

“What a testimony of God’s grace! *Hey God, You Have A Plan, Right?* presents a fast-moving account of misunderstanding, abuse, criticism from spiritual leaders, Christian ‘help’ which didn’t help . . . and then the gift of unconditional love from her husband, Stan. The result was a fresh understanding of God’s tender care for her all along. What a gift!”

—Ken Royer, D.Min.,
Director of Pastoral Care,
Link Care Center, Fresno, CA

“*Hey God, You Have a Plan, Right?* is a compelling story that gives insight into the thought processes and healing of a victim of domestic violence. The journey is difficult, but dreams and hopes can be restored by focusing on the Lord.”

—Paula Silva
President of FOCUS Ministries, Inc.
www.focusministries1.org
Coauthor of *Violence Among Us: Ministry to Families in Crisis*

Hey God,
You Have
A Plan,
Right?

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Karen Jessing



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Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
1. Detours Are Not Dead Ends	1
2. First Love	7
3. Broken Dreams	13
4. A Disastrous Choice	17
5. Christian “Help” That Didn’t Help	25
6. Can Someone Please Help Me?	31
7. Me—A Fugitive?	37
8. Tom, Come Back	43
9. Single Mom Doldrums	49
10. At Last—An Answer	53
11. Will the Challenges Ever End?	63
12. A Major Turning Point	69
13. Dreams	77
14. A Perfect Career Comes and Goes	85
15. Forgiveness—A Blessing	91

16. The Stained Glass Window	97
17. Goodbye, Tom	103
Epilogue	107
What You Might Not Know	113
Parting Words	117



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In loving memory
Mother and Dad
Vic
Tom
Lydia and Walt
Grace
Dr. Ted



Introduction

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

—Jer. 29:11

THIS VERSE HAS been my theme throughout my life. I have claimed these words again and again. There were times when I really believed them, and then there were times when I doubted if they were true. My life took many twists and turns. Some were good and some not so good. I know He had his hand on me every step of the way, and I am who I am today because of the trials and tribulations I experienced.

It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.

—Ps. 119:71 KJV

Once, on a trip up the California coast, I stopped at Fort Bragg, located 170 miles north of San Francisco. A small sign directed visitors to Glass Beach. I soon learned that Glass Beach is one of the most unique beaches in the world, not because nature created

it that way, but because time and the pounding surf have corrected one of man's destructive mistakes.

Sixty years ago, household garbage was dumped into the ocean near this beach. The colorful glass bottles that ended up in the dump eventually broke into millions of pieces. They were tossed and ground up and then smoothed and polished by the waves washing them over the sand. Eventually, they were transformed into pieces of beautifully colored "sea glass" sparkling in the sun.

I knelt on this colorful carpet, picked up several smooth bits of colored glass, and placed them together, permitting the sun to shine through. Those broken, crushed pieces were instantly transformed into a beautiful stained glass window.

I thought, then, about all the adversities in my life. They were like those broken pieces of glass. Yet, the despair of my shattered dreams and the sharp edges of my pain and disappointment have been made smooth with God's help, professional support systems, and lots of time. My life has become like a stained glass window through which the love of God's Son, Jesus Christ, shines.

A decorative flourish consisting of a central white shape resembling a stylized bird or a flame, with two grey, curved lines extending outwards from its base, framing the text below.

CHAPTER 1

Detours Are Not Dead Ends

PERMANENTLY PARALYZED? IS that what you said?”
“Yes, Karen, there is a 50 percent chance you may be permanently paralyzed. We hope the surgery will correct the problem, but it might not.”

Oh, that’s just great. Thanks a lot. I may never get to go back to college.

I didn’t say it out loud, but I wanted to.

I had enrolled at Taylor University in Indiana during the fall of 1959. My parents thought teaching would be a good career for me, so that’s what I pursued. However, my college days were interrupted during my third week on campus. Little did I know this would be the first of several detours in my life.

Earlier, I had returned to my dorm room from class and my legs would not move. I fell to the floor and couldn’t get up. What was happening to me? My roommate immediately called the school nurse, who took me to the infirmary. She quarantined me because she suspected I might have spinal meningitis or polio. The campus physician examined me and watched for obvious symptoms of those diseases. Two days later, there were no symptoms related to either meningitis or polio, so he suggested that my parents take me for further medical evaluation.

