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ONE

The Intruder at the Party

I don't think I was asking for much. At thirty-nine, all I wanted was what everybody else seems to want: a healthy, happy family and a job that pays well and proves satisfying. That's it. I wasn't looking to get rich. I wasn't jockeying for power. I wasn't out to make the world bow down at my feet through fame or notoriety.

I simply wanted to get better at loving and living with the woman I had married nearly sixteen years before, the woman who had borne three precocious daughters. We were a healthy, happy family. We were a family of five strong-willed strivers—and the world was our oyster.

As for work, I had made a concerted effort in my twenties to figure out what things fit me, and I was choosing my pursuits accordingly. Consequently, I loved nearly everything I got into. Now, ever curious and ever adventurous, I could hardly wait to see what adventures heaven

might send my way as I came to my fourth decade of life.

In short, I was on a quest to live life to the fullest. Not so much in material terms. Oh, I enjoy fine and expensive things as much as the next person. But I've always been driven toward something deeper. I guess you could call it wisdom—the knowing that comes by *experiencing* life and then taking to heart what you have been through.

Part of what made the experience so macabre was the very beauty of everyday life.

In the end, though, it didn't matter whether or not I was born to search out the meaning of life. Because at thirty-nine the search for the meaning of life came searching for me. You see, I spent my midlife watching my wife die. Six weeks after I turned thirty-nine, in November 1993, Nancy was diagnosed with intractable breast cancer. Seven years after that, in October 2000, she died. Now, having had four years to recover and reflect, I find myself at fifty.

Some midlife, huh? It was a particularly odd position to be in, given the times. Remember the '90s? What a giddy era that was in America. We were patting ourselves on the back for winning the Cold War. We were all gaga over a so-called New Economy that could make billionaires of us all—overnight! And at the end of the decade, we couldn't wait to embrace a bold new century.

It felt to me as if the whole world was throwing itself a party just outside my family's door. Meanwhile, inside our door, I was tasked with watching Nancy die. It was kind of surreal, really.

Not like our home was morbid or glum or uninviting—quite the opposite, most of the time. Indeed, part of what made the experience so macabre was the very beauty of everyday life. The shouts of children running through the yard. The routine of bringing in the mail. Shaking our heads upon finding that long-lost mitten hibernating under a bed. Cleaning up the pee from a new puppy.

It was a home, like any other. Yet not like any other. Nothing is ordinary when every moment, even the simplest of them—and especially the happiest of them—is lived out in the shadow of death. Not always consciously or openly. But unmistakably, there's an awareness that every moment is fleeting.

HOME ALONE

As those moments slipped by, I experienced the truth of an ancient proverb that says,

It is better to go to a house of mourning
Than to go to a house of feasting,
Because that is the end of every man,
And the living takes it to heart.¹

A rather jolting statement, isn't it? "Better to go to a house of mourning." Really? *Better?*

I don't know many people who would agree with that. Aren't we all looking to end up in the House of Feasting? To gather with friends, to eat and laugh and celebrate good fortune? Those were certainly my plans ten years ago.

Somehow God had different plans. For reasons known only to Him, the particular limo that Nancy and I were taking to the ball dropped us off at a rather different location. And so we missed the party.

Interesting thing, though. There were quite a few others at the House of Mourning—although I didn't realize it at the time. At the time, Nancy and I felt very lonely there.

That's not to discount the overwhelming support we had from countless people. For example, the group of women—Ellie, Michelle, Nancy, Lyn, Leslie (and others I'm probably forgetting or am unaware of)—who gathered every Thursday night for about four years to pray over, for, and with Nancy.

There was the community group from our church, organized by Melissa and Elaine, who took turns bringing meals anywhere from two to five nights a week for more than two and a half years.

There were families, and especially mothers, in our community who more or less adopted our girls on an as-needed basis. There were doctors and nurses and other medical personnel, pastors, youth workers, teachers, coaches, friends old and new, family, even people I never knew about who came alongside us in ways I don't even know about throughout the whole decade. We were unbelievably blessed with caring, concerned people.

Yet affirming that, and grateful beyond words for those God-sent comforters, let me say again: Nancy and I felt very lonely in the House of Mourning. That's just the way it is there. It doesn't matter how many or how few supporters you have around you. Everyone experiences their suffering as

unique to them. And by oneself. Suffering is an a cappella solo.

I remember the day Nancy participated in a Race for the Cure event at a mall near our house. (The Susan B. Komen Foundation sponsors Race for the Cure to raise money for the fight against breast cancer.) Nancy and a couple of her friends walked together to celebrate her second year of survival after her initial diagnosis.

“I don’t care about being brave! I just want to see my girls grow up!”

When she came home, I figured she would be elated by the thousands of people who had shown up to cheer for her and other survivors of that dreaded disease. Instead she was in a funk.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Everyone kept telling me I’m so brave,” she replied. That sounded like a good thing to me. Then my brave survivor broke into tears and blurted out with an edge of anger, “I don’t care about being brave! I just want to see my girls grow up!”

