

If I Should Die

*“Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”*

- The Christian Child’s Prayer

Prologue

The security camera across from our apartment captures the violence in pixelated detail: My pedestrian’s light blinks “WALK.” I look both ways twice and step into the crosswalk. My violin case is in my left hand. An old white sedan speeds into the camera frame just before it slams into me. The driver doesn’t remember to hit his breaks until after my head splinters his windshield. He immediately throws the car in reverse, then steps on the gas again before screeching to a final halt. I roll off the hood and onto the asphalt.

A severe traumatic brain injury, two separate brain bleeds, two strokes, and multiple internal injuries should end my life that night. They don’t. When I am still breathing the next morning, doctors wonder if I will have cognitive function when I wake up. I do.

Introduction

That security camera footage is the only “memory” I have of the seconds that changed my life. I woke up to a world I never saw coming, and to medical and social communities that

aren't designed to meet my complicated set of needs. But I also woke up to a world where I experience God's redemptive work in unique ways that would be unavailable to me if I were anyone but who I am. A large part of God's redemptive work in my life has been creating a microcosm that *can* embrace the complicated new me that exists on this side of that security camera footage.

I may be the only person in my family who was hit by that car or suffered those injuries, but that December afternoon rearranged their lives almost as completely as it rearranged mine. Mom slept on a futon in our apartment for five months to care for me round the clock so my husband Ivan could finish graduate school. For Ivan, "finishing graduate school" meant just that...plus working overtime to pay the bills, plus applying for every full time job in sight so we would have health insurance, plus trying to catch whichever therapy appointments he could, plus, plus. Poor Dad pastored his new church in San Jose all by himself. Even though we should have been maximizing her last year of pre-adult freedom, our "sister time" during Anna's senior year of college was relegated to her coming over at night to do homework while I recuperated after long days of therapy. I couldn't even attend her graduation.

But these early sacrifices also prepared our hearts to celebrate God's timely provisions. Ivan signed a contract for his first full time job on June 1st, 2017. June was the month our insurance coverage ended. The position just happened to be a music teacher at a private school, which was as close to his dream job as he could expect fresh out of school. It also just happened to be near my parents in San Jose. Somehow we landed an apartment not five minutes away from their condo.

On the other hand, God has not seen fit to bless me with a fairy tale ending to my recovery. My legs are stronger and my balance is better than anyone who's been hit by a car and

had two strokes should ever dream of – but my brain is more dangerously complicated than even the best neuroscientists can explain. Caring for me requires more doctors’ appointments, ER trips, and in-home care than anyone projected two years ago. Through it all, God has been faithful. And so has my family. I wouldn’t have beaten the survival and recovery odds that I did without my husband, parents, and sister walking with me every step of the way. It is an honor to tell this story of suffering and hope the way I believe God wants it to be told: as a story where I am *an* actor, not *the* actor. I invite you to walk with me through the testimony of not just what God has done for me, His child, but for all five of us, His children.

Saturday, December 3rd, 2016

My story begins three years earlier when I enrolled in a Health Science degree program at California Baptist University in 2013. Although my academic emphasis was healthcare administration, I spent an equal amount of time performing in various musical ensembles. I had just rejoined my family after studying violin performance in New York, and was financing my time at CBU via a music scholarship. Said scholarship also provided a musical boyfriend, and I married Ivan Utomo, a graduate student studying piano performance, six months after I graduated. I was twenty-two years old.

Eleven months and one kitten later found us tucked neatly in an apartment complex a mere crosswalk away from CBU. Spanish Oaks might not have been picturesque, but it was quiet, pet friendly, and shockingly low rent: perfect for two grad students scrambling to survive on one full-time job and haphazard freelance work. Being across the street from school also put us within walking distance of my job, Ivan's grad classes, and the practice rooms where we taught music lessons on the weekend.

What our ideal apartment situation did not do was streamline the two breakneck schedules that made ends meet. Sleeping in has never been my forte, but marriage, a full time job, music, and grad school made it simply out of the question. Most Saturdays I'd appropriated three of our complex's four laundry machines by 7:30 am and was on my way to the grocery store by 8. Ivan usually finished our laundry and helped me unload the groceries before we parted ways again to teach music lessons. If all went well we would reconvene at night to do homework and – hopefully – rest.