My partial paralysis continued. Sometimes I could move my legs a little, but most of the time I wasn't able to move them at all. They became numb, and that was frightening. I spent a lot of time lying in bed for my back would spasm when I sat in a chair.

Three different orthopedic surgeons examined me. All three had different diagnoses: I was born without one vertebra; I was born with too many vertebrae; I had a fractured vertebra. We chose not to accept any of their diagnoses and treatment recommendations. (We learned later that each surgeon's diagnosis probably was "accurate" because the deformed vertebra may have shifted when the X-rays were taken, allowing each surgeon to see what he saw.)

My parents decided to take me to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. It was a long, three-hundred-mile trip. As I lay across the backseat of the car, I couldn't stop thinking about what was happening to me. I was scared.

I had just become acclimated to college life, and I liked my new roommate. Dorm life was fun, and I had made many new friends.

Why me? I asked myself. *I'm only eighteen years old.*

I entered the clinic early Monday morning in a wheelchair. The doctors put me through numerous tests. Several doctors examined me that day and the following morning. On Tuesday afternoon, Dr. Sullivan gave us the results of the tests.

"There are a couple of problems: spina bifida occulta and spondylolisthesis," he said. "Both are congenital birth defects of the spine. In other words, you were born with them. You need a spinal fusion of the lower three vertebrae in your back. I would like to schedule surgery next Monday, if that is OK with you and your parents."

I glanced at Mom and Dad. They nodded their heads. I shrugged and said OK. The doctor explained that the surgery involved cutting, blood transfusions, and chipping bone. I quickly tuned him out. All that medical jargon was gross!

I had the spinal fusion at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota, where I spent three weeks. They packed chips of my leg bone and other bone received from the bone bank around the three vertebrae in my back.

The post-surgical pain in my leg where they had removed bone was as painful as my back. I couldn't wait to get my shot of morphine.

I was fitted for a large body brace that was strapped over my shoulders and around my body. All physical activity, except for walking and sitting, was strictly forbidden. I was really upset, and I thought, *There goes college.*

During the following nine months, I was allowed to ride in the car once a week, but I could not lift even a teakettle of water. The brace could be taken off while I was lying flat in bed, which permitted me to have bed baths.

I was an energetic and vivacious person who had always been very active. Now I could hardly hobble around the house in that bulky brace. I moaned to myself, *This is a heck of a way to live. I can't even take care of myself.*

My clothes didn't fit because they wouldn't go around the brace. Mom bought me some oversized shirts and large elastic waistband pants. I detested them.

These are ugly, old people's clothes, I thought.

I was angry, bitter, depressed, and miserable, and I made sure everyone else was unhappy, too.

Why did this have to happen to me? I can't do anything. God, what did I do to deserve this? I complained.

I didn't care if my lousy attitude showed. Even my cat avoided me. Since I couldn't go to college and be a normal teen, I wanted everyone to know just how I felt.

Boredom turned into depression. I didn't want to get out of bed in the mornings. Why should I? I couldn't do anything.

Then, one day, I decided to try to play the piano. I had been taking piano lessons since I was six years old. If I was careful, I could sit on the piano bench in my brace. It was awkward, difficult, and painful, but each day, sitting became a little easier.

Well, at least I can do something constructive, I told myself. *Maybe I can learn to arrange music. I can't do anything else.*

My mother and my paternal grandmother were both accomplished pianists. I admired them and desired to play like them.

Here was my opportunity. I practiced many hours during the day to help pass the time. I composed several hymn arrangements, and that gave me a great sense of accomplishment.

I was at peace while playing the piano and wasn't as agitated or miserable as I was at other times. I had fewer meltdowns and slowly accepted the fact that I couldn't change my situation. But I did still grieve that I wasn't able to go to college like my friends.

Then I remembered something. *Maybe I shouldn't have let Suzanne ride with me on Ginger*, I thought. The weekend before I became paralyzed, I had gone home for a visit. I was riding my horse, Ginger, when our pastor's young daughter, Suzanne, asked if she could ride with me.

"Sure. Dad, can you help her get up behind me?" I asked.

No one had ever ridden double with me on Ginger, but I thought the horse would be OK with it. After we were settled in the saddle, Ginger started to buck. Suzanne was holding onto my waist. When we went up in the air the first time, I knew we were in trouble. If we were bucked off while my feet were in the stirrups, and if Ginger started running, I might be dragged behind the horse.

