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Shoes



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NONFICTION

Praying For Your Future Husband

*For Ethel Herr,
my mentor and friend, who has always carried
a bit of the Netherlands in her pocket.
Thank you for inviting me to “put my feet
beneath your table” and for teaching me how to pull
a few treasures out of my pocket.*

*For Anne de Graaf,
for all the reasons that keep us linked soul to soul
over all the years and all the miles. You are a gift.*

*And for my dad,
who served in the U.S. Army in Holland during WWII.
For the rest of his life, he retained a silent tenderness
for the Dutch. I think he passed it on to me.*

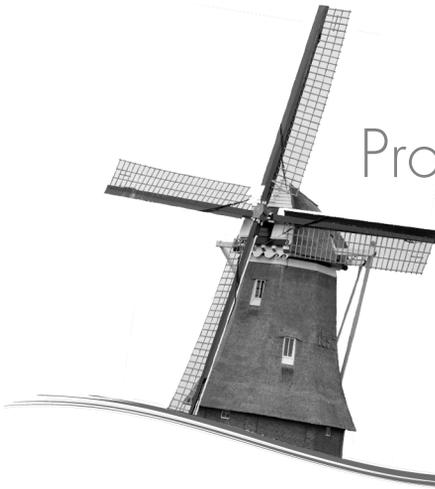
*An armful of colorful tulips to all my hardworking friends
at Multnomah Publishers who made this series a reality
and have been true Sisterchicks from the beginning.
(Okay, so there are a few Brotherdudes
included on the team as well.)
Thanks so much. I'm grateful to all of you.*

A friend loves at all times.
—PROVERBS 17:17, NIV

The Spirit of God whets our appetite
by giving us a taste of what's ahead.
He puts a little of heaven in our hearts
so that we'll never settle for less.
—2 CORINTHIANS 5:5, MSG

The world is a book, and those who do
not travel read only one page.

—SAINT AUGUSTINE



Prologue

We do what we have to do so we can do what we want to do.”

My husband has repeated that line to our children—all six of them—for the past twenty-five years. And I’ve viewed that as a fine approach to managing our family of eight.

But my congenial support of that philosophy abruptly ended on a stormy Tuesday afternoon last April. I answered the phone and heard one word that altered my life: “abnormal.”

All of time paused and held its breath with me. I felt like a harpooned mermaid—blinking, sinking, and incapable of thinking while submerged in an ocean of fear with only the phone to hold on to as a flotation device. Outside my kitchen window the wind plucked the bright pink sprigs of new life from the apple tree and flung them carelessly across the yard.

The medical assistant on the other end of the phone said my doctor requested further tests. When did I want to schedule an appointment for a biopsy?

I told her I would have to call her back. At least I think those were the words that came out of my mouth. The only thoughts I was aware of scampering through my brain were *This can't be happening. Not like it did for my mother. Not yet. I'm not ready.*

I had spent my life doing what I had to do every day. If I was ever going to do what I wanted to do, it would have to be now. This week. Today. Right this minute.

The raindrops pelted the window, arriving on a wind-whipped wave. They came against the kitchen glass at a slant.

I wasn't adrift in the depths, nor was I sinking. Not yet. I was encapsulated. The water could press against all my windows, but it wouldn't touch me. I still was buoyant with life, and there *was* something I needed—wanted—to do.

I realize not every woman knows what she wants to do, even when given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to pursue her bliss. But I knew. I always had known. I wanted to go to Holland. I wanted to see Noelle.

For the past forty years, Noelle had been my closest, dearest, most supportive friend. She and I had shared our hearts with each other ever since we were paired up as pen pals in third grade. Yet we had never met face to face.

It was essential for me to steer a straight course across the vast Atlantic to the land of windmills and tulips. My lifelong dream had been to meet Noelle, and now I was going to do it before... before whatever happened next, after the biopsy.

As the spring storm kicked up outside, I logged on to the computer and scrolled through a list of flights from Cincinnati to

Amsterdam. With a brave, unwavering finger, I hit Enter. Just like that, I had an airline ticket on hold for twenty-four hours.

