



Stepping into Sunlight

by Sharon Hinck

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" - Matthew 25:40

Chapter 1

Terror in the supermarket. Sounded like a ridiculous headline from one of the tabloids on the rack near the checkout lane. Yet the only name for the pounding in my chest was that melodramatic word. Terror.

Gaudy detergent boxes leaned out from the shelves. Under fluorescent lights, the corridor stretched into eternity—as if the bakery counter was shrinking into the distance while the grocery store shelves rose up into towering cliffs that threatened to crash down on my head. I gripped my half-full shopping cart for support as its wheels squeaked and wobbled. Three cautious steps edged me closer to my goal. Blood pulsed a quickening tide across my eardrums. *Don't panic. You can do this.*

Last week I'd managed a quick run for milk, eggs, and bread. This week I had set a more ambitious goal. But the surreal menace hit me with even more force today. Breathing hard, I scanned my surroundings. A woman at the end of the aisle gave me a curious glance.

I hunched deeper into my zip-front sweatshirt and turned my back on her. What did she see? I was just another thirty-something woman dressed for the gym. If she detected the haggard lines of my face, maybe she'd write that off as the exhausted look of a normal mom.

And I *was* normal. I had to be. This errand would prove I was ready to cope with everyday life again.

Farther down the aisle a loud crack cut through the piped-in Muzak. I jumped and lifted a hand to my temple. A vein pulsed against the skin with enough pressure to burst. A pudgy boy leaned down to retrieve his yo-yo.

You're being ridiculous. Scared by a dropped yo-yo. What's next? Fear of hula-hoops?

I pushed my shopping cart past the boy and his mother and forced my feet to keep a steady pace. Six more steps. Five. Four. My target stretched in front of me. The bakery counter.

Now all I had to do was order the cake.

“Can I help you?” The counter woman’s voice creaked with age. I stared at the bear claws on the bottom shelf of the display case.

Come on, Penny. Tell her. You need a small cake. Chocolate.

“Ma’am? Can I help you?” Now she sounded concerned.

Why was this so hard? This store didn’t look at all like—

No! Don’t go there.

My fingertips tingled, and waves of nausea rose up to catch in my throat. Pastries and muffins filled my vision, but the space around them turned gray. Gray with little red sprinkles. Or maybe that was the decoration on the sugar cookies.

I bent forward to draw a deep breath, fighting off the sensation of falling. Who really needed a cake anyway? Too many carbs. This had been a bad idea. I released my grip on the shopping cart and ran.

Back up the aisle.

Past the mother who pulled her son close as I brushed by.

Past a mountain of paper towel rolls.

Past the pyramid of tangerines. My stomach lurched at their scent.

The automatic doors opened outward too slowly. I pressed my shoulder against one side and forced it to let me escape. A short sprint brought me to my car. The passenger side was closest, so I dove in that side, pulled the door closed behind me, and hit the lock. Curled up half on the floor and half on the seat, my body shuddered.

I squeezed my fists to my forehead.

Block it out. Get over it.

But I was getting worse, not better.

September sun baked the air inside the car with another reminder that I was in a strange place. Back home in Wisconsin, the leaves were turning orange and the temperature had a bite. Today’s heat made Chesapeake, Virginia, feel as foreign as Bangkok.

Someone tapped on the glass of my wagon’s door. “Honey-chile, you need help?”

I scrambled to pull myself up onto the passenger seat. A broad dark face peered through the window. The woman probably thought I was hot-wiring the car. Was that a shower-cap on her head? One pink roller poked from beneath the cap, clinging to a lock near her temple.

I grabbed my sunglasses from the floor and held them up. “Just looking for these,” I called through the glass.

She pursed her lips and braced a heavy arm against the car’s roof. Her flowered muumuu filled my line of sight. “You ran outta there like lard on a hot skillet.”

While my northern ears struggled to translate, she leaned down and studied my face. “Sure you’re okay?”

I nodded vigorously enough to make my neck hurt. “I was shopping but changed my mind.”