The third time we bounced up in the air, I took my feet out of the stirrups, and both Suzanne and I went airborne. I fell on the ground very hard and Suzanne landed on top of me. With help, I managed to get up. Neither of us appeared to be hurt, which was a miracle. I got back in the saddle and rode for a few more minutes.

Now, as I went for my nine months checkup, I was anxious to learn the outcome of the surgery. Was it successful? Would I be normal again?

Dr. Sullivan walked into the office and warmly greeted me. I told him about getting bucked off the horse just before I was paralyzed. I asked if it had affected my condition.

"It undoubtedly jarred the deformed vertebra, causing the paralysis," he replied. "Karen, it is a blessing that it happened now. This problem might not have surfaced for many years. It could have created more complications later in life. But right now, are you ready to take the brace off?"

Reluctantly, I said yes. As the nurse helped me take it off, I felt faint and began to tremble. I had to lie down and rest for a few minutes before trying to sit up. I thought something was seriously wrong, but eventually I was able to sit and stand. I took a few tentative steps with help and was relieved that I could walk without the brace. The doctor sent me to have X-rays, which I hoped would show the fusion was successful.

After reviewing the X-rays, Dr. Sullivan came into the exam room with a huge grin. I looked at him and asked, “Well, is it OK?”

“Yes, Karen, the fusion looks great. You are going to be fine.”

I was elated. “Good, then I can go back to college next month.”

“Well, the good news is that you can go back to college. The bad news is that you will not be able to live on campus.”

“What do you mean, I can’t live on campus?”

“You need to live at home for at least a year because you need to sleep on a very firm mattress. And you still need lots of rest.”

Stay at home another year? I wanted to live on campus. At that rate, I would never be able to live in a dorm!

Taylor University was more than a hundred miles from home. St. Joseph College in Rensselaer was nineteen miles away and was the closest commute for me, but it was a Catholic boy’s college. My parents petitioned the school’s admissions office asking permission for me to attend due to my situation.

Needless to say, I wasn’t very excited about attending a boy’s college.

Thanks a lot, Mom and Dad, I grumbled to myself

I enrolled under duress and took the basic courses. Attending a boys’ college was different, that’s for sure. There were five adult women and I taking classes along with 1,100 males. We ladies spent our “out of class” time in the women’s restroom lounge. We could go to the student lounge or the library, but the fellows made us feel as if we were invading their territory. So we stayed away.

While there were five other females in the college, there were no other women in my classes, and that was weird. It was especially

weird when I was in my biology class with seminarians studying for the priesthood. The priest professors were very kind and understanding, though. There were no social activities for me to be involved in, so that allowed lots of time for study.

Some of the guys were gentlemen and held the door open for me when I entered a building. The majority of them, however, were not pleased with women being on their campus. In addition to being female, I was Protestant, not Catholic, but everyone respected my Protestant religious preference.

My college counselor, Father Smolar, was supportive, offering me a lot of encouragement. He was aware that I was still physically and emotionally fragile from the surgery. I could share my feelings with him and he did not criticize my frustrated attitude. He told me it was OK to be angry, but not to let it control me. He was a great mentor.

“Karen, you have your whole life ahead of you to pursue your dreams,” he said. “What has happened to you is just a detour.”

Detour? It felt like a gigantic dead end!

Living at home was tolerable, but nothing like living at the college dorm. My folks guarded my physical activity and made sure I got plenty of rest. Even though the doctor had given specific instructions, I had to be reminded constantly that I could not do everything I wanted to do.

Mom and Dad took it upon themselves to choose the direction of my education. They became quite comfortable changing plans and making decisions for me, but I didn’t appreciate their decision-making. They made a special effort to find the best nursing school for me to attend. Then they went into their power mode and enrolled me. I didn’t want to be a nurse, but I figured out they apparently would be proud of me if I became one. They arranged for me to attend the Vincennes University nursing program in the fall.

I was extremely unhappy. I wanted to be a psychologist. I shared my dream with Mom and Dad, but they said, “Psychology is not a woman’s profession.” I didn’t understand why they couldn’t just let me choose what I wanted to be. I was tired of them telling me what I could and could not do.