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SISTERCHICKS®

*Down
Under*



Robin
Jones Gunn





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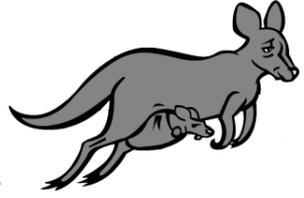
Frances, thank you for taking me to corners of New Zealand that will never leave my heart.

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*Mostly what God does is love you.
Keep company with him and learn a life of love.
Observe how Christ loved us.
His love was not cautious but extravagant.
He didn't love in order to get something from us
but to give everything of himself to us.
Love like that.*

EPHESIANS 5:2

Prologue



*A*ge is just a number, right?

That's what I thought until three years ago when my younger brother opened his big mouth. He was on his way to Mexico to settle the legal details on some property his wife had inherited when he stopped by our home in southern California. His life seemed brimming with new adventures, while Tony and I were riding the overly-committed-to-the-schedule freight train we had been on since we got married.

Over dinner my brother joked about his receding hairline. "You know, Kathleen, you're halfway there yourself."

"No I'm not." I pulled at the strands of my straight brown hair to prove that my dependable mane wasn't falling out.

"I meant your age," he said. "You turned forty-five last month, right? You could be halfway done." He seemed to wait for me to do the math.

I always hated math.

I felt as if an equation had etched itself on the chalkboard of my mind: $45 + x = ?$

I didn't know the answer.

What had my forty-five years added up to so far? What was the value of x that would fill the remaining years? What would the sum of my life be? And what risks was I willing to take to solve the equation?

Apparently God can use all things—including math—to prepare a hurried heart to respond to Him when He's about to do a new thing. If I hadn't been pondering the "value of x " for so many weeks after my brother's visit, I don't think I would have been ready for what followed.

In the middle of the night, Tony's old boss, Mad Dog, called from Wellington, New Zealand, to offer Tony a three-month position film editing at Jackamond Studios. Ever since the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, Wellington had become *the* location for up-and-coming filmmakers. Tony saw the job as the big break he had been waiting for. I saw it as an opportunity to step off the edge of my well-padded nest and take a free fall into the unknown.

After all, our daughter was in college, and we were no longer financially responsible for my mother-in-law's convalescent care. Tony and I could do this. We could leave everything for three months and have the exotic travel experience we had only dreamed about during our college days.

I always do my best thinking while shaving my legs in a tubful of bubbles. The two weeks prior to our departure for Wellington, I had the smoothest legs and the most wrinkled fingers in all of Los Angeles.

I'd thought through every detail and confidently arrived at the airport with everything I needed. Everything, that is, except one item I hadn't tucked in my suitcases or sent ahead in the boxes. I didn't pack a single friend. After spending most of my

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life in the same city, same church, and same circles, I suddenly was minus my built-in community of friends.

Looking back, I now see how unnatural it was to change a well-established migratory route in the middle of life and expect my wings to start flapping in rhythm as soon as I took the free fall. It shouldn't have been such a surprise that I fell so hard. After all, everything in my world had flip-flopped.

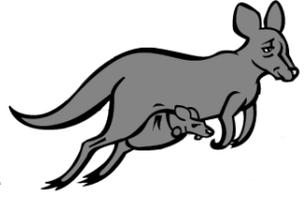
I think it was necessary, though, for me to tumble as far down under as I did. Otherwise, I never would have stumbled into the Chocolate Fish on a fine fall Friday in February with feathers in my hair. And that's where I found Jill.

If Jill were the one telling this story, she would say that's where she found *me*. But I'm saying that's where I found her. It had become clear that to solve the math problem written over this season of my life, I needed one more whole number. That little number was one. One new best friend. Jill.

Jill likes math. She sees math in art and nature and isn't afraid of the unknown equations. Two years ago when she and I stood in front of a painting at an Australian art museum in Sydney, she opened my eyes to the beauty of balance and symmetry, and that's when I began to make peace with math.

But before I flutter through our story, I will add one more important point. I believe the reason I found Jill wasn't so much because I was looking for her, but because she was waiting for me, hanging by her painted toenails on the edge of her own empty nest.

One



During the two weeks before we left for New Zealand, every day felt like a storm at sea. My husband turned into a ruthless commander, as the intensity of it all swept us through our final days in California. When the storm subsided, I found myself washed up at an unfamiliar airport on the underside of the globe.

