

Instantly
A
Widow



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Instantly
A
Widow

by

Ruth M. Sissom

Instantly a Widow

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FOREWORD

Life changes create stress, and one of the most intensely stressful events is the death of a spouse. Whether the death is an expected one following a long illness or is the result of a sudden illness or accident, no one is ever quite prepared to be the one “left behind.” Coping with this new way of life is difficult, to say the least; and as a psychiatrist, I have treated many widows and widowers whose loss triggered depression.

It is important to understand, however, that grief reactions are not clinical depressions; and understanding the stages of grief and recovery will help individuals to work through the process. I have listed these stages below. Although it is not included in this list, I feel it is worth mentioning that “bargaining” is an inherent part of the grief process. This is the point that we reach where we bargain with God by telling Him that if He allows our loved one to live, we will make significant changes in our personal lifestyles.

The remaining stages are as follows:

1. Denial—This is a brief stage where the person cannot believe that it’s actually happening.
2. Anger turned outward—The individual is angry toward someone other than himself or herself, perhaps

even toward the person who died. This might even include anger toward God for allowing it to happen.

3. Anger turned inward—This takes place when the person starts feeling somehow responsible for the death and begins blaming himself or herself.

4. Genuine grief—This is the stage when one can actually weep over the loss.

5. Resolution—The person regains his joy for life.

If someone who has lost a spouse becomes non-functional (unable to do daily tasks) for a prolonged period of time or becomes suicidal, that individual should seek the help of a Christian psychiatrist or psychologist. Many survivors find Christian counseling a positive influence, even when the grief has not reached this severity.

Ruth Sissom shares her personal story with us in the following pages. The title, *Instantly a Widow*, is an apt description of the way her life was totally uprooted in just one tragic afternoon.

Ruth vividly describes her thoughts and feelings through each new step she has to take. She shares her most intimate conversations with the Lord so that we can see how He is faithful to provide the strength and the eventual peace that comes through the final stage of resolution. By being so candid, she provides hope and inspiration to each of us.

The message that she imparts to us is that the grief process takes time. We can see through her testimony

God's promise to be near us at all times (Psalm 34:18). We learn that we will never stop loving or remembering our loved one, but we can find a way to go on living a productive and fulfilling life.

Frank Minirth, M.D.

PREFACE

It is winter. During the night fluffy snow fell silently, transforming the barren yard and woods into a winter wonderland. A scarlet cardinal now sits perched near two colorful blue jays on the leafless limb of the wild cherry tree, surveying the contents of the bird feeder.

As I view this peaceful winter scene through my living room window, my mind wanders back to the happy years my husband and I spent here raising our three children. Nine years have passed since his death. Our children are adults now with their own homes, and I am learning to live a meaningful life on my own.

My family has been encouraging me to write of my experiences as a widow, and today I am determined to begin my chronicle.

The whole idea seemed distasteful at first, and I raised many objections. Numerous books had already been written by widows; what would be the benefit of one more? Many people had experienced greater tragedies; perhaps they should write instead of me. Resurrecting the shock, pain, and despair would mean experiencing those emotions again to some degree. Furthermore, I've always been a very private person, and this book would have to be intensely personal, revealing the intimacies of my heart. I continued to rationalize my opposition to the idea.

However, one afternoon, while reading Isaiah 61:3, I became convinced that I should share my story. In that passage God promised this to those who mourned in Zion:

beauty for ashes, the oil of *joy* for mourning, and the garment of *praise* for the spirit of heaviness. God's purpose in bringing beauty, joy, and praise out of mourning was so that He might be glorified as others looked at those upon whom He had showered His blessings. I had heard others talk about "beauty for ashes" many times, but until that afternoon I had never realized the beautiful message in the rest of the verse. Although it was written to Israel, I believe it has an application for Christians today, including me.

I shrink from the valleys in my life. They make me feel fear and foreboding. I don't like ashes, mourning, and heaviness. But after going through some difficult times and looking back on them, I realize they are the way to experiencing the marvelous refreshment from God Himself.

I now have an opportunity to share how God has brought the truth of that verse to pass in my life. I remember the many times I have been inspired to a stronger faith by reading or hearing another's personal experience. Knowing God was with me in my sorrow could give others confidence that God can do for them what He has done for me. Relating how God's strength was "made perfect" in my weakness during bereavement would bring glory to Him.

The purpose for sharing this very personal story has come clearly into focus. I want to glorify the One who is the Source of all comfort, bring hope and encouragement to those who must endure sorrow and loneliness, and give insight to those who sincerely want to comfort the bereaved.

So today I will begin the task of reliving and putting in print the almost inexpressible personal experiences surrounding my widowhood. I choose to tell my story exactly as I recall it happening; to be brutally frank about my emotions and feelings, noble and ignoble.

