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It's A Miracle

Real Life Inspirational Stories, Extraordinary Events and Everyday Wonders

Richard Thomas

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«HarperCollins»

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It's A Miracle: Real Life Inspirational Stories, Extraordinary Events and Everyday Wonders / R. Thomas — «HarperCollins»,

Richard Thomas, most famous for his portrayal of John Boy in the US television series The Waltons, presents his own selection of inspirational real-life stories of everyday miracles that have touched people's lives, from amazing acts of heroism to miraculously answered prayers.Either astonishing coincidences, answered prayers, or amazing acts of heroism, the stories in It's a Miracle range from angel encounters to extraordinary animal stories, from amazing rescues to remarkable medical recoveries – all inspirational tales to raise the spirits.With a foreword by Richard Thomas, this is a selection of his favourite stories (featured in his US television series, It's a Miracle).The stories include: a man whose nightmares end after they help him save a woman's life… a woman whose beloved dog was injured and lost during airline travel – and the woman who brought them together again… orphaned best friends, separated in childhood, who rediscover each other years later when one walks into a restaurant and sits down at the counter – next to her long-lost friend.

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IT'S A MIRACLE

REAL-LIFE INSPIRATIONAL STORIES, EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS AND EVERYDAY WONDERS

SELECTED BY

RICHARD THOMAS

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Richard Thomas asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

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INTRODUCTION

In 1998, when I was asked to host a new show on PAX TV entitled *It's a Miracle*, I said to myself, "Great idea, but will anyone really care about all of this 'good news'?"

Five years and hundreds of stories later, I have my answer; people LOVE good news, and yes, they DO care.

And I care. Every week I have gotten pleasure and spiritual sustenance from bringing these wonderful true stories to the television audience. I am very happy now to bring them to you in book form, and I hope they will touch you as much as they've touched me. I'm more convinced than ever of the abiding relevance and impact of narratives that reaffirm the essential worth and dignity of people – stories that tell about the mysterious but undeniable power of our spiritual lives. Whether these stories are about healings, separated and reunited loved ones, miraculous escapes from harm's way, or simply about people reaching out and changing each other's lives for the better, they all have the end result of affirming our shared humanity, and they all give us hope.

The world is, as they say, forever changing and forever the same. In the wake of September 11, 2001, life feels different. There is fear and anxiety, grief and anger. An imagined innocence has been lost; an imagined security has been shattered. But, in important ways, things remain the same. In the midst of disaster, people depended on and came through for each other in the enduring need for community. We are still looking for happiness and love, inner fulfillment and fellowship, as well as security and success. We still need each other, still reach out to each other, and the stories in this collection are evidence of that. One person helps another. A dream comes true. A second chance is given. The impossible comes to pass. So, no matter how dark the view may be from where we stand, we might try to remember that a miracle is always happening somewhere, and that – just as in these beautiful stories – something wonderful is always possible, for us and the people we love.

Enjoy!

– RICHARD THOMAS

ROMANTIC PROVIDENCE

FIRST LOVE

The Great Depression hit Otto Sloan's family, like so many others, hard. When his parents separated, Otto was sent to live with grandparents in Colorado. But soon, economic hardships once again forced Otto to move.

"Back when I was, oh, ten or eleven years old, my grandparents sent me to live with and work for Mrs. Rowan and her husband. So I went there to help and worked there with them. And I did that for some time," recalls Otto.

It was while living there that he met Betty Jean Hodge, the daughter of a neighboring farmer.

"My earliest recollection," says Betty Jean, "was when I'd get on the school bus, and he'd be on the bus, already there. And then he would look up at me, with a kind of smile in his eyes."

"She was a very pretty girl, I thought," says Otto. "And I wanted to speak to her then. But I didn't. I was very bashful, you might say. I never would look at her direct, into her face or anything like that. I always cast my eyes down. I still do that to this day."

As the years passed, Otto's and Betty's paths continued to cross.

"There were occasions when Otto would come down with the horse and he would round up the cattle," says Betty Jean, "and I would always beg him to let me ride the horse."

Otto wasn't sure about that, however. "I said, 'No, the horse is a one-man horse,'" recalls Otto. "I said, 'It'd be better if you didn't.'"

But Betty Jean persevered. "I had asked him and pleaded with him so much that Dad finally said, 'Otto, you might as well let her on it, because she won't give up until you do.'"

"So he was hoisting me up on the horse," says Betty Jean. "And he wasn't sure just how to go about doing that, because he was afraid he might touch me in an immodest place on my body. He was very careful of that," she remembers, laughing. "He wanted to be precise in getting me on the horse."

"So I finally ended up making a stirrup out of my hands, and had her put her foot in it," says Otto. "I raised her up that way—and the horse just flew, it seemed to me, full blast for home.

"I hollered at her, 'Drop the reins, drop the reins!' She wouldn't drop the reins," Otto says, laughing. "If she would've dropped them, the horse would've stopped."

The horse finally came to a stop at the end of the field.

"And I looked up at Betty, and you could see that there was fright in her eyes," recalls Otto.

"I kind of leaned over and he put his arms around my waist," adds Betty Jean. "And I think I was probably trembling a little bit. He said, 'It's all right, you're all right.' And then he took me back home," she laughs.

From that day on, Betty and Otto were inseparable.

"I thought our relationship at that time … he was kind of like a big brother to me. Then in 1941 we started dating. And our dating meant going to basketball games together, or roller-skating," says Betty Jean.

As their dates continued, Otto's and Betty Jean's feelings for each other deepened.

"We'd been roller-skating several times together, and a friend of mine then had a little Model A with a rumble seat in it," says Otto. "Well, Betty and I were in the back in the rumble seat, and I reached over and kissed her. I really felt that that was what was supposed to be done. And that's what I did," he chuckles.

"I'll never forget the emotions I felt when he kissed me. He held me close and kissed me so gently," says Betty Jean. "And that just stayed with me for years. I never forgot it."

But the love that was blossoming between them was suddenly interrupted by the outbreak of World War II. And like so many other young men, Otto followed the call to battle.

"The last time I saw him, he came down to our place," Betty Jean remembers. "To see him go, it felt like I'd never see him again.

"It was hard. It was hard to see him go."

"I went into the navy in July of 1941. And they shipped us out of San Diego after we finished training, to Pearl Harbor," says Otto.

It was there that Otto would come face-to-face with the horror of war. On December 7, 1941, hundreds of Japanese bombers attacked the island in two waves of destruction.

By the time the surprise attack ended two hours later, 21 ships were destroyed and over 2,400 people lay dead. Otto's division of 122 sailors did not escape unscathed.

"There were only seventy-some of us left. So I lost a lot of good friends at that time. It was quite a blow," says Otto.

The only thing that helped ease the pain was Betty Jean's letters.

"And though he wasn't much of a writer, I would write constantly because I felt it was important to keep his morale up," says Betty Jean. "I would write about incidents that happened, the funny things that happened, and I would send jokes and letters and things."

The letters kept their love alive during the lonely months at sea. And then, just before Betty Jean graduated from high school, a special package arrived.

Betty Jean recalls, laughing, "I was practically tearing it apart on my way to the house. I got to the house and opened it up, and there was a little jewelry box, and inside the box there was a string of pearls. My first reaction was that he must have thought a lot of me to get me a string of pearls," says Betty Jean. "It meant a lot to me to think that he cared that much, and I think that it was his way of trying to tell me something that he … that he just couldn't express in words."

Betty Jean was right. Otto was in love and he was ready to ask for her hand in marriage. He eventually wired her to meet him in California when he returned to the States on leave, so that they could finalize their plans.

"But then her dad said no. He said, 'I don't think you should do that,'" says Otto. "I was really upset at the time about it."

"I was very, very disappointed that I didn't get to see him then," says Betty Jean. "After that was when things began to slow down a little bit. I didn't hear quite so often from him after he went back to sea."

As the war intensified, and Otto's letters stopped arriving, Betty Jean feared the worst.

"I had thought that he had been killed, because I hadn't heard anything from him after that. So," she says, emotionally, "I felt like he was gone. I felt that way for years."

As the war in the Pacific stretched from months into years, Otto made the difficult decision to stop writing his girlfriend so that she could get on with her life. And when the letters stopped coming, Betty Jean had no choice but to face the facts.

"When I came to the realization that I would probably never see Otto again, I realized that life would have to go on, though I hadn't heard from him. And I began to date others," she says. "Then I met my husband, Clarence, and we married and had five children."

As the years passed, Betty Jean would often wonder what had happened to Otto.

"He was always there in the back of my mind, like a piece of my heart that had been tucked away and hidden for a while," she reflects.

Life continued for Betty Jean, and in June of 1995, she and Clarence celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

"The years just literally flew by, and then came the time when I lost my husband. He'd been ill for some time. And then, my thoughts went to Otto. I could not get him out of my mind, wondering if he were alive. Just wishing I could hear something," Betty Jean says.

And then, as if someone heard her prayer, Betty Jean received a letter from one of Otto's cousins, Lila, with an old photograph inside.

"It had my three sisters and me in it, and it was taken in 1938," she describes. "A grade school picture."

"I was so excited and so exhilarated when I got that, that I just had to get in touch with Lila and thank her for it," recalls Betty Jean. "And I said, 'Incidentally, have you ever heard from your cousin Otto?'"

And in reply, Cousin Lila sent her Otto's phone number.

Betty Jean called him up, saying, "Otto Sloan? This is a gal that you probably won't remember."

"And I couldn't believe it, but I recognized her voice," declares Otto. "It's Betty Jean," he said.

"How did you know who it was?" she laughed.

"I'd recognize that voice anyplace," Otto replied.

The call could not have come at a more perfect time, for Otto had also lost his wife of nearly fifty years. And he too had never forgotten his first love. Soon they were writing and talking on a daily basis, and fifty-eight years of separation quickly vanished.

"You just don't realize how many times I've wondered where you were and what you were doing. And if you were all right," Betty Jean told Otto. "You're probably looking just as young as you ever did.

"And then the talks got a little more personal," Betty Jean reveals. "We told each other our strengths and weaknesses.

"We just talked about everything there was to talk about. It was just like we were face-to-face," she laughs. "And then it became apparent that we were discussing marriage possibilities."