The only comforting sight was the grinning face of Tony's boss, Marcus, aka "Mad Dog," who met us at the baggage claim in Wellington. He punched Tony in the arm. "What did you think of that flight? Was I right about its being a marathon film fest? How many did you watch?"

"Five. No seven. No, I think it was five." Tony's adrenaline-induced gaze seemed frozen on his face.

Mad Dog adjusted his frayed corduroy cap. "Do you want to eat something first or go right to your new place?"

"Home," I said, as if it were a secret password that would lead me into this new world. All I needed was my new space around me so I could start fluffing up things the way I liked.

Then I would be ready to remind myself why this had been a good decision.

“Home it is. Hope you guys like this place. I told you how hard it is to find housing near the studio, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Tony said. “And we really appreciate all you did to find us a place. I’m going to owe you big time.”

“You can pay me back with a few hours of overtime.” Mad Dog loaded our luggage into the back of a van he had borrowed from Walter Jackamond Studios.

“How many hours are a ‘few,’ Marcus?” I asked.

He let out a single gut sound that resembled a cross between a cough and a guffaw. In the twelve years we had known him, I still hadn’t gotten used to his laugh.

“You have to start calling me Mad Dog,” he said. “No one here knows me as Marcus. And when I say a few hours, I mean...”

He didn’t finish his sentence, but I realized I already knew the answer. For the next three months, Jackamond Studios would occupy my husband’s every waking hour. Not only because they were behind schedule on the project for which they had hired Tony, but also because my husband never did anything halfway.

“Hey, it’s Gollum!” Tony pointed to the roof of the terminal. An enormous model of the bald, grim-faced Middle-earth icon peered down on us, looking like a gigantic alien that had fallen to earth and gotten his foot stuck through the roof.

“I guess we’re not in Kansas anymore, Toto,” I said.

Tony gave me a gratuitous wink at my attempt to make a joke. I gripped the car door’s handle. Not because of Tony’s wink or Gollum’s glare, but because Mad Dog was driving on the left side of the road.

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Tony laughed. "This is wild!"

"You'll get used to it," Mad Dog said. "Only took me a week when I moved here. Maybe less."

I expected an oncoming car to ram into us any moment. Everyone was going the opposite from what my brain said was correct. Mad Dog drove past a row of low-rise buildings, and I tried to take it all in. Stop lights, a normal-looking city bus, lots of small cars, billboards—and all of a sudden an Esprit store. All the evidences of Western civilization were here; yet it felt so different.

"There's the Embassy," Mad Dog said with reverence. He pointed to a pale yellow vintage square building. Fixed on the roof was another creature born in Tolkien's imagination. This one looked like a swooping black dragon with a long neck.

"How strange that the U.S. Embassy would have a dragon movie prop on top of it," I said.

Mad Dog and Tony both looked at me as if I were an alien creature who had just stuck my foot through the roof and landed in the same car with them.

"What?"

"Kathleen," Tony said patiently, "that's not the U.S. Embassy. That's the Embassy Theatre. And on the roof that's a fell beast ridden by a Ringwraith."

I kept a fixed expression and didn't blink, waiting for Tony to give me a few more hints as to why that should ring any bells.

"Remember the photos we saw of the premier? Opening night?"

"They still had Gollum on the roof of the Embassy for the premier," Mad Dog said. "Maybe that's why you didn't recognize it."

“Oh, yeah. I’m sure that’s the reason.” I diverted my gaze out the window. I hoped I wouldn’t be tested on any more *Lord of the Rings* trivia before we completed the last few miles of a very long journey to our new home.

We turned onto a narrow road and followed a pristine bay that skirted Wellington like a fancy azure petticoat. Thousands of houses dotted the low, rolling green hills that rose from the bay.

I noticed that some of the trees were beginning to drop their leaves. Autumn was coming to the globe’s underside. At home I had left budding jacaranda trees. My going away party at work had been decorated with fresh tulips and spring daffodils. Here, the leaves were turning gold.

I was in a flip-flopped place, inside and out.

Mad Dog slowed the van as we entered a residential area. “See that house over there?” He pointed at a tidy bungalow that was about eight hundred square feet big.

“That place just sold for the equivalent of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. U.S. dollars. Not New Zealand dollars. Like I said, it was amazing I found a place near the studio for the exact rent you said you wanted to pay. And it comes with a refrigerator.”

I should have known when he listed the refrigerator as a plus that I should brace myself.

“If you don’t take it, another guy at work wants it.”

“I’m sure we’ll want it,” I said.

Tony voiced his agreement.

