

*Foreword by bestselling author JANETTE OKE*

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# *It Was Then That I Carried You*

Non-fiction  
*Angelina Fast-Vlaar*

“If you want to see it, come now!” Peter’s whisper tickled my ear. “Coming,” I muttered. I slipped into my shorts and T-shirt and tip-toed behind him through Jim and Julie’s house.

Peter gently shut the door. “There, we didn’t wake the baby,” he said with a grin.

He reached for my hand, and together we walked in the soft glow of early morning light, past houses on stilts and gardens green with tropical plants and flowering shrubs.

It was October, 1987, and we were in Palm Cove on Australia’s east coast, just north of Cairns. We had come from Canada to visit our son, his beautiful Aussie wife, and their first-born child, our third grandson.

Through a row of palms, we stepped onto Palm Cove beach—a long solitary crescent stretching between water and forest. We sat down on the soft white sand and inhaled the peaceful morning scene, the music of the birds, the measured breathing of the water. The Coral Sea stretched out before us, its dark glistening water touching a far-off pink horizon. Spell-bound, we waited for God to make a morning.

Finally, a fiery arc appeared far across the water and Peter exclaimed, “There she is!”

Gradually, a blazing ball lifted out of the water and spread its light.

“Amazing,” Peter whispered. “Did you know His glory is seen in the rising sun?”

“Yes, I know,” I said, leaning against him. “How many sunrises have you seen here now?” I asked.

“I didn’t miss many, so I guess about thirty. And each one was more spectacular than the one before.” He turned to me, smiling. “Too bad you missed most of them.”

The sun rose and we got up to saunter barefoot along the now sparkling aquamarine water, sand squishing between our toes. I noticed the footprints our feet left behind and decided to take some photos.

“I want a photo of just mine,” I said.

“Why?” Peter asked.

“Just because,” I answered, and waited until a wave had gently erased our prints. I walked alone and then clicked the shutter. I didn’t know why, but something deep within compelled me to take this picture, to have a reminder of Margaret Fishback Powers’s famous poem that contains the line, “When you saw only one set of footprints...”<sup>1</sup>

We strolled on and Peter remarked, “Hasn’t it been great? Our holiday?”

“Much more than what I’d imagined,” I replied.

“But you were so hesitant to come!” he commented.

“You’re not in the best of health, you know,” I returned. It was true. Although Peter was only fifty-five, he had had his ups and downs with a heart condition.

“I’m just fine. Didn’t our family doctor *and* my heart specialist tell me to go and enjoy the trip?”

“Yes, Hon, they did,” I said.

Excitedly, Peter continued, “And tomorrow we leave for our six-week *walk-about* to Adelaide!”

“Yes, but let’s just remember the car we bought is old and has no air conditioning,” I added cautiously.

“The car is just fine also! Didn’t we take it for a test run?”

He turned to me and his grin changed to a chuckle, then to a belly laugh as we remembered our harrowing ride up to Cape Tribulation last week.

“We’re all set to go,” he said, and then added, “Through the outback.”

Under my breath, I said, “That remains to be seen.”

The next morning we set out, with our used Toyota Corolla pulling Jim and Julie's tent trailer. We promised we'd be back in time to celebrate Christmas together.

We headed south along the coast to Townsville, passing waving fields of sugar cane and acres of pineapples. We stopped at a road-side stand to sample one and, with juice running down our chins, exclaimed to the pineapple pickers how sweet the fruit was.

"You don't grow pineapples in Canada?" they queried.

"No," we replied, "but we do grow peaches!"

We spent the next day exploring Townsville, including the astonishing walk-through aquarium. After a swim in the public pool, I settled in the shade of the ornate bathing house and studied our map once more. Going through the outback, the *Never, Never*, seemed risky to me. Jim had said, "You'd better think it over, Dad. That desert is hot and it's a long, long way to Adelaide." But Peter had insisted that anyone in his right mind would not want to pass up an opportunity to see the mysterious outback first-hand. I still had my reservations and would have preferred to drive further south along the coast, maybe as far as Sydney, and this way skirt most of the desert-like country. Observing our map, I decided to tally the kilometres of each route and excitedly discovered the coastal route to be shorter by a bit.

