

# DON'T MESS *With This* MAMA

Risking It All to Rescue Our Daughter



A TRUE STORY

**MISSY MAXWELL WORTON**

FOREWORD BY CHRIS OVERSTREET

## Chapter 16

# ANGEL ARMIES

*“Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities,  
in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions,  
in distresses for Christ’s sake:  
for when I am weak, then am I strong.”*  
—2 Corinthians 12:10, KJV

Within minutes of posting a status on Facebook, our friends were responding with prayers and questions. We couldn’t tell them much, but we found ourselves encouraged and filled with hope. Our hearts were still heavy, but we knew that God most certainly had a plan for us in Ethiopia.

One of our relatives sent a private message about a connection he had who was very familiar with the corruption we might be facing. He had called a special agent, who gave us instructions to not allow Favor out of our sight, or we might never see her again. He told us we had done the right thing by staying, but now it would be best to go into hiding and to retain an Ethiopian attorney through the Embassy. My mind went into overdrive thinking of the danger we could be putting McKenzie into by having her there. One of us should take her home, but neither one of us wanted to leave Favor, or each other. All I could do was pray for God’s protection.

I finally shut my computer off at 2 a.m. I was tired, and knew that I needed to sleep if I was going to think straight the next day. I could tell Mark was still awake, but we didn’t say a word to each other. Although mere inches were all that separated us, we were a world apart.

A pack of dogs barked in the alley outside our window all night. At one point, by the sound of it, I could tell a neighborhood cat was having a really bad night. I don’t know if I was feeling the cat’s pain or just my own, but ironically I found myself totally relating to an unknown feline.

I was glad to see the dawn break. It gave me an excuse to get up and stop trying to act like I was sleeping. Looking outside, I was amazed at how peaceful it looked—so quiet and still. I could feel the presence of the Lord, and I felt safe, although everything happening to us was telling me we were in danger. I ran the bath water and got myself ready before the girls woke up. I wasn’t sure what we would be facing. We were now in uncharted territory. My usually strategic mind couldn’t think of what I needed to do next. All I could do was to trust God in what He was doing now. He doesn’t make mistakes, and He is never random.

I started thinking about where we would go. We didn’t know anyone in Addis Ababa except for those at the orphanage and Julie, who lived in a small apartment with several other girls. We had to leave the guest house early because a large group of medical missionaries was coming in. Our money was almost gone, and the credit cards were maxed out. Where would a family of four go that wouldn’t cost much and be a safe place to hide? *Lord, I know You are my provider. I know I don’t need to worry about You taking care of us. Please help us find a safe place that we can afford. You know exactly what we need,* I prayed silently.

Mark was up checking emails when I returned to the room. I started catching up on Facebook

posts from the night before. There, in the comments, waited the answer to my prayer. Jody had friended me three years ago after meeting our son Shewit—at the same orphanage where they adopted their daughter. She had sent me pictures of Shewit taken while they were picking up their new daughter, and we had remained friends. Her family had moved to Addis Ababa two months ago to do missions. Later, I would find out that they arrived months ahead of schedule because they were able to raise money so quickly for their mission work. Jody had commented several times on our Facebook posts to contact her because she wanted to help us. This time, she offered her home as a place we could stay in Addis Ababa until we could take Favor home. I hesitated. I didn't want to be a burden. But here, right in front of me, was the answer to my prayers. God's provision arrived just in time, and my pride was threatening to step in and take it from me.

We packed up our belongings and dragged our bags downstairs to wait for Pochi. The medical missionaries were starting to arrive. I noticed Mark was pacing out in the courtyard. He still couldn't bring himself to eat, and I could see his eyes were red and swollen from crying. As he paced, he cried out to God to fix the wrong decisions that he had made. He was begging God to protect his family from the danger he had put them in. He prayed that God would forgive him for his unbelief.

Inside, I sat down with the girls and made sure they had a good breakfast before we left. One of the missionaries sat across from me and wanted to know what brought us to Ethiopia. I started to tell her about our story and the battle we were facing with the foster care system that was trying to stop our adoption. Mark walked in as she began to share that these foster care systems were being created by UNICEF.

I told Mark about Jody inviting us to stay at their home, "Does she know that there are four of us and that we have no idea how long we are going to be here?" Mark asked.