"It was unbelievable that we could feel so much love for each other just by talking on the phone like we had," says Otto.

"We had made definite plans just over the phone, practically. We're getting married. If anybody had been there to pronounce us man and wife, we would've accepted that," laughs Betty Jean.

In the summer of 1999, after not seeing each other for fifty-eight years, Otto and Betty Jean were reunited.

"My heart was pounding so hard that I could hardly keep it in its place," says Betty Jean, laughing. "He just took my hand and hung on to it for dear life. And I whispered to him, 'Don't ever let go of me again. Don't ever let go of me again.' And he said, 'Don't worry, I won't.'"

Otto kept his promise four weeks later when he pledged to take Betty Jean as his lawful wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, so long as they both should live.

"Betty Jean is still the little girl that I used to love, and still love," says Otto.

"He's the same as he was when he was a boy," says Betty Jean. "And I've even told him that. I said, 'You look just like you were.' When he puts his head down and looks up at me like that, I just see him all over again, sitting there on that school bus when I'd get on the bus. I probably wasn't sure at the time what that really meant, but I found out later—fifty-eight years later," she laughs.

"And we feel that our getting back together was a miracle; our lives are like a dream. It's something that you just maybe would dream of but not ever expect to happen."

She adds, laughing, "I think we're living happily ever after."

WRONG NUMBER MARRIAGE

Dana Herring and Dennis Dunbar first met in 1973 while attending high school in Los Angeles. At the time, they were just casual friends.

"After initially meeting Dana, I just felt that she had no interest in me," remembers Dennis. "So I felt that it was just something that would not be worthwhile pursuing."

"Dennis was going out with a friend of mine, and I was going out with another person," recalls Dana. "It was just not convenient."

But nine years later, Dennis and Dana met again, at the wedding of mutual friends. And this time, the chemistry between them was different.

"I thought he looked pretty handsome in his tuxedo," says Dana. "There was an attraction that night at the wedding, and we talked for a long time. We ended up pretty much staying together that whole night at the wedding. And that was it."

"We had a good time, and we just enjoyed each other's company," agrees Dennis.

Dana and Dennis began dating, and over the next few months their romance blossomed. As it became more serious, they made plans to go away together for Memorial Day weekend. But before he picked her up for their getaway, Dennis stopped by the home of his newlywed friends.

It was a decision that would change all his plans.

"This girl had come down from San Francisco," Dennis recalls, "and they wanted to set me up with her. They knew that I was going out with Dana, but they probably didn't realize how serious the relationship was at the time.

"They talked me into breaking my date with Dana," Dennis says.

Dana, understandably, was quite upset. "I was upset because we did have plans. And, you know, he called at the last minute to cancel," she says. "I was really angry at the time. I just hung up on him, and that was it."

"She didn't deserve that," says Dennis. "And I felt like an idiot. I never talked to Dana after that."

Dennis ended up marrying the woman who was his blind date that day. But after ten years together the marriage failed, and in 1997, Dennis was once again a bachelor.

At that time, Dennis owned his own pest control business, and on Labor Day 1997, he was sitting in his office, calling clients to confirm appointments for the following day.

"There was one customer in particular that I called, left a message that I'd be out tomorrow to take care of her account, left my name and my phone number like I always do, and said if there's any problem call me back," recalls Dennis. "The next day I went out to service the account, and for some weird reason, the customer had never gotten my message."

But someone else had.

"I came home from out of town, checked my messages, and one of them struck me as strange," remembers Dana, "because it was from a man, and he said, 'Hello, Terry, this is Dennis Dunbar calling from Dunbar Pest Control.' And I thought the voice sounded very familiar."

"That evening the phone rang," says Dennis, "and it turned out to be a girl who asked if this was the Dennis Dunbar who has a brother named Dan, which I do."

Dana recalls, "And I said, 'This is Dana Herring.'"

Dennis was shocked to hear from her, and asked how she got his number. "And she said, 'Well, you called me,'" he remembers. "And it hit me, Wait a second! This other customer didn't get the message I left. So I got my customer's card and I repeated the number, which had a 960 prefix. At which point Dana said, 'How funny. That's very close to mine. Mine is 906.'"

He had transposed two numbers. "What a coincidence," said Dennis.

"I was literally shaking," he recalls.

"One of the first things she said after we chitchatted a bit," Dennis remarks, "was, 'If I remember it right, didn't you stand me up?' And I was like, 'Well, but that was a long time ago. I hope you're not still mad,' "he chuckles.

"And he said, 'You do remember what happened?'" says Dana. "And I said, 'Yes, I do remember.' I said, 'You broke a date with me, and then you married her,'" she laughs.

Dennis told her about his divorce, and Dana revealed to him that she'd never gotten married.

"So we talked a little bit longer, and I was saying how weird this was," Dennis says. "She said, 'Well, if you like, you can give me a call sometime, and maybe we can get together.'" Dennis told her he'd love to, and that was the end of that conversation.

"When he called me the next day at my office, between ten and eleven in the morning, and my secretary said, 'Dennis Dunbar is on the phone,' I was shocked," says Dana. "I was like, Well, gosh, he's already calling? We set a date for Friday night, and he showed up with flowers, and we sat and talked for about four hours when we were supposed to go out to dinner."

"I haven't talked to somebody like the way I talk to Dana for years," declares Dennis. "It just really felt good. It was completely different than any relationship I had ever been in…. It felt like it was meant to be."

"We feel that we were brought together for a special reason," Dana proclaims.

And thirteen months later, Dennis and Dana became husband and wife. For them, their marriage is nothing less than a miracle.

"The miracle is how the whole thing happened," says Dana. "How he happened to transpose that one number and reach me of all people, out often million people in Los Angeles."

"Timing was everything in this, because the area codes had already changed out there," says Dennis. "If I had dialed that number two months later, I don't think I ever would have run across Dana again."

"I think I'm probably the happiest I've ever been in my entire life right now. I am just glowing," says Dana.

"It's heaven," agrees Dennis. "You know, this is the person that I'm going to be with for the rest of my life, and I'm looking forward to it."

ACTING UPON FATE

From the time she was a young girl growing up in Oklahoma, Cyndi Steele was stagestruck. But it wasn't only the lights and costumes that fascinated her. She had a mad crush on one of the local actors, nineteen-year-old Chris Harrod.

"She was always there," recalls Chris. "She had these little glasses on and little braces. She was just, really cute, and I remember thinking, What a cute kid."

In 1992, Cyndi left Oklahoma for New York City to pursue her dream of acting, and it paid off when she landed a role in a stage production of *Bye Bye Birdie*.

"It was kinda cool to get a chorus thing right off," Cyndi says. "'Cause I didn't do that kinda work. And I thought, All I can do is get older and do the character roles, so this was great."

But during a preview performance, a freak accident changed all her plans.

"We were just standing in the wings," recounts Cyndi, "waiting to go on for bows, and a friend in the show just flips his head back, and it just knocked me right above my right eye. Instead of falling body first, I fell head first. The back of my head stopped my fall."

Cyndi was knocked unconscious. None of the actors could revive her. When she finally regained consciousness, she was in a hospital.

Cyndi says, "A nurse came up to me, and she said that I had fallen and hit my head. And I said, 'Where?' She said, 'At work. You were doing a show.' And she said, 'Your friends are out there.' She opened the door, and they're just waving at me enthusiastically … and I have no idea who they are.

"So I came back from the hospital," Cyndi continues. "I saw there were photos of my family, and I didn't know exactly who everybody was…. I knew my name was Cyndi Steele, but that didn't make any sense to me. Nothing made any sense."

Cyndi was suffering from severe amnesia brought on by blunt head trauma and a concussion. Unable to remember the simplest things, she began staying at home, alone, isolated from an unfamiliar world.

"I found some journals, and I thought they would help me piece things together. They were disjointed, but it helped. There were still so many gaps," Cyndi explains. "And I didn't want to meet people. It was too frustrating."

A worried friend finally convinced Cyndi to join her for a night out. As they sat watching a movie, Cyndi noticed that something about the man sitting next to her seemed familiar.

"And I just kinda looked at him," remembers Cyndi, "and I said, 'Did I know you before?' And he was like, 'Yeah, I'm Chris Harrod.'"

"We were watching the movie, having a great time," Chris adds, "and the whole time, I'm thinking, This is strange…. I'm starting to be attracted to somebody who I've known since they were twelve. Who doesn't remember who I am. This is really weird."

A few days later, Chris spent an evening with Cyndi talking about his acting career and how it had brought him to New York. But he didn't bring up the past. As far as Cyndi knew, she was meeting him for the first time. Chris was very moved by how hard she tried to act like nothing was wrong.

"Now, I just thought that she was really brave and strong, and I thought, I'm gonna sit here as long as she'll let me. And then we were just together, we were inseparable," says Chris.

A few weeks later, Cyndi returned to Oklahoma, hoping her parents could help fill in the gaps in her life.

"And I said, 'I'm seeing this guy. His name is Chris Harrod,'" recalls Cyndi. "And they just about choked, because the psychiatrist told them, 'Don't bring up her past. Just be open to what she's doing—as hard as that will be for you.'"

And so Cyndi's parents kept quiet. Then one afternoon, while paging through a scrapbook, she found pictures of the man she'd left behind in New York.

"The more I dig, I find picture after picture of Chris," exclaims Cyndi. "Cutouts with 'I love you' or 'You're so cute' written on them. And I'm just laughing, and when I open the door, my parents are laughing, 'cause they were dying to tell me this forever."

They told her how she used to hang around the community theater, watching her dad perform … and always hoping to get a glimpse of Chris. The story jogged her memory, and suddenly she remembered how she'd once told her parents that, one day, she would marry Chris Harrod.

"It was just like something clicked. I just went to the phone and called him, and I was like, 'I was totally in love with you,'" Cyndi recounts.

Chris adds, "And I thought, This is fate. This is what it is, this is fate. I mean, you don't just meet somebody and then have this happen and not automatically think that there's something special going on here."

Chris's prediction came true on December 22, 1995. And today, the happy couple has added another little miracle to their life: their son, Dalton. Even though Cyndi has recovered only thirty percent of her long-term memory, she believes that she has enough good memories to last her a lifetime.

