

SHE WON THE RACE

FOOTPRINTS OF CANCER

SHE WON THE RACE

A TRUE STORY

MARTHA AXMANN



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FOREWORD



MARTHA AXMANN HAS opened the windows of her soul in this book, sharing with us the story of Robyn. More deeply, she has shared her own story as a wife and mother who has loved and exulted in the life of a beautiful, precious daughter who committed herself to a bold calling to give herself for others. Martha Axmann begins by telling the story of her own growing up and coming of age in the American South, falling in love and living what seems to be the perfect American family dream. She had a loving, supportive husband and a son and a daughter. All were faithful to church and loving of others. In retrospect, her life seemed so right, so much what she wanted for her own daughter, now the age Martha Axmann had been when she had begun her own young family.

Why does Martha have to suffer the worst possible loss—the loss of a child? No parent ever imagines burying their own child, particularly a child in the first bloom of adulthood. And why, still later, the suffering and death of her husband? He, too, slipped from her as she tried to hold on through sheer force of will and prayer, curled in his arms each night, knowing that cancer was taking him away, too.

Where does she find the strength to turn from this second grave of one who was her life and find a way onward?

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It is too easy to offer theological truths such as “God does not cause suffering; rather, God suffers with us,” or “God never leaves us alone,” or “it is a mystery; we see through a glass darkly.” Theological truths without story, though, are like the friends of Job, pronouncing to their “friend” what they believed to be the meaning of suffering. Instead of theological truths, God offers us a story—a story of sending his only son to show us how to live by example, only to watch him live too short a life, then suffer and die a painful, protracted death. We can find God in this story more than we can in a set of so-called “truths.” In the same way, we walk with one another with the greatest comfort and meaning when we share our own stories with one another.

It is in that spirit that Martha Axmann has so transparently shared her life with us. If you are standing helplessly by while your friend, like Job, sits in a heap of ashes and grief, the story of how ever-widening communities of faith were present in meaningful ways for Martha Axmann will show you how to be a truly caring friend.

If you are suffering, you own unspeakable loss; this book’s message is that you are not alone. When Mary stood at the foot of the cross watching her son die, with her stood friends. Martha Axmann offers to stand with you as you suffer loss through this story—the story of Robyn.

—**Diana Garland, PH.D.**

Dean, Baylor School of Social Work

Waco, Texas

October 15, 2006

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I WANT TO THANK God for allowing me to listen to him and respond to his call in asking me to write this book. All of Robyn's friends have been such an encouragement to me and helped me with memories of Robyn. I also would like to thank the following people who helped me in different ways to bring this book to completion: Sharon Brisken, Sheila Ingle, Dr. Bob Hanley, Edna Ellison, Dr. Diana Garland, Livia Mitchell, and Jackson Bundy. My family and church friends have constantly lifted me in prayers and given me inspiration to finish this task.

To God be the Glory,
Martha Axmann

PROLOGUE



I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.

—2 Timothy 4:7-8

GOD CHOSE FOR my daughter, Robyn, to finish her race on Earth on March 11, 1991, at the early age of twenty-six. I had no choice but to give her back to him. I can't see or understand why. However, someday, praise God, I will know. For now I have to exercise faith beyond what I can see and know in my limited human way and bridge this void, this death, and this horror with faith that only God can give me.

A few days following Robyn's entrance into heaven, I wrote this prayer:

Dear God, help me fill this valley of sadness with mountains of divine joy and endless praise and eternal love—the void of her enthusiasm with the harmony of her music, the absence of her presence with the presence of your Spirit, the beauty of her perfect smile with the

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beauty of a Christian witness, the touch of her caring heart with a life of service to others, the friendship of a best friend with an example of what friends are for, the love of my only daughter with spiritual love that radiates to others.

As I know she's now with you, God, fulfilling a divine task, give us the same determination we saw in her to serve you more completely each day.

Thank you, God, for the privilege of having her for these twenty-six years.

I know all things work together for good for those who love the Lord (Romans 8:28). However, as a mother, I continued to seek answers to help me as I ran from depression. One day I turned on the Focus on the Family radio program, and I felt God speak to me through that day's guest. Steve Saint, author of *The End of the Spear*, told about his daughter, Stephanie, and how her death had, for a time, devastated his walk with God. I just sat there and cried because I felt again the pain of losing a child. Steve Saint's feelings as a father were so much like my feelings as a mother! I felt God nudging me to write about Robyn.