Staring at the computer screen, I couldn't understand why I felt such an odd sense of expectancy. I should have been terrified, but I wasn't.

Five days later I stood on Noelle's doorstep on the other side of the world, and the expectancy was still there. God was about to do a new thing. It was springing up.

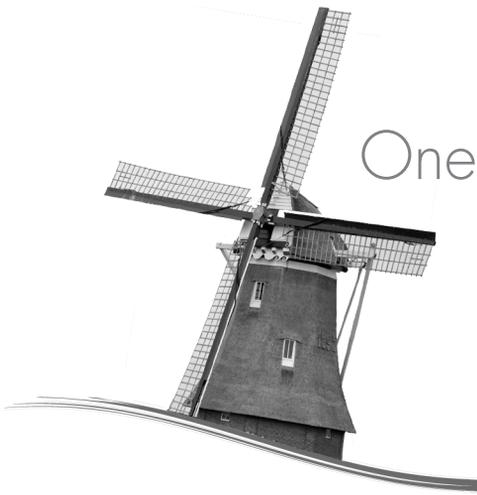
I've lived at a different pace since my whirligig adventure in Holland with Noelle. I think it started with the way I floated through that stormy day last April. Somehow I believed I wasn't going to sink.

Why is it that some life-giving truths can be right in front of you but you never see them? Or maybe you do see them but don't recognize them as the solid, full-of-hope points of light they are. All that life-changing power is wasted on those of us who are oblivious, trapped in the routine of the day-to-day, forever doing what we have to do.

That's how it was for me, and that's how it was for Noelle too. She saw the truth in front of me that I couldn't see. I saw the truth she had tucked away deep inside long ago but had chosen not to see.

Both of us will say that we needed to be with each other last April more than either of us realized. We needed to look each other in the eye, open our mouths, and speak the life-giving truths that seemed so obvious to each other but not to ourselves. And in the speaking came the healing.

I do ask myself every now and then if the visit to the Netherlands truly happened or if I merely dreamed the trek. But then, to prove that Noelle and everything about her home and our deep-hearted Sisterchick friendship are real, I open my closet door, and there they are: my beautiful wooden shoes. I slip my feet into the yellow beauties, and suddenly I believe in God all over again.



After booking my ticket to the Netherlands, I sat quietly in front of the computer, contemplating what to do next. Outside, the rain carried out its spring fling with gusto.

Telling my husband seemed wise. Not on the phone, though. I didn't want to say the words "abnormal mammogram," "biopsy," or "I'm leaving for a week" unless I could see his face.

So I decided to bake cookies. After padding my way to the kitchen, I pulled out a mixing bowl and turned the oven to 375 degrees.

I'm not the sort of woman who takes a long bath or a long walk to have time and space to think. For me, the best processing happens when I have my well-used mixing bowl balanced on my hip. No electric mixers for me. I beat the lumps out of my life challenges with a wooden spoon.

Then I line up all the solutions in my head while arranging the lumpy balls of dough on the cookie sheet. Soon the scent of all that lovely butter, brown sugar, and oatmeal wafts from the kitchen, and I start to feel better.

The fragrance fills the house with a standing invitation for my children to “come hither.” As they gather around the kitchen counter, I remember what really matters, and my problem is somehow quietly resolved.

Only this time I knew that when the enticing fragrance raced down the hall into each bedroom, it would find no takers. All our children were launched and flitting about in their own worlds.

Abnormal. Biopsy.

I went after the cookie dough with renewed mixing vigor. Taking a few steps closer to the refrigerator, I looked over the collection of off-kilter photos until I found the one of Noelle standing in a field of tulips with a windmill in the background.

You’re going there, Summer. It’s going to happen. You’re going to see Noelle. You really are. Believe it.

For many years a variety of photos and postcards have adorned our refrigerator. Every time I would stop mid-pot roast extraction or post-milk replenishment, the images I would look for were the ones of Noelle and her world.

How long had I dreamed of seeing those tilt-a-wheel windmills and picking those bursting-with-color tulips by the armful?

