behind me I hear mom screaming for her life, *Oh my God, mom is burning, mom is burning to death right now.*

I try to push him again, “Please, my mom, you have to help me get my mom,” but he calmly says *No... nononon... no*. I am completely helpless as he gently, but insistently holding my arms, guides me away from the plane.



Mom is screaming, “Help me...please...Sarah, Sarah...help me...” as the man in the white hat sits me down on a dirt roadway lined by thick bushes. I’m about 200 feet from the plane and the flames are really coming. I can only imagine the pain of burning to death; knowing that your daughter just walked away from you.

I close my eyes to escape the image of it all. A hand touches my shoulder...and then another and another. I open my eyes. Standing around me are about twelve people; men, women and a few children. Each of them places a hand on me and begins to pray in what I think is Spanish. Their accent is different from anything I’ve ever heard before and some of the words don’t seem to be Spanish.

“Sarah...please...”

I’ve never been touched or prayed for in that manner. I bow my head...

“Sarah...”

...and pray...

“Sarah...”

...and the plane explodes.





## *Chapter 5*

# Vicki

**D**eath came in an instant, without any forewarning for dad and Zach. Vicki was given eight to ten weeks.

Two years older than mom, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer in the mid-1990s, and beat it. Or at least she thought she had. Vicki walked away from her oncologist convinced that cancer was part of her past, not her future.

She avoided routine screenings and was lucky to have nearly ten healthy years, but eventually cancer found her again. She noticed ever-increasing pain in her abdomen and bleeding, which led her back to a doctor and then the oncologist. There wasn't much to say other than she had stage IV uterine cancer. Vicki is deaf, and I can't imagine what it must have been like to see those words, as they were signed to her by the hands of a hearing friend.

The cancer progressed too far for chemo or radiation to be effective and surgery was out of the question. Cancer owned her body now and there was nothing medical science could do for her other than offer palliative care. She sat quietly as all of this was signed to her and she could feel the two large tumors growing in her abdomen. Even still, the reality of it was hard for her to acknowledge. She insisted that she would somehow beat cancer again.

In her heart she knew she was dying, but it would take her some time to make peace with it.

She had friends, but none of them could care for her. She had family, but she didn't feel comfortable asking them. Vicki was alone, dying, and disabled. With nowhere to go she became a ward of the state.

For a time she was bounced from one hospital to another, never in one long enough to get comfortable. Finally, she was placed in a nursing home an hour-and-a-half from us, in Minnesota.

Vicki could be willful and dour, but she could also be kind and amusing. She enjoyed her friends and missed her children, but preferred to live alone. I suppose like many of the women of my family, she was rather complicated.



With grandma and grandpa in tow, we go to the nursing home to visit her. As we file into her small room with one little window and a cinder block wall behind her bed, we can see she isn't the same. Vicki was always a big woman; tall and slightly overweight, now she looks withered and tired. She lost considerable weight and the skin on her body sags. I feel sad for her, but I also want to leave.

Vicki is totally deaf in her right ear, but with a hearing aid she has some hearing in her left. For a moment we stand around her bed not really saying much other than to wave and mouth hello to her. Grandma leans in to her left ear and loudly asks Vicki how she was doing.

"I'm fine, I guess."

Mom leans toward her good ear and said, “Do they treat you well here?”

“Huh?”

“Do they treat you well here?”

“It’s okay.”

We go on like this for a few more minutes. No one really saying anything of any consequence, just idle and awkward chit-chat. Then grandma says, “Well, I think it’s time for us to go. You look tired.”

No one says anything for a few moments. Vicki taps one hand on her chest and fidgets with a whorl of bed sheet with the other. She looks at mom, “I don’t want to die here.” Her eyes water and redden and her hand twists the sheet a bit harder. “I really don’t want to die here.”

Mom looks at dad. I guess communication for them occurs at the margins, in the glances, gestures and tones, more than words. “I know you don’t,” is about as much as mom can commit to in the moment.