One of the scriptures read at Robyn's graveside was 1 Corinthians 15:58: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Thank you, Lord.

I will have to say honestly that my faith was shaken after Robyn was taken—she was so young and had such potential—and then my husband also died, at a time when we could have spent more time together enjoying some of the things he had worked so hard for all his life. However, I will hasten to say, as I pray daily, God is with me, and he has provided for me and protected me. I constantly say, "Lord, tell me what you have for me to do for your glory, and how I may serve you better and more completely."

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That's why I am writing this book. I felt God kept saying to me, "Martha, when are you going to do what I want you to do so that it might bless and encourage others through trials in their lives?"

But it was so painful for me to get everything about Robyn back out. I ran from that. I could always think of something else I wanted to do. I tried to do things that would fill my time and also use my talents and serve God. I tutored at my home for a while, I did substitute teaching, I taught in an adult reading program, and I served on the foster care board for Spartanburg County. I also taught in an after-school program for the Boys & Girls Club, helping students pull up their test scores. I served as president of the Sanctuary Choir at my church and served on several committees. I was elected to the board of trustees at Anderson. I enjoyed serving in each of these endeavors.

I was prodded every now and then, *When are you going to finish the writing?* When I was serving on the board at Anderson, one of Robyn's friends became ill with leukemia and died. I wished my story were written down so I could hand it to her parents; it would have been a blessing to them. A young girl from my church was killed in a car accident, and I was reminded again. Robyn's friends sometimes said to me, "You know, you could write about Robyn." Another young girl from Anderson was killed in a car wreck on the way to a ball game with other students. I wrote her parents a note, expressing that I understood what they were going through. This was another reminder.

Then one day when I was serving on a committee at my church, I had to write something up for one of the ministers. After this, just "out of the blue," he said, "Martha, just put a pencil in your hand and it's amazing what you can do."

With God's help, I've tried to put my story into words. I pray this will be a blessing to every soul who reads it and a soul winner for those who don't know God yet. I could not live and keep my mind and go through these experiences without God and knowing someday I will see Robyn and William again.

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Steve Saint's testimony on the Focus on the Family radio broadcast spoke to me of this. When Steve was a boy, his father, a missionary in the jungles of South America, had been killed by the people he was trying to serve. One of the warriors, named Mincaye, later became a Christian and a friend to Steve. Steve invited Mincaye to his home in the States. There Mincaye witnessed the sudden and unexpected death of Steve's college-age daughter, Stephanie, due to a cerebral hemorrhage.

In the emergency room, when Mincaye saw Stephanie unconscious, covered with tubes and wires and surrounded by medical workers, he became very frustrated and wanted to know who was doing this. All Steve could say was, "No one is doing this, Mincaye. Steph is real sick. People are trying to help her."

As the flurry of activity around them continued, Mincaye's face was totally changed to a look of peace and confidence. "Don't you see," he asked Steve, "that God is doing this himself? He is taking Steph to live with him in heaven."

Steve slowly realized this had to be part of the story God was writing with their lives. Somehow, beyond his ability to comprehend this terrible trauma, it would eventually and mysteriously prove to be a cornerstone of God's plan for them. Steve bowed his head and prayed, "Change my heart, O God."

Just as Steve Saint prayed for God to change his heart, each day I pray the same. To share Robyn's story was a change for me. Another step in my changing was to *write* Robyn's story. My prayer for you, the reader, is that God will also change your heart and draw you close to himself.

Change My Heart, Oh God,
Make it ever new,
Change my heart, Oh God,
May I be like you.

PROLOGUE

You are the potter,
I am the clay
Mold me and make me
This is what I pray.

Change My Heart, Oh God.
Make it ever new
Change My Heart, Oh God
May I be like you!

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“POOPSIE”

It was typical of Robyn to give everyone a nickname. Her jovial personality was evident in all her activities. She concocted a name for me sometime when she was in high school. Somehow I was her “Poopsie.” Where she got that from, I’ll never know.

CHAPTER 1

BEGINNINGS



I AM THE youngest of five children—four girls and one boy. I was raised in the small town of Cowpens, South Carolina, near Spartanburg. My mom taught school until she had children, and Daddy worked in a small bank until it closed. Then Daddy became a part-time farmer and service station owner, and eventually he went into the used-car business.

