

A photograph of a large flock of sheep moving along a dirt road. The sheep are densely packed and appear to be carrying large bundles of wool or hay on their backs. In the background, a sign on a post points to the left, with the text 'Station' visible. The scene is set in a rural, hilly area with sparse vegetation.

Going Astray

Christine Moore

Prologue

I don't remember the exact date, but I can tell you that it was spring, 1993, during the Waco siege in Texas. Seventy-five Branch Davidians died, including their leader, David Koresh. I recall a brief exchange between Denis, our pastor, and Michelle, a new church member, when someone reported the latest news.

Michelle commented quietly, "Those poor people!"

I'd been thinking the same. The FBI had transmitted loud music and noises at the site twenty-four hours a day, and shone bright lights through the windows all night—presumably aimed at breaking the spirit of the people in the compound. A stupid macho power struggle, was how I saw it.

"It's the judgement of God, Michelle," said Denis. "David Koresh is a heretic. He has led others astray. There's no other way."

Michelle humbly bobbed her head. No-one else said anything.

I was unhappy with myself for not speaking up. I think it has stayed with me because it was the first time I'd admitted to myself that Denis might be a crackpot, rather than a wise man with a special line to God. Denis regularly glossed over detail—in this case damage and pain to children and other followers at Waco—in favour of what he perceived to be the "big picture".

From then on I began to question things when I was unhappy about them. It wasn't much; I only questioned privately, to myself—but it was a start.

On the day before a seminar about the process of moving

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from ordinary church life to communal living, we were at the home of Denis and his wife, Rosamund, seeking reassurance. There were just a few of us. We were the doubters and the nervous in the flock, looking for final reassurance.

Our church had considered this move before, but now that we were part of the New Wave of the Spirit Christian Church Worldwide—an American-based fundamentalist church that was spreading to Britain and the rest of Europe—we could buy just the property we liked, money no obstacle. It would be shared with believers from the mother church in the States.

I wanted to be at the seminar, but was due to take my daughter Mel to hospital for an investigation into a limp that had become more apparent as she began to toddle. My GP hadn't taken it too seriously at first; then suddenly, when she was twenty-three months old, he arranged an urgent appointment with an orthopaedic surgeon.

I suggested changing the appointment, if I could get another one soon, so that I could be at the seminar with my husband, Malcolm. Denis wouldn't permit it. "Malcolm is the head of your household, Laura," he said, "so let's leave it to him, shall we?"

He smiled at me—condescendingly, I thought. Malcolm tried to look confident.

"I'm not trying to take over, Denis," I said, "just be involved. If we're going to give up our home, I'd like to be there when it's discussed."

Denis smiled and shook his head gently, as if indulging my obstinacy in the face of this unassailable argument. "*The man is head of the woman—Ephesians 5:22.*"

"I could easily try to change the appointment," I said. "I could phone the hospital right now."

"Laura, Laura, what have I just said to you?" Denis clasped my hand, squeezing hard. "*Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord—same verse.* Would you mistrust our Lord in the way you so clearly mistrust your husband?"

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Concern yourself with your family, Laura, and leave other matters to your man!”

My ‘man’ was standing shyly in the farthest corner of the room, the place where he was happiest. Denis strode across, gripped his shoulders firmly and propelled him forward into the centre of the room as though presenting a prize specimen for approval. Malcolm looked down, then away to the window.

“Malcolm will deal with the business side of things, Laura. You concentrate on being a good homemaker. That’s what God made you fit for. The men-folk will attend the seminar on behalf of their wives and families.”

“I will be there though,” said Michelle softly. Michelle was serene and unruffled as always. Her French accent added an impression of frailty and femininity.

Denis released Malcolm and turned towards Michelle. He stood close enough to cause her to look up at him awkwardly from her position on the sofa.

“So you’ll be there will you, Michelle? Is this significant in some way?”

He continued to loom over her. He wouldn’t have done that if her husband had been there, I thought, wishing Bruce was with us for many and varied reasons. Denis didn’t like Michelle or Bruce. I thought he might be jealous of Bruce’s pastoral and speaking skills. They’d been with our church just a couple of months, and I think Denis felt threatened.

He turned now to face the rest of us. “There’s no need for Michelle to be there,” he said, “but I don’t forbid it. I’m very easy going, as you know.”

My friend Mary and her husband, Alec, looked at one another, a slight widening of the eyes the only sign of dissent. Denis caught the look with his usual proficiency.

“You think I’m not easy-going? I can assure you I am. You don’t know what ‘controlling’ is. Just you wait!” He chuckled, and shook his head in that familiar, irritating, know-all way of his.

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I wanted to ask what he meant. We all did, I think, but no-one dared. It would be some time before I discovered what he was talking about and many months before I understood everything.

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PART ONE: HOSPITAL

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Chapter One

“As you see, the left hip is dislocated.” The consultant waved an arm towards the x-ray of Mel’s pelvis. He flicked through some papers on a table in the corner.

I was obliged to address his back. “Yes I can see,” I said.

Guilt stabbed me through. Should I have noticed something was wrong sooner? How could I have considered putting off this appointment to attend the seminar?

“I didn't know you could run around on a dislocated hip,” I ventured.

“Clearly you can, Mrs. ... er ... People may continue into adulthood with the condition, but they have a shorter, misaligned leg, a permanent limp, joint pain. You don’t want that for your daughter.”

