

# Roses in December

*Marilyn Willett Heavilin*

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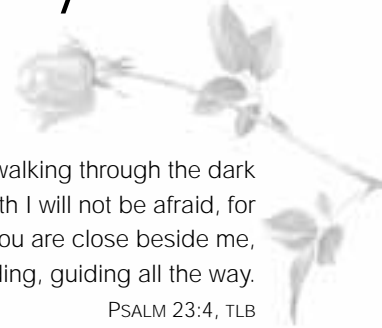
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# *Contents*

A Note from the Author . . . . .	7
The Rose of Preparation. . . . .	13
The Rose of Sorrow . . . . .	21
The Rose of Comfort . . . . .	29
The Rose of Forgiveness . . . . .	39
The Rose of Remembrance . . . . .	51
The Rose of Friendship . . . . .	63
The Rose of Understanding . . . . .	73
The Rose of Innocence . . . . .	83
The Rose of Hope . . . . .	91
The Rose of Uniqueness . . . . .	103
The Rose of Tenderness . . . . .	117
The Rose of Love . . . . .	125
The Rose of Farewells . . . . .	131
The Rose of Victory . . . . .	141
Appendix A—When a Loved One Dies of AIDs . . . . .	151
Appendix B—When a Loved One Dies by Suicide . . . . .	159
Notes . . . . .	169

# *The Rose of Preparation*



Even when walking through the dark valley of death I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me, guarding, guiding all the way.

PSALM 23:4, TLB

*I* sat across the table from my friend Mary, silently sipping tea, waiting for her to speak. Her son had died just two weeks before. She started to speak several times, but her words were choked back by her sobs. Finally she took a deep breath and blurted out, “No one understands my grief. I feel so alone.”

If you have recently experienced a heartbreak, you undoubtedly are well acquainted with feelings of isolation and loneliness. It is true that no one else can understand your grief completely or feel your individual pain, but I have experienced loss. I’ve lived through my own grief: the disappointments, the shattered dreams, the fears, the depression, and the emotional pain that made my whole body ache. I remember feeling, too, that no one else could possibly understand, but I’ve discovered it is possible to walk through that long, cold winter season of grief and emerge on the other side a whole, healthy person.

Dear friend, you don’t have to go through your grief alone. Please let me join you in this winter season and share my very special December roses with you. The first rose along our path is the rose of preparation.

It was a cold, blustery February evening in 1943 when my mom and I climbed aboard the Greyhound bus and I excitedly waved goodbye to my daddy. We were going to a small town in northern Michigan to visit my grandparents, my aunt and uncle, and best of all, my three-month-old cousin, Mary Beth. Now she would be old enough to respond to me. I could hardly wait. I'd been praying for a baby brother or sister as long as I could remember, but since my prayer hadn't been answered, I doted on cousin Mary Beth.

As soon as Grandpa lifted me from the bus steps, I asked, "When can we see Mary Beth?" and was very disappointed when he said I'd have to wait until morning. I climbed in bed with Grandpa and Grandma before dawn and asked, "Can we go now?"

As I gobbled down my breakfast, I saw my aunt and uncle's truck coming up the lane. I anxiously met them at the door, but though only an unsuspecting, innocent five-year-old, I knew something was wrong when I saw the pain on their faces. Mary Beth wasn't with them.

We all stood in that old farm kitchen with the snow piled high against the stone walls and windows, and my Uncle Louie began to explain. Mary Beth had suffocated in the night. She was dead. I can still hear my own screams as I ran across the lane to my great-grandmother's home. "My baby's dead! My baby's dead!"

My screaming must have torn at the breaking hearts of the adults, but no one reproved me. They just picked me up and hugged me, and we cried together.

The snowstorm had closed the roads from town to my aunt's house, and when Uncle Louie had called the coroner and undertaker, he was told they would have to wait for the snowplow—it could be hours before they arrived. Our family all drove to my aunt and uncle's cottage where a kind neighbor waited with Mary Beth's still form.

I insisted on seeing “my baby,” and no one had the strength to resist me. She had been a beautiful child, but the black and blue blotches that come with suffocation had stolen her beauty. I didn’t care—she was still my Mary Beth. I sat by the bed, stroked her hand, and talked to her. She felt like a china doll—so cold and unresponsive.

In those wintry hours my family was able to deal with their grief and to say goodbye privately to our sweet little Mary Beth. My fear of death waned as my mom explained that Jesus was taking care of Mary Beth and someday I would see her again. My fear of dead bodies lessened as I touched Mary Beth and realized she wasn’t in that body anymore.