Certainly every widow's experience is unique and the death of a husband does not necessarily mean overwhelming despair and collapse as it did for me. But since everyone in a lifetime confronts losses of persons and things he or she loves, my story is for everyone. Perhaps some will be inspired and helped by my forthright recollections.

If this book will lead others to praise God, help those who are grieving to gain a fresh perspective, and stimulate courage to pick up the pieces and start over, my efforts will be worthwhile, and I will be grateful.

ONE

Peace in the Midst of Panic

“Mrs. Sissom, STAT!”

“Mrs. Sissom, STAT!”

I rushed to my desk phone and with trembling hands picked up the receiver to answer the urgent call coming over the intercom system of the hospital where I was Director of Education. My mind was racing. What emergency would be on the other end?

“This is Paul. Daddy was repairing Janet’s car; it fell on him and he was trapped under it when I came home from school. I raised the car up, got him out, and the ambulance is on the way. He looks terribly blue and Janet and I can’t feel his pulse.”

“I’ll get there as fast as I can,” I replied with my heart pounding wildly. “It sounds as if you have the situation under control. Call Carol. I’m on my way.”

I was proud and amazed at my seventeen-year-old son’s levelheadedness and quick action in the midst of crisis. I wondered how my daughter, Janet, was coping.

I phoned my boss and ran to my car. Speeding from the parking lot, I found my mind racing ahead to what I would find when I reached home.

“Oh, God,” I cried in anguish, “don’t let him be paralyzed. He could never cope with having others wait on him. He is strong and independent.”

He had helped clear virgin wooded land in the hills of Tennessee for farming and was used to lifting heavy stumps, driving stubborn mules, lifting hay racks, milking cows, walking all day behind a plow or cultivator.

“Oh, God, don’t let him be paralyzed, because I can’t cope with the burden of caring for a helpless husband. I know that’s selfish, but NO, GOD, NO!”

Suddenly aware of the houses on the side of the road flying by, I glanced at the speedometer; eighty miles an hour! I quickly lifted my foot from the accelerator. *My children could lose both parents in one day. I MUST SLOW DOWN.* Without thinking, back went my foot. *I MUST HURRY.*

“Oh, God, no. Please make this come out all right,” I prayed frantically.

The thirteen mile drive home seemed endless as I sped along. About twenty-five minutes after receiving the urgent call from Paul, I reached the long country driveway that wound through the woods. We had purchased this ten acres of land nineteen years before and cleared a spot to build our house.

A rescue vehicle was pulling out. My heart sank. What would I find?

“Lord, give me strength to face whatever it is.”

People were standing in the yard. Our dog Fritz was barking anxiously.

“They’ve taken him to the hospital. Janet rode in the ambulance,” Paul informed me.

I called the emergency room. *“Is he alive?”*

They were evasive. *“He is here, we are working on him, come right away.”*

Paul stayed at the house while my daughter, Carol,

and I drove to the hospital in a silent daze. Janet was in the waiting room crying. I hugged her. We three were told to go into a small room. The young doctor entered. It seemed a face of stone confronted me and a compassionless gaze met the hopeful longing radiating from my eyes.

“We’ve done all we can do and *he is dead!*”

It seemed he yelled those words that felt like a huge sword cutting me from head to toe. The feeling of a powerful weight crushing down on me took my breath away.

“Do you want to see the body?”

“Yes.”

“*No, Mother, don’t go!—it’s too terrible—don’t go!*”

“I need to,” I said and walked slowly into the emergency room.

A young male attendant stood in the room. *Why doesn’t he leave me alone?*

“Do you want his rings?”

How can he ask me such a thing at a time like this?

“No.”

I leaned over and gave Cecil a kiss on his forehead. It was cold, lifeless, unresponsive.

“*OH NO, GOD, NO! HELP ME! I can’t believe this is happening.*”

Suddenly it seemed as if the whole world stood absolutely still—no sound—no movement—perfect peace.

“*It’s all right My child, I’m with you. Trust Me. Everything will be all right.*”

Time seemed to have stopped. A feeling of peaceful calm assurance I had never before experienced was deep within me. I looked at the clock. It had not stopped even though it felt as if I were in a timeless environment. In the darkest hour of my life, God made His presence known to me in a most marvelous way.

This must be the “peace that passes understanding” God promises to His children. It was completely beyond my comprehension how I could experience absolute perfect peace in the midst of this chaos and emotional upheaval. I want to stay here forever basking in the warmth of God’s peace and love, but my daughters are waiting. I must go. “Thank You, God, for this wonderful assurance that I am Your child and You love me.” It really is true that “the Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

I walked into the hall. Friends were there. One of them hugged me and said, “God never makes mistakes.” Those icy cold words plunged like a dagger, tearing into the depths of my heart. I couldn’t stand to hear them now.