He left the room without a backward glance.

“He hasn't said what he's going to do,” I protested to the attendant nurse.

“I've no idea what Mr. Breen's up to,” she replied, shaking her head but clearly not surprised.

We both looked at Mel, my little girl with the big problem. The nurse smiled and squatted down, took a handful of plastic badges with Velcro backs from her apron pocket, and held them out on her open palm.

“Would you like one of these?”

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Mel peered at the selection, craning her head forward while keeping a firm grasp on my skirt. She kept one leg anchored, as though standing near the edge of a precipice, and slid her other leg forward in order to get a better view. The nurse, still squatting, moved towards her. Mel leaned back, maintaining the gap, then reached out and took the largest badge. Beside a picture of Bugs Bunny was the caption: *What's up, Doc?*

Mel held the badge carefully between thumb and forefinger as though handling explosives, then stepped back to safety. She turned the badge over, examining it from all angles.

Mr. Breen burst back into our peaceful scene and began speaking as though there had been no interval. Mel scrambled onto my lap and turned her back to him. She continued to inspect the badge, experimenting with the Velcro on random surfaces, including my hair and nose.

The surgeon was in full flow: "We'll need to initiate treatment for your daughter's condition immediately. It's been left too long already. It's skin traction, or surgery—major surgery. Traction doesn't always work, but we'll give that a try first."

"Traction? I don't think I know—"

"Pulling on the leg with weights until the joint is back in position. After that she'll be in a bulky plaster for three months. If it works it will avoid an operation or two."

"Goodness me! Even that sounds pretty dreadful ..."

I swallowed hard. I'd barely taken in the facts of Mel's condition—so much more serious than I'd expected—and already I'd been hurtled through the treatment options.

An operation or two! Perhaps I should offer him my thoughts?

"It's difficult to decide what would be for the best. It seems a waste if the traction doesn't work. On the other hand it might—"

"We'll try traction first. A few weeks in hospital, then into a plaster," he said, disabusing me of any notion that I was

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to be part of the decision-making process. “Be back here first thing tomorrow morning, if you please.”

“I'd like to stay with my daughter, if that's all right?” I said, sounding to my own ears too apologetic—but that's what doctors do to me. Mel had nestled her face into my leg, her arms holding my thighs. I stroked the side of her ear and neck.

“We do have a sort of crèche here for mothers if they really want to remain nearby,” said Mr. Breen briskly. “Tell Sister on the ward that you'll be staying and she'll arrange things.”

He flipped the door open and strode through in a single movement, leaving it to swing gently back into place in its own time.

I stared at the door, wishing I could snatch up Mel and dash out, along the corridor, to the bus stop, and off home, before the gap became too small for us to squeeze through.

“Will you miss sports day?” My son, Clive, hopped around the kitchen as he spoke, keeping off the cracks between the tiles.

“When is it?” I continued to rummage in the laundry basket for essential washing to pack before I left with Mel for hospital the next morning. Malcolm didn't know how to use the washing machine. He'd have to learn. I must leave instructions.

“... Can you then, Mum?” Clive's voice rose sufficiently to penetrate my preoccupation.

“Sorry, Clive—what?” I sat back on my heels clutching dirty clothes to my front.

“It's *Jooooon!* Sports Day. *Jooo...oon!* Will you be back?” Clive grinned and squatted in front of me. His silky curls tickled my nose as he pressed his inner arms into my neck, hands clasped behind my head.

“Your curls are growing in again. I suppose you'll want a cut and spikes before the beginning of term?”

“It doesn't matter, Mum, not with Mel being ... well, ill,

sort of.” Clive balanced his knees on mine and looked into my eyes. What a mature and thoughtful nine-year-old he was. Would all that change one day?

“It doesn’t really matter about the sports either,” Clive continued. He pulled Mel towards him as she toddled up to gather some of the washing into her little shopping basket. She fell sideways onto his lap, so we ended in a sandwich with Clive’s and my knees flanking Mel’s little body. Mel laughed in her usual deep breathy fashion as Clive rolled her onto his chest, whilst telling her not to squash him.

“We’ll easily be back for the sports, Clive. She might be nearly out of plaster if it all goes to plan.” I made some rapid calculations: four weeks on traction, then twelve weeks in plaster. Sixteen weeks in all. “No, come to think of it, she’ll still be in plaster.”

I had no idea how you put a hip in plaster. I watched Mel crawl away over the washing with her little basket of pink tights. She stood and toddled unevenly towards the washing machine.

I could see now more clearly than ever how her left foot pointed sideways, not forwards. Why hadn’t my GP taken more notice when I mentioned it at her regular checks? And how could she walk around like that? I remembered the x-ray—the head of her femur so far out of its socket that any amateur could see the dislocation. It would be making its way further up the side of her hip with each toddling day. I wouldn’t have been surprised to see it sticking right through her skin.

Mel stowed the tights in the washing machine and returned for more. She smiled as she toddled towards me. She loved trotting around and ‘helping’ me. No more of that for months.

“I haven’t packed the Amiga,” said Clive. “Doug’ll want to go on that.” He rushed upstairs to get his computer and a few games to take to the home of our friends, Mary and Alec and their three sons.

