



Red Sky at Night

By Beth Foreman

I've become such a creature of routine. Mornings are completely predictable: prayer, Bible, a cup or two of Earl Grey, slow-cooked oatmeal with sliced almonds (and sometimes fresh blueberries), favorite blogs, and the elliptical.

I guess these little rituals offer me security. I know what's coming. I can prepare for tomorrow. I buy oatmeal when it's on sale. I slice almonds the night before. I feel in control.

Ha. Dangerous place to be. Thinking I'm in control.

So when a squall rolls onto the shore, and there will always be squalls, the sailboat that is my life, the sailboat that was skimming gracefully across the water . . .

But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

Join me as I go back to my childhood Lake Michigan days, back to glorious summers when I scooped minnows into a yellow pail, built elaborate sand castles, dived for sand-smoothed stones, and swam out to the sandbar with Grandma, who always side-stroked and wore a white plastic bathing cap with a chin strap.

Ah, those Lake Michigan days when my father taught me and my siblings about starboard and port and tillers and tacking and "coming about," the sailor's term for turning the boat. My first sailing experiences were in a little red boat on Lake Michigan where the only reason to "come about" was because I didn't want to sail to Wisconsin. On a smaller lake, I figured out how to turn the boat just to avoid other boats, docks, rocks, water skiers, buoys, anything that might, ahem, get me in trouble.

After some practice, I felt pretty good about fair-weather sailing, delighted to skim across the water when the waves weren't breaking, content with the slightest breeze. Fair weather, remember. Daredevil-risk-taker I was not, am not, nor will I ever be.

So if the morning sky was red, I'd stay close to home. I trusted the sailors' adage: *Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky at morning, sailors take warning.*

And I always listened to warnings because I experienced plenty of Lake Michigan squalls as a kid and knew how fierce the wind and the waves could get. I also respected and feared those storms because they came suddenly. The lake could transform from a peaceful "On Golden Pond" kind of sanctuary to a voracious alien creature who would capsize boats, break tree branches, and destroy precious sand castles.

I sure didn't want to be in my little red boat during one of those storms. Way out of control.

Well, last winter, a squall slammed into my sandcastle world. Wham. No red sky warning, just a routine mammogram and then a second mammogram to check on something that was "suspicious-but-probably-nothing-yet-we-should-really-check," then a biopsy, then the waiting. The waiting. The phone call.

The test results were positive. It's cancer.

Somehow I heard the doctor's words through a curtain of white noise inside me. Maybe it was my heart beating or blood rushing through my brain. Certainly, the waves were pounding my boat, threatening to capsize me and all that I held precious.

The doctor said something about expecting another phone call from the breast care specialist who would schedule my next appointments. I actually managed to say "thank you."

I hung up the phone and dropped the lines of my sailboat. I was paralyzed. My little red sailboat was without a rudder, without a sail, without a captain. The waves crashed over me, black storm clouds closed in on me, and I felt completely and utterly alone.

*Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.
He stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea were hushed.
They were glad when it grew calm,
and he guided them to their desired haven.
Let them give thanks to the LORD for his
unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind.*
Psalm 107:28–31

I turned and saw my husband who heard the fear in my breath. He came to me and opened his arms so I would not be alone in my tears.

God began to calm my storm.

The weeks that followed were wrapped in preparations for Christmas and for a lumpectomy, radiation, and healing. I'd spend twenty minutes reading articles about my diagnosis (thankfully, stage zero, non-invasive) and then I'd go wrap a few presents. I'd cry for a while, pray, bake a loaf of cranberry nut bread, and pray some more. Later, I'd knit and purl and watch a funny movie with my husband. I couldn't bear to watch anything sad on television, not even the evening news. I was already in the eye of the storm. I only wanted to see the sunshine.

Those days are a bit blurry now, but I know that I have never prayed so fervently nor read God's Word so consistently as I did during those weeks of worry and fear.

Prayers, prayers, and more prayers. My first and last prayers of the day were Luther's words, and I imagined that the "evil foe" was my cancer. Perhaps it's not theologically correct, but, in a way, this disease had invaded my body just like sin has invaded our souls. "Let the evil foe have no power over me, Lord."

I was face-to-face with the evil foe, and, beautifully, my heavenly Father answered my prayers for peace, strength, excellent medical care. And every day, for months, I received a new smile, a comforting email, PFY (praying for you) texts, a bear hug, a gift.

And in the most precious expression of love, many storm-survivors climbed into my boat. Old friends and new friends who've battled disease, chronic pain, depression. Friends who have struggled through painful divorces, loneliness, financial ruin. Friends whose husbands died much too young, leaving them to raise children alone. And one special storm-survivor, my sister, whose 20-year-old son went to be with Jesus five years ago. All of them have sailed with me, sharing, praying, encouraging, and listening. Until my storm, I could not begin to understand their pain. Now I'm beginning to see how God calms all of our storms.

Long before this magazine is in your hands, I will have finished six weeks of radioactive sun-tanning on a metal table beneath a mammoth machine in a room filled with Star Trek-like equipment. I will have laughed with the technicians about how it's a good thing the treatment room is right next to the ER in case I fall off the table. I will have grown accustomed to doctors and techs looking closely at what used to be a very private part of my body. (Well, maybe I won't ever be really comfortable with that.) I will have become a tattooed cancer survivor. I will have navigated the rough seas of the storm.

One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they set out, and as they sailed he fell asleep. And a windstorm came down on the lake, and they were filling with water and were in danger. And they went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm (Luke 8:22–24 ESV).

Yes, this storm has passed, but — and I know this may sound unbelievable — it has been a good storm. A *good* storm. When I ask that silly rhetorical question "... *why?* ..." I am struck with a profound sense of peace about all of this. I can say, "Thank you, God," and really mean it. Because in this storm, the Holy Spirit has revealed to me these words of promise: "*I am with you always*" (Matthew 28:20).

Yep. He's with me in my little red sailboat. He's always been right here, but I finally hit a storm where I learned to give Him the tiller and to trust that He really is my Rock and my Redeemer.

With Him by my side, we are "coming about."