

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a bright yellow shirt, is sitting on a stone ledge on a mountain peak. She is looking out over a vast, hazy mountain landscape. The sky is a deep blue with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is bright and scenic.

# no laughing matter

by christine prater

Every September, my hubby and I pack up all our gear and set off for a week in the mountains. To us, there is nothing more healing than that week of quiet; nothing more likely to salve the rough spots of our souls that the world has rubbed raw. And every year on this trip, I have what many people would call a “mountaintop experience” (pun intended.) God meets me in those mountains and ministers to me through all He has created and the resulting rare quiet in my soul.

But every year as we begin to plan our trip, it seems as though the world is against us. This year, our sweet 12 year old black lab, Ty, was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of cancer only a few weeks before we were to go.

This was a terrible blow to our family. We don't have any real children (furry-variety only) so we tend to be overly attached to our pets, plus Ty was one of those once-in-a-lifetime “soul dogs” who was so kind and wise and intuitive, that he was essentially an angel in a fur coat. And since there was no way to know



how long he would make it and we didn't want to leave with him sick, we had no choice but to call off our trip to the mountains. So for those few weeks we had left with him, we visited all his favorite places, fed him anything he wanted, and spooned him daily. Then, on a Monday morning that last week of August, we looked into our puppy's eyes and saw resignation there. So we made one of the hardest decisions there ever is to make. We called our vet and spent the rest of the day crying our eyes shut. And then we said goodbye as best we could; as a family, with our baby all wrapped up in his favorite blanket, reflecting back on the years of love and grace he had given us.

I can't describe to you how much we have missed having him here with us. We have tried to keep ourselves busy so maybe we won't notice how empty the house feels now with him gone, but there is no mistaking that this loss has left an enormous hole in our lives.

So I can't tell you how excited I was when after several days of us moping around our too-quiet house, Kenny said, "Let's just go, babe. We can't just sit around here for the rest of our lives. It'll be good for us to get out of here. Let's go to Colorado."

Thrilled to once again have something to look forward to, I manage to scramble together some last second plans and re-pack our gear. I silently utter a prayer of thanks and tell God that I cannot wait to meet him in those mountains. Because this year, we need those mountains more than ever. We need the quiet rush of the river, those nearly touchable stars, and those aspen trees quaking around us. And what we need most is to be reminded that our lives are small, and our God is big. We need to grieve and heal and maybe even laugh again. We need HIM.

Packed to the gills, we head to the airport. Miraculously, all 4 bags squeak in under the 50 lb maximum so we breeze through check-in. But as we work our way through the security line, I notice that we are destined for one of those big scanner machines that I am not too fond of. Let's just say the combination of feeling like it is providing some random TSA agent full x-ray-nudie-vision and the rumors that those machines give off massive amounts of radiation, is too much for me.

I politely ask, "Is there an alternative option to going through this machine?"

Mistake #1.

"Yes ma'am, there is." The TSA agent replies. "Would you like a private room for your alternative screening?"

"Um, no. I think I am okay, thanks," I naively reply. Mistake #2.

I am taken to an area still in view of everyone else coming through security, where I am given a long disclaimer speech of what is about to occur. Now, I am not sure what I was expecting exactly, but it wasn't what happened next. I figured a good thorough pat down would suffice, but that is not how I would describe the next few minutes. In fact, I will purposely NOT describe the next few minutes except to say that it was intimate and awkward and the word "violated" comes to mind as the most apt description. My humiliation is further multiplied by the fact that I have a captive live audience to witness the event.

When that loveliness is all said and done, they sit me down, rub a paper wand all over me, and run it through a machine. Almost done and lesson learned, right? Wait - no. Why is the machine sounding alarms and lighting up like a Christmas tree? I don't know and no one will tell me. In fact, no one will even LOOK at me. There is lots of rushing around and looking for supervisors and absolutely no eye contact or explanations. Finally, a new officer comes over and explains that they will need to thoroughly search all my items and do yet another, more thorough screening.

I begin to sweat. "Is there some problem?" I ask in my sweetest voice.

"You have tested positive for nitrates on your clothing," he informs me while clearly standing guard over me. I reply stupidly, "Nitrates? Isn't that the bad preservative in bacon?"

He does not find me funny, nor does the head honcho in his booth madly checking watch lists and running an FBI background check on me as I watch with my peripheral vision. I turn to look at my husband for support, but alas, he is no longer making eye contact either. Perfect.

I look over at this sweet older lady next to me who has made the same bad choices I have and awaits her own "private screening." She dares to look me in the eye so we smile sheepishly at each other, a bond established as clearly dangerous to the general public, and then are led separately and shamefully away.

Then the worst thing happens. My nerves begin to get the best of me and I start to giggle uncontrollably. And while I am perfectly aware that this behavior is completely inappropriate in this setting; the harder I try to stop, the worse it gets. This makes my even more intimate 2nd search (this one done in a private room with my husband staring blushing at a wall,) excruciating for everyone involved. Finally, I am cleared as a threat to Homeland Security and allowed to go to our gate. Still giddy and giggly from my stressful encounter, I decide that laughter really is the best medicine and pat myself on the back for being able to maintain a positive attitude.

