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Rewards of Rural Life

# Mountaintop Cathedral

by DEBORA M. COTY  
*Seffner, Florida*

**J**N JANUARY 2001, my family of four went to the Canadian Rockies to "get away from it all." We are native Floridians, so the icy roads, freezing temperatures, and enormous elk walking around freely were certainly novel to us. For me, it was a good opportunity to take my mind off the fact that this had been my due date...a painful reminder of a blessing that would never be.

After five heart-wrenching miscarriages during our first 12 years of marriage, my husband, Chuck, and I were blessed with two children, a son, Matthew, and a daughter, Cricket. A decade later, to my shock and amazement, I found myself pregnant at the age of 42. It was in turn terrifying, absurd, and wonderful. We laughed. We cried. We worried. Then, at the end of the first trimester, we lost the baby.

It was hard to come to grips with the rise and fall of hope yet again, and I felt deserted by God. The old doubts came crashing back like a tidal wave, threatening to drown me in their wake. I managed to make it through the

next few months on autopilot, but I needed something to look forward to... something different, a balm for the raw pain.

That's how we ended up in Alberta. Chuck spent the days jogging and hiking while the children and I skied. Breathtaking scenery stirred faint feelings of hope within me. God seemed to be just over the next rise, if I could only hang on long enough to get there.

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We spent one morning skiing the back bowl. The warm sun melted spots of snow, which would then refreeze, creating a slippery veneer of ice. The steepness of the terrain, combined with the ice patches, made it a hard, slow trek.

As we began our final downhill run in the late afternoon, I noticed that the slopes were nearly deserted. Matthew zoomed by me on his snowboard, and Cricket made wide "snowplow" zigzags as we descended a particularly sharp grade.

My right ski suddenly skidded on a patch of ice, sending me into a widening straddle position. I pulled hard to bring my legs back together and felt a definitive "pop" in my left knee. I pitched forward and, as if in slow motion, felt myself spinning through space. White snow, red skis, and black ski pants fragmented into a kaleidoscope in my whirling vision.

I finally came to rest, upside down, beside a large stand of trees. I managed to turn myself upright and attempted to stand. I felt the bones in my knee separate, and I had to use my hands to push my upper and lower leg back into vertical alignment. I knew enough anatomy to realize that ruptured knee ligaments meant serious trouble.

I sat back down in the icy snow and took stock of my situation. I could see Cricket at the base of the slope, the size of a toy soldier from this distance. She was looking back up to make sure I was all right after my rather spectacular fall. Without forethought, I foolishly waved my arm in a "come back" signal. From her perspective, it looked like a "go ahead" motion, which she proceeded to do, assuming I would catch up later.

I helplessly watched her disappear over the knoll, realizing I was alone, off the beaten path, and no one was even aware I was hurt.

A bitter wind began to blow as the deep shadows inched their way across the face of the mountain. As the minutes slowly passed, my behind started to feel like a frozen rump roast, and I became acutely aware of my proximity to the edge of the woods.

I suddenly thought back to our lunch at the snack bar that day—in particular, a sign posted above our table that read "Cougar Alert!" Our server explained that during the winter months, the elk become hungry and wander into populated areas where they ransack pri-

vate gardens and public parks. The mountain cougars, which consider the elk population fair game, follow them and occasionally mistake people for prey. There had been several recent cougar attacks, and last week a woman had been killed while cross-country skiing through the woods.

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I pictured my rescuers finding only the shredded remains of my parka on the mountain. An uncontrollable shivering began deep within me and gradually spread over my entire body. I seized my ski pole and pointed it shakily toward the ominous forest like a medieval lance.

At long last, I heard the crunching of snow above me and looked up just in time to see two skiers swish by the slope I had just evacuated. I called out, but they didn't hear me. My heart sank as the sound of their lighthearted banter grew distant.

My eyes filled with tears and my arms, weary from brandishing my pathetic makeshift weapon, fell to my sides. *So this is how it feels to be completely alone*, I thought.

My knee had begun to throb and swell, so I packed snow around it and realized I could no longer feel my fingers or toes. My face felt

hard externally, like a plastic mask you could tap on, while feeling nothing internally.

I sat there in the frozen stillness, feeling dejected and hopeless. But then my eyes drifted toward the mountaintops across the deep valley in front of me and beheld an incredible sight. The sun was setting behind the highest peaks, casting red streaks across the sky, like the fingers of a vast hand reaching out to me. A Bible verse suddenly sprang to mind: "\ lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:1-2, NRSV).

The beauty of the scene consumed me, and I was vaguely aware of a tiny smile on my numb lips and a quiet peace filling my heart. "Maybe there is no such thing as being completely alone," I said out loud, startled to hear my own voice in the quiet of that place. Somehow, my frozen prison had become a mountaintop cathedral, where I was filled with a new awareness of the presence of God.

The ski-patrol workers who eventually found me wondered why I asked them to snap a picture before bundling me onto the rescue sled. 'Are you sure this is a memory you want to keep?' one asked as he eyed the frigid scene, noting my blue lips and swollen knee.

'Absolutely,' I replied with assurance. "This has been my best vacation yet."