"The few I have," confirms Cyndi, "I'll treasure them. I wouldn't change it. Something good came out of that accident."

MIRACLE REUNION

When Elsa Amador was twelve years old and living in Puerto Rico, she met a young boy who was the son of Roberto Clemente, the legendary baseball player who had been tragically killed in a plane crash. Elsa and Roberto junior instantly felt a strong attraction to each other.

"We told each other we loved each other every day…. I mean, every day, like twenty-five times a day," says Elsa.

In spite of their tender age, Roberto and Elsa believed they would spend their lives together. But a tragic event tore them apart. Elsa's father was the innocent victim of a botched robbery attempt. And now, his family was in extreme danger.

Elsa's mother had identified the man who killed her husband and was receiving death threats. The FBI moved in to take control of the situation. Elsa had only enough time to briefly call Roberto before she and her family were rushed out of the country, into the Witness Protection Program.

"I explained to him that we had to leave," Elsa recounts. "Unfortunately, I couldn't tell him where we were going. I just kept telling him how much I cared for him and not to blame me for what I was going to do…. It was out of my control."

Elsa spent the next few years moving around the United States. But she never forgot her childhood sweetheart.

"I thought about him all the time," Elsa admits. "I would sometimes close my eyes and see an image of him. He was really thin and tall and just smiling all the time. As time went on, I sort of assumed he had his own life. I just imagined him settled and married…."

In November of 1996, Elsa's mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She had always felt responsible for separating her daughter from her childhood sweetheart. On her deathbed in the hospital, she made a startling request, urging Elsa to find her lost love.

"Find Roberto," Elsa's mother told her. "He's the man for you."

"So I asked, 'How am I going to find him?' And she said, 'You should find him.' And so I kind of brushed it off," says Elsa.

And then, a few months after her mother's death, Elsa had a sudden, unexplainable urge to attend a Yankees baseball game.

"It was as if something was just pushing me," describes Elsa.

Whatever was pushing Elsa to the stadium, got her there an hour early that day—just in time for a pre-game event. The Yankees were celebrating Hispanic Heritage Day, and there in center field, accepting an award for his father, was Elsa's long lost love—Roberto Clemente, Jr.

"It was really strange," Elsa recalls with wonder. "I thought, What is he doing there? I haven't seen him for all of these years and all of a sudden I see him at the park."

After the ceremony, Roberto disappeared from the field. Elsa spent the next nine innings of the game desperately trying to locate him, but without success. The boy she had never forgotten … the man her mother begged her to find … was closer than he'd ever been in over fifteen years, and still he was out of reach. Finally, a security guard gave her a possible lead, the phone number of a local sports cafe. Elsa called and left a message, and the next day Roberto returned the call and arranged to meet again the woman he had been separated from so many years ago.

"I felt like I had just seen her yesterday," declares Roberto. "Like I had just been with her in school the day before. And the feelings that I had for Elsa were so strong. My friends, everybody, knew about Elsa. It was something that I just … I kept her alive in my heart."

On Valentine's Day, 1998, Roberto and Elsa made their reunion complete when they married in New York City. Today, they still marvel over how powers far beyond their own made the dying wish of Elsa's mother come true.

"I truly believe that our parents had a meeting in heaven and said, 'Wait a second … let's do something here,'" Roberto says. "I believe that it was meant to be, and I truly believe that it was a time where our parents' souls got together and said, 'Let's just make our two children happy.'"

For Roberto and Elsa, a tragic separation has ended happily with a miraculous second chance.

THE SPIRIT OF STRENGTH

JUMPING LIFE'S HURDLES

As a collegiate athlete, John Register was at the top of his form. He ran on four championship teams at the University of Arkansas and held three all-American titles in track-and-field.

"I had a great year in 1987, but in 1988 I really put my athletic career on hold to get my degree and get out of school. So my track-and-field career suffered a little bit during that time."

After graduation, John married his childhood sweetheart, Alice Johnson, and they soon became the proud parents of a son, John Register, Jr. But it was the dream of Olympic gold that led John to the U.S. Army and their world-class athlete training program. His road to the Olympics, however, would soon take an unexpected detour.

"I got called up to serve in the Gulf War. And so I went and served with the 5th and 27th Field Artillery in Operation Desert Storm."

Seven months later, John returned from the war and resumed his quest for the Olympic gold. But with only limited training time available, he failed to make the 1992 team.

"I wasn't dejected by that at all, and I started calculating almost immediately. I said, If I can just improve three places each year, I can be on that team in 1996."

So he intensified his training, and his performance steadily improved. It seemed his dream would become a reality … until the end of one fateful training session.

"I decided to take one more pass down the track before shutting it down. I was just too tired to save my energy for the next day."

He cleared each of the hurdles with room to spare, until suddenly he fell short.

"I knew it was going to be difficult to make the thirteen steps for the next hurdle, but I got across it, and when I landed my leg popped out of the socket. I saw that my left leg was crossed over my right leg with my foot pointing back toward my face. And I just turned away from it. I couldn't look at it anymore. Then the pain hit. It was tremendous. I felt like the whole leg was just on fire, was just exploding."

John was taken to the Wesley Medical Center in Wichita, Kansas. Alice and John junior rushed to his side.

Alice remembers, "When I walked in I didn't see my husband. I saw a man, but he didn't look like John.… It was as if every muscle from head to toe were hurting."

Doctors discovered that John's popliteal artery had been severed, preventing blood from circulating to his lower leg. Gangrene had set in, forcing them to remove the infected muscle tissue from his calf, but John's prognosis was bleak.

Alice says, "The doctor said, 'You can keep your leg and you will walk with severe pain and a limp for the rest of your life, or we can amputate your leg and you can rebuild your life. It's not a decision I need right now, but we're gonna need it soon.'"

John says, "I knew that it had to come off. I just knew that it had to be done. The answer was clear. Let's get rid of the pain, and then we can deal with the other stuff later. I could not see myself living with either a wheelchair or a walker and being in pain. Especially the pain that I was feeling at that point in my life."

Once again John was taken into surgery, this time to amputate his leg above the knee.

"About three days after the amputation," Alice remembers, "I asked him if he was strong enough to get up and if he would like to go outside."

"I said, 'Well, just park the wheelchair right here and I'll just watch you all playing on the swings,'" says John. "And when I saw that I could not get out of that chair and go over with John junior to the swing and the slide, I actually understood what it meant to be different—to be a changed individual. And I think that's when the limitations started piling on me. I think I started to realize that I wasn't going to the Olympic trials. This dream was over for me. I would never run again."

"I heard John just crying," remembers Alice. "Just crying. So I walked back over and John junior walked over and we just hugged him. And I think at that moment John really realized that his leg was gone."

Having accepted his loss, John focused on rebuilding his life, attacking his therapy with the same dedication that had made him a world-class athlete.

John says, "In my mind, I was ready to start the recovery process. And I didn't really know what to expect at that point. But I knew that whatever I had to do, I had to get strong again."

Determined to strengthen his body, John began swimming. His competitive instincts soon took over. One year after his accident, John made the U.S. swim team and competed in the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta.

John remembers, "That's where I think the idea was sparked in my head to come back to the sport of my first love, track-and-field."

John immediately started training to run in the 2000 Sydney Paralympic Games. His results, however, were not encouraging.

"I'd go out there and strap the leg on and run down the track. I was trying to get the rhythm and it just wasn't coming."

Alice remembers, "After a run, the skin would be gone on the inner part of his leg. And he would have large sores on it."

John says, "And I said, 'Well, maybe I can't do this.' The doubt started creeping in."

But Alice and John made a pact that would help John get back out on the track.

Alice says, "I was learning to rollerblade and I had severely twisted my ankle. And I said, 'I'm not getting back on another rollerblade.'"

Alice agreed to try rollerblading again if John would try running 100 meters.

John remembers, "She used the rollerblades to show me that if she could go back to it even though she was so scared of them, then I could get up there and get on my leg and run again as well."

Alice says, "So we did it together. I rollerbladed the 100 and he ran for 100. And at that point I was excited. I could see his joy in it again."

A few days later, John ran his first competitive race since losing his leg.

"It was the scariest thing I had ever done. I mean, I had no control. I saw the backs of almost every athlete out-there. And I was just fighting to stay upright, to stay balanced and not to fall, but at the same time, when I crossed that line I said to myself, You know, you just did it. You just ran against the best of the world here."

Two weeks later, John qualified for the Disabled World Championships in the 100 meters and the long jump. Still, he knew he could do better.

"The leg was whipping around and it was not working with my body. I was actually fighting it. When I ran, I was landing on the top portion of the leg. And that was cutting into the inside groin area. So every time I landed, the pain was so bad that I felt like I was on fire."

But someone was watching who would change John's life forever: a prosthetic designer named Tom Guth.

Tom says, "His speed was incredible, fantastic, but his leg was just whipping to the side and going in all directions. And I thought, What a shame. This man has so much power, so much speed. If we could straighten his leg out and get him a good fit, he could probably be a gold medal winner."

Using advanced technology at the RGP Prosthetic Research Center in San Diego, Tom designed a new state-of-the-art running-and-jumping prosthetic for John.

"The results were just phenomenal," John remembers. "Two seconds had just come off of my time. And I felt my body come back to me again. It was an incredible feeling and I knew I was going to make the U.S. team for the Paralympic Games, so I could compete in Sydney, Australia."

The first step was the qualifying trials.

John says, "I saw myself on that runway and the competitive spirit just came back. I thought, You know what to do, you've been in this position many times before, and you can do it."

And he did.

John's Olympic dreams had come true. In spite of all the suffering and hardship, he was competing once again.

"It was a dream come true," John says. "And even though I'm not on the track as an able-bodied athlete, having the experience of playing at the Games is better. It's been really fantastic to understand that you can push your body to another level."

John posted a personal best in every event he competed in, winning a silver medal in the long jump and placing fifth in the 100- and 200-meter races.

Alice reflects, "I think what people can learn from John's journey is that there is nothing that you can't do. If you have determination, you can succeed at whatever you put your mind to."

A FATHER'S JOURNEY

Ever since he was a young boy, Ron Greenfield dreamed of flying.