"I'm sure she knows, but I'll make sure," I said. "What else can we do? We are running out of money, and we used up all our points at the Hilton."

"Adefere is probably looking for us at the Hilton," Mark said. "We need to find a place to hide."

"I'll give Jody a call, but I believe God sent her to help us. It's no coincidence," I said.

"You're right," Mark said, "It seems like God has it all planned out."

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About that time, we heard honks from the car with Pochi, Dave, and the Pastor coming to pick us up at the front gate.

Pastor stepped out of the car, and when he saw Mark, he opened his arms to embrace him. I could see Mark's shoulders shake as Pastor held him like a father. Mark was in so much pain, but even tears didn't seem to bring much relief from his agony.

Pochi ran up and gave me a hug. "Oh, you look so tired! Be happy, Missy! God is going to do something big! He is in control!"

I stared at her, unable to respond.

"Missy," she said, "this is about so much more than you can understand right now. You could've left, but you stayed in the battle. You are fighting for those with no voice. You can help uncover something that needs to be stopped—a corruption hurting these children."

Something she said reminded me of a Nashville pastor's fairly recent prophecy, which stated that Mark and I would both help expose corruption and be used as God's secret agents to advocate for

orphans and human traffic victims. It sounded so exciting and cool when we first heard it...but not so much now as we were beginning to live it out. Yet, God's prophecy was defining us for the work in this moment. We could see ourselves differently—through His eyes, instead of what we were feeling in our stage of weakness, pain, and exhaustion. *He* was defining us—not our circumstances.

“We have a meeting with our attorney this afternoon,” Pochi said. “He will know what steps you need to take next. We can take you to a guest house and get you settled for now.”

Mark looked at me to see if I would say anything.

“Pochi,” I interrupted, “let me call a friend who lives in town before we go to the guest house. She lives in a compound where we could possibly stay.”

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Jody answered on the first ring.

“Jody, this is Missy.”

“I'm so glad you called! I was hoping you would take me up on my offer.”

“Jody, there are four of us, and we don't know how long we will be here. It could be a long time. We just don't want to be a burden.”

“You will not be a burden,” Jody said. “We would love to have you. We're on an eight-acre compound. There are many kids around for the girls to play with, and we have several armed guards protecting us 24 hours a day, every day. So when can you be here?”

“Well,” I asked, “how long does it take to get to you from near the airport?”

“About half an hour. We're at The Academy, if your driver knows where that is.”

I turned to Pochi, “Do you know where The Academy is?”

A big smile came over Pochi's face as she replied, “Of course I do, my nephew goes there! Tell her we'll bring you right now, if that works.”

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We loaded our bags into the cars and headed toward the compound. As we pulled onto the highway, Pochi was encouraging us in the Lord, but I could see Mark was getting frustrated by each word she said. Finally, Mark turned to Pochi and unloaded his pain and frustration. “Why did you take her back to Debre Birhan when we asked you several times not to? Missy begged you not to take her back!”

“I know you are very tired and upset, but this will all work out, Mark.” Pochi calmly responded, then took a deep breath. “I made a mistake. I should've never taken her back, but the woman who was acting as her foster care mother said she would be in trouble if she did not let them know Favor was leaving for America. The officials wanted to see Favor before she left.”

“But that was a lie!” Mark shot back. “They didn't need to see her. She was released from that foster care days after she was dragged out of the orphanage. The judge wouldn't have approved us at court and given us irrevocable rights as her parents. They had no right to know anything about our daughter after they signed that release!”

“Mark, I know you are upset,” Pochi was trying to put out a fire that wasn't going away until he had answers. “I am sorry. I should not have taken her back. I didn't think they would keep her, or try

to stop your adoption. They gave me their word.”

“Do you know how much danger you have put my family in?” Mark asked. “How much hurt you have caused us by not just doing what we asked? You have no idea how much pain we are feeling.”

Our car was quiet. Mark turned his head to look away from Pochi. I could see his face in the side mirror and it told a story of a man past his threshold of pain. Pochi quietly answered him, “I never meant to bring Favor harm or put your family in a position that would endanger them. I give my life for these children. I love them with all that I am. We have four children that need to get to their forever families. If you would’ve left, we might not have had any chance of freeing them to go to their families. You see one child. I see four.”