Mad Dog stopped the car. “This is it. What do you think?”

I peered out the car window at another bungalow-style house. The first thing I noticed was the grinning figurine standing his post in front of a narrow row of yellow and orange

mums. I'd seen a number of lawn gnomes in my day and a pink flamingo or two, but this was the first ceramic hobbit I'd ever seen guarding a flower bed.

"Cute," I said with a smile. "But the hobbit definitely needs to go."

Mad Dog let out his guffaw laugh. "You'll have to clear that one with Mr. Barry, the landlord. What do you think of the garage?"

The tiny building that was separate from the main house had a window in front with curtains. It reminded me of the toolshed my father had built in our backyard when I was a girl. My two sisters and I wanted to turn the shed into a playhouse, but Dad never let us.

"The garage is cute, too." I turned my attention to the main house. The bungalow appeared to be freshly painted in a soft shade of celery green with white trim around the two front windows. It was much smaller than our home in Tustin, but I could make this cottage into "our" place for three months.

"You think this will work for you?" Mad Dog asked.

"Yes." I nodded and looked to see if Tony agreed. He did.

"You got a good woman, Tony." Mad Dog reached into the back of the van for our luggage. "Last week a guy who came down here from Canoga Park left after ten days on the job. His wife said she couldn't live in such primitive conditions. She said he had to decide between her or the job. He picked her."

"Good choice." I looped a shoulder bag over my arm and reached for another bag.

Mad Dog looked at me with his eyebrows raised. "If you say so."

I headed for the front door and was at the doorstep when

Mad Dog called, “Kathleen, over here.” He was standing by the garage’s side door.

I stumbled through the grass and past the lantern-holding, smirking hobbit and wondered if the house key was hidden in the garage. Or maybe Mad Dog wanted to give us the full tour before we went inside the house.

He opened the garage’s side door. Tony stepped in first. I followed, and the lights turned on. Literally.

This was it. We were “home.”

Barely breathing, I dropped both the shoulder bags and stood in the middle of our garage apartment. The single room came with a bed covered in an overly bright floral bedspread, a corner table, two metal patio chairs, a sink, an armchair, a hot plate, and the prized feature—a dorm-sized refrigerator.

“Bathroom is back there.” Mad Dog pointed to a door that looked as if it should open to the backyard.

I looked at Tony. He wasn’t moving. Or blinking.

With quiet steps, I wove my way through the furniture to the closed door and opened it. The newly built bathroom/laundry room/storage room/closet space was nearly half the size of the entire garage apartment. The room had been beautifully finished and was by far the nicest part of the apartment. The white curtains fluttered as a cool breeze came through the open window and coaxed me to breathe again.

I looked at the bathtub, my usual place of retreat and reflection in times of stress. The inner sanctum was defiled by a wooden drying rack propped up inside it. Over the rack was draped a pair of men’s briefs. Not just any briefs, but giant-sized briefs.

The cry of distress that had been welling up inside me came out in two unexpected words. “Jumbo briefs!”

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“What?” Tony came over to me.

I pointed and blinked so I wouldn't cry.

“Who would've left their underwear in here?” Tony asked.

“They look a little too large to belong to the garden hobbit,” I said in a pathetically squeaky voice.

Mad Dog cracked up, his cough-laugh bouncing off the walls. “You keep that sense of humor going, Kathleen, and you'll be fine.”

I pressed my lips together and felt my heart swell with empathy for the wife from Canoga Park. Perhaps she had been the tenant in this toolshed before us. Her departure might have been the reason Mad Dog was able to find a place for us. Perhaps the jumbo briefs were her husband's and had been left in their hasty departure.

“You paid the first month's rent already, right?” Tony asked.

Mad Dog nodded. “I had to grab the place as soon as it opened up, since nothing else is for rent in this neighborhood. You'd have more options if you decided to buy a car.”

Tony glanced my way. Our discussions about simplifying life during these three months had sounded so noble and appealing when we were in California working out a plan. We agreed that we needed to do this without the expense of a car. Obviously both of us thought the amount we had set aside for rent would have resulted in a lot more living space than it had.

“What can I do to help you guys settle in?” Mad Dog asked. I recognized in his voice a commendable effort to put a positive spin on the situation.

“We can take it from here.” Tony stepped into the other room and checked out the premium unused space under the bed.

“You'll need some groceries.” Mad Dog apparently wasn't

willing to leave so quickly. “I can drive you to the store, unless you want to walk down to the dairy. That’s what they call the corner market around here. Or, hey, I know a great place for fish and chips. You have to eat fish and chips your first day here. We could all drive there now.”