I dealt with the washing, with Mel’s continuing help. The

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kitchen floor was muddy. It was also old and chipped and scratched. I couldn't be bothered with it. It needed replacing but Malcolm said we couldn't afford it. A bubble of resentment lodged between my ribs. We *could* afford it ... but not easily, I had to admit. *Besides, we might be leaving this behind soon.* The bubble eased.

Someone rattled the letterbox—Malcolm didn't want to waste time or money on a bell or a knocker. I pushed away another petty resentment, and opened the door to Mary and her youngest son, Doug.

I hoped Clive would be like Doug in a few years. Even at fourteen he managed to smile and be polite and helpful. He'd entertain Clive in spite of the age gap. Perhaps he was sufficiently senior to avoid the need to be aloof.

"Laura, what a shock!" Mary hugged me to her ample bosom. Only six years older than I, she sometimes felt as much like a mother as a friend. She looked old for her years with her solid curves and grey curls—natural but with the appearance of an old-fashioned perm. And she was so calm and sensible.

She released me and continued: "It's difficult to believe Mel could need all that treatment for a little wobbly walk ... Hallo, sweetheart, thank you." Mary bent down to accept a carrot from Mel, who had furnished her basket with items from the vegetable rack. Mary pretended to nibble her carrot, then returned it to Mel.

"Is Malcolm back?" she asked. She peeped into the living room.

"No, I don't think he understood what I was on about." I sighed and shook my head. Malcolm had kept saying 'Oh, dear!' when I phoned him at the seminar. I didn't think he'd taken much in. But who could blame him? I'd barely taken it in myself, and I'd been there.

Doug went upstairs to help Clive pack and Mary helped me tidy the kitchen.

"Well, little Mel doesn't seem to be in any pain, Laura," said Mary. She filled the washing up bowl with hot suds.

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“And maybe it’s as well to find out suddenly, rather than having to think about something like this too long beforehand,” I said.

“Remember what it was like with Gary when he had all that trouble?” said Mary, referring to a time five years ago when her second son was eleven and caught Lyme disease from a tick bite. Sharing Mary’s troubles had brought us close. Gary went through many hospital and doctors’ visits with fever, headache and fatigue before a diagnosis was finally made. Apparently a visit to Richmond Park almost three months earlier had brought him into contact with a tick that lived on the deer there. Eventually he was given antibiotics—just in time. Any later and he could have been permanently affected.

Mary had lived around Stowmarket in Suffolk all her life, and had married Alec, her childhood sweetheart, when she was eighteen. We’d come to know one another through church a few months after I moved to our house, about a mile from the town, nine years ago. We lived with the distant roar of the A14. Mary didn’t make things complicated. She was even-tempered and reliable. We had become firm friends.

We sorted out the practicalities of Clive’s month-long stay as we sorted out the kitchen. He could return home from time to time when Malcolm’s work allowed him to be available.

Malcolm’s key turned in the front door as we stood in the hallway with Clive and a pile of luggage, ready to send him on his way.

“Hallo. I see I’ve got a welcoming committee.” Malcolm laughed, darted me a look ‘hallo’, and shrugged out of his coat.

“Clive’s just off, Malcolm,” I said. I touched his arm to keep him from going to the kitchen for a beer.

“Is he? Where are you off to, Clive?”

“Staying with Mary and Alec while Mel’s in hospital,” said Clive, stepping from one foot to the other beside Mary and

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Doug.

“When’re you coming back?”

“I *said* on the phone. I’ll be in the hospital, with Mel.” I smiled wryly, knowing I’d have to explain again.

“What? All the time?” Malcolm’s Lancashire vowels became more pronounced as his voice rose.

“Enough for it to be easier for Clive to have a reliable living set-up.”

“Will you be all right, son?” Malcolm ruffled Clive’s hair.

“Course, Dad. I’ll have a great time.”

“D’you still want to do the bike on Saturday?”

“Oh, yeah. Can Doug come?”

“As long as Mary doesn’t mind?” Malcolm grinned at Mary, then blushed and turned away.

“Doug’ll love it, Malcolm. You might get the other two tagging along.”

“The more the merrier,” he said turning back to Mary. “We can go out for a late lunch, then ... there’s bike racing on TV, or—”

“We’ll be going to see Mum and Mel some time, won’t we?” Clive cocked his head to one side and looked up at his father.

“Mm ... *some* time. How long are you there for?” Malcolm shot a glance towards me.

We ushered our son to the car and waved him goodbye before I got down to the job of explaining again exactly what would happen, as far as I knew myself.

I wondered how far the future in hospital would diverge from my imagining.

Chapter Two

“Look, here we are, Mel, see?” My voice was high and loud. I was stupidly animated about such a dull scene, desperate for it to be right, for this to be just a mildly unpleasant experience.

The ward was light and airy, but the beige and the silence hit you straight away, broken only by the soft sounds from an elderly lady in the bed furthest from the door. She lay on her back and snored gently at the ceiling, dishevelled feathers of white hair catching the dampness at the corners of her eyes and mouth.

“We seem to have had a rash of broken hips,” laughed the nurse who ushered us in. She gestured towards the snorer and her equally elderly neighbour. There was an empty bed beside the latter, and a woman of about seventy opposite who listened with headphones to something surely gloomy, from her expression. Nearest the door was an adolescent girl reading a paperback. She glanced at us, then returned to her book.

Mel's bed was the first on the left, beyond a jutting wall, its head next to a long, narrow window.

