





THORNS OF CHANGE: THE BLESSINGS OF PAIN, SUFFERING, AND SORROW

By Maria Carter




Thorns can be plentiful and tear the flesh. I tell of the thorns of the many tragedies of my life in one year that shredded my tender heart and protected life. I grew to know pain, suffering, and sorrow, an inescapable part of life. The blessings are the lessons they teach us, and the positive change, growth and strengthening they spawn. We merely must learn how and when to look for the blessings, usually hidden in the experience, and to not fight the reality of the thorns.

When 1982 rolled in, I had no idea of the pain, suffering, and sorrow that I was about to be put through. I amassed devastating losses in my life that came together, one right after the other, like a tragic pile-up of cars. Four deaths, a divorce, and a major move, all in a seven-month period. First three deaths—my niece, my only brother and his best friend, then a divorce from my husband of six years, the death of a dear friend, and last, a major move from my beloved home in Virginia, clear across a continent and halfway across an ocean—a move that would end a chapter of my life.



Elise

After a healthy full-term pregnancy, my sister Bernadette gave birth to Baby Elise. Of course, everyone in the family received a call and shared the excitement with Bernadette and her husband, Bob. The following day, Elise still in the hospital, developed breathing complications and died. Our next call from Bob contrasted what we received just a day earlier. For Elise's sake, we were grateful that her death was swift and painless.



None of us had experienced death of a close family member. All of us were devastated. The entire family came together to mourn Elise's loss with a full funeral. We later questioned whether this was a rehearsal for what would happen six weeks later.

The worst loss of that year was also the worst I *ever* experienced—the death of my youngest sibling, my brother, Nick. He and his best friend, Christopher, died from the same stroke of tragedy.

Nicky

Lights, camera, action...the music played loudly as the fashion models sensuously strolled onto the runway, moving to the beat. I sat in the audience enjoying the showcase of the latest faces and designs. This fashion show was the high point of a regional modeling convention in Washington, DC. As a modeling instructor, I had the honor of attending as the management representative of my agency and school, located in Norfolk, Virginia. It was a fun and exciting time for me. Preoccupied with the event and the trip, my (first) husband, Bobby and I failed to let our family and friends know how to reach us.

In the flickering of the stage lights and darkness of the room, the organizer of the modeling conference found me in the audience. She whispered in my ear that I received an emergency phone call. She then directed me to follow a hotel employee who would take me to the phone. The serious look on her face in the festive environment alarmed me.

I picked up the receiver and heard my brother-in-law's voice on the other end. Blue didn't sound like his normal jovial self. With a deep heaviness in his voice, fighting evident emotion he managed to say, "Maria, we've been looking all over for you—you don't know how long we've been trying to reach you. Maria, sit down." Not knowing what to expect, I sat and braced myself for whatever I was about to hear. The silence, as Blue struggled to put his

thoughts into words unnerved me. Finally, I heard him take a deep breath and continue, “Maria, I don’t know how to say this to you, but Nicky’s dead.” That is how I learned that my little brother, my only brother, my Nicky, had been killed in a car accident.

I couldn’t believe him at first, because tragedy strikes other people, not me. Not my family. But it was true. He told me all he knew. “Apparently, a young teenage girl was driving—not paying attention... they think she’d been drinking. She hit Nicky and his best friend, Christopher, as they walked home from their first dance... Christopher is in the hospital now...I don’t know how he’s doing. They were just crossing the street when they were hit. Look, Maria, just get on the next plane and come home to Mom and Dad’s. The family really needs you. Mom and Dad are taking it pretty badly. Just get home.”

My brother was 14 years old.

Shocked and numbed, I collapsed onto the floor. A hotel employee rushed to help me. In between sobs, I told him that I just found out that my little brother had just died in a car accident. He held me, doing his best to comfort me, to no avail, until Bobby arrived. Between sobs, I gave him the only details I knew.

We left the conference to go back to my cousin Julia’s. We stayed with her to visit and do some sightseeing in DC after the conference. All plans preempted, Bobby and Julia hurriedly wrapped up my affairs at the conference, arranged for the next flight out, and rushed me to the airport, all the while trying to console me and make sense of it for themselves.

On my flight home, I worried about my family, my parents especially. Their only boy, their cherished son, their youngest child had died. They had wanted a son so badly. After *five* girls, they got their precious son.

I worried about my sisters. We had cherished Nicky, the angel in our family. We fully understood his role as the only son, and loved him all the more because of it.

The last time I saw Nicky was when my family traveled from Florida to Virginia, where I lived. Nick was beginning to show fuzz on his face and his voice was deepening, with the occasional treble crack. We teased him about it all. I remembered how I had showered him with hugs and kisses when the family left to return to Florida.

My memories made me ache with sorrow. I could no longer shower my Nicky with hugs and kisses, look him in the eyes and be blessed with that warm, familiar, loving exchange we had shared. None of us could, now. I thought of my youngest sisters, Bernadette and Donna. Not much older than Nicky, they still lived at home with him and my parents. They would be devastated.

