
CHAPTER ONE

My Escalator to Heaven

November 30, 1999

My dear Patrick,

Today Mommy and Daddy did the hardest thing we've ever done in our lives. I know you don't understand. We could see the confusion in your eyes as you cried and pulled on Daddy's hand trying to go with us. You must have wondered, "Why are they leaving me here? What is happening?" The tears in your eyes were enough to let us know you wanted to go home with us. I wanted so much to grab you and run to the car, but I knew it would only hurt you more, and your pain was already stabbing my heart.

I pray your new room gives you some comfort. Your god-parents, Aunt Mary and Uncle Gary, decorated your room for you with some of your favorite movie themes, hoping it would make you happy. They love you so much, Patrick. Grandma Gibbons wanted you to have something special to hold, so she bought you the big teddy bear on your bed. It is hard for her to be so far away in San Diego. I have a small teddy bear just like yours that I keep on the cabinet in the dining room by your picture. Even though it does not ease the pain, it reminds me that soon I will again have you in my arms.

This pain I'm feeling is one I felt ten and a half years ago, just a few days after you were born. You were taken to the intensive care unit for babies because you had a little fever, and your breathing was very fast. The doctors didn't know what was wrong, and they had you hooked up to many monitors. It was so hard to leave you there, but I had to go home for a short while to see Sean and Laura. They were still so small when you were born, and they missed their mommy. I left the hospital and

walked out into the bright April sunshine; it was an unusually warm day. Every step that took me farther from you hurt. I wanted so much to run into the hospital and grab and hold you.

I needed to make sure nothing would happen to you while I was away. I asked God to send His angels to be with you, to comfort and to protect you. I'm once again asking Him to send the angels because I don't know if you are cold, hungry, or frightened. I lie awake here wondering and crying. Daddy and I have both been crying since we walked away from you, but we have found a great deal of strength in holding each other and praying for you. Patrick, you are such a precious little treasure to us. We miss you. God bless you, my little one.

I love you,
Mommy



[M]ay . . . the eyes of your hearts [be] enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

—Ephesians 1:17-19

Many have heard of a stairway to heaven, but I'm sure few have heard of an escalator to heaven. My escalator came in the form of a beautiful child named Patrick. He has been a channel of much grace for me and my family. He has a way of helping me to embrace and love the pain and suffering that come with denial of my will and total submission to the will of God. God is using a precious child to carry me to heaven.

Thoughts of an escalator to heaven take me back long ago, to a place in Peru. I was spending a month there between my junior and senior years of high school helping my uncle, Father

John Tasto, with his missionary work in the Andes Mountains. I stayed with a group of Benedictine sisters in the village of Santo Domingo, in a little convent nestled in the mountains. Santo Domingo was founded by colonists from Spain who came over the Andes to settle several hundred years ago. The people live in small adobe huts and travel by foot on dirt roads to their sugarcane fields and cornfields. The farmers plant the corn right up the side of the mountain. The Catholic parish is in the town square in the center of the village. The people have a deep, beautiful, but simple faith.

One day after closing her clinic, where she cared for many sick and injured people each day, Sister Romaine asked me if I would like to accompany her on a walk to care for an elderly lady. Sister informed me that the walk would be a little over an hour long, and even though an hour seemed an awfully long time to walk to give just one treatment to one lady, I agreed to go along. We walked on the dirt road for a short while on that warm, sunny day, and then I noticed an opening in the rocks along the side of the road. Sister stopped at the opening, and I could not believe we actually were going to climb up those rocks. The huge boulders and smaller rocks formed a path straight up the mountain. I hoped that somewhere beyond where I could see would be a smooth, flat road. I lost that hope when Sister told me that we would be climbing the rocks all the way up. My jaw dropped to the ground. For me, a city girl from Indianapolis, a walk was something you did for fun on a smooth, perfectly flat sidewalk, or at the mall. This was far more than I was prepared for, and I wasn't sure I could make it. If Sister was going to climb, however, I decided I would go along with her.