The next day mom and dad ask Zachary and me to sit with them in the living room.

Mom clears her throat, “How do you feel about Vicki staying with us and dying here?”

“What?” I say. The thought of someone dying in our home seems so foreign, so out of character. Our home isn’t a place where people come to die. I have school and friends as well. Mom and dad have work. Zach has his life. Where does a dying aunt fit?

“How are we going to care for a dying person?” I ask.

“Yeah, we don’t know how to do this,” Zach says. “What would we do?”

“We wouldn’t be on our own. There would be hospice nurses to help us out,” mom says.

“I don’t know... Whose room would she die in?” Zach looks at me as if to say it won’t be his, *You have the bigger room.*

“We’ll have to figure those things out, but we can make it work,” mom says.

“We have plenty of room and we’ll make it work,” dad adds. “I know this is a lot to ask of you guys, but this is important. Let’s try it out and if you guys still don’t like it we’ll deal with it.”

Dad stands up after he speaks and goes to his place on the deck to smoke. That’s it. Conversation over.

I don’t want Vicki to come to our home to die, but it is clear now that she will. She looked horrible in the nursing home. A catheter bag hung off a hook to the side of her bed. Her skin was pale and sallow. She lost a lot of her hair so that she had only thin wisps of it left. Her body was diminished as well as her spirit, though her stomach was distended by two large tumors so that she looked to be starved.

I don’t want that or anything else that my imagination conjures as I think about her death. Crying out in pain over days or longer, a struggle to breathe, and a last horrifying fight for life after weeks of physical decay. I watched movies where people die of cancer, but it seems unreal to believe that they just fade away, that their bodies simply melt into clean sheets, a white world, and fading light.

At the same time, Vicki looked so sad and trapped. She was desperate for the end of her life to be more than the yellowed cinder block walls of an aged state-run nursing home; her last moments spent with nurses that are virtual strangers to her. Even as she assured us she would beat cancer, she wanted to maintain her dignity by not dying in that place. Mom and dad recognize this.

I wouldn’t want to die there either.

When she comes into our home, her frame and figure covered only by a blanket and a thin robe, the truth of cancer is laid bare.

A hospice nurse edges her into our house in a wheelchair and brings her to the hospital bed we set up in half our living room. The nurse helps Vicki stand and ease herself into the bed. As she moves from chair

to bed I see the silhouette of her body against the robe. She is so thin and frail, yet her stomach bulges out as if she is pregnant. I can't believe it, but I can see the outline of the two tumors growing in her abdomen.

Death seems so inevitable, but she continues to cling to her hope of survival.

The nurse helps Vicki settle herself and places the catheter bag on a hook near the end of the bed. It is about a quarter full and I can hear the yellow liquid slosh as it settles on the hook. The nurse speaks with Vicki as she works.

“How's that love?”

“That's okay.”

“How much pain are you in?”

“I'm okay right now. When's my next pill?”

“Not for a couple of hours.”

“Okay, I'll need it then.”

“Sure...” and so on as she helps Vicki into our home and into our lives.

The nurse stays about an hour, but then it is time for her to go. We are on our own with Vicki.

“Vicki, would you like some music?” dad says into her left ear.

“Yes, I think I would,” she says.

Dad runs upstairs and brings down a CD player and plugs it in. “What do you like?” he asks

“Elvis Presley.” and that is how we begin to take care of her.

Over the next couple weeks, my parents change her catheter bag as it fills, clean her when she has a bowel movement, give her meds as she needs them, change the bed sheets, anything that needs to be done. Each day one or two hospice nurses come and spend about an hour with Vicki. There are the normal medical checks, vital signs and that sort of thing, but one of them, Maggie, has a sixth sense about the process of dying.

“She’s doing well,” Maggie says.

“What do you mean well?” mom asks.

“The tumors are growing and she’s in pain, but she’s okay.... She isn’t ready yet.” She sounds like a midwife for the dying.