"My mom told me that from the time I could walk and talk, all I ever talked about was becoming a pilot," says Ron.

Ron's love of aeronautics grew stronger over the years. But it wasn't until he was seventeen that his dream finally came true.

It was 1968, and the Vietnam War was in full swing. Ron enlisted, went through flight school, and began piloting the new Cobra Attack helicopter over the jungles of Vietnam.

"I was flying what we called mortar patrol," explains Ron. "Mortar patrol is where we keep aircraft up all the time, waiting for either the North Vietnamese Army or the Vietcong to make mortar attacks on the U.S. troops. Once they'd fire the mortar, you could pinpoint it. And then you could quickly roll in, and fire rockets on that spot."

On March 5, 1969, Ron was on a reconnaissance mission when his Cobra was hit by enemy gunfire. The helicopter was badly damaged, and began a steep dive into the jungle below.

"Apparently they hit my flight controls, because I couldn't pull out of the dive," says Ron. "We probably hit the trees at 200 or 250 miles an hour."

"It looked like the jungle just opened up, we went into it, and it closed up," remarks Ron. "You couldn't even tell where we went in."

The Cobra literally came apart in the crash, with only the cockpit remaining intact. Badly injured and bleeding, Ron managed to crawl out of the aircraft, but the excruciating pain made it impossible for him to move any farther. Ultimately, he passed out.

Moments later, Ron's copilot, Terry McDonald, regained consciousness. Dazed and disoriented, Terry staggered toward a clearing in the trees to try to get his bearings. What happened next was a soldier's worst night-mare—the enemy lay in wait, and Terry was captured. Tragically, he would never be heard from again.

Back at the wreckage, however, Ron remained unconscious. In their haste, the enemy soldiers mistakenly left him for dead.

When he finally awoke, hours later, Ron was confused and unsure of where he was. "You know how in the movies, they say, 'Where am I?' That's just how it was." Slowly, he discovered the extent of his injuries. "My flight helmet was shattered, which means I hit my head pretty hard," he comments, "and I felt a real sharp pain in my left leg. I looked down, and the foot was laying flat, even though my leg was straight. When I moved it, the foot flopped all the way over. I could see that half of my boot was gone, that I was bleeding quite a bit. I knew I had to stop this bleeding or I was going to die."

Weak, immobile, and losing more and more blood, Ron knew that it was only a matter of time before he would die or the enemy would return. Summoning up his remaining strength, Ron recalls, "I crawled over to some trees not far from the wreckage. And I put both legs up in the air, against the tree. And that's how I spent the night."

"When I awoke, it was morning. It had been raining, and I remember trying to catch some raindrops with my mouth, 'cause I was thirsty," says Ron. "I began trying to think about how I was gonna get out of there."

The situation seemed hopeless. Three search-and-rescue missions for the two missing pilots had already failed. One helicopter had been shot down, killing three soldiers. A second was badly damaged, and a third was ambushed when it landed.

Unable to walk, Ron had no choice but to wait and pray. He desperately needed a miracle. A few hours later, his prayers were answered when a fourth army helicopter finally spotted him.

"The door gunner had seen a piece of wreckage, and that's what made them turn around," explains Ron. "They sent a medic down on a cable. He hooked me up to a harness, and they hauled me out of there."

The next thing Ron knew, he was waking up in a MASH-unit field hospital. But his ordeal was far from over.

"It was three days before I gained consciousness. And they did emergency surgery on me." Doctors did their best to try and save Ron's leg, but as he tells it, "They told me later they didn't know if I was gonna make it."

Ron was shipped to Japan, where doctors performed additional surgery. But the prognosis wasn't good. Upon his return to the States, Ron would face amputation below the knee.

"I had not realized how seriously I was injured," reveals Ron. "I saw my flying career going away."

When Ron was finally returned home, his doctors felt they could save his leg. But it wouldn't come without a price—the damaged limb had contracted an incurable bone infection, which gave Ron constant pain, and which got progressively worse. "A lot of time was spent on crutches," Ron says.

Four years and sixteen painful surgeries later, Ron had had enough. He was transferred to a military hospital in Denver, Colorado, where, two days later, his foot and lower calf were amputated. The results were immediate and miraculous.

"By 10:00 A.M. I wanted to get out of bed. And they said, 'No, you gotta stay in bed, nobody gets out of bed after an amputation.' I said, 'I feel fine.' The next day I was out of my bed and walking on crutches around the hospital, with absolutely no pain. It was like this huge burden had been lifted," recalls Ron.

Ron's convalescence was amazing. He was fitted with an artificial limb and, as always, he was determined to defy the odds.

"They'd always have to chase me out of therapy," Ron remembers. "I'd get down there and I would spend hours. I was determined I was gonna be a good walker."

Ron became more than just a good walker, however. Soon, he was playing baseball, learning to ski, and running 10K races.

"The attitude I developed," he says, "was that the artificial leg was now a part of me."

Eventually, Ron also came to terms with the fact that his flying career was over. But he was still struggling with one unanswered question.

"I was always asking God, you know, 'Why me? Why did you take my leg?'"

Then in 1992, while on a business trip, Ron came across a newspaper article that helped answer that question. The article described three-year-old Russian twins who'd been born with gangrene in their legs. Both boys had been turned over to an orphanage at infancy—after their legs had been amputated.

"It struck me," Ron says, "that with all I'd been through over the past couple of decades, I could do something for these two kids that somebody with two good legs couldn't, because I know what they can do and what they can't do.

"I got on the phone to my wife and I pleaded with her that we should adopt these kids," recalls Ron. Next, he contacted the Cradle of Hope, an adoption agency in Washington, D.C., and convinced them that they needed to look no further to place the Russian twins.

"I told everyone that even if it takes more medical care than I thought or if it takes more mental care than I thought, I was gonna bring these boys back and give them an opportunity," declared Ron.

That August, Ron and his wife boarded a plane to Moscow to bring the boys home.

"I went to the orphanage there to see them," remembers Ron, "and they were sitting in a double stroller. And the only way to describe it is that they were even more beautiful than even I expected.

"On the plane back, I looked down at these two little guys as they were sleeping, and it just hit me like a lightning bolt, you know … that *that's* the purpose. *That's* the purpose that God had. *That's*

why I lost my leg," says Ron. "Because if I hadn't, I probably wouldn't have pursued those two little boys. They wouldn't have jumped out at me like they did."

Ron finally felt that he'd found a reason for all of his suffering. He knew that through his own experience, he could give his sons the confidence to rise above their disabilities.

"They tell me often that they wish they could have real legs," Ron admits. "And when they tell me that, I tell them, well, you know, we're dealt with what we're dealt with, and we just have to make the most of it."

Today the boys, Max and Andy, are fourteen, and they both realize what a special gift their father has given them.

Says Andy, "Dad adopted us because he felt like he can help us. Because, if you have problems, he'll know what to do."

"My dad's my favorite person in the world because he has an artificial leg like I do, and he loves me a lot," adds Max.

That love has made it possible for Max and Andy Greenfield to have the advantage of a full and active life.

"It doesn't keep me from doing what I want to do," says Andy. "I can ride my skateboard, or bike, and sometimes I ride my rollerblades. And I go swimming."

As Ron looks back on his experience, he is awed by the miracles that have touched his life.

"It's been a multitude of miracles," he says. "Surviving the crash, surviving the Vietnamese, and then, I think the final miracle is Andy and Max.

"God put me in the right place at the right time to do another miracle."

BLIND AMBITION

In early 1993, Lisa Fittipaldi was the picture of success. She had a loving husband, a thriving career, and a very busy schedule.

"At the time," says Lisa, "I was working forty or fifty hours a week as a professional, and driving to work, and going grocery shopping, and doing the normal things that we all do."

And then, in March, Lisa's life was suddenly thrown out of focus.

"I was driving down 1–35," Lisa recounts, "and there was a semi in front of me, and all of a sudden, the semi disappeared."

For one terrifying moment, Lisa went completely blind. She dismissed the incident, but a few weeks later, it happened again. Deeply shaken, she called her husband, A1.

"She explained the situation to me," recalls A1, "that she was driving, and all of a sudden her vision just blacked out, and she almost hit a truck."

Lisa refused to get back behind the wheel, and during the next month, the episodes became more frequent.

"I thought I was having a brain aneurysm, because one minute I would see something, and the next minute I wouldn't see it," Lisa says. "Then the colors would start fading away, and everything became a milky color, like it had a handkerchief over it."

But her doctors could not pinpoint the exact cause of the problem.

Dr. Michael Nacol explains, "Initially, when she was seen by her eye doctor, she started out with a corneal irregularity that made her vision distorted. Not only did she have hazy vision but her vision field was decreased."

Lisa underwent several surgeries to cure her condition, but her eyesight continued to deteriorate. And slowly, her world disappeared into complete darkness.

"It was like a grey-black obscurity," describes Lisa. "Even talking about it makes my stomach go into knots. It is incredibly hard to even describe the kind of panic you have."

Lisa was eventually diagnosed with a rare form of vasculitis, a disease that was attacking the nerves in her eyes, and that would leave her legally and permanently blind.

"The first thought I had was," says Lisa, "my life is over. Simple as that. You can't see, what can you possibly do? Seventy percent of everything you do is done with your eyes first, whether you notice it or not."

"She broke down into tears," A1 remembers, "and pretty much knew that in a very short period of time, her world as she knew it was gonna go away. And that's a hard thing to take."

Lisa tried desperately to adjust to a life in the shadows. But even the simplest activities had become an enormous challenge.

"After a while," admits Lisa, "you feel like it's just not worth the effort. The world is dark, let's just stay in the bedroom because the space is comfortable, and you know where you are, and why move?"

Adds A1, "She didn't want to have to fend for herself. It was like, hang up a towel for me, or get me this, or get me that. I think I started getting a little angry at having to do for her when I knew she could care for herself."

And then, in May of 1995, Lisa received a phone call from a friend asking her to join her at a two-week painting seminar in Louisiana.

"She said, 'There's a man out there, and he's supposed to be very motivational,'" recalls Lisa. "'And you just sleep in a dormitory and you get away from A1, 'cause you've been with him day and night now for a year.' And I said, Okay, I can do this."