Mark started to respond, but no words would form, so he sat silently in his suffering.

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About 20 minutes into our drive, I noticed a shift in the atmosphere—more than just a physical shift—it was something I was feeling in my spirit. I had that undeniable, uneasy feeling come into my stomach that wasn’t my exhaustion or the conversation that had just taken place—it was something deeper—some kind of spiritual warfare going on around us.

We finally arrived at the tall black gate at the end of a long dirt street. Barbed wire was circled around the top and as promised, we were greeted by some very serious and strict security guards. Jody had to vouch for us before they would let us pass. Once we were inside, I felt safe. We parked near the gym, which was lined with flags from the countries representing the students who attended The Academy. Just seeing the American flag made me proud. The buildings were in good shape, and a peaceful feeling surrounded us from the first moment that we came in. We could see that some of buildings were used for classrooms. Everywhere we looked, we knew this was a place for kids. The playground would have been illegal in the United States. No plastic, unappealing labyrinths to explore here. Everything was metal and looked like an adventure—or a hospital visit waiting to happen. Either way, it was going to be a bright, fun spot for the girls. There were huts we could sit in and birds singing in some nearby trees. They even had a little coffee and snack shop.

Walking up the path was a woman I only knew from pictures, but by the smile on her face, I knew it had to be Jody. I couldn’t wait to reach out and hug her.

“Thank you so much for allowing us to stay here,” I said. Then I introduced her to Mark and Pochi.

“I’m so glad you took me up on my offer. What a crazy time you’re having!” Jody said in an apologetic tone.

“Yeah, a little crazy,” I said. “Hopefully, God will somehow use it. We’re meeting with someone at lunch to see what the next step is.”

“Well, I can’t wait to see what God does. It does sound like a great book or movie though.” Jody smiled at me, “Don’t you write? You never know!” I laughed at the thought of writing my own adventure story. Things like this don’t usually happen to middle class families who decide to adopt. I know hundreds of adoptive families that never had any problems adopting—including us.

“I was going to have you stay in my house, but there is also another option: My husband, Pat, found out we have a small apartment available, which is really unusual, especially right now,” Jody said

in disbelief. “We never have apartments available.”

I knew God was taking care of every detail.

“You are welcome to use it anytime while you’re here. I know there’s a small fee, but I don’t think it’s much,” Jody continued. “You might just want to be together with your new family after all that’s happened. I know you’re transitioning with Favor, and I remember how tough that can be.”

Mark didn’t hesitate, “That would be awesome. Would you mind if we just start in the apartment?”

“It would be no problem at all.” Jody turned and walked toward the office behind us. “Let me grab the keys.”

The small apartment was located over the kindergarten classroom in a building near the entrance of The Academy. We went through the teacher and administration lounge area, up some beautiful mahogany steps, and then up a few more steps to our door. The computer classes were right next to us. Mark was excited that we’d be getting a good internet connection. We walked in and saw a small apartment perfect for a single adult. It had the feel of an older cabin with a slanted ceiling. The first sight from the doorway was the “U” shaped kitchen, stocked with all the utensils and cooking necessities we’d need. I noticed a few extra buckets, but I didn’t question why they were there. In the living room was a couch and a small table. The bathroom, the same size as our half-bath at home, had a sink snuggled up to one side of the toilet with a small shower on the other side. The bedroom, in the back of the apartment, had a bed under a slanted ceiling and a small armoire for our clothes. The ceiling had a sliding door that revealed a skylight, which doubled as our light during the day. The apartment was perfect, and it would serve as our home for however long we would be here.



*Our apartment located above the Kindergarten at The Academy.*

Our girls were excited to check out the rest of the compound, but that would have to wait until after our meeting with the orphanage’s lawyer.

“I’ll bring some mattresses for the girls and some towels for you,” Jody said as she glanced around the apartment looking for things we’d need. “We don’t have air conditioning, so windows stay open all the time. You’ll need to boil your water, and the big containers are for your purified water. I’ll show

you where that is.”

“This will be perfect, Jody. Is there a place where I can buy food?” I asked.