She looked puzzled but then flashed a broad white smile. “Well, chile, them prices can set me to runnin’, too.” Her eyes scanned me like an experienced grandmother checking for injuries. Finally, she patted the roof of the car and waddled away.

I scooted over behind the wheel. Hysterical giggles freed from my throat. Running from high prices?

My smile died. If only my problems were that simple.

For a crazy moment I wanted to roll down the window and call the woman back. Cry on her ample shoulder. Tell her everything. “My husband left for three months at sea. I don’t know anyone here. And a few days before he left—” Even in my imaginary conversation I couldn’t finish that sentence, couldn’t make myself explain why the simple act of buying groceries had become impossible.

Instead, I started the engine and aimed for home, pressing my hand against the ribs where my heart fluttered, as if I could soothe my circulation back into sanity. At the next stoplight, I fumbled in the glove compartment and pulled out a dog-eared business card. *Victim Support Services*. The policewoman who’d given it to me had been matter-of-fact when she’d told me I’d need help in the days to come. Help? I had my husband. And my faith. I had the inner strength to get through this.

Or so I’d thought. Lately my confidence was as slouchy and battered as my old denim purse on the passenger seat.

I tapped the card on the steering wheel. A left turn would take me to the Norfolk address.

As if in argument, the car stereo blinked the time at me. Bryan would be getting off the school bus soon. I needed to get home and be there to greet him.

When the light turned green, I tossed the card into my purse and pulled ahead.

The heat brought prickles to my skin, but I didn't open the window. The air conditioner made little impact on the superheated interior, so I pretended I was enjoying a sauna at the Y.M.C.A. Too bad I didn't have a towel.

It took full concentration to navigate the unfamiliar streets. Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, the cities ran together like an irregular puddle. In our Chesapeake neighborhood, modest brick ramblers lined up behind chain-link fences. Some tidy yards offered bursts of color from planters or a birdbath. Others were strewn with cigarette butts and crushed cans.

A mulberry tree stained the neighbor's sidewalk, helping me identify our house in the middle of the block. Almost there.

As I emerged from the car, the pit-bull next door yanked his chain and began a token round of barking. When the heat discouraged him, he lowered himself into the dirt that he'd clawed bare of grass. I knew exactly how he felt.

"Afta-noon."

My breath choked, and my hand flew to my neck. Laura-Beth Foley, owner of both the mulberry tree and the pit-bull, sat on a paint-chipped chair in the shade cast by her house. She blotted her forehead with a tumbler that dripped condensation past the freckles on her cheeks.

Tantalizingly close, my house called to me. My nerve endings screamed for escape, but politeness glued me to the concrete. "Hello."

She smiled. The slight gap in her front teeth didn't mar the friendliness of her grin. She was probably a few years older than me, but her over-bleached blond hair made her look even older. "Finally got the twins down for a nap. Hotter 'en blue blazes and it makes 'em fretful."

"Mm-hm." I hunched inside my long-sleeved hoody. I probably looked ridiculous in this land of tank tops, but the soft cotton comforted me.

Laura-Beth had delivered a lopsided banana bread when we moved in several weeks ago. She'd told us about her girl in fifth grade, a boy in third, and twins who were two. I couldn't remember all their double names. Jim-Bob, Billie-Jo, Mary-Lou? It was as if Southerners couldn't contain their personality in a mere single name.

"Come on over and have some iced tea." Laura-Beth lifted a magazine from her lap and fanned her face.

I looked at my front door. The lock gleamed—even through the shadows cast by the awning. "Oh. I . . . I can't. Maybe another time."

She shrugged. "All right. But I hope you don't mind a piece of advice. Try some chamomile tea for your nerves. You're gonna get an ulcer if you stay wound this tight."

"Thanks. I'll do that." I race-walked to my door and hurried inside, bolting it behind me.

I dropped my purse on the small table near the front door and slumped onto the couch. Each second passed slowly while my heart searched for a normal rhythm.