When Peter approached, I called out, "Look, Hon, the coastal route is shorter!" thinking this would convince him.

It didn't. He held my eyes and I read the sadness he was feeling. He quietly said he'd shop for some groceries. I knew that enough had been said. I'd leave the decision to fulfill his long-held cherished dream up to him.

When we left the campground the following morning, I waited with bated breath. At the gate Peter slowly, ceremoniously, turned the wheel to swerve the car onto the highway that would lead us directly into *the back of beyond*. He turned to me, grinning mischievously, the familiar twinkle in his blue eyes. Despite my misgivings, I returned his smile. I loved this handsome, grey-bearded, fun-loving man. I loved him for his strength and his brave, courageous spirit. We'd share this adventure together.

As we drove out of town, the outback scene slowly became a reality: skinny cows, thirsty stunted trees, anthills several meters high standing like grave monuments on the cinnamon sand. As the fiery sun climbed higher, the interior of the car heated up like an oven. Around noon, the road led up to a rocky height. We stopped and in awe observed our 360-degree horizon. The outback stretched around us without end. We felt very small, two tiny specks in this vast heated wilderness. I gained a deeper understanding of the term *Never, Never*.

In the late afternoon, we turned into a lonely campground, set up our gear and cooked our supper. Peter went for a walk. “I saw graves back there,” he said when he returned. “It must have been lonely—probably no doctor.”

I didn’t want to comment, so kept myself buried in my novel.

The sun set and a soft orange veil stretched over us, enveloped us, wrapped us in what seemed like God’s protective love. The shrubs and spheres of spinifex grass on the red earth glowed as if on fire. Darkness gradually fell and the sky became a black velvet dome punctured with brilliant lights. A poet saw the stars as “altar fires.”

Early in the morning we continued on. We drove through towns that were no more than a cluster of dust-covered buildings; we stood in line at service stations to have a cool shower; we found a patch of skinny shade to sit and make a sandwich. Our car and clothes began to blend into the red landscape.

The further we drove into the outback, the quieter we became. We felt lonely, fragile, vulnerable on the hot empty plains. But it was more than that. The isolated stillness around us, around me, amplified the “noise” within. Desert journeys tend to do that. With outward, surface distractions virtually absent, we encounter our inner selves. That night I lay awake and confronted my fear.

Two mornings later, I woke very early. As my eyes feasted on the desert bathed in pre-dawn pink, I realized how much more my heart, now quieter, blended with the stillness around me. My heart was still, because God is God.

Later that day, we arrived in the middle of the outback, in the small oasis-like town of Alice Springs nestled in the curve of a red rocky



mountain range. A spring in the desert. We set up camp in a lovely shaded campground at the edge of town and spent three beautiful, joy-filled days in Alice.

We ended our first day of happy sight-seeing with a drive up Anzac Hill to watch the sun complete its daily round. We sat close together on a west-facing bench and marvelled as colour seeped into the sky and turned the red hills into shades of purple.

When it was almost dark, I said, "It's over, let's go."

"No, it's not over," Peter said, "Turn around."

I turned my head and, amazed, saw Alice twinkling with light. As the world in front of us had darkened, the town behind us had begun to shine like a precious jewel.

"Look, the City of Light!" Peter whispered, his voice breaking with emotion.

We sat spell-bound and drank in the beauty of the evening laden with meaning.

The next day, Sunday, we attended an Aboriginal evening service. Peter was asked to bring a greeting from overseas, which he happily and movingly did. The leader of the group invited us to come and visit the Aboriginal community where he lived. We set out the next morning and spent an enjoyable time meeting the friendly native people and admiring the craft items they designed to be sold in town.

Back in Alice, we decided to get our roll of film developed. One photo of Peter and me was especially lovely, and we ordered several prints to send to our children back home. It would take some time.