"The friend never showed up," A1 continues. "So Lisa, rather than canceling the class, wound up saying, 'Would you drive me to Louisiana?'"

Lisa attended the seminar on her own, and the two weeks away helped boost her confidence. Although some of her classmates expressed skepticism about a blind person's ability to paint, Lisa became determined to prove them wrong.

"I said, Well, why not?" recounts Lisa. "Why can't I do this? If I learned how to get dressed again, and I learned how to eat with a knife and fork again, why can't I paint?"

"Can darks be luminous, bright, and powerful all at the same time? Yes," says Al.

With Al's help, Lisa began absorbing everything there was to know about painting.

"We went through hundreds of volumes of art books, magazines, catalogs," Al says.

"That's when I realized how difficult it was to paint if you can't see what you're doing," explains Lisa. "You can't verify in front of you what you've painted. And that's when I started to teach myself how to *feel* if a paint pigment and watercolor was yellow, versus blue, versus red."

Once Lisa memorized the various color formulas, she perfected a technique called "mental mapping," which helped her find where she was on the canvas. Soon, Lisa was creating beautiful life scenes in intricate detail. And before long, she was displaying and selling her work at art fairs around the country. Lisa's mysterious ability shocked everyone, including her close friend, Claudia Lane.

"I couldn't fathom how she could paint with such depth and detail," says Claudia. "I couldn't even speak. I didn't know what to say at that point because it was so amazing. It was like watching a miracle."

In the summer of 1999, Lisa caught the attention of Jason Siegel, a gallery owner from Austin, Texas.

"One day I received a packet in the mail," recalls Jason. "I get packets from artists asking me to review their work and consider representing them. And I was very intrigued with the work, you know, very intrigued that she was blind and that she could paint realism."

Jason arranged to meet Lisa for lunch and quickly agreed to represent her. The very next day, he sold one of her paintings.

"When I would show people these paintings," says Jason, "I'd say, 'What do you think of this painting?' And they'd say, 'Oh, that's a beautiful painting. I really like it.' And I'd say, 'Well, what would you say if I told you this artist happens to be blind?' And they'd just be blown away by that and want to know the rest of the story."

Seven years after her odyssey began, Lisa has become a full-time artist, painting seven hours a day, seven days a week in her studio, "Blind Ambition," and selling her work through one of the largest galleries in the country. Her incredible transformation amazes even those closest to her.

"It blows you away," Jason says, "that somebody who can't even see can paint these most amazing paintings, and get these compositions, and balance—all these things other artists are trying to achieve in their paintings."

"How she does this is a miracle," adds Claudia. "She sketches it out in pencil. She puts the color on and she gets this incredible piece of art that is totally unexplainable."

A1 agrees, "I'm not really sure there is an explanation as to how someone is given a gift. What Lisa has given to me, and what I know she has given to others, is hope for the future. A feeling that life is wonderful and that you should live every moment to the fullest because you never know what's going to happen."

"I'm just very fortunate," concludes Lisa. "There's always been an angel on my shoulder—or a leprechaun, probably, knowing me. One day I would like to be noted as a good painter, a good artist. That's what I'm striving for."

ALL GOD'S CREATURES

BORIS AND THE BIG APPLE

In 1996, Barbara Listenik was living in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, with her constant companion Boris, a beautiful mixed-breed boxer.

"I got Boris when he was two years old. He's the most lovable dog in the whole wide world. He knows when I'm happy. He knows when I'm sad. He's a very big part of my life. I don't have children and I'm not married, so he's like my child. He's my best friend," Barbara says.

Just before Christmas, Barbara made arrangements to move to Brooklyn, New York. She was renting a moving van, but decided to send Boris via airfreight to spare him the long drive.

"Boris had never flown before, so I was very worried for him. I did everything that I thought was necessary to get him there safely. I did everything the airline recommended as well."

That included removing Boris's identification collar so it wouldn't get snagged during the flight. Barbara gave Boris one last hug and lured him into the crate with his favorite toy bunny. She was worried for her best friend's comfort but excited to start her new life with him in Brooklyn.

"My thoughts when Boris was in the air were, Please, please, let him get there safely."

But when she arrived at LaGuardia Airport to pick him up, her fears became reality.

"The airport staff took me in back and they said, 'Miss, there's a little bit of a problem. There was an accident.' Then the supervisor walks up to a bloody, crunched-up, empty carrier. I knew that they must have dropped him or driven something into him. And my immediate thought was, Oh, my God, is he alive or dead?"

The supervisor told her that Boris had been seen running around on the tarmac and that they had their cargo crew personnel chasing him right then.

"Well," said Barbara, "he's going to keep running. You're never going to get him. He's scared to death. Just let me go out there—one whistle and he'll come running to me."

The supervisor insisted that they had the situation under control. And for the next two hours, Barbara waited anxiously for some word of her injured dog. When the supervisor finally came back out, he had bad news—Boris had evaded the cargo crew and crossed the fence from the tarmac onto the highway. He had last been seen running over the overpass into Corona, Queens.

"You idiots!" screamed Barbara. She ran from the airport in tears and jumped in the car. Alone and heartbroken in a strange city, she drove in circles, searching for Boris. He was lost somewhere off the eastern edge of Manhattan and if Barbara didn't locate him quickly, he could end up anywhere in New York City.

"Boris had never been in the noisy streets. He'd never been in New York City. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. At first I was looking for his body, and then some kid said he saw this dog that was tan-and-white, running like a bullet. That gave me hope. I said to myself, He's alive. He's alive."

Alive but lost in one of the largest cities in the world.

"I searched all night in the rain and the cold, just walking up and down the streets, calling his name. And on Christmas Eve, I really realized how impossible the situation was. Here I was, this tiny little speck of dust in this big city looking for a lost dog. I've never felt so alone in my entire life. I didn't know what to do. I just kept calling for him, 'Boris, I know you're out there. Please come home.'"

On Christmas morning, Barbara returned to the airport.

"I went to the supervisor and said, 'Okay, we have a situation. What are we gonna do about this? You lost my dog.' And the supervisor says, 'Yes, miss, I'm filling out the form now.' And he just reached under the desk and pulled out a baggage-claim form and said, 'This is all we can do.' 'This is a baggage-claim form,' I said. 'Are you telling me my dog is baggage?' I almost collapsed. My dog is considered baggage! I never knew in a million years that animals were considered luggage, and that

the law hasn't been changed since 1929. I said, 'This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard in my entire life! My dog is not a piece of luggage. He's my baby. He's like my child.'"

The supervisor just shrugged and apologized again. Immediately, Barbara ran home and went through her boxes, still unpacked, to find pictures of Boris. She pulled out her fax machine and started running off flyers. She spent the rest of Christmas Day putting up missing-dog posters throughout Corona, Queens.

That night, Barbara returned home even more exhausted and depressed. How could she possibly celebrate under the circumstances? Wiping away tears, she started decorating her tree. She swore to herself, I am not going to light this tree until he's found. And I'm going to keep this tree until he sits next to it with me.

Barbara realized that the job was too big for just one person, so she tried a different approach.

"I asked myself what the best way was to get the word out that Boris was lost, and I said, Okay, let me call the newspaper."

She found a sympathetic ear in *New York Post* reporter Laura Italiano, who found herself unexpectedly touched by Barbara's story.

"Barbara called the *New York Post* absolutely frantic. Typically, we're busy chasing murderers, political corruption. It took a special kind of story to get us to care about a little lost dog. And Barbara was the one who made that happen for us. The *Post* absolutely loved the story. It is a classic tabloid story. You have a clear-cut villain, this bungling airline, and a very sympathetic victim—a poor dog who had been lost. I think everyone's heart went out to Barbara. This is a woman who doesn't know New York City, knew no one in town, and she had this tremendous responsibility to find an animal in completely unfamiliar surroundings. You had to feel for her; you had to worry about her," Laura says.

"I couldn't believe how many people responded," Barbara marveled. "It touched so many people's hearts."

One of those hearts belonged to Paula Forester, a professional psychic who saw Boris's picture on a television news program. Paula was amazed at her reaction to the picture. "They did a close-up on his eyes, and *pow*. There was a psychic connection. I have worked psychically with animals before, but I have never felt such a strong and urgent connection to anything before that point."

Paula immediately contacted Barbara.

"She told me that she was a psychic and that she was getting strong feelings from Boris. They were communicating. My first reaction was, Hey, lady, if you're communicating with my dog, tell him to come home! She told me that she didn't want a reward, she didn't want pay, she just wanted to get Boris back to me. I didn't believe in that hocus-pocus-type stuff, but I just wanted my baby home. I wasn't going to turn away anyone volunteering to help find him."

Paula turned out to be more than just a volunteer. She was a force to be reckoned with.

"She was pushing me, and I thought I was the aggressive one. She told me, 'Come on, let's go, you can do it, you can do it. Keep going, keep going.' She was really doing the legwork, really going out there getting the flyers out."

"I knew Boris was alive," Paula said. "And I knew he was desperate to find Barbara again. He was very confused and very, very sad. Every time I linked in psychically to Boris, the sadness, confusion, and heartache were overwhelming."

"We went from neighborhood to neighborhood. We just kept looking every night, in the cold. We just never stopped," Barbara said.

"What really kept me going was this little dog that had a really big psychic voice that said, 'Please help me,'" Paula said.

But after days of searching, Barbara's hopes began to fade.

Barbara remembered, "New Year's had come and gone, and it was so cold. With the wind-chill factor it was 25 below zero outside. All I could do was cry, I couldn't imagine how Boris was surviving."

Meanwhile, Barbara's friends and family were worried sick about her and urged her to accept reality and get on with her life. But Barbara wouldn't give up.

"Some people told me, 'Oh, it's only a dog,'" Barbara recalled. "You know, get over it, get another one. And I told them, 'You don't understand. There is no closure. I can't live my life knowing that he's out there, he's cold, he's hungry, he's starving.' I said, 'I'm not gonna give up on him.'"

And the media was standing by Barbara's decision.

Laura Italiano says, "We started running a story a week in the *Post*, and Barbara kept us well-fed with updates. She felt that if the newspaper kept up a steady drumbeat to search for this dog, that public attention wouldn't just die down. And he wouldn't die out there, unmourned, unsearched for."