Most of our Saturdays were harried, but December 3rd had devolved into the chaotic. Ivan and I were teaching music lessons like usual; unlike usual, I was also scrambling to finish an online biostatistics final before leaving for my Christmas concert that afternoon. Ivan ducked out early while I frantically rushed back and forth between the outdoor laundry unit, my laptop (which had chosen that glorious moment to freeze), and the concert set-list on my music stand. Grocery shopping was simply out of the question. We intersected briefly around noon so I could borrow Ivan's school ID to salvage my exam on a Mac that actually worked. My ID didn't open the Apple computer lab at CBU since that lab was dedicated to music majors, but at least I was married to one. Besides being on the verge of exploiting my husband's identity, I don't remember much about our goodbye. Ivan says I was frazzled, and he was intent on making the call time to the high school choir concert that he was accompanying.

Ivan surmised my mood lifted after my final became "final," however. Ever since we started dating we've been teased for our constant communication and, true to form, I resumed texting him as soon as I vacated the computer lab. A blurry selfie of me with our kitten confirmed his supposition, and he was only too glad to continue our playful banter. The picture came around 2:45, which was still early for picking up dinner although my caption mentioned walking to Subway soon since we were leaving around 4. When his concert ended at 3:15, he texted that he was on the way to meet me, then waited for me to call. I didn't. Ivan gave me a few minutes before deciding to call me himself. No answer. I'd said I wanted to get his dinner order, but maybe I'd forgotten. He was confused...I always kept my ringer on when I was walking by myself...why hadn't I picked up? Could it be I was still at home? "Hey, Siri. Call Grace Utomo." Still no answer. When Ivan threw open the door to our apartment a few minutes later, only our kitten bounded to meet him. *Where was I?*

Ivan is one of the calmest, most methodical human beings I have ever known, but by now my inexplicable silence was disorienting him. It was extremely out of character for me to change plans right before a paid gig without letting him know. Something wasn't right.

He hopped back in our blue Yaris to check the Subway where we'd planned to meet, in case he'd missed a text somehow. Ivan slowed to navigate around a fire truck and ambulance parked at the entrance to CBU, just across the street from our apartment. There didn't seem to be any damaged cars still around, and fire trucks and ambulances were standard procedure nowadays. Sometimes he said a prayer for serious accidents, but this one didn't look like much. Finding his wife was the pressing issue at the moment. Ivan made the U-turn and kept going.

Ordinarily Ivan would have gone inside the Subway to scan for me, but he was growing too anxious to execute just one step at a time. He parked where he could see all the tables through the restaurant's glass front, then began calling me and leaving voicemails over and over and over again. He didn't process that if I hadn't answered the first call, extra calls and messages wouldn't make a difference. Suddenly my dad's name popped up on his caller ID and broke his irrational cycle.

"Hello?" Neither Ivan nor Dad makes social phone calls. The last time he talked to Dad on the phone without me was most likely the day he asked permission to propose. Confirmation flashed through his mind – if Dad was calling, there really was some meaning behind my silence.

"Ivan. What're you up to?"

"Um, nothing much..." Ivan is not one for extra details.

"How's Grace?"

“She’s fine. Why?”

“Well...” Dad cleared his throat. “...I don’t know how to tell you this, so I’ll get straight to the point. I’ve just heard from Doug that he heard from a guy in CBU Public Safety that Grace was in an accident. I think it’s right at the entrance to CBU, you know, that crosswalk?”

“Oh my goodness I just drove by there and there was an ambulance and a fire – ”

“Well, as I understand it, they’re already transporting her to the hospital. You find out what hospital, and we’ll get ready to fly down.”

Ivan whipped back around the corner and onto Magnolia Avenue, but they – and I – were already gone. Traffic pulsed methodically as if nothing had happened. *Where was I?* The question had assumed a nightmarish quality.

He pulled up the Life360 app on his phone. We’d traveled separately twice during our eleven-month marriage, and although we seriously believed the app was for peace of mind, anyone over the age of twenty-three would probably have called it entertainment. Until now. Ivan saw my phone signal near Riverside Community Hospital. The signal should have been at the Kaiser Hospital on the opposite side of town since we were insured through Kaiser, but he didn’t have time for details. At least he knew where I was.

Or did he?

Suddenly it hit him that most people called loved ones after accidents, telling them what happened, telling them that they were okay, asking them for a ride, maybe asking them to come to the emergency room. He’d called me just a week ago when someone sideswiped our other car

and it had to be towed to the shop. But I didn't call him. Or even my sister Anna, since he was at a concert. Someone from CBU Public Safety had called Dad.