Peter said, "I'll go to the grocery store while you wait."

I sat on a bench in front of the photo shop and opened the envelope of prints once more. The footprints photo I had taken was captivating. The grey, red-rimmed clouds in the sky were reflected in sheets of water spread on the beach by the rising tide. Alongside foamy froth was a lonely set of footprints. I planned to enlarge the photo and frame it.

But where was Peter? He'd looked tired after our adventure. I was relieved to see him emerge from the store. We drove back to the

campground and went for a swim in the pool. Peter pulled himself out rather quickly.

“I forgot my nitro pills, so I’m going to lie down,” he said.

I followed him a little later and found him sleeping. I showered and changed and lay down to have a nap. It was 6 o’clock in the evening. I fell into a deep sleep and woke at midnight. Peter’s breathing was deep and even. I decided to just go back to sleep.

When I woke at 6:00 a.m., Peter was sitting up. He told me he’d had a bad night. True to character, he turned everything into a joke by telling me a funny story. Laughter filled our camper. It was too early to rise and we decided to doze off again.

Suddenly I sensed a shiver pass through Peter’s body. I turned with a start and asked, “Hon, are you okay?” He didn’t respond. I jumped up. Leaning over him, I stroked his hair and asked again whether he was all right. His face was pale, almost grey; his breathing shallow; his eyes shut. My mind began to race— *Help! I need help!*

I ran to a silver RV parked a few spots over to our left. No one answered my frantic knocking. I ran to another RV parked on the other side. Again, no one answered. Running back to our camper, I noticed a pup-tent set up just behind us. I desperately called out, “Is there someone here who can help me? My husband is very ill!”

The tent jiggled and a young man crawled out while trying to pull on a pair of jeans. Without saying a word, he ran like a leopard toward the office.

I rushed back into our camper. Peter was the same—short, shallow breaths. I stroked his hair, his cheek, while tears filled my eyes. “Oh, Hon, what is it? What can I do?”

The shallow breathing suddenly stopped. Then one long breath escaped his lips and everything became eerily still except for the pounding of my heart.

Moments later, I heard vehicles squeal to a stop. Two uniformed women rushed into the camper, one carrying paddles, the other a mouthpiece for oxygen.

“How long has he been this way?” one asked urgently.

“A few moments.”

“Please wait outside.”

My feet were frozen in place.

“Please wait outside!”

I managed to obey the command and stumbled to the large tree that sheltered our camper. I leaned against its sturdy trunk. A terrible trembling now wracked my body from head to toe as it began to sink in what was happening. Peter likely had had the dreaded heart attack. Jim was 3,000 kilometres away on the east coast; our four other children were back in Canada; I was alone in a town where I didn't know a soul. A desperate cry escaped my lips, “Lord, what am I going to do? What am I going to do?”

Just then, I became aware that I was not alone. I lifted my head. Something glistened in the rising sun. I blinked away my tears to see a man in a bright white shirt. I noticed his kind brown eyes, his neatly trimmed dark beard.

“Is it your husband who is ill?” he said gently. I nodded and he said, “I have come to look after you.”

I struggled to grasp the meaning of what he'd said, his comforting, calming words. He had come to look after me? Where had he come from? Was he an angel?

He touched my elbow and I felt my trembling ease. Softly, he said, “Let's sit in my car.” I hadn't heard a car drive up, but there was a dust-covered vehicle parked behind the ambulances. He opened the door for me, walked around and slid into the driver's seat. I sat, tears now streaming, on the passenger side.

“Tell me what happened,” he said.

I haltingly told him about Peter and what had just occurred. He listened. He nodded with understanding. He *was* an “angel.”

“I'll go check on your husband,” he said, and walked to the ambulances. He returned and told me they were taking some time to stabilize Peter before transporting him.

“I'll take you to the hospital now,” he said. “There will be a *sister* waiting for you.”