Dad listens intently to every instruction, every comment; the whole while looking at Vicki, almost lost in thought. This is a project, a task, a job he has set himself to. He wants to be good at it, and he is.

I’ve never seen dad so gentle with anyone else in my life. One day I come home from school and he is sitting next to her rubbing her hands to make her feel good and ease her pain. He looks so kind and peaceful as he is doing this; lost in the moment and sensation of providing so much relief to another human being through such a simple act of caring.

“Are you okay Vicki?” he asks.

“Yes, this is nice. Thank you.”

“We’re here for you, Vicki.”

I sit in the living room and listen. They are quiet for a few minutes, then dad asks, “How do you feel?”

“I’m okay, not much pain.”

“No, I mean.... I know it’s difficult to be happy, but are you okay? You know, do you feel loved? A little happier than in the nursing home?”

I can’t believe it. *Do you feel loved... are you okay emotionally... are you happy... tell me about your emotions...* These are not words spoken by *my* dad.

These moments become normal in an abnormal way. Dad spends part of his day gently lifting Vicki so that he can rub her neck and back. The whole while talking to her, listening to music, calming her, helping ease the pain that seems to burn through her entire body, and trying to care for her emotionally. His words and movements seem so intuitive and natural around her, like he simply knows how to help lighten her burden, the weight of slowly dying.

I've never seen dad do anything like that before. He is coming around with Vicki and learning how to provide love and care. It is a side of him that he probably never knew he had.

It isn't just dad either. Mom finds a very soft, nurturing place within herself as well. She cares for Vicki with a sense of love and quiet calm that she hasn't been able to draw upon since Zach and I were much younger.

And my parents seem to discover each other in ways that life has never previously allowed. They split the shift during the day so that dad watches her while mom works and mom watches her while dad works. When they are together in the evening, they cooperate and engage with each other and Vicki in ways that I've never seen.

They both learn some sign language so they can speak with Vicki. They share changing out catheter bags or cleaning up after she moved her bowels. They share cooking for her and keeping her clean. They work together to change her sheets like they have been caring for the dying all their lives.

"Ready...? Okay, one ... two ... three ... turn." They push Vicki to the right. "I got her ... you pull out the cover sheet ... okay ... I got the pad ... I got her. You lay it down. Here's the clean cover sheet ... okay, one ... two ... three, turn." They ease her body to the left. "Pull the other side down ... yeah, I got it.... Good? All set. Lay her down ... gently. I know. Vicki are you okay, are you comfortable?"

Before Vicki they only lived their own separate lives, but now they have something important to share. They are going from strangers living in the same home to friends.

One of the kindest things I see mom and dad do is help Vicki reunite and say goodbye to her children. She has three boys that I don't think she has seen in ten years. I don't know why they became estranged. I guess Vicki is no more immune to emotional isolation than the rest of

her family. I imagine her life has been just as difficult, if not more than, as mom's.

"April, I think we have to do something for her," dad says one evening in the kitchen.

"I know. I couldn't stand it if it was me. I'd have to see Sarah and Zachary." Then he says something that surprises and touches me deeply, "It would kill me if Becky wouldn't come to see me."

"Do you think they have any money to fly out?"

"I don't know." The next day dad speaks with Vicki about her kids and asks if he and mom can help fly them out to see her.

"That'd be nice," she says. They talk a bit more about the particulars and as dad walks away Vicki turns her head slightly. A single tear slides across her cheek and bleeds into the pillow.

Right away dad makes arrangements for them to fly out from Maryland to see their mom one last time. He even pays for their grandfather, who they live with, to come out too.

The last time I saw them I was five or so. Now, they stay with us for a couple of days and spend most of their time sitting with Vicki, signing to each other, we all share a meal, and sitting quietly in the same room with her.

"I'm sorry," Vicki says a few hours before they are to leave. Her boys look embarrassed, unsure of what to say.

"It's okay," the oldest one says. Afterwards, they sit and chat lightly, until it is time for them to leave to the airport.

