

CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER

Mary's mother died in 2010,
Mary's 60-year-old husband David died in 2012,
and Mary's 8-year-old grandson died in 2013.

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Yesterday my daughter Elizabeth called when I was babysitting her youngest. Elizabeth's voice shook as she informed me that the surgeon had found cancer in Jacob's lung.

No bigger than a lima bean, the cancerous growth meant that just six months after Jacob's treatment, his Wilms' tumor had returned. He will now be facing additional treatment that likely involves a stem cell transplant and stronger chemotherapy to be administered through a line that was inserted during surgery.

Time stopped as I stood there holding
the phone, long after my daughter
had hung up.

I was startled out of my reverie by a movement from the couch. I looked down at Jacob's little brother staring up at me; my three-year-old grandson Jo-Jo, bleary-eyed from having abruptly woken from a nap by the phone's ring. As if in slow motion, I sat down beside him, pulled him close and sobbed quietly into his back. He struggled a little against my tight embrace, and I loosened my grip, kissing the top of his head.

"I love you," I whispered hoarsely, and a little voice whispered back, "I love you, too."

When Jo-Jo pulled back to look at my face, I forced a gentle smile, lightening my tone, "So, how about those corn dogs Grandma promised? Should we go get them?"

He nodded his head, jumped from my lap, and ran to get his shoes. Thick with grief, my fingers struggled with his small socks. "Owww," Jo-Jo whimpered softly when the shoes refused to go on, so I left them off. As I buckled my grandson in the car's backseat, my heart ached for his brother Jacob. And his mother and father.

Instead of heading straight home, I found myself heading toward my sister's consignment store. There was a parking space right in front, and I couldn't see any shoppers when I peaked through the window.

Jo-Jo was quiet as I pulled him from the back seat. Stepping inside the doorway of the store, I saw two smiling faces—my sisters Denise and Pat—look up from their lunch. "Mary!" one of them called out in welcome.

"It's back. The cancer is back." I blurted out, and they left their chairs to come hug me. Clinging to me like a little monkey, Joseph was hugged inside their embrace, as well.

Joseph. Nearing four years of age, and facing weeks without his mother as she stays in the

hospital with his older brother, he'd suddenly become Joseph. It would forever be the first day he'd told me he loved me. It would also be the first time I'd thought of him as anything but my Jo-Jo.

The library was our next stop. Joe still clung to me, uncharacteristically quiet. The stairway down to the children's room seemed longer than usual, and I prayed my sister had returned from her lunch.

Angela, who had become my best friend after our mother's death, came around the corner from her office area. She knew as soon as she saw my face. We hugged, and again I began sobbing; poor Jacob. Poor Elizabeth. Poor Ben. Poor little Joe, who silently observed the adults around him crumple one by one.

At home, Joe ran ahead of me into the house and I faced my husband on the porch. He held his arms out to me, and we clung to each other for a few moments.

David, a cancer survivor, had a special bond with his grandson, Jacob.

It was as if they belonged to a secret club, comrades in a war fought only by those who had experienced cancer.

David disappeared around back, raking leaves in the yard, experiencing his own private hell, while I went inside and collapsed on the couch. Katie, age twelve, took care of making lunch for the others. Emily, sixteen, and Matt, eighteen, kept approaching the couch to give me a hug. I picked up a book laying nearby, *A Grief Observed*, by C.S. Lewis, a book he'd written while grieving the loss of his wife. I read these words:

"You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a

matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it . . . Only a real risk tests the reality of a belief."

I pondered these words.

If I truly believe that God has a purpose and plan for everything, then this trial has to be for a reason.

My faith has been strengthened since my mother's death, my marriage had never been so wonderful as it had been since David's cancer. But an innocent child facing something that knocks grown men to their knees? What purpose could there be in that?

It was only by God's grace during Jacob's first bout with cancer, through the love of friends and family members, and my daughter's incredible strength in the face of adversity, that she became a stronger, faith-filled woman.

I have delighted in watching her husband, the son-of-my-heart, grow in faith as well.

Throughout the months of Jacob's treatment, the goodness and love of others was revealed to them repeatedly. They both felt blessed that Jacob had done as well as he did through a sometimes grueling treatment.

And now? They face the enemy once again; not just the evil of cancer, but another darkness. The bleakness of this journey could sink into their

very souls, closing them off to God. Searching deep within myself, I know that is what I truly fear through all of this; losing my daughter or the son-of-my-heart to the darkness of despair.

“What can I do?” E-mails are already arriving in my inbox, and I think of that rope that C.S. Lewis mentions, the one that Elizabeth and Ben must hang onto through the coming days. I think of the friends, the loved ones and even the strangers who care about this little boy and his family. I think of the little boy himself, who wakes from surgery, pulls out the IV lines, and even amidst his pain, asks when he can buy his sister a toy from the gift shop. This little boy who trusts with a childlike faith, whose life is the epitome of the goodness we all search for. I look to my family for assurance that they will be there, and they protectively circle around me, embracing me. I turn to friends, and their answering prayers are lifted to the heavens. In the darkness of these days, I reach out and feel the rope. It feels thick and strong. I tug tentatively. Why, Lord? Why this little boy? Why?

I step out in faith, and the rope holds.

AUTHOR NOTE:

That evening my husband's shoulder hurt, and we thought it was from an afternoon of raking. The pain intensified in the next few days until it moved to my husband's chest and I took him into the emergency room. Apparently, he'd experienced a series of smaller heart attacks, his heart literally breaking for his beloved grandson. My husband passed away three days after he came home from the hospital.