He slowly drove along a few quiet streets. The hospital was close by. The two-storied rectangular building had a long sidewalk leading to glass doors. Two nurses, dressed in white uniforms, opened the doors and welcomed me by name! They took me across a shiny floor to a long counter where I answered questions to fill out a registration form.

I turned, wanting to thank the kind man, but he had gone. I stared at the long sidewalk—how could he have walked that length so quickly...?

A nurse invited me to follow her to a small room. A young lady, with a kind, open face and shoulder-length straight hair, stood as I entered. She reached for my hand. “Angie? I’m Michelle. I’m here to be with you. Would you like a cup of tea, some toast?”

I wondered who she was. She didn’t have a nurse’s uniform on and she didn’t seem like office personnel. She set the tea tray on a low table and sat down beside me.

“Tell me what happened,” she invited.

She listened to all I needed to say, and an hour later held my sobbing body when the doctor came to tell us their attempts to save Peter’s life had failed.

Shortly afterwards, a social worker stepped into the room. Her kind blue eyes held mine as she said, “I’m Margaret. I’m here to be with you and to help you with everything that needs to be done. Let’s go up to my office.”

She led me up a staircase. As I entered her bright, sun-lit office, a poster hanging on the wall faced me directly. On the left side was a little koala hopelessly entangled in a shrub. On the right side was a soft curve of light suggesting the Shepherd might appear at any moment. The caption read, “Relax, I AM in charge.”

First, the heart-rending call to my son Jim. We decided it was best for me to go to Peter’s niece in Adelaide as planned. Jim and Julie would fly down, and other family members traveling in Australia could gather there. I kept glancing at the poster.

Margaret had some difficulty getting an overseas telephone connection, but finally handed me the receiver. Standing behind me, she let

her hand simply rest on my shoulder as I tried to voice the devastating news to our four other children. It was the most difficult task I'd ever done. I felt drained and let my tears flow onto Margaret's desk. When I looked up, my eyes again fell on the poster. *Relax, I AM...*

Gently, Margaret said, "I'll now take you to an undertaker to make all the arrangements." I followed her obediently into this strange new world. On the way back, she stopped at a travel agency for me to buy a ticket to Adelaide.

When we returned to her office, she arranged for tea and sandwiches to be brought up. In between glances at the poster above her desk, I munched on the sandwiches and expressed my thanks again for everything she was doing. I wondered about the amount of time she was able to spend with me.

Pushing back her greying hair, she smiled, and softly said, "Angie, today my work is to help you. And if that takes all day, I have all day."

I saw the loving sincerity in her eyes.

She telephoned a pastor to meet us at the campground to help pack our gear. I went through the motions, as if on autopilot, and calmly decided what needed to go where and guided them in how to fold up the tent trailer. The pastor led the way to the train station for me to ship the car and trailer to Adelaide. Margaret took some of Peter's clothes to the undertaker.

When we met back at her office, there was a call from Jim. In a voice hoarse and heavy with emotion, he said, "Mom, we have our flights booked. We'll see you tomorrow at 6:00 p.m. in Adelaide. Please take care. I love you."

Margaret tucked a bar of soap and a towel into my hands and said, "You have time to take a shower before I take you to the airport."

The warm water mixed with my hot tears, but could not wash them away. Nor could the water rouse me from my dream-like state, or open my numbed mind to absorb reality. Peter gone? How could that be? We laughed when he woke this morning...

Margaret drove me to the airport in time to catch my flight. Over the roar of the engines, I hugged her and thanked her again and again. We promised to keep in touch.

A kind stewardess, seeing my tear-crumpled face, whispered, “Would you like a private seat in the back of the carrier?”

I gratefully accepted.

The airplane lifted, banked, and I glimpsed Alice Springs below, cradled in the mountain range. She had indeed held a spring for me. I reeled to think what this day had brought. Yet, everything was done. I had been cared for; I had been carried.

One set of footprints in the red sand...

1. “Footprints in the Sand,” copyright © 1964 by Margaret Fishback Powers. Used by permission.

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