“Actually, we’d love to have you for dinner at our house tonight—if that works for you,” Jody said. “I can take you shopping tomorrow at a little store we go to. It’s the only place that I’ll buy meat from, and there’s a fruit stand that we’ll visit. Oh, and if you hear something above your heads tonight, it’s probably the resident mongoose.”

“Is it a pet?” I asked, trying to remember what I could about the species.

“Oh, no, no, it’s completely wild—so don’t try to pick it up or anything like that,” Jody told the girls.

“What does a mongoose look like?” McKenzie asked.

“Well,” Jody explained, “it looks like a giant cat with a flat face and a really bushy tail. Just go the other way if you see it.”

“It sounds so cute!” McKenzie said.

“Really,” Jody warned, “they’re not cute. They’ll attack if they feel threatened.” At that, the girls’ eyes got as big as saucers.

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Later that day, Pastor and Pochi drove us to the guest house, where they had suggested we stay earlier that day. There, we would be able to print some needed documentation for the court and for our next meeting later that day. When we walked in to the guest house, I recognized the other adoptive mother who was adopting through EAI. She had been on our flight to Addis Ababa, and she was the lady who Josiah gave a ride to when he relegated us to the hotel shuttle. We now realized that God’s protection had steered us to stay with Jody and Pat instead of the guest house because EAI might have found us if we had stayed there. Mark hurried to print all the correspondence between us, Adeferefe, and EAI. We wanted to leave as soon as possible for our safety.

I joined Pastor and Dave, who had been our driver and bodyguard, at the dining room table. They were talking about timing. A man in their church had brought Psalm 57:1–6 to Pastor three weeks ago. God had shown this man that this passage was the promise God had for those of us going through the fire of the enemy right now. In this Psalm, even though David was fleeing from Saul into the caves, David was praising God for His protection and refuge. His soul trusted the Lord, he had confidence that the truth would prevail, and he was seeing God’s great mercy in the midst of his enemies. The trap Saul was trying to set for David ended up being the one that would entrap Saul. As I read this passage, I marveled at how many times I had read that psalm, but now I related to every line of it—in every fiber of my being.

Our next meeting with the orphanage’s lawyer was across town at a luxury hotel. We sat in the huge marble lobby as they served us coffee and soft drinks. Pochi told the lawyer everything that had happened leading up to us being stopped at immigration. Mark showed him the note that was slid under our door at the Hilton. The lawyer began laying out a plan for us.

The girls were getting fidgety, so I took them exploring up and down the eight flights of marble steps to the floors above. I felt like I couldn’t take my eyes off Favor for a moment. It was exhausting on a normal day to follow a high-spirited and active seven-year-old, but today was even worse because

I was running on no sleep. At one point, the girls got far ahead of me, and I could no longer hear them. My heart started beating faster as I charged up the steps and into a room that overlooked a dark ballroom. The girls were nowhere to be seen or heard. Then the elevator opened...it was empty. I went up a few more steps and saw a couple eating outside their room. They had not seen anyone. I rushed back down the steps, praying that nothing bad had happened to them. I looked back over the balcony in the ballroom. Then I heard giggles behind a table, and I knew the joke was on me. I had only feelings of relief that they were safe.

After that trick, the exploring came to an abrupt halt, and the girls were entertained with a soft drink while I shot down a strong cup of coffee. I was hoping it would jolt my body awake, but I must've been too exhausted for the coffee to make a difference. As we waited, I listened to the lawyer's different strategies. The first was to go directly to the president of courts, but after he made a call and had an appointment set, he felt it was in our best interest to go through the lower courts first to prove our innocence. He kept asking Mark what else had happened between us and Adefere, because this looked like a personal attack on us. Adefere was telling the court lies about us being involved with illegal activity. He was even suggesting that we were human traffickers. Why would he do that unless he wanted to get us back for something we'd done to him? Mark and I sat there at a loss, knowing we had not done anything wrong, nor had we done anything personally against Adefere.

"Can you represent us in court?" Mark asked the lawyer.

"I can't," he said. "I represent the orphanage. It would be a conflict of interest."

"Then let me ask you," Mark asked, "who would you not want to go head-to-head with in court? I want that guy!"