“We thought your daughter would like a window,” said the nurse. Outside was an empty courtyard. “I'll leave you to get yourselves sorted out.”

I began to unpack Mel's bag. “Let's get you into your pyjamas!” I cried, trying to make it sound like wicked fun rather than strange and untimely. “See, I brought your 'Little Angel' ones!”

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I dressed her in silence. I was suddenly afraid of what we might be letting ourselves in for.

I'd like to say that things improved after a bad start, but they didn't. Staff made an effort to make Mel's treatment more acceptable to her. On the first morning they laid her favourite doll, Mandy, beside her on the pillow, making the toy into a substitute patient. They pretended to spray adhesive onto her hard plastic legs, and attached big plasters along her thighs, fixing them to her 'skin' with sellotape. They wrapped the plasters around with bandages and pulled Mandy's stiff legs about, talking soothing words.

Mel stared at her mummified doll with a puzzled frown, but perhaps Mandy's treatment had helped a little, for Mel made no fuss as they sprayed real adhesive onto her own legs and attached four enormous pink fabric plasters, one on each side of either leg. She looked unhappy about the swathes of bandages and the weights attached to cords on the ends of the plasters, but she seemed to tolerate it.

Once that was done she had to lie back. They would gradually increase the weights pulling on her left leg over the next two days, then begin to move her legs apart.

It was the next morning, when Mel found herself still on her back, unable to move, that she decided to assert herself. She cried and begged and screamed: "Mumma mumma mumma peese *pe-e-e-s-e!*"

This was Mel's first meaningful sentence. Apart from 'da' and a general 'mum mum mum' sound that I wasn't certain applied to me, she had no words, just grunts and laughs and a happy sing-song noise.

Now she clung to my arm, digging in her fingernails. She pressed her cheek against my sleeve, making it wet with tears, and held her anguished little face up towards me. "*Peese, Mumma! Peese!*"

I was devastated that her first words should be dredged from such wretchedness. She found them because I was the one who could put things right ... only I couldn't. I had to look away. I had to let her down.

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I was ushered away in tears while Mel was given Valium to calm her down.

After that she needed Valium only once more. I continued to feel badly for her, though. It soon became difficult to conjure up images of home. My world closed down to concern for Mel. I rarely strayed far from her; it began to feel like bad luck to do so. On the one occasion I took a walk away from the ward I returned to find her awake, screaming, and surrounded by people in white coats. Nobody had mentioned that Mr. Breen would be visiting.

I barged through the throng. Mr. Breen gave me a look that implied I shouldn't be there, and I almost apologised. It was dreadful, the mixture of defensiveness and anger he stirred up in me.

Mel's spine was arched. She had flung her head back as far as her neck would allow while she yelled, tears flowing sideways and upwards into the hair around her temples. She looked so helpless! The traction had been advancing every day, and by now she was held feet higher than her head, making sitting up impossible. Her legs were being abducted, a notch a day, by the cords around a large, circular frame at the base of the bed.

The ward sister, Jean, understood her need to hide away and gently lifted the edge of the sheet over the little ear that faced the crowd, thus obscuring most of the small, anguished face from view.

I leaned over and stroked Mel's forehead, whispering sufficiently close to her ear to be heard above her cries. She yelled loudly for a while, clutching my head to her chest like a great football, blocking off all she could of the strangers. Gradually the yells subsided to small hiccupping sobs.

Mr. Breen sighed impatiently and lectured his students briefly on Mel's condition, saying she had a 'congenital dislocation of the hip'. The term made it sound as if Mel were a defective model. I'd never liked it, and didn't understand how it could have come about, with no history of it in Malcolm's or my family.

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The incident *was* useful in that it prompted Sister Jean to suggest that I sleep on the ward, rather than in the mothers' crèche.

'Crèche' was not a misnomer, for we mothers felt about as useful as helpless babies there. It consisted of a large hut with four small dormitories, and toilet facilities. It was a few minutes' walk from the main building. Meals were taken in the hospital canteen, and our door to the ward was locked at night from nine o'clock, so I couldn't be with Mel at her most vulnerable times. I was segregated, along with the other mothers in the crèche: impotent, occupying space and bed linen to no purpose.

I was assured I would be called "if we get desperate", but I didn't want them to wait until they were desperate, especially if Mrs. Taggart, the other sister, was on duty. Her idea of being desperate was bound to be considerably more extreme than mine. She was a chisel-faced, no-nonsense lady who bustled me aside for everything from checking Mel's traction bandages to making space in expectation of the cleaning lady—"she gets vexed when people walk near her vacuum." She rang the visitors' bell at her own convenience, as far as I could tell.

It was good to be able to have breakfast at Mel's side once I was sleeping on the ward. On our first two mornings at the hospital I'd come to the ward from the crèche to find Mel whining in a tired, mechanical way that suggested she'd been weeping for a long time and had almost cried herself out. There was the red patch in the centre of her forehead that appeared when she was especially upset. Worse was the third morning, when she had stopped crying completely. A fly crawled round her nose and mouth. She seemed unaware of it. She gasped and sighed spasmodically for a long time whilst I sat by her side. *Why hadn't they called for me?*

By the second Saturday I was tired and anxious. I couldn't let go of my identification with Mel's limitations. I probably

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felt worse than she did herself.