As the boys leave, she promises she'll see them again soon, but the bulging tumors in her abdomen tell a much different story. I can't imagine she actually maintains the cognitive dissonance to truly believe that her life is not near its end.



After her kids leave, Vicki slides down emotionally. She seems to disengage a bit from us and is quieter than usual. Mom and dad understand that having more people in the house probably would help her. Dad takes on the responsibility of inviting Vicki's friends to our home and arranging their visits. It's amazing. We start having people in our house; actual strangers coming into our house. And my parents host them and prepare dinner for them and care for Vicki as they visit.

We share Thanksgiving with Vicki and mom's family and then Christmas. Vicki has become part of our family and my parents continue to reach out to Vicki's friends to encourage them to come to our home. All the time, mom and dad are partners and friends sharing this experience, but at the center of it all is dad.

He lost people in the past; people who died suddenly without any chance to care for them or say goodbye. And now he has an opportunity to care for a person, to become close to that person, knowing she will soon die. It is bittersweet, but he begins to feel that he isn't such a bad person after all. He is capable of being very kind and caring for not just Vicki, but Zach and I.

He prepares us for Vicki's death in a calm and quiet manner. Dad does not hide the reality of her situation and how short her time is, but he does so in a way that feels caring and respectful to us.

"It's going to happen," he says. "She may seem really great right now, but she is going to die. It's going to be sad, but we will do this together. I'm proud of you guys. I think we've really helped her. We are the last pieces of her life and that's been really special."



When she came to live with us, the doctors predicted that Vicki had about eight to ten weeks to live. She's alive after eight. At first she does remarkably well. She brightens and becomes engaged with our family and seems to be happy, not just to be out of the nursing home, but to be among family. We enjoy her and beyond the efforts of our parents to

care for her, Zach and I watch TV with her or listen to music and help keep her comfortable.

Early on dad tries to speak with Vicki about her funeral, but she won't have anything to do with it. She is going to beat this and be on her way before long. Dad presses her gently that she needs to talk about arrangements and the business of dying.

"Don't worry about the finances. We'll take care of everything," he says.

Vicki is adamant, "Thank you, no."

A week later, her body is starting to fail. She is quieter and her spark starts to fade. She eats a little less each day and is never really hungry. She becomes so thin that I can see the outline of her ribs through her shirt and when dad helps her up to rub her neck and back I can see the outline of each vertebra in her spine.

She starts throwing up after eating and her catheter bags aren't as full. Her eyes, which had been wide and curious, dim and her gaze looks at times confused and at others far away and wistful. It is clear she is slipping.

Finally, she asks dad to help her plan her funeral.

"Okay Vicki. Tell me what you want and don't worry about a thing," he says.

The two of them sit for a couple of hours talking about the music she wants played, how her body should be handled, the Bible verse she likes best, writing a letter to her children, her last wishes. It is all very sad, but dad handles it with care and in a business-like manner.

A few days later Maggie is at the house tending to Vicki. She asks general questions such as how much pain she is in and how Vicki feels as she takes her blood pressure and so on.

"I'm ready to go to the hospital and get my tumors removed," Vicki says. "I want to go to the hospital to get the tumors removed soon ... they are getting so big it hurts to roll over you know."

Vicki looks at me, “I want to start driving and get my own place here in Amery too.”

Maggie sits on the bed beside Vicki, “Vicki, the tumors have spread through your body and we can’t get rid of them.”

“I’ll prove it to you. I’ll be fine.”

“Vicki, we have already talked to the doctors.”

“Please.”

“Okay, I can make another appointment for you, but let’s see how it goes. Okay? If you start to feel better we’ll make an appointment.”

Vicki pulls her hands up to her chest then wipes away a tear with the back of one hand, “Okay.”

The next day is Friday, the 11<sup>th</sup> of January. As on most Fridays, I slip out of the house that evening to go to a party. I get drunk and stay with a friend that night. The next morning my cell phone wakes me up.