The lawyer thought for a moment then said, "I think I might know someone. He is smart and is a very good man. I will get back with you on this. I believe the president of the courts will be willing to help you, but first let's see if the judge will clear whatever charges are against you. In our culture, I think this is the right way to do it. The judge is the one who can get Favor's passport and visa back into your hands."

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Mark and I felt a little better after speaking to the lawyer. We trusted him, and he seemed to know how to work the system correctly. He also had the connections we needed in the event that our case went terribly wrong. Both Mark and I believed the lawyer, and felt like we wouldn't be in Ethiopia that much longer.

Driving back to The Academy from our meeting with the lawyer, I noticed that the area we were in was predominantly Islamic. In every direction, I saw signs of Islam—from the mosques, which seemed to be around every corner, to the women, who were covered in their burqas and khi-mar headscarves. As I watched the people around me, I couldn't help but notice that not one person was smiling and no laughter filled the air.

"I never knew how large the Muslim population was in Ethiopia," I said.

"It has grown in the past 10 years, but this area has the largest population in Ethiopia," Pochi answered.

"This area?" I asked. "The place where we are staying?"

“Yes,” she said.

I didn't have a problem with Muslims, but I did know that some Muslims, who are radical, have a problem with Christians. I also knew that in the last few months, American Embassies in nations surrounding us were being taken over by radicals who burned American flags and put up black Islamic flags in their place. Then there was the horrific attack in Benghazi that left four Americans dead, including the ambassador. My exhausted mind went negative, my heart started beating faster, and I found myself fearing the worst. I questioned God for placing us in the middle of an Islamic area. I felt like I was already living a nightmare, and now I was about to go head-to-head with another one.

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When we got back to our apartment, we found our counter and refrigerator filled with yummy comfort items, snacks, and bread. I knew these items had to be from Jody. The girls taste tested everything, like they hadn't eaten in a week. I started unpacking and tried to make our little apartment feel like a home while we were there. I took the wooden cross that we had bought for our home and hung it where we could see it...a reminder of where our salvation came from.

Mark quickly checked our emails. One was from the U.S. Embassy in Ethiopia. He became suspicious when one message stated, “Adefereze was working in our best interest, and we needed to work together with him and keep the lines of communication open.” Mark couldn't believe what he was reading. He knew someone in the Embassy was working on behalf of Adefereze. Most likely that person was completely unaware of our side of the story. Our trust level dropped knowing that we had been falsely accused by the man who they were now asking us to work with. Another resource that we had hoped would stand with us had just fallen through.

The next email Mark opened was from U.S. Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, wanting to see how he could assist us. The email after that was from Tennessee Congresswoman Marsha Blackburn, seeking more information to help us with our dilemma in Ethiopia. I knew that Marsha was a strong advocate for orphans and adoption. It seemed that our friends back in Tennessee had been busy calling our senators and state representatives—giving us a possible lifeline.

Favor kept asking when we were leaving for America. I could only say, “Soon.” Her question broke my heart, and I knew she was wondering why we were still in Ethiopia. I checked Facebook and cried as I read the prayers that filled my wall. There were words of encouragement that helped me see things from a different view—a heavenly perspective. These words and prayers brought such peace and life into my battle-weary soul.

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We joined Jody's family for dinner that night. They were warm and encouraging. We knew that they were very conscious of our emotional state. As Jody prepared the meal, I tried to help as we got to know each other. Her heart for Ethiopia amazed me, and her ability to take things in stride was delightful. She told me all about the things that she had learned since moving to Addis Ababa a few months ago, including the trouble her four girls had adjusting, and the things she missed most about America. Skittles, pretzels, and a bag of chips were like gold to them. On the bright side, it seemed

like everyone who moved to Ethiopia from America dropped 10–20 pounds in the first few months they were there. I'm sure that had something to do with the lack of processed foods.

Jody's husband, Pat, confirmed that we were in the heart of an Islamic area, and also near Mercato, a place that people in the States had warned us about.

Walking back to our apartment after dinner, we met a giant tortoise coming down the hill. McKenzie couldn't believe her eyes.

"That is the biggest turtle I have ever seen!" She blurted out as she ran toward it. "Can I ride it?"