Each of my parents had different talents. Daddy, a gifted businessman and a Purple Heart WWI veteran, also knew how to invest and save his earnings. He provided a good home and college educations for his five children. Mom, talented in music and teaching, did a lot of church work and was involved in community activities.

I am thankful to this day for Christian parents and the love, fellowship, and support of a small community and church. More than once since becoming an adult, I've been told I lived a very sheltered life, and compared to today's world, I did. However, as I look back to my roots, I see that parents, church, and community are the glue that holds me together, the foundation of the workings of the inner person I am today.

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As we go along in life, we continually seek God's will in major decisions. Sometimes I am shocked or amazed at how I have felt his leading, but at other times I have had to keep seeking a final answer. When I was seeking God's will regarding leaving home and going to college, I felt lost. All my siblings had finished college and held jobs in other places, and for six years it had been just Mom and Daddy and me living together in our small town. In many ways I was not prepared to face everyday trials without this close home environment, and I wasn't too thrilled at the idea of leaving it.

I had always wanted to be a schoolteacher. When I was a small child, I played school with my dolls, my dogs, my friends, Daddy, and anything or anyone else who would sit at the desks I arranged like a schoolroom. I was always the teacher, with chalk in one hand and a ruler in the other. I could keep my dogs sitting in their desks in rows, listening to what I said, and Daddy loved it. He was always the behavior problem—he liked to chew tobacco and spit. Since I had to have school after he got home from work, and this was his time to relax, I had to let him chew. The dogs loved it. Daddy often came up with off-the-wall remarks that were not appropriate for the classroom either—bad influence on the dogs. One day a neighbor said to me that she didn't know if I was going to be a schoolteacher or a veterinarian, but she believed I could do either. I knew I had to go to college to be prepared.

I felt I did not want to go to a large college, but I did not know where I wanted to go. The Lord was leading me at this time, although I did not realize it. One day a lady knocked on our door, and my mom let her in. She said she wanted to talk with me and that she was a field representative from Anderson College in Anderson, South Carolina. At that time, Anderson was a two-year junior college. I liked what she said. After a visit to the campus and the offer of a voice scholarship, I decided I would go to Anderson. After being at Anderson for several months, I knew I was where God wanted me to be.

I took basic courses that would transfer to a four-year college; I knew I had to go on to a four-year college to get my degree. Then after two

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years came another major decision—where to go next. Anderson had a good relationship with Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina; both of them were Baptist schools. Several of my close friends planned to take the test to see if they could get into Furman, and I decided I would go with them and try also. Difficult, standardized, timed, and long, the test almost defeated me, but I was determined. When I got my letter of acceptance, I was thrilled and called my parents right away. We all felt Furman was where I was to finish my education.

God was leading me all the time.

Not long after I arrived at Furman, a close friend of mine from my Anderson College days told me about a boy who wanted to go out with me. President of his class, everyone on campus knew him. I was not interested at the time because I was going with someone else. This boy kept pursuing me through my friend, however, and finally I agreed to a double date.

I knew right away that William Axmann was smart, competent, and athletic. I continued my other dating relationship, but somehow I felt God telling me that William Axmann was going to be my husband. I could not give in to that nudging of the Holy Spirit, but William persisted, and I finally accepted a going-steady ring from him. He was an outstanding leader and student at Furman, and it was an honor to be known as his girlfriend. From then on we were inseparable.

William did not have a car, but I needed a car to do my student teaching, so Daddy let me have an old Ford from his used-car lot to get back and forth. (We didn't tell Daddy it was badly needed to date with also!) My siblings really gave Dad a hard time for giving me a car, complaining that they never got cars in college, and to this day I still hear this from them! The old Ford was wonderful for my student teaching, however, and William and I liked having a way to get off campus. Prior to this, we dated on campus or double-dated with friends. Occasionally, a close friend lent William his car.

Now, understand, my Ford did not have all the bells and whistles it needed. Daddy let me know, in no uncertain terms, how cautious I

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was to be, and I had a very limited amount of money for gas. When William and I went out in the Ford, we were careful not to go very far from Furman. The passenger door stuck and made an awful cracking noise when it opened. I was really particular about where I was when I opened that door; everyone jumped and looked to see what had made the loud noise. It was a little embarrassing.

One night, as we came back from town, the lights got dimmer and dimmer. William drove slowly until we got back to campus. There were no lights at all by then. We breathed sighs of relief—at least we didn't get stopped or have an accident—I knew Daddy would not have liked that! Living dangerously as a college kid was challenging.