But all the publicity only produced more false leads. The phone rang around the clock with sightings of strays from people anxious to help, but all turned out to be dead ends. Barbara was completely physically and emotionally exhausted. She didn't know how much longer she could continue.

Luckily, she had Paula Forester to help keep her spirits up. "Her energy just kept me going," she said, "and really it was a godsend that she did come along."

Paula said, "The worst thing you can do is get discouraged. I just knew he was out there. I told Barbara not to give up. I don't care if it takes two months; I don't care if it takes three months. The dog is coming home. Alive."

Several weeks later, despite all of Laura Italiano's best efforts, the publicity and the media attention hadn't produced a single solid lead. But a strange recurring dream was about to change the parameters of the search.

Paula tossed and turned for hours every night, dreaming of Boris. She said, "I would get images of Boris sleeping in tires, of him having a bloody foot, starving and very cold. I knew that I was picking up what the dog was feeling. Boris was freezing and desperate."

The dream eventually led Paula to an automotive shop in Queens.

"I must have driven by this one auto repair place a hundred times. I actually went up and approached one of the workers there, asking about a stray. The man was so busy, he really kind of brushed me off."

It seemed like just another dead end. Unfortunately, at this point, the media was also beginning to question its involvement in the search. Even the indomitable Laura was giving up hope. "Maybe we were doing the wrong thing keeping this story going, because the more time that passed, the less likely it was that there would be a happy ending."

Barbara had to make a tough decision. "I didn't know whether to keep going on with this endless search or get on with my life. It was really getting to the point where reality started checking in with me. But Paula said to me, 'Barbara, if you give up, this dog's going to give up and die. The only reason he's staying alive is because he knows you're out there looking for him.'"

After weeks and weeks of searching, Paula received a tip on yet another sighting of Boris. Paula received a call at her apartment from a stranger in Queens, a man who said, "I think I have the dog that's in the flyer. There's been a stray dog living in this garbage-filled abandoned lot next to my house. And sometimes we throw leftovers over the fence because we feel sorry for him. It kind of looks like the dog in the picture."

The call brought Paula back to a familiar location. The man's apartment was next door to the automotive shop she'd visited days before. The man had brought the dog into the apartment. Paula stood in his apartment, looked at the dog, looked at the picture, then looked at the dog again. "His eyes were soulless, they were dead. He was filthy. He was a different color. He had a slash in his foot, almost all the way through. I walked up to him and said, 'Boris, is that you?' And then one ear went up and one ear went down. And I said, Oh, my God. It's Boris after fifty-two days."

Her hands shaking, Paula immediately called Barbara. "Barbara," she said, "we have Boris."

"I can't go and look at any more dogs," Barbara answered. "Are you sure it's him? I'm so tired. I don't know how much more I can take. Are you sure?"

"Somebody called me. He's inside a house. This is definitely your dog. You gotta come here now."

"Paula, I can't go through this anymore," Barbara said. She didn't have an ounce of strength left.

"Look, I'm telling you. One ear up, one ear down. You've gotta come down here. He's only a mile from the airport."

"I'm on my way."

Weeks of sorrow and worry were about to come to an end. "I went inside this apartment complex and there he was, this little dog coming around the corner peeking its head out at me. And I looked and I said, 'That's not my dog. Boris has beautiful eyes. He's got a tan coat. This dog's skinny.'"

"Barbara, please," Paula begged. "Just look again."

Barbara kneeled down and looked the limping, bedraggled dog in the eye. "Boris," she called softly, "Boris, is that you?" And he looked up at her with one ear up and one ear down, and suddenly Barbara let out a yell. "Oh, my God, Boris, it *is* you! It's you!" She was shaking all over, and suddenly her legs gave out. She found herself sitting on the floor with Boris licking her face, crying. Everyone else in the room was crying right along with her.

"I missed you so much," Barbara told Boris tearfully. "I love you. I can't believe they found you!"

"It was the most beautiful thing," Paula remembered. "It was worth every minute of whatever I contributed as a part of this bigger picture. It was the best reward and the most miraculous. And it was a miracle. It was a chance in a billion."

That night, Barbara kept her promise. After weeks of waiting, her Christmas tree was finally lit to welcome Boris home. "We'll make it all better," she told Boris. "Look at the pretty tree with the lights. You're home. You're home, baby!"

The next morning, a triumphant *New York Post* headline greeted all of New York City. And Boris immediately became a media darling.

A reporter said, "After six weeks of street life, the boxer was finally home. He's a trooper. He held in there. I can't believe it. All the while his owner kept faith. But it was a little magic that brought him home."

And Paula Forester helped provide some of that magic. She and Barbara continue to be close friends, and today Barbara is far less skeptical of psychic phenomena.

"Our chances psychically or otherwise were one in a billion," Paula says. "I could have been totally wrong through this whole thing. It was a miracle that Boris was found."

"I'm a believer," Barbara says. "There are some powers out there that you can't dismiss. To find a lost dog in New York City? Anything could have happened to him. Anything. For me to be reunited with him is a total miracle to me."

RUPERT, THE PARROT

Lynn Norley of Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, has a very special relationship with Rupert, her African Gray Parrot.

"There's definitely something magical about this bird," she says. "I mean, the bird just interacts with everyone in such a way that's so touching. His affection, and his rapport, and how he absolutely knows what's going on around him—it's just fantastic."

Lynn acquired Rupert as a baby in 1986, and since then, the parrot has become a central part of her life. In fact, she literally wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for Rupert.

It all began in February of 1998, when Lynn put Rupert in his cage for the night, and went to bed herself. What she didn't know was that in just a few hours she would wake to a living nightmare.

"I was lying there and I heard a very loud thud. Rupert fell off his perch, and then I heard him squawking very loudly. It was definitely an alarm sound. I mean, there wasn't any doubt in my mind that there was a problem," she remembers.

Lynn went to investigate, but got no farther than the bedroom door, which opened to reveal smoke and flames. "I was faced with a wall of smoke that was horrible-smelling, and I couldn't see anything."

She knew that Rupert was in danger. Not thinking of the consequences, she rushed to free him from his cage as the room filled with smoke.

"When I got to the cage, I was extremely panicked, and I was sure that Rupert wouldn't make it. This parrot can take only a little bit of smoke. I couldn't find the door of the cage because I couldn't see, and I couldn't get a breath, either. But somehow I fumbled and found the cage, and I grabbed Rupert out from the bottom."

With Rupert tucked under her arm, Lynn rushed out to her patio for air. She took a deep breath, and ran back into the smoke-filled house to rescue her dogs, Alex and Panther, who were still trapped in the fire. The dogs were frantic, and in the middle of all the chaos, Lynn felt Rupert go lifeless in her arms.

"I was sure that Rupert had died," says Lynn. "I felt horrible, because Rupert was such a part of my life for so long, and I couldn't just drop him on the floor." With the fire burning around her, Lynn didn't have a lot of time to make a decision. "I wrapped Rupert in a bathrobe, and gave him the only burial I could at the moment. I put him in the bottom of the shower stall."

Lynn could hear the flames crackling in the hallway outside the door. She put a wet shirt over her face, grabbed her dogs, and tried to make a run for it.

"I put Alex under my arm and grabbed Panther by the collar. I planned on going out the bedroom door, but when I opened the door again, I was hit with a wall of smoke and an explosion. I realized then that the house was bursting into flames, and I knew I had to escape through one of the windows of my second-story bedroom."

Thankfully, Lynn and the dogs dropped safely to the ground, leaving the house in flames. Firefighters doused the fire, but only after the inside had been totally gutted.

"It was terrifying, and it was horrible. I was watching my house exploding and smoke coming out of the roof," remembers Lynn.

The next morning, with the support of friends, Lynn returned home to see the devastation the fire had caused. The building was still standing, but it was merely a shell. There was little left in its charred interior. For Lynn, however, the greatest loss was Rupert.

"It seemed that nothing in the house could possibly survive," she says. "The windows were all blown out. In order to fight the fire, the firefighters had thrown everything out the window—my grandmother's things, and my paintings, and all that—but they really didn't matter. I mean, really, truly, the only thing I felt bad about was the bird."

Lynn didn't have the heart to go into the bathroom, so her friend Laurie Moore went in to remove the dead bird. Blackened debris had filled the shower stall after firefighters had doused the blaze, and Laurie pulled away the remains of crumbled walls.

"I started rummaging through the tile and the plaster and the fiberglass," Laurie recalls. "I moved some of it away, and found Rupert plastered up in the corner, looking at me. 'Rupert!' I screamed. Both of us were very surprised, looking at each other, and when I reached down to pick him up, he bit me." Laurie yelled out to Lynn to come quickly, that Rupert was alive.

"When I heard her scream, I couldn't believe my ears," says Lynn. "I ran into the bathroom, and there was Rupert, sitting in the corner of the shower stall on top of a pile of debris. He was shaking, and looked horrible." But finding the bird living, Lynn declares, "It was really a miracle…. No one could believe the bird was alive."

Today, Lynn and Rupert are living happily together in a new home. Lynn owes her life to her pet bird. It was Rupert's warning calls that saved her from the fire. But what saved Rupert?

"I don't know how the bird's alive," Lynn reflects. "It's a miracle that this bird lived through that. I mean, it's totally astounding. Between everything that Rupert inhaled, and everything that happened to him … if even a small part of any of those things had happened to any other bird, it would never have had a chance to live. And everything that happened to Rupert was so intense. It was just really a miracle."

DOG ANGEL

In 1993, John and Toni Sheridan shared their home in rural Virginia with a very special companion, a dog named Sailor who had been a member of the family for more than a decade.

Toni says, "I guess I loved Sailor so much because we really got him as a little pup. He was just five weeks old. We brought him up, we nourished him, and he was just closer to us than a baby."

Sailor may have been Toni's baby, but he was John's best friend.

"Every time I hopped into my pickup to go somewhere," John explains, "he'd be right there alongside me with his head on my knee."

And then, returning from a drive one morning, Sailor waited a moment before his normal routine of jumping out the passenger side of the truck. But this time, something went wrong.