*McKenzie and Favor meeting one of the turtles on The Academy's grounds.*

"That's probably not a good idea," Mark warned as McKenzie stopped in mid-stride with one foot held in the air. We were so thankful she was with us. Favor loved having a big sister, and McKenzie's cheerful disposition was a light in a very dark place. As we all continued to walk toward our apartment, I looked up and noticed how beautiful the night sky was. Mark reached out for my hand, and without a thought, I grabbed it. As mad as I was at him, it felt good to have him by my side.

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That night, we couldn't wait to crawl into bed. We were completely spent. The girls were asleep the moment their heads hit the pillows, while Mark stared at the ceiling, 36 inches from his face. I quickly drifted off to sleep, but I was awakened a few minutes later by the Islamic call to prayer blaring through the loudspeaker next to the compound.

The streets were alive and noisy, and I knew there was no way I was going to fall back asleep. The

four mosques surrounding us seemed to take turns seeing who could be the loudest. Although I had heard the call to prayer many times on our overseas trips, something was different about it here. I couldn't understand much of what they were saying, but I knew a spirit of war was behind it. The crowds outside became louder and more aggressive in their chants. Mark and I became more and more painfully aware that we were in the heart of Islamic territory. I tried to pray, but the people were so loud I couldn't think. I checked the girls and they were still sleeping. I thanked God that they were both heavy sleepers.

We heard what sounded like a riot all around us. I made a mental note to find a bugle and blow it as loud as I could in every direction first thing in the morning. Then I decided that the right thing to do was pray for their salvation and that they would come to know Jesus's love. After an hour, all grace left and I found myself praying for a sudden onset of laryngitis and narcolepsy to come upon them all. I thought about blasting some loud music out of our window, but I realized that I would be as annoyed as they were. I tried desperately not to think about Benghazi and what the radicals did to the Americans there. My spirit was so stirred, my body was so tired, and my heart was pounding within my chest.

I reached over and found my iPhone in the dark. Even at 2 a.m., it sounded like the crowds in the streets were just getting warmed up. I could feel my anxiety level rising. I searched for a worship song that would set my mind and spirit on the things of God and drive away the fear that was trying to take over and torment me. I found some music by Alberto and Kimberly Rivera. Within a few minutes, I could feel my spirit settling and tension leaving my body. I kept worshiping and thanking God that He was with us and taking care of us.

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I'm not sure if what happened next was a vision in my spirit or an actual out-of-body experience, but as I lay there, I found myself being "caught up." I could hear everything around me as my body kept rising toward the heavens, looking down from where I was, high above the city. I could see the perimeter of the compound where we were staying, including a creek which ran on the back side of the area. I could see the homes, mosques, and people in the streets all around us. Then I looked at the top of the brick walls, and I could see large 9- to 12-foot angels facing out, standing guard around the entire compound. They were beautiful and mindful of their surroundings. Each had long swords to their left side, and they stood in silence. Suddenly, I felt my body being pulled toward the front gate. As I turned, I saw the most amazing and majestic being rising up in the midst of these angels. I watched in awe as this mighty host angel stood up and took a commanding stand before me. He was the most magnificent being I had ever seen, towering into the sky. His knees came to the top of the three-story gym to his left. He had a radiance illuminating from within him, his forearms were covered with gleaming gold armor vambraces, and he carried a massive sword in his right hand. His breastplate and body armor were like iridescent gold, which seemed to shine with a light of its own. The colors looked alive. His lower legs were protected with golden greaves. I watched as he looked toward the darkness that was surrounding us, and I saw the enemies instantly take flight in every direction when they saw him. All of them were completely terrified at his presence. They looked like ants next to him. The glory that he carried took my breath away.

I knew God had sent him for us, and I knew God wanted me to see His immeasurable power in this moment. As I watched in awe, I was aware that the mighty God I served, Who created me, was this mighty angel's Creator. Jehovah God was so much bigger and greater than I had made Him. In that instance, all fear left me, and in its place, came love. I was filled with wonder and reverence that the God of the universe was mindful of our need, and I knew we were there for a Godly purpose.

As suddenly as I was "caught up," I returned to my bed. Peace and love had replaced the fear and anxiety. I looked over at Mark to tell him what God had just shown me, but he was asleep, and I knew he needed rest. Within a few moments, I had drifted off into a restful sleep, safe under the protective watch of an army of angels.