Both Ivan and I are pastor's children and have encountered our fair share of death growing up. But no number of funerals could prepare anyone, much less a newlywed twenty-three-year-old, for that twelve-minute drive to RCH. Ivan had spent the afternoon asking where I was, and suddenly he realized how right and yet how very wrong his question had been. He should have been asking where *I* was. Was I at RCH? Or in Heaven already? Would he make it in time? Or only in time to say goodbye? What if he was already too late?

All at once his thoughts burst into words:

“God I know you're in control, so if it's time, it's time, and she's with You...but *please* give her more time on Earth! She's not done here yet, she has so much more left to do! Please, God...”¹

Silence echoed in the car.

My sister Anna was chatting casually in the lobby of the Wallace Theatre at CBU while waiting for the signal to head backstage. An extraordinarily gifted pianist, she was following in my footsteps by attending the school on a music scholarship even though she was a science major. The Chamber Singers concert was the first of many Christmas concerts scrunched into her schedule between Genetics labs and study sessions for impending crises like Calculus and Statistical Computing finals.

¹ Prayer by Ivan Utomo.

Any good concertgoer knows to silence their cell phone before the lights go down, and any good performer knows to silence their cell phone if the green room is within a fifty-mile radius of the stage. Anna is a good performer. When she noticed she had about twenty minutes to stage lights, she peeked at her phone to make sure it was on silent, careful lest she disrupt her friend's tale of break up woe. Then she saw she had a voicemail. If there is one thing my sister hates, it is stopping to listen to someone's voice tell her exactly the same thing they could have texted. Her ire increased when she saw it was from Ivan. Why would Ivan of all people do that to her? He knew she had a concert. Besides, he never called her anyway. Then she paused. If Ivan had called *and left a message*, he must have had a good reason. She mumbled an excuse to her friend before wandering to a corner by the ladies' room.

His voice sounded wobbly and far away:

"Hey, Anna...umm...I know you're at a concert right now, so...uh...sorry if I'm interrupting, but...well...Grace was in an accident. Can you come? I'm driving to RCH..." The message cut out.

Anna closed her eyes for a moment, too confused to panic. "Accident." That word could mean anything. *Car* accident? Obviously I hadn't been with Ivan when it happened, or he would have said so. There was something wrong with my being in a car accident without actually being with him when it happened, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was. Anna tried to remember anything else she could from when she'd seen me last. I'd texted her that my violin student canceled, and then we'd met for lunch on campus around 1 pm. It sounded like I'd been stressed about some sort of grad school final earlier, but over lunch I mostly talked about my concert that evening. Ivan was going to pick me up from Subway and drive me to Orange. There

was that part about Ivan picking me up again. Where else could I have been between lunch and when he was supposed to meet me? I should have been at home if I wasn't with Ivan...

Anna dialed back even though it was less than ten minutes to the downbeat and she could see the choir lining up in the wings. Ivan answered on the second ring. Did he know anything? Not yet. Did he still think she should come? Silence. Anna had been around him long enough to know that in first-generation Asian, silence was polite for "Yes." She hung up and parted the Red Sea of whispering singers to find her music director.

"Excuse me." Anna cuts an imposing figure in concert black at 5'11". "My sister has been in an accident and I am leaving." She omitted the "May I," or the "I think I might need to," that would have given her professor any say in the matter. She also ignored the fact that the woman had approximately five minutes to find a substitute. Our parents raised us to never count family as anything less than first. Unfortunately this virtue was lost on the conductor.

"That's ridiculous!" the woman snapped. "Can't you see what time it is? I'm sure your sister can survive for one more hour."

"I said I'm going." The singers at the back of the line had stopped whispering.

"Accidents happen all the time. I can NOT believe you. Just look at all these people sitting here, ready to hear us sing. You need to think about who you're impacting, young lady." By this time the conductor's husband had heard the commotion from the other side of the auditorium and was shimmying over the last row of seats to reach them.

"Shh! Hold on a sec!" He grasped his wife's elbow. "I think I saw something...the ambulance and fire truck, I mean. It was right at the main entrance an hour ago. Maybe she should -"

“Well, *was* there a car?”

“I didn’t see one, but – ”

“Then it must not have been anything. Anna, get ready.” The choir was filing out from behind the curtain.

Anna was getting ready. She had her coat and her keys, and was already halfway out the door. The words “no car” had pinpointed what was with the scenario. I didn’t have a car that day because our second car had been in the shop all week. That was why Ivan was picking me up from Subway and driving me to my concert in Orange. If I’d been in an accident before meeting up with Ivan, I’d probably been on foot. She slammed the door on the conductor’s angry shouting. *Could I survive another hour?*

Christmas decorating is synonymous with pomp and circumstance in the Crosby household, the pomp including more or less bickering and at least one circumstance. The year before, that circumstance involved the family cat decapitating an heirloom angel just after it was set on the dining room table. This year the decorating ceremonies promised to be less pompous and circumstantial than usual, however. My parents had just moved up to Northern California to minister at a church in San Jose, and Mom was decorating solo for the first time since my birth.

