

# Under a Desert Sky

REDEFINING HOPE,  
BEAUTY, AND FAITH IN THE  
HARDEST PLACES

LYNNE HARTKE

  
Revell

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For my parents,  
Stanley and Lois Hankins

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## Introduction

I thirst for a sliver of shadow.

The desert sun flares white through the window next to the only available table at the coffee shop where I sit waiting for a friend. In the parking lot, each two-year-old sapling has a car parked under it, the three-inch width of shade spreading long across blistering vehicle chassis. After three days of 110-degree heat, shade is a priceless commodity.

I shift my body away from the relentless burn. I glance at my watch.

My friend is late.

I sip my chai latte, wishing I would have strayed from habit and ordered something iced. The hint of cinnamon and cream does nothing to soothe me.

I pull out my phone. No messages. I know my friend will come if she can. She promised to take a morning nap so she would have the strength to meet me.

I see her coming toward the front door and rush to open it.

*Keep smiling, I tell myself. Don't appear shocked. Keep smiling.*

I give my friend a one-arm hug, careful of her gaunt frame. She grabs me close, collarbones and ribs poking. Her breath is warm on my neck. Does she cling to me? Am I the one holding her?

I offer her the seat away from the sunbeam, but she sits directly in the light and pulls a thin sweater tighter around her shoulders.

“I can’t get warm,” she says.

I nod. How could I forget my own days of treatment, when radiation fried away my inner thermostat and I shivered wherever I went? Long pants and a sweater became my dearest companions in an air-conditioned theater and nothing was as physically painful as the freezer section of the grocery store, where I quickly grabbed vanilla ice cream and orange juice and rushed over several aisles to warm up next to the rotisserie chicken and right-out-of-the-oven French bread.

My friend asks about my children. I have to turn my ear to hear her forced words. Her voice is raspy. Low. The cancer has spread to her lungs.

She is trying so hard not to disappear, yet she is so faintly here.

We chat for several minutes while the barista whips out espressos and lattes, the scent of coffee mingling with our words. We talk about the weather. Our husbands. Summer plans. Mundane life. Beautiful, ordinary life.

She is the one who brings up her health. “I’m done,” she tells me.

“With treatment?” I ask.

“Yes.”

A chill runs through me. Wasn’t it only four months ago when someone else I loved told me those exact words?

“Is your family done?” I ask.

“Not all of them.”

“That’s tough.”

She agrees. “I am not afraid of eternity, just the process of getting there.”

I reach for trembling hands. Her thin fingers cling. Tight. I stumble to reassure, to speak of hard truth found in my own desert wanderings. “I don’t know if you will get an easy, gentle ending or a hard, painful one,” I say, “but this I can promise you—Jesus will be there in either case.”

Her fingers squeeze harder, grasp for difficult reality.

“And He will be there for your family,” I say, “for your children. It will be hard, but He will not abandon them either.”

I gulp down grief. Memories. “I know,” I say. Clear my throat. “I know.”

She nods. “That’s why I wanted to meet with you.”

I gaze into eyes too large in a thin face. I wonder at the depth of what I see. Desperation? No, that is not the right word. Her gaze doesn’t waver. She doesn’t blink.

Surrender?

Yes, I decide. That is what I perceive, and I bow my head at the pain of that realization. I have seen the same determined finality in others who have fought long, hard battles with this insidious disease that comes like a thief to take it all.

I know my friend wants reassurance that it is okay to be done, to surrender—not to cancer but to a God who has loved her before the beginning of time. She seeks support in this uncharted wilderness place from one who is only a few steps ahead in her own sojourning.

I ponder what to tell her. Having cancer redefined life for me. Watching my mom endure pain from her cancer made me rethink my views on strength. Sitting next to my dad as he faced eternity without fear gave me new thoughts about courage. Meeting people wearing head scarves and proudly displaying their scars caused me to reevaluate my view of beauty. Facing eternity with those whose journey was ending challenged my definitions of hope and faith. Being surrounded by family, community, and a loving, pursuing God expanded my thoughts of belonging.

I remember at the beginning of my journey when I thought I needed to do it on my own, even shutting out my own husband—so determined, yet so foolish.