Across from me in the blank television screen, a shadowed reflection revealed a stranger's face. A new Penny Sullivan. The old Penny used to live in the Midwest with her husband and son: Tom the youth pastor and Bryan the seven-year-old motor mouth. *That* Penny hosted backyard barbecues for the youth group and volunteered in Bryan's classroom every Friday. *That* Penny enjoyed people and saw promise and potential in every face she looked into. *That* Penny would never avoid a friendly neighbor – or be told she needed to do something about her nerves. I squinted at my likeness in the television glass. The face was still heart-shaped with full lips. The hair was still long and chestnut. But the eyes had changed. Flat, dull, frozen in a moment of shock like a bad photograph.

I glared into the screen. "You are not giving up. Bryan deserves more than a can of alphabet soup for supper. We need groceries."

I pushed myself from the safety of the couch and marched to the kitchen for the phonebook. Plenty of grocery stores delivered these days. If Penny couldn't go to the chocolate cake, the chocolate cake would come to Penny. For the second time that day, my lips flickered in a brief smile.

A quick call led to the promise of a grocery drop-off—complete with chocolate cake and chamomile tea. Even better, I learned that Tidewater Groceries could take my weekly order via email. I wouldn't have to drive to the store or even talk to anyone on the phone. Problem solved.

Buoyed by my success, I walked down to the corner to meet Bryan's school bus. Someone had to make my son's life as secure and normal as possible while Tom was at sea. I would give Bryan back the mom he used to have. I decided not to look too closely at the fact that it took every ounce of my determination to do the simple act of leaving the house to meet his bus—the kind of act I used to do without a second thought.

The bus pulled up, the yellow doors folded open, and Bryan plunged down the stairs. The sun put copper glints in his brown mop of hair and grape-juice stains surrounded his lips. For a moment I remembered how it felt to be myself and grinned.

"Hey, Mom. Guess what?" Bryan handed me his backpack and marched past leaving me to follow as his pack mule. "We're doing a really cool play. It's for Thanksgiving and I get to be a Pilgrim 'cause they came on a boat. Didja know it's close to here? And we get to have corn and squash and stuff. Mom, what's squash? And we get to invite our moms and dads."

"Sounds fun." But worry twisted under my skin. I tried to picture myself walking into the school gym full of kids and parents. Rows of tables decorated with crepe paper. All the strangers. The noise. The chaos. My chest tightened. What was my problem lately? I'd always loved Bryan's school events. Why did I feel dread instead of anticipation?

"Will Daddy be home by then? I get to sing a special song all by myself." He ran up the steps to our door and puffed his chest out.

“He’s hoping he’ll be home by Thanksgiving. We don’t know yet. But I’ll tell him all about it when I email him tonight.”

He twisted the door handle and kicked the base-plate with more force than necessary to swing the door open. “I want him to be home.”

I took a slow breath. “Me too.” Bryan’s grumpy spells had begun the minute Tom’s ship sailed toward the horizon. I should have hidden Bryan in Tom’s kit bag, so my husband could deal with the cranky little stowaway.

“Don’t forget to tell him about my field trip.” He planted himself in our small entryway. “Hey, Jim-Bob told me the new Disney movie is out on video. Can we go rent it tonight? Can we?”

I hefted his schoolbag in his direction. “Take your backpack to your room.”

“Mo-om. You said you wanted to see it.”

“Your backpack?”

“The movie. Please?”

I shook my head. “Not tonight.”

He pulled the bag from my hands and stomped off to his room. “You’re no fun anymore.”

Right. Like being fun was my biggest concern these days.

We were both prickly the rest of the evening. At bedtime, we marked our tenth big red X on the kitchen calendar with great ceremony, but the expanse of blank days ahead sneered at me.

After I tucked Bryan into bed, I padded out to the living room. The small, square room opened into an eating area overseen by a short kitchen counter. I missed our Victorian dining room and the built-in bookshelves of our generous, wood-floored front room. Here, the beige carpeting looked so mottled, I hated crossing it in my bare feet. Mini-blinds dangled from the windows, giving the house the feeling of a drab office, and instead of our old spare-bedroom study, we used a card table in one corner of the living room.