“Sarah, it’s mom.”

“Yeah, mom.”

“Your dad and I need to run errands and Zach has to go to work so we need you home. Okay?”

“Okay, fine.” I wipe my eyes and feel the pain of a hangover pulse behind them. I pull my clothes on, brush my teeth and tell my friend I have to go.

“Whatever,” she says from under her covers.

It is cold and overcast when I walk outside and there are a few inches of fresh snow. I start the car and get home just as my parents are getting ready to head out. Zach is looking for something before driving himself to work in the white Ford Escort that had once been Vicki’s car. He loves that car. It is something of a rusty beater, but he cleaned it up so it looks nice. He also beefed up the sound system so you can hear the bass beats as he pulls up the driveway.

“Hi Vicki, how are you?” I say as I walk past her to the kitchen. Mom yells goodbye behind her as she and dad leave. The house is quiet except for Zach wandering around the living room.

“Zach,” Vicki says, “make sure you drive extra safe. Sarah, I think you should go with him.”

“Vicki I can’t leave you alone. Zach is fine. Everything is fine.” I lie down on the couch and close my eyes for a moment as Zach launches out the door with a quick goodbye.

About five minutes later my phone rings. “I skidded off the road and I’m stuck in the ditch.”

“Come on Zach...” I rub my forehead. “Vicki, I have to go help Zach.”

“I told him to be careful.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“I told him.”

“Okay?”

“Okay...”

Zach wasn’t going very fast. All that happened was a slow skid into some deep snow in a shallow drainage ditch that runs along the road. The low-slung front end of the Escort rests on packed snow so the tire treads can’t gain any torque against the ground. This is the most common way to get stuck and takes just a little digging, rocking the car, and then a good push to get it moving and the tires back on solid ground.

I walk back into the house about 20 minutes later and say hi to Vicki. She doesn’t say anything to me other than to quietly mumble to herself. Her eyes are fixed on some point just past my shoulder. Her voice is a low murmur and she seems to be speaking to someone just behind me.

“Vicki, are you okay?”

She doesn't respond other than to continue murmuring to whomever or whatever vision she is experiencing. She is very quiet and peaceful and does not seem bothered. There is a contentment or sense of serenity in her eyes and voice.

"Dad, I need you guys to come home right away," I say into my cell phone.

"What's going on?" dad asks.

"Vicki's acting really weird. I think she's hallucinating."

"Okay, we're on our way."

"I think she might die any minute."

"It's okay Sarah. Just sit with her and we'll be home."

By the time mom and dad get home Vicki has come out of it, but she knows what's happening. "Call mom and dad and the others, will you? I need to say my goodbyes."

"Okay," mom says as dad picks up the phone and calls my grandparents. When mom turns to look at me her eyes are red and moist.

Dad puts his hand on mom's shoulder and squeezes it gently, "Yeah, you guys need to come over here," he says into the phone. "Yeah, tell the others," and he hangs up the phone. "They're on their way Vicki."

"Okay ... good."

Vicki slips in and out of lucidity. One moment she speaks to us softly or stares off in the distance. The next she speaks in whispers to people or hallucinations that seem to hover in some unfocused distance around us. After about 20 minutes or so she slips off to sleep.

Grandma and grandpa walk in a little while later and quietly ask how she is. Vicki looks peaceful, but there is a slight rasp to her breathing. Grandma goes to her and picks up Vicki's hand. Vicki wakes up looking worried.

"Where's my Jesus, where's my Jesus?" she says, asking to hold the small statuette that sits on the table beside her bed.

Grandma hands her the Jesus and Vicki clutches it to her chest. “I’m dying,” she says.

“I know honey.”

Before long the aunts and uncles come in and stand around Vicki. No one seems to know exactly what to say; sort of a pretty big test for such an emotionally withdrawn group of people.