As I dropped the dough into agreeable rows and slid the cookie sheets into the oven, I made another decision. I would tell Wayne everything as soon as he came home. But I wouldn’t tell anyone else about the biopsy until I had received the results. Not even Noelle.

If everything worked out for me to see Noelle, I wanted to spend my time with her as unencumbered as possible. I would

take the trip in a self-induced state of denial. Yes, complete denial. It was the only way I would be able to enjoy the visit.

I foraged around in the garage for a suitcase and went hunting through Wayne's desk for my passport. The scent of warm cookies encircled me, and I thought about how one should never underestimate the power of comfort food when faced with monumental decisions. I'm convinced that the fragrance of cinnamon and sugar enlivens the heart and strengthens the senses when a woman is in want of a special measure of courage.

My courage lasted all afternoon and kept me company as I ran errands. Denial can be a wonderful thing. Why had I never called upon its fabulous powers before?

I was eager to reach home to see if Noelle had read my e-mail yet. In the rhythm of our online correspondence, I would write to her toward the close of my day, and she would read my post at the start of her new day. The time difference between our two lives was six hours. She was always six hours ahead of me. Maybe she had seen my e-mail before going to bed. Maybe she already had responded.

The rain stopped as I rounded the corner, returning home with a full tank of gas and a week's worth of groceries. Wayne's car was in the garage when I pulled in. I inched the old family minivan up to the hanging tennis ball to make sure the van was in far enough to close the garage door. As the tennis ball did its usual bounce-bounce against the windshield, anxiety surged in my stomach. Everything in me tightened. I sat in the car, waiting for the cinnamon-laced courage to come back.

I wasn't afraid of what Wayne would say. He is a great husband. I didn't always think that, but I do now. The longer we've been married, the better our relationship has become.

The anxiety was connected to my logic in all this. How wise was it for me to leave the country right now? What would be the repercussions of staying in denial for another week or so?

Wayne stepped out into the garage. He peered at me through the windshield with a half-eaten cookie in his hand. "You coming in?"

I nodded but didn't move.

"Summer?"

I couldn't quite get my body to open the door and exit the car.

"Honey, are you okay?" Wayne came over to the passenger side. He opened the door and climbed in. His current position at our church as one of the associate pastors includes most of the counseling load. Wayne is a careful listener. He is intuitive and empathetic in his approach, which was quite an adjustment from the "Wild Wayne" I had married when I was nineteen years old. Life, love, loss, and raising six children had had a marinating effect on his heart. He is a big softy now.

"Is it one of the kids?" Wayne reached over and wove his fingers through my nearly shoulder-length brown hair. With a steady hand he massaged the back of my neck. "What is it? What's wrong?"

I let out a long sigh and then exhaled all the details, starting with the phone call and rolling right into how I had put a flight to Amsterdam on hold and had e-mailed Noelle, asking if I could come see her for a week.

Then I sat very still, my hands clutching the lower rim of the steering wheel, waiting for his response, which I knew could go either way. The neighbor's schnauzer barked. The car's engine pinged.

Wayne untangled his fingers from my hair and said the last thing I expected. "Good for you."

I turned to take in his full expression. "Does that mean you think I should do this? I should go to the Netherlands?"

"Summer, for as long as I've known you, you've talked about meeting Noelle. Yes, I think you should do this, and, yes, I think now is the time to go. The biopsy can wait another week or so, can't it?"

"I think so."

Wayne took my hand in his. "Do you remember what you told the kids when they left the house?"

I nodded. My farewell line was the same for each of them, and after saying it six times, I was quite familiar with the utterance. I just hadn't realized that Wayne had heard me say it. Or had remembered it.

"You told the kids, 'Go make your own adventures, and come home often to tell us about them.'" He smiled. "I'd say it's time for you to do the same. Go make your own adventure, honey. When you come home, I'll want to hear all about it."

I leaned over in the front seat of our van and kissed my husband good. Yes, I did.

The next morning I woke at four. My efficient subconscious started in immediately with a flutter of directions.

You should confirm your reservation now. Don't wait until the twenty-four hours are nearly up. The price could go up.