John remembers, "He hit the ground, and he let out a yip, and he just laid there. So I figured, well, in a few minutes he'll get up and walk around, but he just laid there the way he hit the ground. And I knew darn well something had happened. He was paralyzed."

John and Toni rushed Sailor to the local vet.

Toni continues, "The vet said he was hurt internally, and, you know, there was very little he could do. And he suggested putting him to sleep, and there's no way we wanted that. We wanted to keep him and see what would happen."

"So we took him home," says John. "We put him in the bedroom there and made a nice bed for him and he just laid there. I tried to give him some water and he wouldn't drink. I tried to give him some food and he wouldn't eat. After two days or so, he got steadily worse. His eyes were closed half the time and I told Toni, 'He's paralyzed. He can't move. So … I think tomorrow morning when the vet opens up, we'll have to take Sailor there and put him to sleep.'"

But Toni refused to give up hope. She told John, "'I'm going to go and say a prayer. I'm going to ask God to send us an angel.' I prayed and I prayed and I prayed for him."

But Sailor wasn't getting any better. And it was killing John to watch his faithful friend suffer.

"So I looked at Sailor, and I said, 'Well, I guess you know it's the end.' So I slipped off his collar, and I went out to the shed. I had a couple of dog collars from previous dogs I had, and I hung Sailor's collar next to them. It was something I hated to do, but it brought tears to my eyes. Those three collars represented almost forty years of faithful companionship."

The next morning, John was up an hour before taking Sailor to the vet. And that's when something entirely unexpected happened.

John recounts, "I looked up and I saw this little brown dog coming down the driveway. She looked lost. And I looked, but there was no collar on the dog. So I said, Well, heck, she must be hungry. I took her in the house, but she wouldn't eat anything. She started walking around the house. She walked into the bedroom where Sailor was, and she sat down right in front of Sailor, just looking at him. After a minute or so, she went up and she nudged Sailor. And believe it or not, he slowly tried to get to his feet. He was shaky as all heck. He got up and he walked to the door, and that little dog went out, and Sailor followed her out. I couldn't believe it, that Sailor was almost ready to be put to sleep, and here he was walking around wagging his tail and all.

"So I called Toni, and she came out and she said, 'Oh, my God, Sailor's alive! God must have sent an angel.'"

Toni agrees. "Something happened. I don't know what kind of angel He sent, but He sent something to get Sailor up and moving and following that little dog the way he was, and I was just overjoyed."

But there was still the question of this stray dog. Where had it come from? And was some anxious owner desperately searching for it? John called the local radio station to report a lost dog. A few hours later, the dog's owner called to retrieve her pet. Her name was Karen Jarett.

John explains, "She had just moved up recently from Atlanta, Georgia. They lived three or four miles away, with a big wooded section between us. The dog didn't know this area, and ran into the woods and never came back. Something brought that dog through those woods right to my house, and right to Sailor. And in my opinion, that dog saved Sailor's life."

As the owner thanked John for saving her dog, she pulled a collar from her bag. And at that moment, John understood what had happened.

"She had a collar in her hand, and she put it on the dog," John says. "And I looked at the collar and I called Toni. There was 'Angel' written on the name tag. Toni saw it, and she said, 'That's God's angel.'"

Toni says, "I thanked God because I knew it was through Him that this happened with Sailor. And I knew that if it wasn't for Him, this miracle would never have happened, because to me it was a miracle."

John wonders, "How could a dog come through three or four miles of woods in a strange place? And come right up, nudge my dog, and bring him back to life? This is something that happened without any help from mankind. Something stronger than a human being saved Sailor.

"And it was that little dog."

WOMAN'S BEST FRIEND

Nestled among the majestic redwoods of Northern California is the quaint town of Garberville. In 1999, Nancy and Jeff Best were raising a family there, while running a popular coffee shop, the Java Joint.

"Our lives were a little hectic at the time," recalls Nancy. "We had three kids going to three different schools. My husband had taken a job in the Bay Area, which is a good four-and-a-half-hour drive away, so during the week he'd be gone and I would have to run the shop."

Even with her active schedule, however, Nancy dreamed of adding another member to her family.

"I've always been an animal lover," she says. "My mom used to call me 'Dr. Doolittle' when I was little, because I always had animals around me.

"I'm particularly fond of dogs," says Nancy. "I had been pestering my husband about getting a yellow Lab every time I would see one. I would hint, 'Christmas is coming, I want a yellow Lab.' But he kept saying that we really shouldn't get one at that time."

"I didn't want a dog, because our lives were kind of in flux then," Jeff says. "We were renting the house and we just didn't need a dog."

But a few weeks before Christmas, opportunity rang.

"I received a phone call from a friend of mine who had spotted some yellow Labs," says Nancy. "She said, 'Nancy, these dogs are just beautiful. You have to come down here right now. The man who's selling them is just here for a minute, he's traveling. If you don't come now, you're going to miss your opportunity.'"

Nancy decided that she wasn't going to let the opportunity pass her by, and she took off to meet her friend without telling Jeff where she was headed.

"I got in the car and drove to the park," says Nancy, "and as I drove up, I saw these beautiful puppies. They were so cute, they were the most darling yellow Labs. They were healthy, and their tails were wagging, and they were all running around in a little bunch. I knew that I wasn't going to leave without a puppy.

"And at this point I didn't know if I wanted a boy or a girl," says Nancy, but she bonded instantly with one of the puppies. "When I held her, I knew she was the one I was going to take home."

"So anyway, she showed up with this puppy, and I was not happy about it at all," recalls Jeff. "I wanted her to take it back."

"Which I couldn't do, because the owner of the dogs had already left," counters Nancy. "So that worked out really well."

It didn't take long for the puppy to soften Jeff's hard heart.

"I mean, puppies, you know, you fall in love with a puppy almost immediately, so it worked out pretty good that way," admits Jeff.

Nancy named the pup Mia. And Mia grew to become a true member of the family.

"Mia's kind of like Nancy," says Jeff. "She likes to have fun, she likes to be with people. She's just a nice dog, always friendly, ready to cuddle up or be scratched behind the ear or whatever."

When Mia was about fourteen months old, Nancy started to feel run-down, and her dog's behavior began to change.

"With my life so hectic at that time, I was feeling a little tired. I was just getting worn out. I was physically tired. I knew if I didn't start taking a rest during the day I couldn't continue," says Nancy. "When I would lay on the couch, Mia would usually lay next to me, and it would be pretty uneventful. But during this particular time when I was starting to feel really tired, Mia would come up and lay her nose on my chest and start sniffing. And at the time I didn't think anything of it. I

thought maybe she was smelling meat or some kind of food from the Java Joint that I might have had still on my shirt," explains Nancy.

"This proceeded again. She came back to me a couple of days later, and did the same sniffing and licking in the same spot. I was so tired and I was so bothered by the fact that she was doing this, that I actually got mad and put her outside," Nancy admits.

And she kept her outside the next day as well, but eventually Mia snuck back into the house.

"My daughter had come home from school," says Nancy, "and after she opened the door, Mia came barreling into the house. She dove into my chest, with her nose again in the area she had been sniffing and licking before. I started to rub it with my hand, because it did cause a great deal of pain.

"And at that instant, I felt the lump."

"Despite having had a mammogram before that was negative, indeed there was a lump of tissue there that was new and different from the previous exams," reveals Nancy's physician, Dr. Mark Phelps. "Unfortunately, the lump did have the little specks of calcium that make us real suspicious."

Dr. Phelps recommended further testing to determine whether the lump was malignant.

"It was very scary," recalls Nancy. "I never thought I would get cancer. I always thought everybody else got cancer, and I lived a pretty healthy lifestyle. It was a shock."

"The diagnosis was, unfortunately, a new breast cancer called ductal cancer," says Dr. Phelps. "It's one that can be extremely dangerous, that spreads quickly, and the timing is critical. Gotten early, these are the cancers you can cure, but just a little too late and they spread."

"When the doctor called me with the results," says Nancy, "the first thing that I thought was, I was going to lose my family, my children. I wouldn't get to see them grow. Other than the fact that you think you're going to die, you have to think about the things you haven't done yet. And you know tomorrow is not promised to anyone. I had that feeling in an instant."

Nancy was immediately scheduled for a partial mastectomy and the removal of nearby lymph nodes where the cancer might have spread.

"My fear was for any suffering Nancy might have to endure," says Jeff. "I gave her a kiss for good luck, and I was just trying to keep her positive. But, you know, there's always that thought in the back of your mind that you can't help but think: Your wife is going to die."

As Jeff waited, the surgeons removed twenty-six lymph nodes from below Nancy's arm.

"All of the lymph nodes were negative for any spread. The cancer was confined just to the small area," says Dr. Phelps. "She was able to remove the cancer and preserve her breasts, and go through the treatment with a very high likelihood of complete cure."

"If this cancer hadn't been detected at that time, my doctor feels that it could have gotten a lot worse. He said the chance of it spreading would've increased," reveals Nancy. "Had Mia not discovered it at that time, my chances for survival would have been greatly reduced."

"The fact that the dog was able to do this is just remarkable," says Dr. Phelps. "I've heard little bits and hints. You hear them from cancer specialists now and again 'cause they'll hear the stories. But I never thought I would see a case like that. Who would ever think?"

"I think the miracle here," says Jeff, "was that Mia was determined to let Nancy know that there was something going on there that wasn't right, and she kept at it until Nancy realized it."

To show Mia how much they appreciate the miracle she gave them, Nancy and Jeff reward her each morning with a special treat.

"My husband makes breakfast for the kids in the morning, and Mia waits anxiously every day for her pancake," says Nancy. "And she's just thrilled to be spoiled like that. She's the little princess of the house now."

And Jeff realizes how close he came to not allowing her to be part of their family.

"I thought about the fact that I never wanted the dog to begin with, and what an amazing thing it was that we got her," Jeff remarks. "I mean, I didn't want it, and Nancy kind of snuck down there

and bought this dog behind my back, and then it turns out to be a savior dog, you know. So it was a tremendous thing."

"For Mia to find this cancer, and just five months after I had a negative breast exam, is a miracle. It's nothing less than a miracle to me," declares Nancy. "If Mia could understand words, I would tell her thank you. Thank you for alerting me to something that could have taken my life, something that could have taken me away from my children, my husband, the things I love most.