Mel had been on traction for nine days now, and I'd been with her on the ward for five. Friends had been marvellous, sending in games and activities suitable for a small child to use while lying on her back; tempting snacks to keep Mel eating (she had begun to reject her meals); even a small portable television, as the ward didn't have one within her view.

No-one used the courtyard outside her window. It was enclosed on all sides, and even the birds neglected the bird table. There was a bench, never used. I'd stare at it through the glass until my eyes began to water. I'd imagine cutting off Mel's traction weights, picking her up from her bed and sitting out there with her upright beside me, the breeze and the sun on her face.

The traction apparatus—the bandages, plasters and weights—seemed to me like something you might find in a castle dungeon for the long-term torment of your enemies; not in a hospital, even one as old as our particular ward block. And I'd already been told that the treatment might do no good.

My rational mind told me to look to Mel's future and put up with this necessary, if unpleasant, means to a healthy joint. My emotions told me to release her from these harmful restrictions immediately. This feverish, short-term longing caused me to continue to hope and pray for a sudden and miraculous healing.

This wasn't a sudden switch-on to God in a time of trouble. Denis was the pastor of our church—a 'free' church, not an Anglican or Methodist or other traditional denomination. We spent most of Sunday worshipping, with food and fun (honestly) in between. People were always jumping up during worship to give special words from God, or dancing for joy, or laying on hands for healing. I don't think I'm a naturally churchy person, but God had grabbed me—I don't know how else to explain it—when I was a teenager, and

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he'd never let go.

It started when I was thirteen and Susan Kenny stopped being my best friend. She began to go to the Friday Teens Night at the deviously named Safe Harbour Ballroom. I wasn't allowed to go. Susan would show off her love bites the next day. To me those blotches and bruises were both fascinating and repellent. I wondered whether I would have wanted to go, even if I could.

Another school friend, Celia, gradually replaced Susan. Celia had long dark hair, parted in the middle, and olive brown skin. She was serene and assured.

Celia already knew what she wanted to do with her life. She was an exceptional person—still is. Her eyes were lifted to a future where she would serve humanity. She wanted to be a doctor and go to South America. She felt called by God. She's there now. She believed that in serving people she was serving Jesus, and that Jesus was the way to God through his death and resurrection. She believed that we could have a friendship with God, speak to him and let him speak to us. It was so simple—or she made it so simple.

I committed my heart to Jesus, and my life changed. I found that behind the comfortable rhythm of friendship and the deeper throb of a contented life with two loving parents beat the heavy pulse of God's heart, there for me beyond and beneath everything else.

I lost that second layer—the contented life with two loving parents—when I was twenty and they died within a few months of one another, my father of an inoperable brain tumour and my mother in a car crash, possibly caused by her driving when still too distressed and distracted to concentrate. I had no brothers or sisters.

As for God's heart—it suffered some palpitations, or seemed to. It took months to settle back and for God to prove himself my rock in even the worst of times.

I was at Sheffield university, reading English, when it happened. I had many Christian friends who helped me through, and my faith became stronger than ever ...

eventually. I read Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* and gave myself totally to what God had in store for me. I made no conditions. How could I, having lost my closest kin in so sudden and untimely a manner?

"Strive for this, pray for this, desire this one thing—that you may be stripped clean of all selfishness, and follow Jesus in complete self-abandonment, dying to self that you may live to Me forever." Those words of Thomas à Kempis calmed and strengthened me; took me away from fear.

I think I was drawn to Malcolm's unassuming kindness at a time when I needed a close relationship. He was an engineering student at Nottingham. Was he *too* unassuming? I had doubts even before we married, but I had become compliant to events, assuming they would be for my good merely because they had happened and getting out of them was not clearly a right or easy path. I think now that that attitude had some effect on my willingness to move to communal living without knowing the fine detail, not many weeks after Mel's traction finished.

Perhaps 'compliant' is the wrong word. It was—and is—more positive than that. My other favourite Christian writer was Frances Ridley Havergal. She wrote the hymn *Take My Life and Let it Be*. In her posthumous book, *Starlight Through the Shadows*, she said:

"The Lord who loves you, thinks about you and cares for you, the Lord who understands you, the Lord who never makes a mistake, the Lord who spared not His own Son, but gave Him up for you! Will you not let *Him* do what seemeth Him good?"

God was in control, not just expecting me to let things happen. It would be all right. If there were difficulties I would welcome them, just like Thomas à Kempis. And, like Frances Ridley Havergal, I knew God wouldn't make a mistake. And if *I* was making a mistake of significance, he would tell me.

So with Mel in hospital, it was a big question for me: was *God* telling me to keep hoping and praying for healing, or

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was I telling myself? A number of Christian friends were urging me to expect a miracle. Two people said they had received direct words from our Lord that Mel's illness was to be a witness to God's power. She would be healed.

So here we were, nine days into traction. It was Saturday, and Malcolm was with Mel, so I left the ward for a break. I went farther than usual, plodding on through a mild drizzle. I sat on a bench which was still dry because it encircled the trunk of a huge oak tree just coming into leaf. I was trying to summon the will to return to the ward, my thoughts buzzing monotonously round and round. They centred on Mel night and day. My whole being seemed to have shrunk into a tight ball of concern for her.