As a child, that was my first but not my last contact with death. By the time I reached twelve, my paternal grandparents, my great-grandmother, a thirteen-year-old cousin, and a seventeen-year-old cousin all had died. Even my Aunt Lucille and Uncle Louie died after their gas stove exploded, causing a flash fire. It was through that tragedy that I got my long-awaited little brother Walt—my parents adopted the youngest of Aunt Lucille and Uncle Louie’s three orphaned children.

Death was no stranger to my family, but I don’t look back to a childhood filled with tragedy and sad memories. I remember a family made strong through sorrow, a family with a tenacity that triumphed over troubles, a family that cried and laughed together.

After my husband Glen and I were married, we had three children, Matthew, Mellyn (our only girl), and Jimmy. Our life seemed ideal. Glen was an executive with General Motors; we had a new home, and we were on our way to a successful life.

Early one morning Glen went in to make a routine check on the children, but suddenly his voice penetrated my slumber, “Marilyn, call the doctor—Jimmy’s gone.”

With my heart pounding and my mind racing, I obediently called our personal friend and physician. “Tom, come quick, it’s Jimmy!” But I knew Glen must be mistaken.

I quickly hung up the phone and raced into Jimmy's room in time to see Glen trying to breathe life into our young son. As my eyes fixed on Jimmy's lifeless form with black and blue blotches, I gasped, "Mary Beth!" The memories came tumbling back in a wave. Could this be happening again?

While waiting for the doctor, Glen and I knelt, with the baby still in his arms, and we prayed, "Jesus, please use this situation for Your honor and glory." The autopsy said "interstitial pneumonia." Today we would probably classify this as a crib death.

Jimmy died more than forty years ago, but as I write this account some scenes are still very vivid: the hurt I heard in my mother's voice as we called with the terrible news; the panic I felt later that day when the thought crossed my mind, I haven't fed Jimmy! and then the wave of grief as I realized Jimmy was dead; the feeling of rage mixed with overwhelming sadness that I experienced when I went into Jimmy's room and discovered that well-meaning friends had removed all of Jimmy's furniture and clothing without my knowledge or permission. I also recall dreading to meet people on the street or in the grocery store because I didn't want to answer the question, "How's your baby doing?"

Glen and I trusted the Lord and were able to go on with our lives, though it was hard when we were told, "You can still have lots of babies, and you'll probably forget all about this."

A year and a half later we were delighted with the doctor's announcement that we were going to have twins. I reasoned that God was "paying us back" for the child He had taken. It's amazing how we try to fit God into our mind-set.

Our identical twin boys, Nathan James and Ethan Thomas, were born on Christmas morning, 1965. What a celebration we had! I received dozens of phone calls and bouquets. We were sure the birth of twins would lessen the pain of Jimmy's death.

We took Nathan home on New Year's Eve, but Ethan needed to gain a little weight. Each day I checked on Ethan and his progress was good. But on the ninth day his weight began going

down and he was lethargic. Specialists were called in: diagnosis—pneumonia; prognosis—not good.

I was angry at life and at God. What had we done to deserve this? We were strong Christians, actively serving the Lord, and we had accepted Jimmy's death without bitterness or anger. Was this our thanks?

I struggled with God all night, and the next morning as I read out of *Streams in the Desert*, I thought I had found my answer. The verse for that day was "Go thy way; thy son liveth" (John 4:50).

I called all of my friends. "I'm sure Ethan will be fine. I'm sure that's what this verse means." Once again I thought I had God all figured out, but that evening as I pressed my face against the nursery window and watched my dear little Ethan labor with each breath, God spoke to me very clearly. "Marilyn, I loved you enough to die for you; aren't you willing to trust Me with this child?"

In an attempt to get alone with God, I went into the bathroom in the private room the hospital had given us, locked the door, slumped to the floor, and cried out to God. "This isn't fair. We're good people, good parents, good Christians. Why should this happen to us?"

Once I had blurted out my feelings, I sat silently for a while and then a peace began to grow within me. My prayer continued, "Lord I don't understand this, and I certainly don't like it. But I love You and I trust You. I give You complete control over Ethan's life. Now You must give me the strength to live through this."

Glen and I clung to each other as we peered through the glass into that hospital nursery. I had only held Ethan twice and Glen had never been allowed to touch him. As Ethan's condition worsened, the nurse closed the drapes at the nursery window. We were separated completely from our little boy. A few minutes later Ethan joined his brother Jimmy in heaven.