“Oh, God, I don’t believe this is happening. It must be a bad dream. Wake me up. Tell me it’s not true.”

The nurse came. “You will have to call the funeral home.”

Me call! As a nurse, I had always done the calling in cases of death. What’s wrong with her, has she no feelings? How cold and heartless these medical people seem. They are my peers. Did I appear this way to those I cared for at times of death? I certainly hope not!

My eyes wouldn’t focus. I couldn’t see the number. The nurse read it for me. *I can’t say the words. How can I say, “Come pick up my husband’s body?” No, I can’t say it. But I have to!*

“God, help me!”

“Please pick up my husband’s body at the emergency room,” I blurted out.

The clothes were handed to me in a large plastic satchel. They felt like lead as I carried them to the car. We drove home in stunned silence.

Paul came to the door. “He’s gone,” I said. Tears

welled up in his eyes. Janet began fixing supper. She seemed to have the ability to maintain some measure of order and continuity in our lives even in the midst of panic and despair. The food tasted like cardboard. I struggled to swallow a few bites. I felt numb. I couldn't think clearly or function routinely.

Phone calls began coming. I repeated the unbelievable words, "Yes, he died today."

I called Mother. "We've had a terrible tragedy in our family. Please notify the others."

My sister Marjorie phoned. *How kind she is and willing to share my pain.*

An eerie stillness hovered over us that evening. We said almost nothing to each other. We were stunned, dazed, unable to verbalize our shock and despair.

My wildly pounding heart seemed to vibrate the entire king-size bed. I relived the unbelievable events of the past afternoon over and over the entire night. *How long had he lain there screaming for help with the crushing load on him and no way to escape?* I imagined him struggling, screaming, praying, writhing in pain and agony. If I only could know he didn't suffer a long time. No sleep came. Only pain, disbelief, and shock.

The next morning I met the pastor at the funeral home. "Don't you want to include your children in planning the funeral?" he asked.

"No, I don't want to put them through any more pain than necessary. I'll handle it."

As I sat in the funeral director's office my head was spinning. I kept saying over and over to myself, *I don't believe it, it can't be true. Yesterday at this time he was fine.*

"Wake me up, Lord, this has to be a bad dream. Tell me it's not true."

Just yesterday all was well. This can't be true. Now that I think about it, yesterday I felt an eerie sensation when Cecil kissed me good-bye as I left for work. I did not realize it was the last kiss he would ever give me.

"Now select a casket." We walked into a large room with caskets everywhere.

How can I select a casket for my husband? I can't. But I have to!

"*HELP ME, GOD.*"

"Are they all so expensive?"

"Don't you have more upstairs?" the pastor asked.

"Yes, this way."

The pastor said that a pine box was good enough for him to be buried in.

My mind is absolutely out of gear, I can't think.

"Help me, Lord, to muster enough mental capacity to make this decision."

As long as I have to do this, I must do it the way I think he would want it.

"This one—the oak."

He loved trees and could name all the kinds. He loved the smell of wood. *I must also consider his family's feelings. They would like a special, beautiful casket.*

My knees were wobbly and my hands were trembling. *A casket for my husband, I can't believe it!* When the arrangements were completed I left the funeral home feeling stunned and confused. It seemed as if I were experiencing a horrible dream. I could not make myself believe that I had just arranged the funeral for my husband. He had been alive and well at this time yesterday.

Back at the house I selected the clothes. He would want his Hart, Schaffner & Marx suit. He was so proud he owned one. We had never definitely decided where we would

be buried. Now I must make that decision without him and I trembled, hoping I was doing what he would want.

That afternoon I contacted the cemetery owner. I purchased two lots. By buying my lot now I would spare my children this turmoil at my death.

The next morning Jeannette came to the house. I grabbed her and sobbed uncontrollably. “Why,” she asked, “would God do such a thing? Why would He take a good husband and father, a faithful church worker?”

“I can honestly say I haven’t asked God why,” I responded.

I was so glad she allowed me to hang on to her as I shook with sobs and soaked her shoulders with my tears.

Later that day the pastor and his wife met us at the funeral home, just before visiting hours for family and friends.

“I was unable to remove all the bluish coloring from his skin,” the funeral director explained.

“*Why did he have to say that?*” The deep pain pierced me again. *That must mean he suffered a long time.* My insides felt wounded and raw from the constant stabbing pain that was piercing my heart again and again.

Carol, Janet, Paul, and I stood at the casket in continued unbelief and shock. The children were silent.

“He’s in heaven,” I said.

Friends and family began arriving. “I don’t know what to say—this never should have happened—it’s not fair—I’m sorry.”

Nothing you can say is as comforting as your presence, just being here, your willingness to share our pain. I don’t want to hear lots of words—not even words from the Bible. What helps most is your quiet presence, your willingness to listen to how I’m feeling, your hugs, handshakes, your shoulder to cry on if I need it.