Malcolm was in the process of signing over some sort of rights to our home to the church. Well, he was the boss, as Denis said, and now I was mainly thankful to leave it to him. A suitable house had been found for us all to move to—a big old place on the Norfolk/Suffolk border. It came with thirty acres in the middle of nowhere. The nearest town, Diss, was five miles away. Things had moved quickly since the day less than a fortnight ago when Denis had told me to leave everything to Malcolm. Negotiations must already have begun for the house by then and the seminar arranged quickly to answer the remaining questions. That's what I think now, but at the time I couldn't summon up enough interest to speculate.

Plans were well under way for us to move to this place—'Jayfield's Corner'. I was ready now. We'd been thinking about it for so long, it had begun to feel half-hearted to go on *nearly* doing something that was to be a way of giving our all to God, including more fully the way we lived our moments and the details of our days.

I was vaguely concerned that Malcolm's desperation to leave his job might cause him to sign any piece of paper put before him, but my concern was muted by my preoccupation with Mel—and after all, God wouldn't make a mistake.

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Things that happened away from the hospital seemed unreal and inconsequential. It was hard to imagine that other events and circumstances might arise from anything Malcolm did in that non-hospital world.

I continued to sit on the bench, staring unseeingly at bushes and bracken growing beyond the tree's shade. I could hardly face the thought of returning to the ward. I'd scarcely spoken to Clive, who had come that day with Malcolm. Not that he appeared to mind my going. He seemed to be coping better than anybody, probably enjoying being looked after by Mary and Alec and the boys, who between them gave him a great time.

I guess I was coping least well. I couldn't imagine how I would survive the next few hours, let alone two weeks or more. The short expanse of time seemed to have expanded to infinity; my movement through it had almost ceased. *If only I could make the next fourteen days—until we were home again—not exist for Mel and me; if only I could annihilate them, burst that stretch of time like a bubble and appear on the other side, dazed and smiling with relief.*

It was at that point that two women, strangers, found me. They were mothers with their own children in the hospital. The only mothers I'd met before were in the parents' accommodation, and thus in the same situation as I was.

We fell into conversation and I discovered that there was a children's ward, and that the young orthopaedic patients of the other consultant were there, where parents didn't need 'permission' to stay with their children. The women speculated that Mr. Breen 'wasn't comfortable' on the children's ward.

"*He doesn't feel comfortable?*" I cried. "What about the children? How comfortable does he think *they* feel, stuck in a ward full of old women, no toys, no television, no other children and mums and families and ... everything ..."

I subsided, dissatisfied with the way I had expressed myself, my resentment undiminished by such a mild

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outburst. Squeezing Mr. Breen's scrawny neck would probably be the only action to have some kind of cathartic effect. I imagined shouting at him about his beastly selfishness. The depth of feeling might convey to him just how culpable he was, and when I began to throttle him he would know he'd pushed me too far ...

I saw his eyes popping, his face becoming pink, then red, then purple. I saw myself being dragged off him ... *'Milud, the balance of Mrs. Gray's mind was disturbed. We appeal for leniency ...'* Maybe not.

I could see myself more realistically vandalising his office. Just thinking of it gave me a brief thrill. I was overturning his desk, tearing down curtains and blinds, smashing pictures and ornaments ...

The spasm passed and I found myself standing shakily and taking my leave of the two women. I returned to the ward to find Toni visiting for the first time.

Toni was on the central council of the US mother-church and had moved to England from Houston with her husband, Jimmy. We'd become good friends soon after her arrival. Looking back, I see the friendship had more to do with her than with me. She'd cultivated me. Even at the time, I think I suspected she viewed me, at least in part, as more of a responsibility than an equal partner.

She looked especially stunning that afternoon. The ends of her hair, which usually had a dry and ragged appearance from over-bleaching, were neatly looped into a wide jewelled slide at the nape of her neck. Her makeup was, as always, heavyish but impeccable. She wore a long loose turquoise jacket that highlighted her extraordinary clear blue-green eyes. She sat on Mel's bed, resting back on one elbow.

Both Malcolm and Mel looked apprehensive. Malcolm was hunched over in his chair, leaning away from Toni and glancing at her sideways for a split second at a time. His posture suggested he might be preparing for some kind of physical assault. Clive was nowhere to be seen. He'd probably left already with Mary's eldest on his way back

from football.

Toni's an extrovert. She's outspoken, flamboyant, warm—all the things Malcolm is not. I tend to form close relationships with people at the extremes—maybe because I'm both extremes at once myself in that I'm shy and often go with the flow, but sometimes I blow my top or dig my heels in and surprise everyone.

When I came back to the ward I was ready to get angry all over again. I was so wound up that I was on the brink of a full-blown tantrum if I didn't get my way about the children's ward. Frances Ridley Havergal was far from my mind. The trouble is, I didn't expect to get my way. The shy retiring bit of me was set for failure. I was in no state to argue my case, even if Mr. Breen had been around.

It was wonderful to see Toni, the classic optimist. She slid off the bed the second she saw me, and came bounding over. She gave me a really tight, hearty hug.

“How are you, honey?” she asked, loudly enough for the whole ward to hear. She held my shoulders and looked into my eyes. I tried to say I wasn't too bad, but my face wouldn't keep still. I blinked and swallowed repeatedly.

Toni acted decisively. She led me out into the deserted courtyard, moved the bench into the corner, and spread her raincoat over it. We sat down. At least it had stopped raining.

She put an arm round me and said: “Now, dear, dear Laura, what's the matter; I mean what *exactly*, apart from the obvious?”