I inch my chair toward the light until I share the sunbeam with my friend. I fix my eyes on her face, for I have learned that sometimes the greatest act of compassion we offer the dying is not to look away.

## One

# Cancer Makes a House Call

The clouds gather on a ninety-two-degree day while Mom and Dad help me with the yard work. Dad mentions the gray sky, atypical for this time of year. We are several months away from the shifting winds that bring the life-giving monsoon rains later in the summer. My parents are visiting from their country home near Albert Lea, Minnesota. Dad trims the oleander bushes, the soft pink flowers littering the grass at his feet, while Mom and I rake the rock around the citrus trees.

I answer my cell phone on the first ring.

“Are you sure?” I ask. “Yes. I can come in tomorrow.”

“Is that the doctor?” Mom asks when I drop the phone to my side.

I stare at her. Numb. The morning sun blisters hot, but I tremble.

“It’s cancer.” I want to say more, to soften the blow from the test results we’ve been waiting for, but it is all I can get through my tight throat. I bend double, every particle of air knocked from my body. Mom’s arms surround me. Dad’s hand squeezes my shoulder, as emotion overwhelms me.

One thought comes into focus: *I need to call my husband, Kevin.*

Mom snuffles as I stare at my phone. How am I going to tell him I have the same disease that killed both his parents? Must worst

nightmares be repeated? I punch in his number with freeze-frame fingers.

Kevin answers immediately. “Hello?” In the background, I hear him shuffling papers on his desk.

I clear my throat. Nothing comes out. I am weightless, falling down a rabbit hole, but instead of the white rabbit, I see the doctor in scrubs as he inserted the biopsy needle into my right breast. “You’re going to feel a slight pinch,” the doctor said.

Instead of a pinch, I feel a punch. A punch right in the center of my life.

“Hello?”

I can’t speak. All I can do is sob. Cancer has stolen my words.

---

Sleep becomes illusive, as questions drive me from my bed. As the questions multiply, sleep subtracts, and I struggle to comprehend the incomprehensible.

*Why? Why me? Why cancer? Why now?* With no family history, I never thought I’d get cancer. I obeyed each and every one of the “How Not to Get Cancer Rules”: I consumed healthy foods, exercised regularly, never smoked, and ate my canned peas as a child. Surely that should get me points for something if there was any fairness in the world. But I began to wonder about the whole fairness thing in elementary school when I noticed the pretty girls were allowed cuts in the lunch line. Sometimes life stinks, and since I grew up downwind from a pig farm, I know what I am talking about. Having cancer ranks up there with the smelliest of days.

Along with the questions comes a crushing onslaught of too much information. My brain swims with words like *ductal carcinoma*, *stages*, *genetic testing*, *lumpectomy*, and *possible mastectomy*. Doctors and specialists discuss options, but eventually, all I hear is “Yada, yada . . . CANCER . . . Will I die? . . . yada, yada.” A Google search on breast cancer results in 214 million posts to choose from—214 million! How can one person process that amount of data?

Informing our married son, Nate, and fourteen-year-old son, Zach, is difficult, but telling our college-aged daughter, Aleah, and sixteen-year-old daughter, Katelyn, is a million times more difficult, knowing they can no longer check “no” on future medical forms asking if there is a history of breast cancer in the family. I grieve in places, as a mother, I never knew existed.

I call my siblings. Close friends. I tell the story again and again. People cry. *Does rewinding and repeating make it more real?* In the few days following my diagnosis, cancer multiplies to touch everyone I love. *Can't we be actors in a different reality series?*

“Don’t tell our teachers,” the younger two plead, not wanting to be labeled as The Kids Whose Mom Has Cancer. “People will treat us weird.” We acquiesce as their eighth- and tenth-grade years near completion, not realizing how much the silence would wear on them.

We stumble through days. Tests. Doctor appointments. In the swirling numbers of blood counts, days until treatment, and life expectancy, numbers escape Katelyn, who no longer finds algebra relevant. Or English. Or studying for finals. Cancer to her means death, having already lost two grandparents to the disease.

Before I can schedule an appointment at her high school to finally bring the teachers into the cancer loop, Katelyn can’t contain the secret any longer and unloads the entire story. As does Zach. “Mom has cancer.” They inform the English teacher. Science teacher. Friends.