We paused before we began, and I turned to Sister and said, "It looks like a stairway of rocks. Now if we could only push a button and get these rocks to move and turn into an escalator . . ." We laughed and began our climb. Little did I

know the impact that statement would have on my life. As we walked, my lungs began to ache because the air was thin. As I looked at Sister, she smiled. I knew she had bad knees and must be in pain, but she showed no signs of distress other than stopping once in a while to rub her knees. While I watched her make that climb that day, I knew that she possessed something very beautiful. Something had indeed turned her mountain of rocks into an escalator. When we arrived at the little adobe home of the old woman, it became clear to me that what Sister possessed was a beautiful ability to see Christ in this poor, helpless woman. As she climbed, she knew she was climbing to see Jesus. I thought to myself, “Is it possible to embrace such pain?”

In my heart, I asked God to give me an escalator, but I would never have dreamed that He would bless me with one in the form of a special little boy. I did not know that God would allow my beautiful little baby to be afflicted with the cold and painful disorder of autism.

Many years after my first climb up the escalator with Sister, I drove down the highway with the words of the specialist running through my mind over and over again: “Your son is autistic.” Even though we had expected the diagnosis for months, the confirmation was piercing. The tears filled my eyes and then flowed down my cheeks. I could feel a child within me, little Megan, our fifth child, as she moved about. Once again, I thought, “God has blessed our family with new life. What would this new life hold for her with an autistic brother?” I had many thoughts running through my head, but I couldn’t contain the overwhelming feelings of peace and joy in my heart. I knew that these feelings were not of my own doing but were from the grace that I had asked from God over and over again in my life.

As a nursing student, I prayed for God’s grace on many nights after hours of study, before every test, and after

Communion at daily Mass. I knew I would never make it through nursing school on my own, and the fear of failing was more than I could handle. A complete peace and joy came over me each time I placed my will into the gentle hands of my heavenly Father. He took away my desire for a degree in nursing and left me with a desire only to do His will, however He asked. My prayer was the beautiful prayer of Saint Ignatius of Loyola:

*Take, Lord, receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will,
all that I have and possess.
You have given all to me,
To you, O Lord, I return it.
All is yours; dispose of it wholly according to your will.
Give me only your love and your grace,
for this is enough for me.*

A few years later, after my first child, Sean, was born, I prayed the prayer again as I sat in a cold hospital room with Mark beside me. The woman in the bed next to me had a beautiful baby in her arms. My arms were empty. At that time the only memory I had of my son was of his being rushed off to the intensive care unit. I didn't even get a chance to touch him. The doctors explained that he had severe meconium aspiration syndrome. Meconium, a black, tarry substance, is a baby's first stool. Because of stress during labor, Sean's stool was released into the amniotic fluid and had filled his lungs. At birth the doctors wouldn't let him cry for fear he would inhale more meconium. Within seconds he was whisked away to the special-care nursery.

He was placed on a respirator, was given antibiotics, and received respiratory therapy. Only time would tell if he would survive. If he did, the list of possible complications was

frightening. The chaplain even suggested that we have Sean baptized. Numb, Mark and I prayed together, thanking God for the nine months we had had with Sean. We asked Him for the grace to see each and every moment with Sean as a precious gift from Him. Much as Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple, we gave Sean back to God. Then God intervened and performed miracles. As quickly as a doctor would explain a potential complication to us, another doctor would come and say that we had passed that hurdle. After a week of sleepless nights, many treatments, and much prayer, we took home our perfectly healthy baby boy. Today he is preparing to study for the priesthood.

As I drove down the highway with Patrick beside me, once again I prayed the prayer of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and asked for the grace to cherish every moment with Patrick, just the way he is. The tears rolled down my face. I thought, “He may never play ball, or say ‘Mommy,’ but he will always be a special child of God.” And then it came to me: God had blessed me with an escalator to heaven, just what I had prayed for over ten years before. God knew my weakness. He knew I needed much more than a stairway, so He gave me the hand of my beautiful son and asked me to ride. Sometimes the escalator stops; sometimes it goes in reverse; but always it points towards heaven.

*I have a treasure of my own of gold and silver,
and because of my devotion to the house of my God
I give it to the house of my God.*

—1 Chronicles 29:3