

A Memoir

It Was Out of LOVE

A True Love Story of Deception, Grace, and Forgiveness

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ISBN 13: 978-1-60615-023-8

ISBN 10: 1-60615-023-5

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2009935239

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CHAPTER I

Valentine's Day

Valentine's Day is a day for romance, a day for falling in love. It's the day I declared my intent to marry a woman I'd never met face-to-face. Thirty-one years later, it's the day I began saying good-bye to the love of my life.

At 4:45 A.M. on Valentine's Day, 2007, the phone rang as I was preparing to go to work.

"Mr. Marr, this is your wife's nurse at the health care center. We found Melissa nonresponsive in her bed this morning. Which hospital do you want her taken to?"

I could feel my pulse pounding as my hands began to shake. The memories of thirty years together as husband and wife flashed through my mind. I couldn't help but fear I might be losing my wife on this day, of all days. *Was this the end of Melissa's long battle against diabetes and kidney failure? Was Melissa already in heaven, free from pain?*

Startled back into the urgency of the moment, I told the nurse the name of the hospital. This was not the time to ask for more details.

As I ended the call, my eyes welled up with tears. My mind raced as I tried to think of what to do next.

Over the last few years, with all the doctor appointments, hospitalizations, and months of home care, Melissa and I had endured many challenging situations together. But this Valentine's Day morning was more serious than anything we had experienced before. I ran to get dressed and gathered up a bag of things to take with me to the hospital. I was out the door in minutes. As I backed out of the garage, I realized I needed to talk to someone—someone who could pray for Melissa and for me. I stopped briefly in the driveway to call my parents.

“Mom?”

“Yes, Jim, what is it?” my mom asked with some apprehension in her voice.

“The nurse at the health care center called,” I cried out through the tears now flowing profusely. “Melissa is nonresponsive and they are taking her to the hospital. I'm driving there now.”

I ended the call and grabbed a handful of tissues to clear away the tears now blurring my vision and flowing down my face. I imagined what Melissa was going through in the health care center as the nurses and paramedics worked to save her life.

I struggled to navigate roads that were covered with an inch or two of slippery snow. This journey to the hospital was a route I knew all too well from the last few years of Melissa's treatment for declining health. I labored to process the rush of images coursing through my mind. I restrained myself from thinking the worst and called out to God for his help.

Thinking about what I was going to see when I arrived at the hospital, I questioned whether this emergency was really as serious as it appeared. *Was Melissa nonresponsive from something very serious, or was she only having one of her deep-sleep events where she couldn't be awakened and the nurses overreacted?*

“Nonresponsive” was all I knew.

When I arrived at the hospital, I ran from the parking garage up to the emergency room entrance. I quickly made my way through the metal detectors and into the emergency room waiting area.

"I'm Jim Marr," I panted to the nurse behind the counter. "I'm expecting my wife Melissa to arrive by ambulance. Is she here yet?"

After searching the computer screen a few seconds, the nurse replied, "No, we don't see an entry yet for Melissa. Wait a few minutes and we'll let you know as soon as she's on the way."

I paced around the large waiting area that was quiet and virtually empty, except for one person seated across the room. I sat down for a few minutes to regain my composure. I made another phone call to update my mom on what I knew about Melissa's condition. After talking for just a few minutes and seeing no activity at the nurses' station, my mind turned again to Melissa and what had happened in recent weeks.

For the previous two-and-a-half months, my wife had been bedridden in two different hospitals and a health care center. She battled infections from diabetes and complications from kidney failure. Her diabetes-related sores had been making steady improvement in recent weeks, allowing her to be transferred just two weeks earlier from a long-term-care hospital to the sub-acute health care center. A rising fever two days ago, however, signaled the return of the infections. The doctors resumed an antibiotic regimen to combat these attacks on her body. Melissa's temperature was slightly elevated the next day, but she was able to make it to her dialysis appointment.

Today was Valentine's Day, but I had arrived at Melissa's room at the health care center the previous evening after work, with my early Valentine's Day presents in hand.

VALENTINE'S DAY EVE

I was disappointed to see Melissa's lunch tray untouched at her bedside as she slept in the clothes she had worn to dialysis that morning. It had been an extremely exhausting day at the dialysis center. She was fighting the recurrence of a fever. The nurses decided to wait until bedtime to change Melissa into her hospital gown. She slept most of the day.

Because Melissa had refused to eat lunch, I knew it would be important for me to help her eat something.

"Melissa, it's Jim. Are you awake?" I lightly shook her shoulder, trying to awaken her from a deep sleep. I repeated this several times.

Melissa's eyes flickered open. She moved her legs slightly and then grimaced from pain.

Groggily, she turned her head toward me and I recited a recurring theme of mine over these many weeks of hospitalization. "Melissa, I see you didn't eat your lunch today. You've got to eat if you expect to get better and go home."