I leaned my head heavily against Glen's shoulder as we drove silently home. The snow glistened in the moonlight, and I could hear the crunch of our tires against the half-frozen slush on the highway. My mind drifted back to that verse, "Go thy way; thy son liveth." What did it mean to me now?

Glen and I were preparing to move to California to join a Christian organization. We would be leaving our home, our family, and all our friends. I sensed God was saying through that verse, "Marilyn, continue with your plans; serve Me with all your heart, and don't worry about Ethan or Jimmy. They're both living with Me, and they're fine." I now believe that was what God was saying, but I couldn't receive that interpretation until later, when I had yielded my will to His.

I experienced many of the same adjustments after Ethan died as I did after Jimmy's death. We already had sent out birth announcements and an article had appeared in our local paper, so during the first few weeks after Ethan died, we often received congratulatory cards and sympathy cards in the same mail. I recall receiving two beautiful baby blue suits accompanied with a note, "Twins! I think you're one of the luckiest couples in the world!"

I didn't feel lucky; I felt plagued because our troubles were continuing. Shortly after Jimmy died I had begun to have a problem with recurring ovarian cysts which required several surgeries. Five weeks after Ethan died the pain began again. I had another cyst. We consulted several doctors who all recommended I have a total hysterectomy. After losing two babies in less than two years, the hope for more children was gone. While some of my friends were crying because of too many pregnancies, I was crying because I would never be pregnant again.

A month after that surgery, my grandmother died. As the family was preparing to leave the house for Grandma's funeral, Glen developed a migraine headache and went to bed. Then I began sobbing so violently someone had to give me a tranquilizer to calm me down enough that I could attend the funeral.

People couldn't understand why Glen and I were having such a difficult time with my grandmother's death. After all, she was in her seventies, she had lived a good life, and she didn't suffer long. No one took the time to consider what Glen and I had been through in the past year and a half. And the following year we moved four times, including the move from Indiana to California.

We moved from a large home into a tiny, two-bedroom apartment in San Bernardino, with rented furniture, and Matt and Mellyn were to sleep in bunk beds with Nate's crib in the same tiny room. The very first evening Glen had to work late so I began trying to get Matt and Mellyn settled into bed by myself. Just as they climbed in, the upper bunk came crashing down on top of Mellyn! Except for a few bumps and bruises, she was not injured, but the children all became hysterical. Overwhelmed and crying myself, I collapsed in the middle of the floor, and tried to comfort my three screaming children, all the while thinking, *And this is the great adventure God has called me to?*

When Nate was about eight months old, I went into a severe depression. I couldn't sleep; I cried a lot. And when I wasn't crying I was yelling at the children.

Glen was very patient with me, but he didn't know what was wrong. My Christian friends were certain it was a spiritual problem, and they kept asking, "Are you sure you understand the Spirit-filled life?"

My mother came to visit, took one look at me, and said, "This girl needs to go to bed." I had been running and running from my pain, but it finally had caught up with me.

No one had warned me that it was necessary to grieve, nor did anyone explain that, even though I had a baby and two other children to take care of, I would still miss Jimmy and Ethan. I was told that the adjustment to a hysterectomy was all in my head, and I was not informed about the changes that would occur in my body. Three babies, two funerals, four surgeries, and four moves in twenty-four months, and I was only twenty-eight. No wonder I was depressed!

My mother gave me the physical help I needed, the children matured, and I slowly grew accustomed to my grief. As the years went by I spent my time with my family, and God allowed the empty spots in my heart to be filled to some extent by other children, especially boys, who needed the attention I had time to give. We cooked for the band and bolstered the high school football team. Matt and Mellyn participated in various activities, and Glen, Nate, and I became their cheering section. Matt and Mellyn graduated and went on to college. In 1982, Mellyn married Mike Savage, a young man I had led to the Lord earlier.

That fall Nate began his junior year in high school. He had grown into a tall, handsome, sixteen-year-old young man. He was on the cross-country and basketball teams, sang in the ensemble, played trumpet in the pep band, and was on the honor roll.

Since I worked at the Christian high school where he attended, Nate and I spent a lot of time together driving to and from school. Although he was a very quiet boy, occasionally he shared something that gave me a hint of what was going on in his mind.

One morning on the way to school, he said, “Mom, have you ever wondered what Ethan looks like?”

I said, “Well, honey, you were identical twins; he must look just like you.”

There was quiet for a moment, and then Nate said wistfully, “Boy, I sure would like to see him.”

I chuckled rather uneasily, trying hard to cover up the strange feeling that flooded over me and replied, “Well, when we get to heaven, we’ll all get to see him, and Jimmy, too.”