Having the farthest to travel, I was the last to arrive. I joined the rest of the family already gathered at Mom and Dad's. My family met me with heart-wrenching sobs, and long tearful comforting hugs. All except Mom. I could hear Mom weeping in another room, from behind a closed door. For her, there could be no consolation. None of us knew how to dry our mother's tears.

I went to her after seeing my sisters and Dad. When Mom saw me, she clung to and enveloped me with her pleading hug, asking for God's mercy—as if I could help her. As I held her, my tears began to know my Mom as the consummate mother. NEVER will I understand her pain or my father's.

Coincidentally, Steve, a friend of the family and an off-duty policeman, was at the scene of the accident and held Nicky in his arms as he took his last breath. The family kept him near, realizing he was 'heaven sent,' an angel in disguise who consoled Nicky at the moment of his

passing. Steve mostly tended to Dad, who busied himself with the police reports and the details of the funeral. Dad kept the dealings with the police private, not allowing any of us to see the reports or know all the details. He only brought us into the final funeral arrangements, letting us select the remembrance card and statement. In front of us, Dad dared not give himself a moment to spare from his busyness for chance of feeling an emotion about what had happened. Dad left tending to Mom to my sisters and me.

Jovita consoled her family, helping her young children, David and Angela, cope with death and the loss of their beloved uncle. Dolores turned to her husband, Blue, and did her best to bring some levity to this gravely serious time together. Both Netty and Donna busied themselves by answering the many calls and receiving visitors to the house, a daunting assignment. They relived the painful emotions with every person they encountered: the close family, friends, and community that saw Nicky on a daily basis at school, baseball and football games, church, or other social activities.

That left me as primary support to my mother. I did nothing but hold her for hours. I just had to let her be. I knew there wasn't anything I could say or do to mend her broken heart.

The angels cried at Nicky's funeral—gentle raindrops fell from a cloudless sunny sky. Christopher died a week later. Most of my family did not attend, the wounds still too raw and deep.

I left soon after Nicky's funeral, anxious to get back to Virginia, back to Bobby, who could console me. I wanted my turn to be consoled. I hoped to get back to "normal," but I realized life couldn't be normal again.

In all honesty, I really didn't want to go back to my life. On the plane ride home, I took the uninterrupted time to think about my life and what I was doing with it. My heart, now open and raw, screamed for release from a marriage that had already died.

I gained that brilliant moment of clarity, but I couldn't take another big hit of painful emotions. Bobby picked me up from the airport, and I let him console me. I allowed myself to begin to release the emotions regarding my Nicky, but I repressed and blocked the reality of my failed marriage. I became a jumbled up ball of emotions and confusion. Bobby did not know what to do with me.

My brother's death reminded me of my own mortality and that life's much too short. *"If I were to die soon, I wasn't going to die with my life the way it is now,"* I thought.

The next few months everyone gave me plenty of emotional space to just let it all out about Nicky. This gave me time to contemplate on my life. I recognized that I became a me I didn't like to be. For a woman in my prime and height of my youthful beauty, I lost the sexual and romantic interest from my mate. What a blow to my desirability. I began to ache to have children much sooner than we planned. Bobby, a brilliant jazz musician, feared children would disrupt his career and take away his freedom. A baby's cry was music to my ears, but not his. Work fed me. I did what I loved—fashion. I enjoyed being a make-up artist for a television show and other clients, a model, and modeling instructor. Only I worked too much so I didn't have to face my life at home.

With Bobby's own fears about marriage and parenthood, the distance between us grew too wide. Why didn't I "get it" after five separations in six years of marriage. I never hated Bobby, I just hated our life together. I didn't understand how a person could be lonely in a marriage. I didn't understand how we let it get this way.

I wanted more out of my life. I wanted the fairytale love and marriage, children, and a career I loved. You know... Having a man thrilled to want to be with you, whose eyes light up with the mere mention of your name. Great intimacy, sex, and affection for each other...growing old together and sharing everything together—our thoughts and ideas, time, activities, our bodies. Having happy, healthy children. A fulfilling, fun, and prosperous career.

After Nicky's death, life had become too precious for me to play the emotional yo-yo game *again* of separating and getting back together. I knew like clockwork, Bobby would soon want to separate. Sure enough, he declared he was leaving me and wanted another separation. I looked him in the eye and said very firmly, and surprisingly without emotion, "If you leave, this is the end for me. There's no coming back." This time I was done with our marriage. He left and that was the end of my first marriage.

I immersed myself into my work, hoping that my busy career would provide enough distraction from the pain to allow for some healing. I found great joy in teaching. But life would hit me again with another major loss. Evidently, enduring three deaths and the end of a marriage wasn't enough.