"I wasn't hungry," she said weakly, as she strained to focus her eyes on me. She tried to adjust her headscarf that had fallen down over her eyes.

"I'll be sure to get some food into you tonight at dinner," I told her, reaching out to help straighten up the uncooperative scarf. "So, how did dialysis go today?"

"I don't remember anything special. I guess it was okay." She closed her eyes, as though exhausted from speaking those few words.

I helped Melissa eat some dinner, but still it was not the full amount of nourishment her body so desperately needed.

After dinner I announced, "Tomorrow is Valentine's Day, Melissa. I have a card and some gifts for you tonight. I won't be back to see you until tomorrow evening after work, and I didn't want you to think I forgot Valentine's Day!"

“That’s nice. After that you can take me back to my room upstairs.”

From experience, I was able to recognize when Melissa was digressing into an episode of dementia caused by her medications and long confinement in a hospital bed. Fortunately, she always recognized me. Sometimes, she would forget that I had visited the day before, or she would talk about some strange things she had seen in her room that day.

“No, Melissa,” I assured her, “you are already in your hospital room where you will sleep tonight. Your roommate, Barbara, is here with you.”

Barbara spoke from behind the curtain separating the two hospital beds. “Melissa, I’m right over here—this is your normal room that we share.”

We continued the conversation a few minutes before I reminded Melissa that one of her favorite television shows, *American Idol*, was on that evening. I knew that most likely she would not have the attention span to watch the show and would fall to sleep soon after it started.

I walked over to the dresser to gather up my Valentine’s Day gifts and card. “Melissa, I have a small box of chocolates for you.”

“I don’t want any chocolate.”

I compromised. “Okay, I’ll cut off a small piece so you can at least say you had some Valentine’s Day chocolate.”

She obliged and ate a single piece of candy while I gulped down several pieces myself. I gave her a small, red Valentine bear, and opened up her card and read it to her. I signed the card with my trademark salutation that goes back to what Melissa wrote on a picture she gave to me thirty-one years earlier:

Love, Forevah and Evah! Jim ☺

“I love you, too,” she said drowsily.

Memories rushed through my mind of previous Valentine’s Day celebrations, the thirtieth wedding anniversary we had

recently celebrated in the hospital, and the tremendous challenges of these last couple of months of hospitalization, not to mention the last few years of a slow and gradual decline in Melissa's health. If this weren't enough to deal with emotionally, I was still reeling from Melissa's shocking revelation six weeks earlier about the deception she had maintained for thirty-one years.

Her confession initially convinced me that it was out of love she had deceived me into falling in love with her—only later would I fully comprehend the selfish motivations behind her actions. If I had known the truth from the beginning, I'm sure we never would have been married. Despite Melissa maintaining this deception—a deception I will reveal later, God had blessed our lives together and had enabled us to be a blessing to others. He helped me forgive Melissa and assure her of my deep love and commitment to our marriage.

Melissa, family, friends, our church family, and I continued

The LORD is good, a refuge
in times of trouble. He cares
for those who trust in him.
(Nahum 1:7)

to pray to God for her healing and for him to give his strength to both of us. It was a struggle to trust God as I watched Melissa go through so much in these recent years, but I knew that trust was the only thing to get us through each day.

We began watching *American Idol* and, as I had predicted, Melissa was soon falling asleep. About the time the program ended, the nurses came around to prepare her for bedtime.

"Melissa, you need to wake up so the nurses can take your vital signs and get your clothes changed," I said. As she slowly

awakened, I was preparing to take a break down the hallway while the nurses dressed her for the night.

Melissa surprisingly said, "Well, you'd better be getting home now."

This was entirely unexpected. At the conclusion of most of my daily visits, she would plead with me to stay longer or to spend the night at the hospital. Even if I extended my stay, she would still be disappointed when I eventually went home. I tried to reason with her many times about my need to get a good night's sleep at home before work the next day. This was a cycle we had maintained since Thanksgiving, when she began this long period of hospitalization. With the periodic dementia symptoms, any reasoning like this was usually fruitless. So her response this night was very unusual.

Realizing how exhausted Melissa was, I agreed it was time to go home and said, "I love you. Have a happy Valentine's Day, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"I love you too. Good night."

After a light kiss on her cheek, I gathered up my things and went home.

MELISSA ARRIVES AT THE EMERGENCY ROOM

As I reflected upon those precious memories of the night before, I was jolted back into the emergency room waiting area. *Were those the final words Melissa would ever speak to me?* Soon, I was up pacing again and praying to God for both of us.

And call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.
(Psalm 50:15)

Several more minutes passed with no status updates from the emergency room nurse. Since I expected the ambulance to beat me to the hospital, I wondered what was taking so long. I called the health care center and reached the charge nurse on Melissa's floor.