Tom and I had laughed as we set up our computer in its new home. I found a fabric remnant bright with blue irises, and he told me it was the perfect elegant touch for the home office and coordinated beautifully with our blue denim couch. I praised his bookshelf assembly, as he created the “library” on the wall next to the “desk.”

It was all great fun settling in to our scaled-down home when we’d moved here a month ago, and we hadn’t even felt like we were making a sacrifice.

Had I been naïve and foolish? Had I forgotten to count the cost?

No. We were ready for this. I couldn’t have known about what would happen.

Stop. Don't think about it.

I quickly booted up the computer. Tom's face grinned at me from the screensaver, warm and inviting in spite of the formal dress uniform he was so proud of. I touched the tiny scar under his left eye, leaving a smudge on the monitor.

Why was this separation so much worse than the weeks while he was at chaplaincy training? Each empty square on the calendar stretched ahead of me like the cold linoleum tiles of the grocery store aisle. *Tom, I don't know how to do this.* A weight sat on my lungs and squeezed my throat.

I slid the computer mouse and his face disappeared, letting me breathe again. Bryan would keep hounding me to see the latest Disney video, so I searched for movie rental stores in the neighborhood. I jotted down the addresses and printed out MapQuest directions on our wheezy printer. Good errand for tomorrow. Maybe.

My pen doodled rain clouds next to the list of directions. Maybe not.

I scrolled past the Google list of movie stores and found Netflix. Even better. I quickly signed up and chose the movie Bryan wanted along with a few for me. God bless the Internet. Movies by mail.

When I opened my email program, I found a brief note from Tom. What would he think if he knew I'd barely managed to leave the house in the ten days he'd been gone? That the night terrors were getting worse and not better? I flexed my fingers and attacked the keyboard.

Hi, back atcha!

Yes, we're fine. Bryan got a part in a school play for Thanksgiving, so we're hoping you'll be home by then. I don't know why my mom emailed you. I thought she was busy with Cindy's new baby. I wish she'd stop fussing about me. How many times do I have to tell everyone? I'm fine. Tell her that, too, okay? Maybe she'll listen to you. Today I tried a new grocery store. I splurged and bought a chocolate cake. Now don't feel bad. It's not like we're celebrating your absence. We just deserved a treat after surviving our first full week without you. How's the food on your boat (sorry—your ship)? I miss you tons, but I know you're doing a great job. YES, you have what it takes. You're going to be a terrific chaplain. Want me to write it in a bigger font? You are exactly where God wants you. Love, your favorite wife. :-)

After signing off, I wandered into the kitchen to try some of my new chamomile tea. It tasted like I was chewing on a dandelion stem, and even after choking down the whole cup, I didn't feel an ounce more relaxed. That's what I got for listening to Laura-Beth.

My cup joined the sink full of supper dishes. They'd keep until tomorrow.

In the bedroom, I opened my dresser drawer and stared at a cheerful striped pajama set. To change, I'd have to take off my baggy shirt and the tank top beneath it. And I should probably wash up and brush my teeth.

Too much work. My outfit was all cotton knit anyway, as comfortable as sleepwear. I shoved the drawer shut and crawled into bed in my clothes.

Every one of the past sixteen nights, a dark companion had joined me the minute I stopped moving. In the days since Tom's deployment, it had advanced with even more arrogance, as if it could take up the room my husband had left vacant beside me. I curled into a tight ball and tensed against the familiar assault. Fear crept up the edge of the bedspread, under the covers, and under the skin of my scalp.

All day I pushed back the memories. But they waited for this moment when I tried to sleep—for this time when I was alone, vulnerable. Frenetic, violent images on a horrible repeating loop attacked my mind. My body shook and I tried to pray. The whisper scraped in my throat.

"Make it stop. Please. Make it stop."



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