

FEATHERS OF FAITH

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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Self care articles for the bereaved

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My five-year-old grandson was diagnosed with cancer five weeks after my mother died.

When a doctor gives us news that we can barely stand to hear, when a little boy struggles mightily to speak around a breathing tube, with eyes pleading for relief.

We might wonder if God even cares, we
are so alone in our misery and despair.

It has been one week since the news of Jacob's cancer. The days have blended into one another.

I was with my daughter Elizabeth while they poked and prodded this little boy, drew blood, forced him to drink a vile liquid, took a CT scan, and generally turned our world upside down.

I was there when the doctor informed her it had spread, and I could hardly bear the sight of her face crumpling when the doctor informed her Jacob would need immediate surgery, followed by chemotherapy and radiation.

I've heard my daughter ask "Why?" and have no answer.

I am not privy to her husband Ben's innermost thoughts, but I have seen the rosary and

prayer book he carries with him, and spotted the little bottle of holy water he used to bless his son while we were out of the room. My heart breaks when I see his face after he returns from a visit to Jacob's room, knowing that this strong man cannot stand to see his little boy in pain.

I pray their faith will sustain
them during this time.

"Can Grandma be there to help him through this?" my daughter has asked, and I wonder the same thing.

We know so little about the other side. We look for signs that there is an angel watching over Jacob, and he gives us an answer himself when he says to his mother, "Grandma. Angel," and pats his own shoulder.

Can we hope that perhaps he has felt the comforting touch of an angel, my newly deceased mother? We don't know, but we like to think there is a comforting presence there for little Jacob.

Then, I remember that day in the doctor's office. After he'd given us the worst news we could possibly imagine, leaving the room and closing the door behind him, the most beautiful voice overhead sang just two words, "Ava Maria."

I'd gasped in surprise, turning to my daughter to point out the amazing song that my mother had loved so much. Before I could even say the words, a generic Christmas song began playing and so I said nothing. Later I would ask Elizabeth, "When the doctor left the room after the terrible news, did you hear a song playing?"

She replied that she hadn't heard an entire song playing, only the two words
Ava Maria.

The slight whiffs of smoke my daughter has smelled a few times in the last few days seem such a small and dubious sign from beyond. There could be so many explanations, and yet we want that smell to mean her grandmother, my mother the avid smoker, is nearby.

I've gotten a whiff only once. On the way back from the tests in Iowa City on Friday, with my heart aching heavily, I turned around in the front seat to see if Jacob had fallen asleep and was inexplicably greeted with the smell of a freshly lit cigarette.

We hold onto these small reminders of a beautiful and loving woman who is no longer here to comfort us. She would have been praying ceaselessly during all this. Yet I cannot lift up the phone and call her, cannot head to her house for a much needed hug.

I miss her so much.

During those darkest of days, we walk around in a stupor, and our faith waivers. Why would God let an innocent little boy suffer?

There are so many people praying for Jacob that our heads spin with the knowledge. My blog postings have gone viral, with over seven hundred people in one day reading them. Seven hundred people praying. Seven hundred strangers caring.

A woman I knew in college found me on Facebook after my mother's cancer diagnosis. She informed me her husband was dying of the same cancer, and he died shortly before my mother did. Now this woman is my strongest prayer warrior.

A group of women who know Beth and I only through a Facebook group, who have traded children's clothing and toys with us, band together and collect donations for a virtual stranger. A fellow mother.

Ben's workplace does the same, and then he finds \$60 on the driver's seat of his van. Friends and family bring meals and give them money and gift cards.

Small miracles pile up around us like the feathers we keep finding on Jacob's coat.

Light and airy, they tumble down from the heavens.