"This is Jim Marr. I'm waiting at the hospital for my wife, Melissa, to arrive. Is she still there?"

"Yes, the paramedics are stabilizing her and they should be leaving in a few minutes."

This was good news to me at the time, because it meant Melissa was indeed alive, although I didn't know exactly what they were doing to stabilize her. I could only imagine what might be going on based on the emergency room scenes I had seen on television or in the movies. Shortly after this call, the emergency room nurse reported that Melissa's ambulance was arriving. A few minutes later, the nurse appeared at the door to take me to where Melissa was receiving treatment.

As we approached Melissa's room, the nurse paused and asked me, "Are you ready for this? She's going to have lots of equipment hooked up, and this may be difficult for you."

I thought that it couldn't be much worse than what we'd already been through the past couple of months, and I confidently replied, "Yes, I'm ready."

The nurse pulled back the curtain, and I walked into the room to see Melissa unconscious and surrounded by several nurses and a doctor attending to her condition. The scene in front of me was overwhelming. In addition to the expected intravenous bags attached to her arms, the blood pressure monitor, the heart monitor wires, and the oxygen tube, my eyes were drawn to two things I hadn't seen before on Melissa. The first was a respirator tube in her mouth, and the second was tubes in her nose. The nurses called out instructions to each other in a calm but deliberate manner as they methodically worked to stabilize Melissa's vital signs. A nurse at the end

of Melissa's bed documented each medical supply item as it was consumed.

I heard the usual beeping tones of various medical devices and the rhythmic sound of airflow from the respirator. My vision of this entire scene blurred, and as my eyes filled with tears, I bit my lip to restrain my emotions. I continued to observe the busy activity a few steps away. When I was able to get closer to her bed, I reached out to touch Melissa's shoulder and said to her, "I'm right here with you, honey."

The emergency room staff drew several vials of blood for various tests. Other technicians soon arrived with a portable chest x-ray device. Minutes turned to an hour, then another hour, and around 8:00 A.M. I went to a private waiting area to make several phone calls to family, friends, and my employer.

The lab results from the blood tests and the pictures from the chest x-rays came back to the emergency room staff. When I returned to Melissa's room, the doctor explained that my wife had suffered a cardiac arrest at the health care center, due to septic shock from the infection in her blood, urine, and lungs. He told me that Melissa would be transferred upstairs as soon as a room in the neuro-intensive care unit was readied. Only then would the hospital staff continue their assessment of her condition.

Two of Melissa's close friends arrived at the emergency room. They provided some much-needed emotional and prayer support during those initial hours of whatever it was we would be facing. We prayed to God for his healing touch and for the doctors' wisdom in treating Melissa. As we prayed for her, I wondered if she could hear us in her comatose state. I had read several testimonies where people claimed to have had a near-death experience and reported seeing what was going on around them in the emergency room. Melissa and I strongly believed in the scriptural promise that we have for eternal life beyond this earthly existence—I wondered if she was already

We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the LORD.
(2 Corinthians 5:7–8)

experiencing a glimpse into her eternal home.

I stood close by Melissa in the emergency room, trying to fully comprehend everything going on around me. Several mixed emotions rushed through me as I watched her lying in the bed, totally helpless, and fully dependent on the machinery now keeping

her alive. I felt apprehension, but also peace, a peace in my spirit that God would be with us through everything. I am sure the shock of this surreal moment kept me detached from the full range of emotions I would experience later. I imagined what Melissa might be experiencing at that moment in her own mind and spirit. I thought again about our lives together as husband and wife and what lay ahead in the next hour, the next day.

As I faced what might be the end of my time with my dear wife in this life, I was comforted knowing that she trusted the Lord Jesus as her Savior, and that death for the Christian is not the end, but rather the beginning of our eternal life with Christ. As I yielded to that comforting thought, I was also admitting to myself that I didn't believe God would yet heal Melissa short of her glorified body in heaven. I knew I couldn't bear to see her endure more suffering in her present condition. In just the previous few months, I had learned some valuable lessons as a Christian about what someone will do out of love for another person—things about forgiveness and about trusting in God's perfect timing. Although I had prayed months earlier for God's

mercy, I now realized it was none other than God's mercy that had allowed Melissa sufficient time to make her confession.

Melissa's confession of a decades-long deception to me on December 30, 2006, first resulted in brief anger and disbelief, but the Lord helped me express my sincere love and forgiveness to her. This is a true story about Melissa, about me, about the love we shared, about the mystery that I'm still trying to fully unravel, about the importance of forgiveness, and about the confidence we have in knowing that God is always working on our behalf.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.
(Romans 8:28)

I pray the very telling of this story will strengthen my readers who may be going through similar challenges now or who may be facing them in the future. I pray you will seek to find and fulfill God's purpose in your life.



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