"I would tell her that she is my miracle, and there is a reason that I have her, and that I love her."

REMARKABLE RESCUES I

SECOND CHANCE ANGEL

1999 was a bad year for Rob Gingery of Memphis, Tennessee. Recently divorced, and separated from his son, Rob channeled his depression into motorcycles and living on the edge.

"He was at the point in his life where he didn't care anymore. He'd party all the time, and then he'd want to know where the next party was," remembers his girlfriend Cale Smith. "He was always cutting up on his motorcycle—the faster, the better."

And then one afternoon in May, Rob and Cale were leaving a restaurant along with Rob's close friend, Randy Brewer.

"Rob and I were going to ride our bikes over to his house. Cale was riding with another friend of ours in their car," explains Randy.

After the couple said their good-byes, Randy and Rob sped out of the parking lot. As they headed back to Rob's house, the two friends played a dangerous cat-and-mouse game, each trying to outrace the other at speeds of up to a hundred miles per hour.

Randy recalls, "We were hot-rodding back and forth, you know, on the main streets. When we got in the neighborhood, we turned the corner and Rob just shot off. I wasn't really familiar with all the streets, so I drove at kind of a slower pace."

Meanwhile, Cale and her friend Kat had taken a different route to Rob's house.

"We went kind of the back road, and as we got there I noticed that his motorcycle wasn't there. I looked at Kat and I said, 'He's down.' She told me not to jump to conclusions, but I knew he was down, I could feel it."

The two women sped off in search of Rob and Randy to make sure they were all right, but they didn't have to travel far to discover that Cale's horrible premonition had come true.

"When we turned the corner, there he was. The motorcycle was flipped upside down, and pipes were sticking out. It was a mess. Rob was lying on the curb with blood all over him."

"Cale was hysterical," remembers Randy. "She was crying, hanging over him, trying to see if he was alive."

"The paramedics came at about the same time, and they jumped out and pulled me away from him," says Cale. "We didn't know if he had a broken neck—we didn't know anything. When the paramedics finally got him on the gurney, Rob kept saying, 'Where's Cale? Where's Cale?' He looked at me and gestured for me to give him a kiss, so I leaned down and gave him one, and then he shut his eyes. I thought he'd died. I really thought that was it."

Rob was still alive, but badly injured. The paramedics rushed him to the Regional Medical Center in Memphis. His injuries were extensive, including four skull fractures, a broken hand, and a broken leg. But it was his behavior that had Dr. Preston Miller most concerned.

"It's pretty typical for folks who have a significant head injury to be combative or confused or a little bit out of it," Dr. Miller explains, "so he went from our shock trauma room to the CAT-scan room, where he had a CAT scan of his brain."

The CAT scan revealed that Rob had received a traumatic head injury. A small blood clot had formed in his brain.

"Those sometimes stay the same and sometimes get worse," says Dr. Miller. "There's no way of knowing. If they stay the same, it's great, but if they enlarge, it either leads to serious brain damage or death."

Cale was there when they did another CAT scan early the next day. "By about 7:00 in the morning, the blood clot had tripled in size. So the doctors rushed in and started telling us that they needed to do emergency surgery."

Rob was rushed to an operating room where neurosurgeons spent the next several hours opening his skull and removing the blood clot from his brain. When they finished, there was nothing left to do but wait and pray that Rob would regain consciousness.

Meanwhile, Cale struggled to deal with the grim possibilities. "The doctors came out and said he could be a vegetable. I thought about what I would do if he did die. I cried more than anybody knew. Not only was I going to lose the person I was with, but Rob's also my best friend. I never gave up hope on him, though. We prayed, and we prayed, and we prayed."

Miraculously, two and a half hours after the surgery, Cale's prayers were answered.

Rob remembers, "I wake up, and I'm in a room by myself. I've got hoses and IVs hanging off me, and I don't have a clue as to where I'm at. I don't remember having a wreck. Then the nurse walks in and tells me to be still, and all I can say is 'What am I doing here?'"

"He got better like overnight," Cale marvels. "I mean, he had brain surgery on Monday and was at home in bed by Friday. It was totally miraculous that he recovered the way he did."

But as astounding as his physical recovery was, it was nothing compared to the life-altering change that had taken place in Rob's attitude.

"I had a whole new perception, a whole new feeling inside. I felt clean. This wreck was the best bad thing that ever happened to me because it was a reality check. It sobered me up, straightened me up."

But there was still one nagging question in his mind.

"When you hear about a child that dies in a car wreck or about anyone that passes away, you wonder why a person like me was saved. You wonder, Why am I here? Was it just an accident that I lived?"

Rob underwent a remarkable transformation. With a newfound sense of purpose, Rob channeled his energy from motorcycles and parties to starting his own business as an electrical contractor.

Rob said, "I believe that prior to the wreck I would not have been able to handle the business. I would like to say I'm on my way back up and I thank God every day."

But Rob still wondered why he of all people would be given a second chance at life, and then, almost a year to the day after his accident, Rob was driving past the same intersection when he received the answer to his question.

"I was heading back to the office in a dead run—you know, in a hurry. I come up, and there's a car wreck right in front of me," recalls Rob. "I mean, two trucks hit each other right in front of me. I was the first one on the scene."

Rob ran to the nearest vehicle while calling 911 on his cell phone. Meanwhile, inside the other vehicle, Vicky O'Briant was just beginning to regain consciousness.

Vicky remembers, "I didn't know anything about how we had flipped over or anything. I just knew that I was upside down, and I really couldn't get a grasp on where I actually was."

When Rob was certain the first driver was okay, he turned his attention to Vicky's truck.

"With truck damage as bad as that, you don't know what you're fixing to find. You're praying that a cop might show up, because I don't want to do it. I managed to get the driver of the vehicle to the curb. I sat her down on the grass, and the little boy sat down right beside her."

"That's when I started screaming about my daughter, Camille," says Vicky, "that my daughter was hurt very badly."

Rob rushed back to the vehicle. "I look in, and there is a little girl, upside down, unconscious, and just hanging limp with the seat belt around her neck. Her lips and skin were exactly the same color—she was one solid color blue."

Worse still, the truck was leaking fluid and the engine was still running. Rob knew that if he didn't act quickly, the truck would catch fire or explode.

"There was no room inside the truck. It was crushed and I couldn't get the seat belt unbuckled. At this point, I'm now praying, 'Please don't let this truck blow up.' I'm throwing a double prayer up to God—'Please don't let this baby die, whatever you do, please don't let this baby die. And please don't let the truck blow up.' Luckily, I had a small Leatherman pocketknife on me and I was able to use that to cut the seat belt."

Rob quickly cut the young girl free. But she remained unconscious.

"I had this little child lying in front of me. And I really didn't want to move her because I thought she might have some internal injuries. So I decided I would stay inside the truck with her and pray that an ambulance or somebody would show up."

Vicky was beside herself. "I didn't know anything about what was going on—if my daughter was okay. And I was so scared that I was just screaming. I didn't know how to help her. I just knew that somebody was in there helping my daughter."

After ten terrifying minutes, paramedics finally arrived. Luckily, the truck never caught on fire, and the paramedics were able to get Camille out. With the situation finally under control, Rob left the scene without a word. Vicky and her children were taken to a local hospital. Miraculously, no one had suffered any serious injuries, including her daughter, Camille.

"The doctors told me that if someone hadn't cut her out of that seat belt, she would have suffocated," says Vicky. "There was no way that she probably would have made it."

But Vicky had no way of thanking the heroic stranger that had saved their lives that day … until she stumbled upon a clue to his identity.

"A few days later we decided we were going to clean the truck and get our personal possessions out. We looked in the backseat and there was a Leatherman knife that we'd never seen before, and I said, 'This must be the knife that cut my daughter out of her seat belt.' So I turned it over and there was a man's name on it. When I got home, I looked in the phone book and the man's name was right there. It was the only Rob Gingery that there was."

Rob was working at home when the telephone rang. Little did he know, it was Vicky O'Briant.

"And she said, 'Were you at the scene of an accident?' and I said, 'Yes.' Then she said, 'I've got something that belongs to you. We found your knife in the truck.'"

Vicky recalls, "I gave him my name, and I said, 'Well, I believe you're the man who saved my daughter.' And he couldn't believe that she had made it, and that he had been a part of saving her life. It was a miracle to him, and he couldn't wait to meet us."

But it was Vicky who was truly in disbelief when she learned about Rob's motorcycle wreck at that same intersection just one year before.

"I couldn't believe that he happened upon our accident at the same site where he had his. I felt like his survival was such a miracle and that God let him live for a reason, and that reason was to help my daughter and save my daughter's life. He says he's not a hero, but I believe he's my hero, and he's my daughter's hero."

Little Camille agrees. "I think it's a miracle because he saved us and if he wouldn't have been there, I would have died."

Today, Rob is a close friend to Vicky and her family, and while it took a year and two near-tragedies to bring them together, the experience they share taught them all the lesson of a lifetime.

"I don't go to church every Sunday," says Vicky. "But I do pray to God every day, and thank Him for saving us and saving Rob a year ago."

"Prior to my wreck, I took the blessings I've had in life for granted," concludes Rob. "I don't do that anymore. The lessons I've had in the last eighteen months have taught me to look at things differently. Even when they seem their worst, look around, because it could be worse. Every day, I take time to say, 'Thank you, God, thank you for what I've got.'"

LADY IN THE LAKE

Ever since he was a young boy, Paul Lessard's nightmare was always the same.

"I'm in a car, and the car hurtles through the air, and then hits the water. And the water starts coming into the car and we start submerging. And I can feel the water moving up my legs, up to my waist, up to my chest. These dreams began when I was eleven years old, and literally continued three —four times a year, all the way up until I was in my thirties," says Paul.

His wife, Jayne, a psychologist, was concerned as well, often waking in the night when he had a nightmare to ask, "Honey, are you okay? Did you have another one of those drowning dreams? Baby, I don't know what's causing them." Frustrated, Jayne attempted to help Paul understand his dream, but although they'd "talk through it and stuff, it didn't ever feel like there was a real resolution to why he was having it or what was going on—and it would keep recurring."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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