With all the bad stuff presumably behind us, we board the plane. Even though I am sandwiched soundly in the middle seat between 2 obvious prior defensive linemen, we have a pretty uneventful flight. I am looking forward to a stress-free week ahead and refuse to be deterred from enjoying myself; that is until we land and I realize I've lost my phone. Suddenly, I no longer feel like laughing.

I own my own business, so phonelessness is nothing short of a catastrophe in my life. But after frantically searching for it and unsuccessfully begging airline personnel to call our departure gate to see if it is still there, I admit defeat and go to catch up with my husband at baggage claim.

As I approach, I notice that he only has three of our four 49.7-pound bags near his feet and a very peculiar look on his face.

"You must be kidding me - they lost our bag?" I ask.

He looks at me briefly and then back at this lone bag-thing coming towards us on the belt.

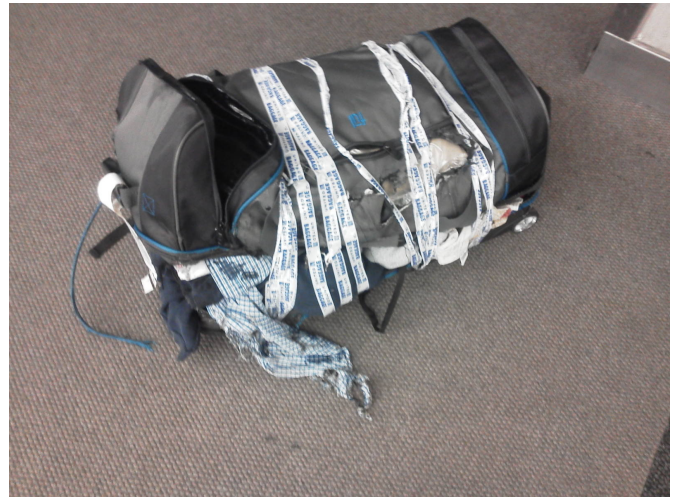
"Nope. I am pretty sure that's it."

I turn to see this:

While a picture is worth a thousand words, let me help paint this one for you....:

The cloth you see at the bottom and all along the side is/was clothing. Those are random sleeves and pant particles just shooting out in all directions. And what I sn't sticking out of the bag had clearly

already fallen out, been shoved back in, and had tape wrapped around it well enough to actually hold the bag together again. The dark spots on the surviving patches are shampoo and other various toiletries, all free from their previous confining containers and soundly soaked in..



At this point I have had enough. Thus far today I have been of stripped of my integrity, my phone, and 25% of our clothing for this trip. This is clearly NOT on my itinerary. Would someone kindly inform God, the government, and United Airlines that I like my life on a spreadsheet? Why does God have to wait to meet me in the mountains today? Couldn't He maybe go ahead and meet me here at Denver International?

I am not naturally a conspiracy theorist, but at this moment, I buy in. I decide, while my head spins around on my shoulders, that the government wanted to punish me for my refusal of the nudie radiation machine and has purposefully embarrassed me, stolen my phone, and ruined my luggage to teach me a lesson.

Sure that God has also deserted me, I grab what is left of the bag and start dragging it across the room to the airline's baggage claim counter, leaving a nice dark stain of shampoo trail behind me, along with random sleeves to random shirts that are no longer attached to their counterparts. I approach the desk huffing and puffing. The people behind it wait wide-eyed and silently.

"I believe we need to file a claim." I say rather calmly, I think.

As Bill from baggage claim starts to fill out the necessary paperwork, there is much discussion between he and his colleagues as to what may have happened to our bag. It is finally discerned and then announced to us that our luggage had apparently been run over.

"By the plane?" I ask sarcastically.

"No." Bill says, ever so patronizingly. "It can't have been the plane because at United Airlines, we put the bags inside the plane."

Thanks Bill.

At least I'm laughing again.

Hours later, I sit quietly under these nearly touchable stars and reflect. I think about the day and the dozens leading up to it, plus all the obstacles that nearly got in the way of this quiet solitude that I hungered for. I think about how life, in and of itself, can be an obstacle to this place where we really can sit quietly before God.

And then it dawns on me that I SHOULD be a conspiracy theorist. But it isn't the government that is against me, and United Airlines may not be the corporate anti-christ after all. The conspiracy and the battle we face is so much bigger and darker than that. Ephesians 6:12 tells us that as Christians, "...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Obstacles like time, energy, and everyday circumstances are so simple to overcome, yet they are our enemy's greatest tools. He uses them to keep us from these healing moments with God and these mountaintop experiences. He does it by keeping us so busy and so covered up by the worries of this world that we forget to take the time to be quiet with God. And in these last few weeks, amongst my loss and grief and frustration, I nearly let him win.

And while being in his creation is certainly a catalyst for his presence, we don't even have to be alone on a mountain to feel close to him. He removed any distance between us when he sent his Son to die on the cross. And now, even when I can't be on this physical mountain, I can feel His presence as I count the blessings in my life; every bit as abundant as these stars above me tonight.

So as I sit on this mountain, in awe of the provision of His power, I realize that this moment with God, along with every other moment I have spent with Him, is a victory in the hard-fought battle against the enemy. Every prayer I say and every praise I give is an obstacle overcome. The devil and this world work hand-in-hand to distract and dissuade my focus from Him. And the Bible says that the enemy “...prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.”

But every time I fight for Him, every time I battle back, He meets me. He is always right here, on the mountain, waiting with the stars.