Storm clouds can only hold so long before bursting.

My children find relief in words shared, but I choose a different course. My heart keeps it all tight. Close. I *will* hold the family together. I hang on to strength. My strength. I will kick cancer in the teeth and get on with my life. I am strong. Stupid strong.

I escape to the desert.

---

The blast of heat hits me full in the face as I open the door of my Toyota Highlander and step out on the gravel road at the Pima Canyon access at South Mountain. Not yet 5:00 a.m., the parking

lot is already filling with mountain bikers and hikers trying to catch the cooler morning temperatures.

I kick off my flip-flops and lace up a pair of running shoes. I slip my hydration pack over my shoulders and snap the belt around my waist, adjusting the nozzle so I can easily reach the water during my workout. Mollie, my terrier-retriever pound puppy, waits for me to connect her leash before we head toward the trailhead, our feet kicking up dust on the dirt service road. The bordering brittlebush droops tired and thirsty. Heat wears everything—and everyone—down.

I have been coming to this trail more years than I can remember. I never meant to live in the desert this long. My husband and I, with a newborn son, moved to Chandler, Arizona, from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in upper Minnesota, a wilderness of endless lakes and easy water. We came for a season.

Three more children and the season became a decade. And another. And another. Sometimes a season becomes a lifetime.

Through the years I wrestled under blistering sun. Complained. Whined. I grimaced when I stepped out of air-conditioned coolness into sweat-dripping sauna heat. I languished in the endless brown and muted green. My soul longed for one drop of color.

On the trail, Mollie's ears perk up and I follow her gaze to a paloverde, the tree's green bark casting a strange lime color in the dawning. A rabbit rests in the shadows, its long ears twitching as he senses the danger in my rust-colored mutt's interest. Its black tail identifies the bunny as a jackrabbit, not a white-tailed cottontail.

I whisper a command and Mollie sits at my feet, her eyes alert. I pull out my pocket-sized camera and crouch low for a better angle. Mollie whimpers and the jack bounds away, doing what a jackrabbit always does—attempting to outrun an enemy. His black tail is the last thing I see before one final long leap takes him over the horizon.

Down the road I see the crumbled ruins of two stone buildings built during the Great Depression. I tug Mollie's leash toward the trailhead off to the right. I glance at my watch. Later in the day I

need to meet with my surgeon and set an appointment for surgery. When my feet hit the narrow path, I start to run. My questions chase me as I speed through the desert.

---

“Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?”<sup>1</sup> the desert wanderers asked Moses. I wander under a different desert sun, but the same question festers in my mind. *Why have you brought me out to wilderness—the desert—to die?*

The book of Exodus weaves a tale of the Israelites’ escape from slavery under the leadership of Moses and their subsequent journey through the desert. Along the way they complained. Whined. Longed to go back to the place from where they had come.

Perhaps desert stories don’t change much in the telling.

Four hundred years of slavery had toughened their muscles as they performed the backbreaking work of making bricks for Pharaoh’s endless building projects. Four hundred years of slavery had also toughened their hearts.

Unanswered questions have a way of doing that if we are not careful.

After waiting so many years for the answers to their questions, the Israelites made a joint decision to carve their own path. *God has specific instructions for us to obey? Yeah, right. We have a better idea.* Their better idea bought them a forty-year tour of the desert until all who disobeyed were buried in desert sands. But the story did not end there.

God did not abandon them.

“He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.”<sup>2</sup> In a confusing land of countless sand dunes, without streetlights or road signs, God provided His own GPS. A pillar of fire by night. For protection. For warmth. For light.

And during the day? A cloud—the largest shade umbrella that ever existed. The shade covered each and every one of them.

Grandmas. Grandpas. The newborn babies and the boys playing hide-and-seek among the dunes. The mothers searching for another manna recipe. The fathers standing on the lookout for enemy marauders. Under the covering, the Israelites knew where to go. They stood protected from the heat and the elements. The desert travelers only had to look up. And follow.

“Why did you bring us out to the desert to die?”

God never answered their questions. At least not with words. God answered their questions with protection. With direction. With presence.

With shade.

What if God does not answer my questions? Is it possible I too can find Him of endless cloud and covering shadow?