Tony looked at me, and I returned his numb gaze. I wasn’t ready to sit with another seat belt around me for any reason. Even if food was waiting at the end of the journey.

“Do you want to stay here, Kath? I’ll take a run with Mad Dog to get some food.” Tony opened the refrigerator, as if sizing up how much space he had to fill. His mind was always editing, arranging, and adjusting to fit the parameters of a given situation.

Once Mad Dog left, I would let Tony know that too much information had been edited from our housing arrangements. This place was not going to be okay. Not for ninety days and ninety nights. Not when Tony was the one who would be going to work every day, and I would be the one sitting here with nothing to do.

We don’t have to stay here. We can find another place. This is just for a night or two. We won’t even need to unpack. This is very temporary.

“Anything you want me to bring back for you, Kathleen?”

I mouthed the word *chocolate*.

My knowing husband nodded. “Anything else?”

“After the chocolate it doesn’t matter.”

Tony and Mad Dog opened the door to leave, and there stood our landlord with his large fist raised, as if he were about to knock. He was huge. Gigantic enough to fit into the briefs occupying the hallowed bathtub space.

In a deep voice with a New Zealand accent, Mr. Barry

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boomed out his greeting. Then he ducked the way I remembered Gandalf ducking to enter Bilbo Baggins's house in the Shire. Mr. Barry seemed to fill the room. Suddenly the joke seemed to be on me. I was the hobbit!

I tried to keep my jet-lagged self from bursting into laughter. Not a friendly chuckle sort of laugh. Welling up inside me was the sort of unladylike, explosive laugh that accompanies any truly successful preteen girls' sleepover.

I couldn't hold it in. The laughter spilled out. I couldn't help it. I'd never before met a giant's underwear before I met him.

"Jet lag," Tony said graciously.

I composed myself, and Mr. Barry told us all the important specifics of the apartment, including trash pickup and making the next rent payment. I only half listened, confident we wouldn't be here by the time the trash was ready for pickup.

As soon as all the guys left, I flopped onto the surprisingly comfortable bed. My head was pounding.

How many days do we have before Tony starts work? Three? No, wait. What day is this?

We flew out of LAX on Tuesday night. We lost a day when we crossed the international date line, so that made today Thursday. At least I thought it was Thursday.

I am so lost. What are we doing here?

I promised myself that regardless of what day it was, before Monday arrived, Tony and I would be settled in a real nest. All I had to do right now was float a little longer.

Tony and Mad Dog returned with a bundle of newspapers that Tony placed on our tiny table. He pulled back the pages. In the center were half a dozen large pieces of breaded, deep-fried fish and a mound of French fries. The excess oil

from the fish and chips had soaked through the thin paper on which the fish were separated from the layers of daily news. I found the odor of the oil on the dried newspaper ink inviting.

“Here’s the malt vinegar.” Mad Dog pulled several small plastic packets from his back pocket. “You have to try it with the vinegar.”

I sat in the armchair and enjoyed the fish and chips while Tony unpacked the groceries.

“I’m not sure where we’re going to put all this food,” he said.

“I told your man he was buying too much,” Mad Dog said.

“Tony, all we needed was some snacks, milk, and Cheerios to get us through breakfast tomorrow.”

“Did you say *Cheerios*?” Tony held up a package of what looked like little red-skinned sausages. “This is what they call *cheerios* around here.”

“No cereal Cheerios?”

Tony shook his head.

“Oh.”

Three months without my favorite breakfast food felt almost as shocking as the first sight of this garage apartment. It was all I could do to keep from crying. Over cereal. Or maybe it really was the jet lag. My throat hurt, and one of my ears hadn’t popped yet. I just wanted to go home.

Mad Dog left after the fish and chips were devoured. Tony leaned against the closed door and looked around. “Well, what do you think?”

I told Tony every single thought down to my opinion of the obnoxiously bright floral bedspread that dominated the room.

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Tony selected that problem as the first he would attempt to solve. “You think it’s too bright? Really?”

I was fired up and let my words fly. “It’s so blazingly bright that I feel like we could gather around and roast hot dogs in the visual heat it gives off.”

“Or roast cheerios.” Tony grinned.

“That’s not funny.” I clenched my jaw.

“Kathleen, relax! It’s just the name of a breakfast cereal.”

“Apparently it’s not! Not in this country, at least!”

Tony laughed at my fury, and that was his mistake.