Yes, the situation looks completely different when you’re inside the dying body than outside it. No one perceives the reality of what’s going on quite the way you do. They simply can’t, however much they try. I think that’s one of the more insidious sides of suffering. Others may be able to see *that* you are in pain, but they can never *have* your exact experience of pain, because pain is about what matters to you, and what matters to you is unique to you.

I experienced a similar loneliness whenever I had to tell

someone about Nancy's situation. For instance, I'd have lunch with a person and they would innocently ask, "So, Bill, tell me about your family."

"Well, my wife and I have three daughters," I'd begin, and we'd talk about the girls. But inevitably we'd get to the part I knew was coming and always hated.

"So, I guess your wife is pretty busy, what with three girls to keep up with," my acquaintance would say, obviously wanting to hear more about Nancy.

"Yes, she's very involved with the girls," I'd reply, and then brace myself to deliver the bad news. Something like, "Unfortunately, she's not as involved as she'd like to be because she's battling breast cancer . . ."

It didn't matter what I said after that. When you choose to inform someone that your wife has a life-threatening illness, you're choosing to upset his equilibrium with a very unpleasant reality—which means you're open-

ing yourself up to who knows what sort of reaction. And I got all kinds. Shock. Expressions of sympathy. Advice. Tears. Nervous chatter. Stunned silence. Apologies, as if the other person had done something wrong. Stories about their great-aunt Myrtle who had breast cancer and found a cure through an extract from apricot pits, and how Nancy just *had* to look into that because it's a miracle cure, even though there's a big conspiracy by the medical establishment to keep it off the market. I even had one person, who apparently could not

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tolerate discomfort, come across with an effort at humor in a vain attempt to lighten things up.

I never asked for any of that. But that's what you get when your wife has cancer. And what's lonely about it is that while people genuinely want to know, in a way they *don't* want to know. People certainly want to be supportive. But they don't want to have your experience. What they want is to get through that unexpected moment that you've created for them, and then they want to go back to their routine and go home and kiss their spouse and hug their kids and watch TV and take their daughter to the mall to buy eye shadow to match the prom dress.

And I don't blame them in the least for that, because that's exactly what I wanted to do, too. But such a life was not given to me. Oh, sure, I kissed Nancy and I hugged my girls and I watched TV and the rest of it. But as I said earlier, my family and I lived at every moment, 24/7, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, but always, always with the uncertainty of how this "cancer thing" was going to turn out.

How do you communicate that to other people? Do you even want to? Do you really want to be the one who always brings the conversation to a screeching halt by talking about your sick wife? Do you even want to show up at things, knowing that people are going to ask because they care? You're so glad that they care; yet you're just weary of having to talk yet again about how Nancy is doing, and how the girls are doing, and how you're doing. At some point, you just want to go hide.

It's by such means that suffering manages to alienate us from others and make us feel very lonely.

JOIN THE CROWD

And yet, as I started to say earlier, while Nancy and I may have felt lonely, we found we were far from alone. For example, the first time Nancy went through chemo, she discovered a whole floor of people who, like her, were fighting for their lives. Each of them had a story.

There was the elderly lady who matter-of-factly announced that she just *had* to get better because, if not, she didn't know how her husband of forty-three years would manage. He had had a stroke, and she was his only caregiver.

There was the woman about five years younger than Nancy who came to chemo on her day off from work. Her husband had divorced her after her diagnosis (apparently, that's quite common, I learned). Now she had two small children to provide for, cancer or no cancer.

And then there was the retired guy who viewed chemo as nothing but a huge inconvenience to his golf game. Always decked out in checked trousers and sneakers, he constantly looked at his watch, fretting to get the IV out of his arm so he could go hit the links.

After Nancy went metastatic (meaning the cancer spread to other sites in her liver, lungs, and bones), she found an online support group of fellow "mets" people. Day after day they exchanged e-mails to trade thoughts, information, jokes, prayers, poems, news. It was a profoundly important community for Nancy to participate in.

The only downside was that longtime members would suddenly go silent. And sometimes it would be weeks or months before a survivor had the presence of mind (and the

compassion) to send back word of that person's death. Sometimes the word never came. They were just . . . gone.

In short, we discovered lots of people sharing the House of Mourning with us. If I'm doing the math right, in the nearly four years since Nancy's death, 155,000 women have died of breast cancer in the United States. Whenever I hear about such a woman, or come across her obituary, I sigh, knowing there is a world of grief wrapped up in that one story.

Cancer is the number one cause of death for people Nancy's age (forty-seven), according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The second is heart disease. And so, a few months after Nancy died, a neighbor up the street went jogging one morning, as he had for most of his forty-five years of life. With no warning, and for no apparent reason, he dropped dead on the sidewalk, his heart having failed. He left a widow and four small children. A company minus a valued employee. A community minus a solid citizen. More arrivals in the House of Mourning.

On an extraordinarily beautiful morning almost a year after Nancy's death, I boarded an American Airlines flight at Dallas's Love Field. We took off at dawn and landed at Chicago's O'Hare at 7:55. I don't think I've ever had a more peaceful, relaxing flight.