Vicki drifts in and out. At times she wakes from sleep and seems surprised to see everyone. At others she speaks in hushed murmurs to the hallucinations that surround us. Watching her, it feels as if we are enveloped by the souls of those who will take Vicki to what lies next. Like us, they wait for the last remnants of her physical self to finally capitulate to the tumors that slowly choke her life away.

I am sad, but recognize there is a beauty to it all. My family has never been terribly religious, no church for the isolationists, but I feel there is more at work than the simple ceasing of physical life. I don’t know my higher power, nor do I think it is possible to truly know God, but there is some unnamable presence in the room.

In the world of Judaism they have euphemisms such as HaShem, which means *The Name*, or Elohim, *The Power*. I don’t now use the word God, but prefer to refer to this unknowable essence as my *Higher Power*. It is my Elohim, my HaShem. In the room with Vicki the pneuma of this power, of the word, helps ease her fear, helps her to say goodbye. It helps her body slowly release its grasp on her soul.

I have to go to work that night and tell my boss that Vicki will die very soon. He allows me to take the next few days off. That evening, Saturday, I don’t go out with friends. I go straight home. Grandma, grandpa and the others have left. Mom and dad are sitting quietly with Vicki. The light in the room is dim and mom’s hand rests on Vicki’s.

“How is she?” I ask.

Mom looks up, but my dad turns to me, “She’s still in and out, but she’s been sleeping for a while now.”

My muscles relax a bit. I have been worried I will come home and she would have passed. “What do you think?”

“You mean how much time?”

“Yeah.”

“Not long. Maggie says another day or two...could be longer, but not long.”

“Okay. Tell me if something happens.”

Mom looks up at me, “We will honey.” She touches Vicki so gently and in that moment I want to be held, to be comforted. Without the apparitions, the house feels so much lonelier.

I go downstairs to my room in the basement. I am tired, but not ready for sleep so I wiggle the mouse to my computer, but nothing, no spark of life from the screen. I have forgotten a guy is coming tomorrow to take a look at it. I lie down on my bed and sleep comes to me easily.



The next morning I am terribly sick. I have chills, my head pounds and my stomach feels watery and sore. I stay in bed for a while hoping it will pass, but as the morning wears on I feel worse and worse. I decide I need at least some water and ibuprofen so I go upstairs to the kitchen. Mom is still sitting with Vicki and dad is up in their room napping. Zach has gone to work. I don't know why he didn't ask for the day off.

As I reach the kitchen, the doorbell rings and mom asks me to get it. “Maybe its grandma and grandpa,” she says.

I open the door and standing on the porch is a thin wisp of a kid with a black tie, black pants and a white shirt. Behind him is a small car with *Geek Squad* painted in orange and black letters. He doesn't have a coat on and is shivering as he stands out in the cold holding only a black bag.

“Mom, it's the computer kid.”

“Oh, okay. Let him in, I guess.”

The kid looks at the hospital bed, but doesn't say anything. He quietly follows me to the back half of the living room where we kept the computer. It's next to Vicki's bed. He begins asking me questions about the computer. I feel horrible, but I sit with him and help him however I can.

I watch the kid click through one screen after another and race the cursor around the computer. He pulls up one dialogue box and then another until there is layers of windows popping up, text scrolling across them, and then disappearing. Watching him work makes me feel worse and all I want to do is lay my head down and sleep until it all goes away.

"I'm going downstairs," I say to mom. "I need to lay down, I'm not feeling well."

After about 30 minutes I wake to mom at the top of the steps, "Sarah, you should probably come up and talk with Vicki. She's worried about you."

I walk up the stairs and Vicki looks up to me. Her eyes are soft and seem to be filled with sleep. Her hands rest on her chest with Jesus tucked in her fingers.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"No, I'm not feeling that well."

"That's okay. Go drink some water and go downstairs and rest. Everything will be fine."

*I was just asleep in my room*, is what I want to say, but instead, "Okay. I love you."

"I love you too."

The kid is still working away at the desk next to Vicki's bed. Windows and text boxes materialize then vanish. I walk to the kitchen and pour a glass of water from the tap and walk back downstairs.