Mom had just begun to lay out a wreath with its accouterments on the living room sofa when Dad answered his cell phone in the foyer. His voice was muffled but she heard enough. “So you’re saying, Grace...accident...broken legs and concussion...How much does *Jim* know? Did you call Ivan?” By this time Dad had rounded the corner. “I’ll call him then. Please tell Jim

we say thank you, and...uh...Doug? Keep us posted.” He looked over at Mom. She’d sunk to her knees on the floor.

Decades of receiving crisis phone calls hadn’t prepared my parents to get the call that their own daughter had been in an accident – even if there was a decent chance the accident wasn’t serious. Or was it? The news came from Doug, an old friend who’d been a member of our church in Riverside, but it came several hours late and was worse than hearsay. Key members of CBU administration and Public Safety had also attended that church, and a Public Safety officer had been alerted about the accident. Unfortunately that officer was missing my family’s updated phone numbers, so he called Doug instead. Doug had Dad’s correct contact information and the news finally got through, but by this time it was third hand. Fourth hand, considering Public Safety could only give statements in concert with the Riverside Police Department. Still, a confirmed accident was a confirmed accident.

“I need to call Ivan. Nobody’s gotten ahold of him yet. Let’s pray.” Dad’s insistence on praying at the most time-sensitive moments used to exasperate me as a teenager, and it didn’t always rub Mom or Anna the right way, either. But this time it was different. My parents stopped and bowed their heads, sitting on a cold tile floor in front of a naked Christmas tree.

The triage nurse in the emergency room looked sympathetic, but rules were rules – even for a panicking twenty-three-year old who was obviously alone. She couldn’t give out information on patients until they had been identified and stabilized. Ivan would need to sit down in the waiting room until he was called. She caught his eye at the last minute as he turned away. “I will say this, though. Do you believe in God?”

“Yes.”

“I’d start praying if I were you.” So I wasn’t dead – yet. Ivan thanked her, then pretended to move toward the waiting room as the next person stepped to the window. While he did dump his backpack on a chair, he did not sit down. Instead, he stationed himself just behind the red tape separating the waiting area from the treatment wing.

The guard eyed him suspiciously. “I’m gonna need you to move farther back behind that line, sir,” he growled.

“I know.” Ivan stayed where he was. He was still standing there when Anna stumbled in an hour later, breathless from her escape. The two would keep up their restless vigil for another three hours, both dressed in black from the day’s concerts.

Did the triage nurse know anything else? Not yet.

“Ma’am, you need to take three steps back...”

Did the triage nurse know anything else? Not yet.

“Sir – *the red line.*”

Our people began flooding the emergency room shortly after Anna’s arrival. To this day, we’re not sure how they all got the news so quickly: Alicia, my sister’s roommate; Linda, one of my Mom’s close friends who worked in Orange County; A CBU professor and his family; several elders and their wives from my Dad’s old church in Rialto, CA. Few talked. Most brought Bibles. They all prayed.

Everyone's mood thickened as the ER clock ticked minutes into hours. Finally a male nurse stuck his head through the curtain. "I'm looking for Mr. – Ottommo?" Ivan took a deep breath, then set his teeth before stepping over the red line. He'd just crossed into different territory. It no longer mattered that he was only twenty-three. He was a husband. He was going to have to function like a husband. He was going to have to think clearly. What if something *was* badly wrong with me? What was he about to see? Suddenly he realized Anna was no longer beside him. Ivan stopped and gestured toward the curtain. "I think Anna Crosby should be allowed to come back, too."

Ivan and Anna say that I was floating in and out of consciousness when they saw me. I wish I'd mumbled "Thank you," or "I love you," when I finally made eye contact, but all I actually said was, "It really hurts." A doctor stopped by and told them not to be worried by my dissociation – I had been sedated, but that should wear off after a couple of hours. In his eyes my overall condition actually looked quite positive. Yes, I had been hit by a car and needed some orthopedic surgery on my legs, but otherwise I only had a concussion. Anna rushed to the waiting room to call Mom and Dad and update our prayer squad with the good news...

And then something went horribly wrong.

I convulsed and vomited. My monitors began screeching. A nurse grabbed Ivan's arm and pulled him out of my room, while others dashed in and began shearing off my clothes. He wandered back to the waiting room in a fog.