On the shuttle to pick up my rental car, a guy across the aisle looked at the person beside me and said matter-of-factly, "Did you hear what happened in New York? Someone crashed a plane into the World Trade Center."

All of us who heard him looked at him like he was a nut. But when I got to my car, the attendants were all buzzing

about something happening in the Big Apple. Then I turned on the radio.

Few human activities present more pitfalls than trying to find the meaning in grief and loss.

And so the towers fell, and the Pentagon burned, and the heroes forced the plane down in Pennsylvania. And I drove back to Dallas. And by the time I got there, the entire country seemed to have joined me in the House of Mourning.

And emotions that by then had become so familiar to me—anger, rage, grief, loss, loneliness, fear, confusion, depression, sadness, despondency, disappointment, frustration, touchiness, restlessness, tearfulness, resignation, stress, weariness, exhaustion—I found them wherever I turned as people were venting their feelings.

Not always appropriately. Not always consciously. Not always willfully. For many, it seemed to be a whole new thing to experience life in such a way: to lose one's confidence, to no longer feel secure. To gradually become aware—and grieve—that maybe the party is over.

Very quickly, I started hearing and reading all sorts of analyses pretending to “come to terms” with what all these feelings meant. It's what people do when they first arrive at the House of Mourning. They grasp at quick, easy answers to deaden the pain. But later on, time and perspective reveal just how off point most of those early pronouncements turn out to be.

I can say that because, remember, I've spent ten years in the House of Mourning. And until now, I've refrained from

making any pronouncements. You see, I have a strong aversion to embarrassing myself, and few human activities present more pitfalls than trying to find the meaning in grief and loss (consider Job's three friends). As my dad says, better to keep your mouth shut and let people wonder if you're a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.

However, sometimes life has a way of goading me into action. Something happens, and I *have* to say something. It's not like a choice. It's an assignment. A "burden," the Old Testament prophets called it. I was "burdened" into writing this book by the following incident.

While the leading cause of death for adults is cancer, the leading cause of death for younger ages is "unintentional injury," as the CDC categorizes it. In other words, accidents.

ON A SUNNY MORNING

In October 2003, I marked the third anniversary of Nancy's death. The next morning, a Wednesday, was another spectacularly gorgeous day, more like spring than fall (we don't really do fall in Dallas; we just open up the windows and let the air conditioning cool things down).

Anyway, it was the sort of day when all seemed right with the world. Sun shining. Leaves turning. Birds singing. Dogs barking. Parents hugging their kids good-bye. Neighbors waving on their way to work.

And a parade of schoolchildren walking, skipping, biking, and scootering their way to the elementary school just up the street.

A mother walks her two girls to the thoroughfare between

their block and the neighborhood of the school. Look one way. Look the other. No cars. Okay, it's safe. Into the intersection goes the four-year-old, then the mother, then the first-grader on her Razor Scooter.

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Just then an SUV sitting at the intersection across the street pulls forward. Without warning, it turns left—right over the first-grader. Later, the driver would tell officers that he was blinded by the morning sun and never saw the little girl.

But three years and a day after I held my wife's hand as she slipped into eternity in a tragic and premature way, a mother just blocks from my house held her daughter's hand as she lay in the street and slipped into eternity in a tragic and premature way. And two more families, and classmates, and teachers, and neighbors joined us in the House of Mourning.

It was my responsibility on the following Sunday to teach the second of a two-part series to a class at my church. The first week I had spoken on God's lovingkindness from Psalm 136, which twenty-six times insists that God's lovingkindness is everlasting. And then that tragic "unintentional injury" occurred to a little girl in our community. I found myself silenced. And a bit embarrassed, to be honest. *Rebuked*, was how I felt. Rebuked by life and by "reality."

Where was God's lovingkindness for that precious little girl? That was the obvious question. Where was God's lovingkindness for that poor mother? Where was God's lovingkindness for the little sister who watched the whole tragedy

unfold? Where was God's lovingkindness for the eighteen-year-old driver and his family? Where was God's lovingkindness for everyone else who loved those involved in the tragedy?

Psalm 136 says, "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting."² Oh really? In what sense is it "everlasting"?

And what about that proverb I cited earlier? "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting." How so? In what sense is it "better"?

I had planned to teach on other things that Sunday. But the loss of that little girl just taunted me: "So, Bill, have you learned *anything* through your experience with Nancy's death that might be useful in a time like this?" The book that follows is what I ended up saying.

But before I say it, let me say this to the reader. As you may have guessed by now, I approach grief as a Christian, and I write from my perspective as a Christian. However, this book is not just for Christians. It's for anyone who knows grief, loss, pain, or suffering. Because the experience of those sorrows is universal.

I recognize that not every reader will share my beliefs. That's fine. My hope is that regardless of your faith, religion, or spirituality, you will benefit from my experience. Because should you ever find yourself in the House of Mourning, you'll discover a perfect cross section of the world. We've got people with all kinds of beliefs and disbeliefs about God here. And the interesting thing about mourning is that it more or less forces out what people really hold to and hold on to. What follows is what the burden of the last ten years has forced out of me.