Ten minutes later mom comes downstairs. "Honey, Vicki just died." Tears fill her eyes. "She's gone, she's really gone."

I walk upstairs and there is the kid, seated at the desk, staring at Vicki, completely unsure of what he's supposed to do.

Vicki looks peaceful, like she's asleep. "You may as well go," I say to the kid.

"Yeah, okay." Relief washes across his face.

Mom sits beside Vicki and cries. The kid does his best to pack his things and not knock anything over or bump into mom. I'm crying too. I've lost my aunt and am seeing my first dead person. I also understand that whatever influence she had over my parents, our family, may end. Mom and dad, all of us, may go back to living separate lives together, and that is truly depressing.

I tell the kid to come back the next day and walk with him to the door. He only glances in the direction of her bed; probably doesn't want me to see him looking.

"I have to go pick Zach up," dad says. "I'll call the funeral home when we get back."

Mom and I pull the covers up to Vicki's shoulders. Jesus is still clasped in her hands. I gently stroke her cheek with the soft skin of the back of my hand and say goodbye to her. She isn't cold yet and though her skin is a pale light blue, she looks as if she is in a deep sleep. She is the first dead body I have ever seen.

For the next few minutes, mom and I sit quietly with Vicki. Mom weeps lightly.

About 20 minutes later, Dad and Zach pull up in the driveway. The car doors shut and then I hear their heavy, male footsteps on the porch, the stomping of snowy shoes, and then the door opens. The two of them ease through the door. Dad's arm is wrapped around Zach's shoulders, holding him close as he cries harder than I've ever seen him cry.

They take off their coats and dad rubs the back of Zach's head. "Hey Zach, we knew this day was going to happen. She's in a better place now and she isn't suffering anymore, ya know?"

Zach nods his head and wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. "I just wish I could have been here."

"I know, it's okay to be sad."

Zach lays his head on dad's shoulder and reaches up and pulls him closer. "Why...?"

"It's a part of life, Zach. We knew this was going to happen when we brought her into our home, and today's the day."

Dad knows death. There is more death to come, but dad knows that feeling of losing someone close. He understands that there is no wishing it away. There is no honey-colored ending where everything is simply okay. It takes time to heal and he recognizes that it's a process that has to play itself out.

I think this is the first time he realizes that there is a role for him to play in helping people he loves heal. He is tender with Zach and gentle with me as we talk about Vicki and what it means to see her leave this world. This is Zach and my first experience with death so close to us, and it hurts.

I know this person. I love this person. I had a relationship with this person that became stronger as their body became frail and failed. It is an experience that neither Zach nor I have been through.

"I know it hurts," dad says as he holds Zach, "but it is very much a part of life and we'll get through it together, as a family."



The next day dad wakes up early and starts packing Vicki's stuff away in boxes. Mom wakes up, dresses and comes downstairs. When she sees dad, she starts to cry.

"Oh Roger, please don't do that. I'm not ready."

Dad stands up and walks to her and holds her.

“It’s okay, April. I think we need to . . . I can take care of everything.”

Later that week, at the funeral, mom starts crying during the service and walks out of the room. Dad follows her and holds her as she cries into his shoulder.

For so long we have been so angry and feel betrayed by what dad had done; the lies and drugs and living a life separate from us. But here he is caring for Vicki and then in our grief he cares for us. It shows me that people are stupid and fallible. We make mistakes, but those mistakes don’t define who we are.

Dad isn’t a meth user. He is just a troubled guy who turned to meth because it filled some hole in his spirit, even as it worked to ruin his body and took him from his family. I don’t know why he did that. Dad lied, but he is not a liar. Dad isn’t a meth user. He’s just a guy who used meth.

And he is a really caring person. He sacrifices his work, his time, his house, his money to care for his sister-in-law because that’s who my dad is. He is a loving and caring person, and I love dad for it.

I still have some anger, but after Vicki dies, the past becomes the past.