A few minutes later the ER doctor called Ivan and Anna back to a consultation room. Their hearts were still pounding from my downturn, but they quickly realized the doctor wanted

to discuss something entirely different. Before they could reorient themselves, they were shaking hands with the orthopedic surgeon who would be repairing my legs. Those convulsions just now? The ER doctor shrugged. I'd probably just had a seizure. This was to be expected under the circumstances, but he was still running a couple of routine CT scans in case there was something else. In the meantime they really should get started with the pre-operation consultation. Ivan and Anna were shocked yet again, this time by the pair of shattered legs on the X-rays. Ivan quickly signed a ream of paperwork. *Surgery*. Function, think clearly, sign. That's all it is.

Although the two doctors seemed wholly intent on my impending surgeries, something still made Ivan pause by the nurses' station before he and Anna returned to the waiting room. "Is Grace Utomo back from CT yet?" Ivan had never seen a seizure before, but something about what he'd seen before he was pulled from my room left him wondering if a seizure was the *only* thing that had happened. *Seizure*. Function, think clearly, ask. Please be all it is.

"No, sir. She's been admitted to ICU Level 4. They'll call you when she's all set up."

Ivan and Anna stared. They were still new to the world of hospital terminology, but they'd been around long enough to know what ICU meant. Intensive Care Unit. It was not until later that they'd learn that Level 4 is the highest level of ICU, or that RCH is the only trauma hospital in Riverside, or that I'd been put in ICU for neurological trauma. No. God had slipped "trial blinders" over their eyes. Anna and Ivan only knew what they needed to know at the time.

The nurse that buzzed them into the ICU unit was delighted to see them. Anna wondered if she was *too* delighted. Unless all ICU nurses were trained to be that way? Impossible to know. And then they saw me.

I was in a coma. My body had been transfigured into something weirdly blanched and bulbous, complete with a respirator tube protruding from my taut lips. IV ports appropriated what seemed like all available veins – including one large vein in my neck. The room reeked of something. Ivan turned to Anna. “Umm...maybe go meet your parents when they get here...they’re gonna need to be prepped before they see this...” He looked up at the sign on the wall. “Besides...it says only two at a time. I guess I’ll have to step out in a sec, too.”

“Oh, no, not at all!” One of the nurses chimed in as she continued hooking me up to various machines. “You can have as many people as you want! You got any more friends and family out there?” Anna and Ivan exchanged confused glances. In the emergency room, rules had been rules, no matter what. Now they were in the most specialized unit of the hospital and the nurses were ignoring an extremely obvious placard hanging in an extremely obvious location. But they were too tired to ask questions. Ivan only muttered that they were waiting for my parents to arrive, then eased his backpack to the floor and joined Anna as she watched the nurses finish setting up my machines.

Mom and Dad’s plane had touched down in Riverside a little less than an hour earlier, just as Ivan and Anna were making their eternal elevator ride to the top of the hospital. Doug, the original accident messenger, had picked up my parents from the airport, then passed them off to

my sister's roommate Alicia in the waiting room. She'd greeted them with silent hugs before escorting them to meet Anna at the door to ICU.

Both of my parents burst into tears when they rounded the corner to my room. The nurses gave them a moment to collect themselves before renewing their refrain: "Please, go bring in all your family! Make sure you let everyone know where she is. It's okay, you don't have to be shy! We can fit a lot of people in here." Unlike Ivan and Anna, Mom and Dad knew exactly what that meant. No ICU rules meant no life expectancy. Mom shook her head as a daze began to slur her thoughts. "All our family...lives in Georgia..." The nurse blinked. "Hmm. Well, you got friends out there? Promise it's fine for them to come in!" She was still careful to keep her air cheery and casual. Dad nodded to Anna, and she glided back to the ICU waiting room to gather whoever remained. The rest of the support crowd must have trickled away sometime between my parents' touchdown and 1 am, but Alicia and Mom's friend Linda had stayed just in case anyone needed anything. They gathered with my family around my bed to pray. Some of the nurses joined the circle, too.

Dad took a deep breath and steadied his voice:

"Father, we know that You are sovereign. We know that You are good, and Your will is perfect. We don't want to be selfish, but we ask that You restore Grace Elisabeth to us. Please guide and direct all the doctors, specialists, nurses, technicians, and diagnosticians, enabling them to perform beyond their natural abilities. But in all these things, we pray Your will be done. We pray this in Jesus' name."²

Calm echoed in the room.

² Prayer by Keith Crosby.