---

Several years ago, at a family reunion on my mom’s side, my aunt collapsed in the hotel room next to the room where my sister Renae and I stayed. We rushed to find hotel staff to unlock the door to her room, since my wheelchair-bound cousin, my aunt’s daughter, couldn’t reach the door latch to let us in. Once inside, Renae started CPR. Helpless, I held my frantic cousin.

In that thin place where heaven and earth touch like a transparent piece of vellum,<sup>3</sup> we prayed desperate prayers. If we could have observed, we would have seen my aunt sitting on the brink of eternity, but we, being earthbound, fought so hard, so hard, to keep her with us.

Once the paramedics stabilized her heartbeat, they wheeled my aunt into an ambulance. The small-town hospital staff assessed the damage from the brain aneurism that caused my aunt to collapse and helicoptered her to the closest large city. Chance of survival? Zero.

At the hospital, a palliative care nurse went over information and told us how my aunt would receive care to make her comfortable until the family made further decisions. Several people asked questions and then the nurse turned to my cousin.

“Do you have any questions?” the nurse asked.

My cousin began to cry. “I have lots of questions, but . . .” She sobbed. She waved her hands in the air. Gaspd for control.

“But what?” the nurse prompted.

“I have lots of questions, but you can’t answer them,” my cousin choked. “Only God can answer them.”

---

I pull off my sweatpants, fold them neatly, and stack them on top of my shoes. I unbutton my loose-fitting blue blouse and add it to the pile, obeying the presurgery requirements of having comfortable clothing for the trip home. I stand shivering in my bra and panties, reflecting on the last time I was in the hospital—for the birth of our youngest, fourteen years ago. I was nervous that day too, of the uncertainties of childbirth, but knew the joy of holding our little son would make it worth it. I feel none of that anticipation today.

I take off my undergarments quickly, not knowing when a helpful nurse will appear unannounced. With the bra topping the stack, I shove my clothing inside a personal belongings bag. I slip my arms into the paisley blue hospital gown with the words *Property of the Hospital* stamped on the hemline. I wonder at the wording. *Who would want to take this home?*

The words only confirm my sense of dread—that I folded the last little piece of myself, stuffed it into a bag, and now belong to the hospital. Moments ago, in the admissions office, I signed a consent form stating I was aware I could die from the surgery or suffer permanent brain damage from the anesthesia.

I am no longer in control. I hate the feeling.

“I’m ready,” I say, as I crawl into the bed, but I know it is a lie.

My husband and oldest daughter, Aleah, duck around the curtain. We make small talk as the medical staff takes vital signs and the breast surgeon comes in and asks if I have any other questions.

“No,” I say, knowing the doctor has no answers beyond the surgery. I wonder what he would do if I let spill the dam.

*Will I live to see all my children grow up and be married? Did I survive late-night feedings, the terrible twos, and the awkward junior high years in vain? Will I live to see the adult human beings each will become?*

*Will I ever hold a grandchild? Will I live to grow old and gray beside my husband? Years from now, will I reach out in the darkness and find him breathing beside me? Will we take wish-list trips to Italy and Peru? Will I hike the ruins of Machu Picchu?*

*Will the scar be hideous? Will the anesthesia make me nauseated? Will they cut out all the cancer? Will my husband still think I am beautiful?*

The questions rage as a nurse pokes a vein for an IV, a tiny bead of blood forming near the puncture. My hands start to shake. The nurse brings in a heated hospital blanket and unfurls the blanket in one smooth motion. Kevin tucks it around me. I lean back and close my eyes. The blanket warms like the desert sun. My shivers subside as the heat seeps into my bones.

Author and naturalist Ann Haymond Zwinger writes, “Deserts are beginnings, perhaps because there are so many questions in a desert. Questions are beginnings, answers are endings, and in the desert all the answers come in the form of more questions.”<sup>4</sup>

“Why did you bring us out to the desert to die?” the Israelites asked Moses.

“I have lots of questions, but you can’t answer them,” my cousin said.

In this wrestling-questioning-wandering place, one question looms paramount as I am wheeled down the hall and into the operating room: “Where is the God who answers questions?”

I am met with silence.

When the shivers return, I cannot stop them.