I continued to try not to be too upset. I felt I had no right. Although Mel wasn't happy—no active toddler would be—she should be well again soon. Toni had no such uncertainty. She squeezed and shook my shoulders. “Cry if you want, Laura. Let yourself go, you must!”

I did as I was told, with great heaving shuddering sobs. Eventually words came: “Oh Toni, I didn't realise how upset I was.” I blew out my breath, upwards over hot eyes and cheeks. “I'm finding this so hard to cope with. I can't stand

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seeing my children unhappy. I wish it was me instead of Mel!”

Toni hugged me again, and then sat back with one arm still draped round my shoulders. “Tell me all about it, Laura. Bawl your head off, if it'll help! Malcolm can't cope with all this emotion, but I can, so c'mon, out with it.”

The little lecture calmed me. I poured out the host of complaints, both petty and serious, that had been accumulating. The way Mel—and all the patients—were woken an hour or more before breakfast for no reason that I could understand; Sister Taggart's surly ways; her visitors' bells; the lack of facilities on the ward for a child, especially one with Mel's restricted view of life around her. This led me to the problems of her being on a ward for adults, and my earlier conversation with the two mothers.

We were interrupted by Malcolm coming out to tell us that visiting time was over. The bell had rung.

“We haven't quite finished yet, Mal,” said Toni. “Give us a few more minutes, okay?”

Malcolm looked uncomfortable and said that he didn't know what Sister Taggart would say. He attempted a rueful smile but it came over as a nervous twitch. Like me, he considered Sister Taggart someone to succumb to rather than confront. However, Toni was pretty formidable herself, so Malcolm backed away and returned to Mel's bedside.

I continued to tell Toni my feelings about Mr. Breen and my increasing sense of antagonism towards any member of the hospital staff who was the slightest bit inconsiderate, offhand, busy even, when I wanted something for Mel, or who appeared not to understand perfectly what the requirements of a small child might be. In fact, more and more people and things were falling under the swelling shadow of my animosity. The smell of the hospital, the busy bustling nurses, the noise of clanking trolleys, the hard, cold floors; all stirred in me a tangled mess of resentment.

Malcolm poked his head round the door once more. “Mrs. Taggart said that visitors really must leave the ward.”

"This must be the only ward in the country still to have visiting bells," cried Toni, throwing up her hands. "But it's getting cold out here. You ready to come in, Laura?"

When we were in, Malcolm left. He practically ran. Toni stayed, talking to me and playing with Mel. Sister Taggart came over and locked the door to the courtyard, pocketing the key. She stared pointedly. Toni returned the look with a warm smile and asked if she had to lock the door for security purposes.

"No, it leads to an enclosed area, as you can see," the Sister replied heavily. "But it shouldn't have been opened, not in this weather." She looked at me accusingly until I lowered my gaze. She then directed unfriendly eyes towards Toni. "You'll have to excuse us now, if you don't mind. We need to get on. This is a busy time of day."

"Oh, I won't stop you. Never fear." Toni sat on the end of Mel's bed and rested her hands, loose and relaxed, over her crossed legs. Mel stared at Toni, wide brown eyes fixed on her face. She turned her head on the pillow to regard Sister Taggart, raised her arm and pointed, as if demanding a response.

"I'm afraid too many extra people get in the way, madam," obliged Sister Taggart. "The evening meal's coming soon, and Mr. Breen is calling to see a new patient."

"Well, that's wonderful. We wanted to have a word with Mr. Breen as a matter of fact, so I'll wait if you don't mind."

"That's not possible, madam. It's a Saturday and he wouldn't normally be here at all. Mrs. Gray can speak to Mr. Breen on his regular rounds on Tuesday if there are any queries."

"But that's ages away, and Mrs. Gray wanted to ask him something of particular urgency. I'm here to give her some support, that's all." Toni sat on the end of the bed, no tension apparent at all. She might have been discussing the weather with a congenial companion.

"I don't think Mrs. Gray or anyone else can bother Mr. Breen on what should be a day off. Excuse me, he'll be

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here soon and I have to get on.” She stared angrily at Toni for a moment longer before bustling away.

The old ogre had backed down! I was amazed. Toni busied herself with Mel, while I wondered what was coming next.

I don't know what I would have done on that Saturday afternoon if Toni hadn't been there. I would certainly have tried to speak to Mr. Breen, but he would have brushed me off. You're so vulnerable when you have a child in hospital. Nothing much is under your control. I would have ended up getting furious, yelling and getting nowhere, or trying too hard to be pleasant and reasonable—and still getting nowhere.

Toni got it right though. “You really must bring up anything concerning Melanie Gray next Tuesday”; “You're not a relative of Miss Gray are you?”; and finally, “I really am a very busy man you know. I am urgently needed elsewhere!”—none of this deterred Toni. And Mr. Breen was more approachable without his entourage of white coats that always put me in mind of a supporting army.

I think he might have fancied her, too. He couldn't decide whether to be angry or ingratiating, so he combined irritated words with a rubbing of hands and neck, like a self-conscious Uriah Heap.

“We won't take much of your time ... please!” said Toni finally.

Mr. Breen tapped his foot and sighed. He rubbed his chin distractedly. After a few seconds he seemed to come to a decision and opened a door into a small room next to Sister's office.

He stepped back to allow us to precede him. “I will give you two or three minutes, if you will please be concise and to the point.”