Sharon

"Giggles, giggles, giggles...how I loved to hear the hustle bustle and excitement of my teen modeling class. Twenty or so girls filled the room, each carrying a bag or two full of make-up, curlers, and other tools to transform them into beautiful women. They hurriedly claimed their own space in front of the mirrors at the counter by setting down their belongings. After they got into their leotards and high heels, they moved into formation at the center of the room.

They began their walk around the room while I checked their posture, gait, sway, rhythm, attitude... The girls giggled as I joked and teased them while teaching them how to act and carry

themselves like princesses. I loved working with young teens because of their giddy enthusiasm and their dramatic transformation from little girls, klutzes, and tomboys into sophisticated young ladies. Not long before, I was in their shoes, a little girl turned teen, turned woman. I so loved my own transformation, I became an instructor.

One of my favorite students, Sharon Everett, became a dear friend. Sharon was model thin, almost frail, with light colored thin hair that framed her well-chiseled face. She took a liking to me and treated me more like an older sister. One day the director of the school announced in my class that we would not see Sharon. Her doctors diagnosed a brain tumor and gave her only a few months to live.

I began to visit her almost daily. Oddly, I found my time with Sharon consoling and a way of compensating for not being around for Nicky's last days before his death. He left without saying good-bye to me. I wanted a proper good-bye with Sharon.

On one of my visits, I told her about a handsome old acquaintance I ran into. I hinted at the possibility of this man, Michael, being 'The One,' just from an intuitive hunch. Sharon suddenly perked up. She could see the sparkle in my eyes as I told her about him. I met him three years earlier during one of my separations from Bobby. Back then we had a strong attraction to each other. As I told her more about meeting him and described him in detail, I'm sure she could tell that I was falling in love.

Our imaginings for a full-blown love story began to dominate my visits. Sharon knew she was dying and that she would never fall in love. She fell in love with Michael and our love story. She indirectly experienced 'falling in love' through us, a refreshing distraction from her fate. Sharon died at the end of the year, without hearing more of our love story.

As my intuition proved right, this handsome acquaintance turned out to be my true love, and we made real some of Sharon's and my love story imaginings. The love story contrasted the pain of losing Sharon, which added to my already tender heart still recovering from all my earlier losses.

But that wasn't enough change for that year. I moved my home thousands of miles away from Virginia so I could start a new life. I left family and dear friends, my business partner and our new business. The move greatly eased the unfathomable pain from all I had been through, although I felt as if I was on a precipice, about to fall into, perhaps insanity.

In the bold strokes of tragic fate that year, my innocent heart, which never knew much pain, suddenly gained the wisdom of the ages.

Thorns of Change

In 1982, *everything* in my life crashed. In a seven-month period, I endured, sometimes in several doses, what the experts call the top three traumatic events that occur in a person's *lifetime*: 1) death of a loved one, 2) divorce, and 3) a major relocation/move. That fatal year of change lives in my heart forever. Many aspects of my life died. My niece. My brother and his best friend. My dear friend. My marriage. A mere glimmer of hope remained for my dream of a fairytale life. Was it *really* possible?

Despite death and pain engulfing me, my spirit never died. I clung to the threads of hope, expecting them to heal my broken life. I looked to my parents.

*"I knew that if my mother and father could endure the pain, I could.
I knew that if they couldn't, I had to live to help them."*

I realized that *no matter what the circumstances or how angry or hurt I got* I could heal my life. The thorns of change that ripped my heart and soul to shreds also saved my life.

The blessing from thorns? A huge awakening:

An honest look at my life and myself.

The urgency of living life more fully.

Clarifying what 'living life more fully' meant to me so I could recognize and/or create it:

God, love, my purpose, romance, intimacy, sex, children, career, money, fun, laughter, health, etc.

Coming to terms with death, dying, and loss.

Increasing my threshold of pain, suffering, and sorrow. (I now know I can probably endure anything.)

Seeing what I was made of.

Grasping the meaning of NOW and prioritizing my life.


Cleansing my heart and soul through the wash of emotions.

Getting dreams out of the closet.

Getting angry and coming to a level of conviction about my new life: ***"I WAS GOING TO HAVE A HAPPY MARRIAGE WITH CHILDREN, NO MATTER HOW LONG IT WAS GOING TO TAKE ME, AND I WOULD DO WHATEVER I HAD TO DO TO MAKE IT HAPPEN!"***

With beliefs that God is love and love is all-powerful, plus being an undying romantic, I *never* shut the door on love. No matter how raw or tender the condition of my heart, I kept the light on for love. Soon after I passed through the peak of the most excruciating pain, love presented me with a surprise blessing. Love brought to my door the man of my dreams, who became my husband at the end of that tumultuous year.

No matter what thorns rip through your life, at the end of the stems you can always find roses. The greatest blessing I learned from life's thorns was to *savor each breath*, each precious



moment of my life. Because if I couldn't find the blessings in the smallest denomination of life we have—a breath, a moment, then how the heck was I to find them in the 'bigger' things of life—marriage, family, career, opportunities, etc.? ...