Flowers kept arriving. I inspected each one. *How wonderful people are. They do care and desperately want to help.* But how helpless and at a loss they all seemed. They were hurting too, but I could only seem to think of *me* and *my* pain. I was thankful for every act of kindness, but couldn't help thinking of Job's "miserable comforters." *The pain is too deep. No one has enough balm to soothe it.*

"Oh, Lord, help me be a good witness for You. Help me speak to many who come who don't know You."

"He's in heaven," I kept repeating.

I felt a superhuman composure and strength. I was responding as a gracious hostess: greeting, smiling, hugging, thanking people for coming. Inside I felt numb and mechanical. Mentally I was repeating, *this can't be true, I can't believe this has happened.*

In retrospect I am very grateful that God graciously made me so that I was anesthetized and numb in the first stage of my tragic loss. This protected me from having to face the entire reality all at once. It enabled me to get through the first three weeks before the devastating impact of the loss sank in.

At home the eerie silence persisted. Each of us was doing the necessary tasks in a cold, silent, mechanical way. We were stunned with shock and disbelief, walking about in a daze. We hardly spoke to each other. I needed to verbalize my feelings and encourage my children to share theirs, but we seemed unable to put into words the deep pain we felt. We appeared to be trying to protect each other from additional suffering that might be caused by our words. We never did sit down together to talk about how this tragedy was affecting each of us.

Carol was our quiet child and she remained outwardly calm and composed. She slept soundly for ten

hours at night and found it hard to keep from napping during the day. The urge to sleep seemed an unconscious attempt to escape facing the tragic reality.

Janet had displayed boundless energy during her growing up years and now she took over the routine tasks of cooking, setting the table, and washing dishes. No doubt her training as a nurse helped her bring some degree of order to this chaotic situation. The day after the funeral she returned to college in Pennsylvania.

Paul always had a curious, inquisitive nature. During this time of crisis he provided stability with his level head and common sense. He had several friends who spent time with him and supported him as he grieved.

Food was delivered, friends called. I was overwhelmed by the kindness and helpfulness. Sympathy cards came by the dozens, money from the neighbors and Cecil's co-workers. *How wonderful these people are.*

"Thank You, Lord."

As we drove into the church parking lot for the funeral, my brother, Phillip, arrived and greeted me with a hug. I responded with a burst of sobs. I couldn't speak. *Thank you for not pushing me away, for just holding me and giving me your kind shoulder to cry on.* Family and co-workers arrived. I tried desperately to control my tears while I greeted guests and thanked them for coming.

The church was so packed for the funeral that extra chairs were put in the back.

"This was not in this man's plans," the pastor said. "Are you who are here ready if your plans should suddenly come to an end?"

I sat in the front row with my children. I wanted to be brave for their sakes but could not hold back the tears that now streamed down my face. I could feel the warm

wetness as the tears splashed onto my blouse. *Just three days ago Cecil was in this very place, sitting beside me, singing in the choir, praying, laughing, a picture of health. THIS HAS TO BE A BAD DREAM. How can I ever endure to the end of this service. Words of comfort from the pastor, songs of hope sung by friends and family, soft organ music all seem to make the tears flow faster. I'm a wreck!*

At the end of the service the funeral director came down to the front row to escort me out to the waiting hearse. My face felt hot, swollen, and wet. *I'm glad this service is over! If only I could slip out a side door so I wouldn't have to face these people. I'm so embarrassed that I can't keep from crying.* I looked into the sea of faces as I started back the aisle. All eyes seemed fixed on me. There were tears in many of them. A dark cloud of shock and sadness seemed to encompass the entire congregation. *How deeply do they feel this pain? Can they even begin to realize how "chopped in half" I feel?* An eerie silence prevailed as people left the church. Most of them spoke in hushed tones or not at all.

Mother joined the children and me in the hearse. A kind neighbor came to hug Janet and comfort her. Janet had babysat her children many times. *What a thoughtful, compassionate gesture.* Mother's kind, loving presence helped dispel the icy coldness of the hearse. *We are taking him past his home for the last time. The woods, the barn he built, the memories. It's over for him. My children are being so brave and I'm a wreck. I'm supposed to be the strong one, and I'm falling apart.*

"Help me to be strong, Lord."

The sun peeked through the clouds warming me with a feeling of God's love as we drove into the cemetery. The short graveside ceremony seemed like a blur.

We returned to the church for the dinner lovingly prepared by the ladies. I felt stunned and dazed. *Everyone is laughing, talking, eating, as if nothing is wrong. How can they eat? My stomach feels full of lead. How can I go on?*

I felt enveloped by dark clouds of confusion, in a separate world from those around me.

Unfortunately the anguish that seemed so intense was but a small foretaste of that to come.