“Yes, surely, Mr. Breen.” Toni looked at me.

I had him all to myself for once. I breathed deeply. “I'd like my child transferred to the children's ward.”

“That's quite impossible, Mrs. Gray.”

“Why?” My voice rose. Already my heart was pounding, banging against my ribs.

Mr. Breen sighed pointedly, as if the task that lay ahead of him in answering this question was something akin to attempting to explain the theory of relativity to a baboon.

“You may or may not have noticed that your daughter is on traction.” His voice was heavy with sarcasm. “We cannot disturb this. She must remain on traction until the joint reaches its final position. Have I made myself clear?”

He looked at me, arms folded and eyebrows raised almost to his hairline. His deliberate rudeness had the effect of silencing me. My emotions were too shaky to stand a confrontation.

“I notice the bed is on wheels. Why can't you wheel it to the children's ward?” asked Toni.

“I'm sorry, I don't know your name,” said Mr. Breen. He turned reluctantly to Toni.

“My name is Mrs. Marwick. Now, why can't the whole caboodle be wheeled to the children's ward?”

“It is too heavy, too large and the weights would swing dangerously and uncomfortably for the patient.” Mr. Breen spoke to the ceiling in a gruff sing-song, as if his answer was so obvious that it was irritating and wasteful of his time to have to go through the motions of arguing the case.

“Is that bed kept in the ward all the time?”

“Of course not. Only when it's needed. We have a special room for bulky orthopaedic equipment.”

“Then it's certainly not too large and heavy to wheel round the hospital when there isn't a patient in it,” said Toni.

“No ... but it would be tricky with the patient and weights attached.”

“But not impossible? You could find a way of anchoring the weights?” Toni opened her blue eyes wide and placed a pleading hand on his arm. “It would be so wonderful if you and your team could find a way to move Mel, it really would, Mr. Breen. Do say you'll try! ... Please?”

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Toni's wheedling and pleading was perfectly timed. At the last moment she'd placed Mr. Breen in the position of a powerful but benevolent potentate. She sounded fully confident of his ultimate kindness. He and 'his team' would do their best against almost insuperable odds.

He turned to me, smiling just a little. "Well, Mrs. Gray, is this really important to you?"

"Yes. It would make a tremendous difference to the whole family. I can see it would be a great deal of trouble, but we would appreciate it so very much." I'd followed Toni's lead. I'd lick his boots if it would help.

"The sooner the better, I dare say? I'll have a word with my registrar. She's on call this afternoon."

He even shook hands with us as he left. I was trembling. Toni gave me a warm hug.

"Well he's got a heart after all, eh, honey?"

"Yes! What a relief!" I laughed breathlessly. "Do you know, I feel so much better towards him now. There's hardly any resentment left. It's like a whole load of painful knots have been untied inside."

"Doesn't love and trust beat bitterness and grudges every time? That's Jesus' love you know. He's got enough love to cover all those feelings you were telling me about. He can just drown them out! I'll be praying for you, Laura, real hard. Now I must fly. Cheers!"

Toni had been moving forward and speaking over her shoulder. As she turned away she collided with a student nurse who was working on the ward. The girl's face lit up. She cried out with delight, "Toni, hello! We meet again! Just visiting this time, I hope?"

Toni made a non-committal kind of "huh" sound and moved away fast towards the swing doors.

"Hang on," called the nurse. She put a hand on Toni's arm and performed a polka step to stay with her. "How have you recovered? As quickly as you thought?"

Toni stopped in mid-stride, crossed her arms and stared at the girl, head to one side. When she eventually spoke,

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her tone was coldly polite: “Excuse *me*, but who *are* you?” She enunciated each word with icy clarity.

The young nurse blushed deeply. Toni glanced at me and moderated her tone.

“Dear lady, if you intend staying in the medical profession, in however lowly a capacity, you must learn not to shout out what are after all fairly private matters, in fairly public places. Understand?”

The girl understood. She hurried into the ward, leaving Toni by the swing doors looking back towards me. I hovered in the office doorway, intrigued and embarrassed—for Toni a little, for the nurse a lot. I hate to see people put down and you saw that sometimes in our church; inevitable, with someone like Denis as pastor.

“Don't worry about that, Laura,” Toni called out, her smile warm again. “I'll tell you all about it one day when you don't have any cares of your own, though it's pretty boring. Anyway you just bother about yourself and Mel for now. Cheers!”

She was gone. Her parting remarks to me hadn't been guilty or evasive, had they? I didn't think so at the time. She had been angry with the nurse, but that was just an understandable desire for privacy—wasn't it? Nor had she been unusually cruel. It wasn't uncommon for Toni to be scathing when she disagreed with someone. I'd seen it before, especially in fellowship Bible studies if a member of the group had expressed views considered to be deviant.

It was her custom to express herself forcefully. To her, the verbal lashing didn't mean anything more than annoyance at having her ailment, or treatment, or both trumpeted forth. What exactly the young nurse had been trumpeting *about* was unclear. What had she said?

I discovered that I didn't want to think about it. Toni's words about love and trust beating grudges came back. Well, love and trust beat suspicion and misgivings, too.

I was profoundly grateful to Toni. I could not and would not believe that she was deceitful. I wouldn't even think

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about it. Toni was my dear friend, and I felt tied to her with bonds of love and gratitude that would not easily be broken.

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