The army had loaned William the money for his education at Furman and required two years of active duty service in return. After graduation, William went to Texas for a year to fulfill his duty to the army, and I went to Atlanta, Georgia, with two other girls from Furman to teach school there. William came home around Christmastime and gave me a diamond, and we were married in July. We lived in Connecticut, where he was serving his second year in the army.

William had already been in Connecticut for several months before we were married, so he talked to several of the school districts there about a teaching job for me. I interviewed with those closest to the base where he was stationed, and had several opportunities. I signed a contract with a school in Southington, Connecticut, about fifteen miles from where we were stationed. It looked like a good situation. The school was new and I liked the grade level.

When I signed the contract, I was told about another teacher who might like to carpool with me. Mrs. Light lived about five miles from our home. William did not have to worry about getting to work because we lived on the base, and I could have the car to go to school. I called Mrs. Light immediately.

Mrs. Light was much older than I and had been teaching a long time. She also had been married long enough to tell her husband what to do! Mrs. Light and I took turns driving each week. Inside her car

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she had posted a note requesting passengers not to smoke while riding in her vehicle. I was allergic to cigarette smoke, but I asked her one day why she had that note in her car, and she said it was for her husband. Now, being just married and very much in love, I thought this was very strange. Couldn't she just ask him not to smoke in her car? However, as I got to know her better, I learned her perspective on marriage differed from mine.

Mrs. Light told me, after about a month of riding together, that I should carry a bag in the car packed with my pajamas, toothbrush, and change of clothes—winter was approaching, and we might not be able to drive home every day. Now, this did not sit too well with me because I was newly married. I needed to get home to see William every night! But since I had never lived up north, I did not realize that snow came often, quickly, and in truckloads.

This became a reality one day when it started snowing in the morning while we were at school. In Connecticut, school officials did not call off school right away as is done in the South, where I had lived all my life. I became more and more concerned as I saw the snow begin to cover the road and grounds outside my classroom window. That week we were driving my car, a Chevrolet with no four-wheel drive and with a large rear end that slid around in bad weather.

I was determined to make it home. We got about halfway and came to a huge hill, and I could not make that car go up that hill. Every time I got about halfway up, the car started sliding sideways, wheels spinning. After I tried three times and slid back down each time, a policeman tapped on the window and asked if he could try. He got in and somehow made the grade. I was so thankful! I certainly did not want to spend the night in a cold car with Mrs. Light saying "I told you so." We just poked all the way home; it took us a long time. As dark began to fall, I was so thankful to pull up to my house and see William, and he felt the same way. I needed that special TLC that only William could render.

I was beginning to miss my South Carolina home, parents, friends, and weather. William was better adjusted to being away because of his

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time in Texas. I didn't even know if we were going to be able to go home for Christmas that year, and I had never been away from home on Christmas. Sometimes William had to work all night or even a long weekend, and I was miserable. To help my loneliness, William decided to get me a dog—a dachshund. The dog was a lot of company and slept right by my side of the bed.

Besides missing my family, I also felt uncomfortable at the school where I taught, which was very different from any school I had attended or had experienced in my student teaching at Furman. I taught a combination first- and second-grade class, which is difficult for a new teacher. Although the school was a public school, most of the teachers and students were Catholic. The students brought an offering to school about twice a week to give to the nuns. All during those days, I heard the sound of money dropping to the floor or the students playing with it at their desks. At the end of the school day, the nuns came to my class and taught my students about their religion. I am a Southern Baptist, so the Catholic emphasis challenged me.

The teachers' lounge provided another difficult situation. All the teachers, both male and female, shared the lounge. We had a male principal and several male teachers, and some of the teachers went to the lounge just to talk. The only adult bathroom was in this lounge. By the time I had a break, I was "bursting at the seams," and I would go barreling down the hall to the lounge, only to find men and women sitting there talking. I felt very uncomfortable even using the bathroom. Needless to say, I learned a lot of bladder control that year.

One day when I came into the lounge, there were more men than women, so I thought I would just wait to use the bathroom until some of the men left. All the chairs in the lounge were taken, but one chair did have wooden arms. As one of the gentlemen offered to get up, I said, "Oh, no. Don't get up. I'll just sit on the handle of this chair." Everyone thought it was hilarious that I said *handle* instead of *arm*. The teachers loved to hear me talk and would ask me to talk for them; my southern drawl was entertaining.