Wide awake, I slipped out of bed and went to the computer to check my e-mail. I wasn't going to pay for the ticket until I knew if the timing of my visit was convenient for Noelle.

Her response was waiting. The subject line of her e-mail contained one simple, perfect word: "Come!"

Over the next four days, I took care of all the necessary travel preparations, and I gave my husband more deep kisses and tender looks than he had received from me in some time.

I boarded the plane with everything I needed, including a sense of expectancy and a gentle sort of peace I had come to recognize over the years as the peace that "surpasses all understanding," which is how Scripture describes it. I love it when God grants that sort of peace, because it truly does "guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

One of the first things I did after the plane took off was to pull out a book Wayne had presented to me as a travel gift. The chunky paperback was a travel guide to the Netherlands that he had checked out from the public library. That's how tight our finances were and how ridiculous it was that I had charged this flight to Amsterdam on our credit card.

On the inside cover of the book was a map of Europe with the compact country of the Netherlands highlighted in red up in the top left side of the continent. Compared to the dominant landmass of France that curved into the equally full-bodied shape of Spain, the Netherlands appeared to be the equivalent of a ruffled peony tucked behind Europe's ear.

After the in-flight meal was served, I skimmed through the “Things to See and Do” section of the tour book. A smile came to my lips as I read one of the opening lines: “The best time to view the famed tulip fields as well as catch the final bloom of the daffodils is the middle of April.”

Today was April 13. I couldn’t have planned the timing better. But then, I was beginning to believe I wasn’t the One who had planned all this.

I snuggled into my seat and thought about how I hadn’t been anywhere internationally since Wayne and I had adopted our two oldest daughters from Korea twenty-five years ago. We had to update our passports four years ago when we attended our niece’s wedding in Toronto. Aside from that, I hadn’t traveled much.

I closed the tour book and closed my eyes. A lulling sleep settled on me. Sometimes when I get caught up in a novel, I fall asleep with the book in my lap, and I dream about the story. This time, when I dozed off on the plane, I floated into a dream with tour-book images of the Netherlands mixed with impressions of flying over the ocean.

I saw myself as if I were seated in a toy plane held in the hand of Almighty God. He was standing outside of planet Earth and propelling the toy airplane across the Atlantic Ocean with a soft whirring sound, as if the plane were a determined honeybee heading for the bright red peony fixed behind Europe’s ear.

In my half-awake, half-asleep state, I thought of Micah, our middle son. He must have been the inspiration to my subconscious for the bee image. Micah is worried about the honeybees. He says the homing devices God built into the bees have been

magnetically scrambled as a result of microwave towers around the world. Bees load up with pollen and then can't find their way back to their hives.

I sank back into the vivid dream and saw myself flitting about with Noelle inside the bright red peony, loading up sweet moments. Just as I was about to make my way back to my home "hive," I woke up. A bit of drool moistened the corner of my mouth. I dabbed it and looked around, having no idea how long I had nodded off.

I reached for my purse and pulled out a tiny bottle of eye drops. My contact lenses seemed exceptionally dry. Noelle wears contacts as well. We know an extraordinary amount about each other for never having been in daily, side-by-side life together.

Adjusting my position and tucking the blanket around my legs, I thought about how Noelle and I knew a lot of facts about each other, but we didn't know any of the details that make a person dimensional and real. For instance, I didn't know what her voice sounded like. I suppose we could have called each other over the years, but we never did. I didn't know what the back of her head and the bobbed style of her blond hair looked like. I didn't know her gait when she walked or if she kept her fingernails short or long. Did she wear perfume?

In my half-awake state, Noelle seemed for a moment to be a character in a novel I had been reading for so long that she had become real in my imagination.

But Noelle was real.

And now I was crossing not only the ocean but also the one-

dimensional world in which our friendship had grown all these years. In a few hours printed words were going to be exchanged for audible words. Photographic images of each other would come alive in three dimensions, and those “images” would move, laugh, and smile.

Noelle and I were about to meet for the first time, and I felt inexplicably shy.