

MIRACLE LIFE

Yvette Stemberidge

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This book is dedicated to:

My husband Ross.

*Thank you for your love, care and partnership,
and for taking this life adventure with me.*

*To my loving and wonderful children and spouses
Tammy and Darren, Craig and Brittany, Nick and Michaela-
my constant support and encouragement.*

I love you all.

Special Thanks

Thank you to God for always being by my side. For picking me up,
dusting me off, and keeping His promises.

To all those I have met along my journey — you have each given a piece of
yourselves and left a lasting impression on me. This has formed who I am
today. Thank you.

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Introduction

2012 — As I lay on my bed staring out the window at the glistening turquoise sea, with seagulls hovering above each wave in hope of an early morning snack of sardines, my mind wandered and I asked myself: why has God not healed me this time? He has in the past. I knew what He was capable of. I had the evidence of it written across the whole arc of my life. And yet here I was, totally bedridden, watching the world carry on through a pane of glass I could not reach. I had returned to South Africa after being diagnosed in the UK with catastrophic Antiphospholipid Syndrome.

I had been managing a private hospital in Durban, South Africa, and had been transferred as Executive Director to their biggest hospital in the UK. It was a position I had worked toward for years, and I had thrown myself into it with the energy and determination that had carried me through every challenge before it. I had been working in the UK for a year. It was 2011, and I was attending a conference for all the Executive Directors. The day had been unremarkable. Meetings, discussions, the usual business of running a large institution. That night, however, everything changed.

I developed the most excruciating pain in my lung area. I was writhing on the floor of my hotel room. Perspiration poured off my forehead. I gasped for air, each breath feeling as though it were being drawn through a passage that was rapidly closing. Then the vomiting of fresh blood started. The carpet beneath me turned dark. To this day I do not know how I survived that night. I was in agony — so much so that I could not even think of being frightened, as I was so focused on breathing and managing the pain. Fear requires a certain amount of spare capacity, and I had none. Every ounce of my being was directed toward the simple mechanics of staying alive until morning.

The next morning I contacted my personal assistant and told her I was on the way to the hospital and to please ask my general practitioner, based at the hospital, to be ready for me. I dragged myself to the car and slumped into the seat.

How was I going to drive? The steering wheel seemed impossibly far away, and the act of turning a key felt like it required strength I did not possess. I said a prayer and started the car. Thankfully it was an automatic. I was not very far from my hospital. I arrived, and the Operations Manager was waiting in the car park for me. I managed to heave myself out of the low seat of my cabriolet, took a few steps, and collapsed in her arms.

I was taken straight to the imaging department, where the team ushered me into the room for a CT scan. My doctor was waiting for me. The CT scan revealed multiple bilateral pulmonary emboli — blood clots in both lungs. I was wheeled to the small intensive care unit. Everyone shot into action. It was the weekend. Usually the hospital did not house anyone over the weekend in intensive care due to the unavailability of trained staff. An order was received from the national management to transfer me to an NHS hospital intensive care unit.

The message that came through was: “We can’t afford to have our own ED die in her own hospital.” There was a grim practicality to those words that I might have found darkly amusing under different circumstances. By evening I found myself in a very big NHS hospital general ward, as when we arrived the intensive care unit did not have the promised bed available. It did not take the staff very long to realise this was no ordinary general ward admission, and I was moved to a side ward directly opposite the nurses’ station. After having nursed for many years when I was younger, as an intensive care nurse, I knew — as all medical staff know — that once you are put into the side ward next to the nurses’ station, your prospects of survival look rather bleak. That room is where they put you

when they want to keep a close eye on your departure from this world.

Night came and a new set of staff came on duty. It was evident they were very short-staffed. The night registered nurse heading the shift came into my room. She looked frantic. I could tell that her evening was already off to a bad start and it was still early. She had too many patients, too few hands, and a long night stretching ahead of her. She said goodnight and gently closed my door. That would be the last face I would see until morning. They were evidently too busy, too short-staffed, and chose to give their attention to patients who had a fighting chance. Obviously, according to their assessment, that was not me. I was already on my way out.

It was one of the longest nights of my life. The hospital sounds drifted through the closed door — the squeak of shoes on linoleum, the distant beep of monitors, the low murmur of voices that never quite resolved into words. Not knowing how long I had, I prayed. I felt a presence in my dark room. I could not see anyone, but I could definitely feel someone was there. It was not a figure or a shape; it was simply a knowing, as certain as the bed beneath me. A warm feeling of peace filled the ward and my heart. I drifted in and out of sleep, acutely aware that

the presence was still by my side. I must have dozed off and was awakened by small shafts of warm sunlight starting to filter through my hospital window, gently caressing my cheek. Morning. I was still here.

The ward door opened and a lovely, smiling lady came in to change my water carafe — and to her surprise, I did not have one. Nobody had thought to provide one. She busied herself dusting and then, as she was leaving, I heard a voice outside the door. “Has the South African woman died yet? I need her bed for another patient.” The flustered registered nurse muttered something, and then I heard the lady who had just been in my ward say in broken English, “No, no — not dead. She not dead.” The flustered nurse flew into the room, took one look at me, sighed, and did an immediate turnabout and promptly marched straight out again. The shift changed and fresh faces appeared.

It was not long before a very pretty, young doctor walked into my room. She was from North Africa. I immediately felt a kinship with her — fellow Africans, far from home. She smiled and came around to the side of my bed. “How are you feeling?” I said I had felt better in the past and forced a weary smile. She

took my hand and said, “You do know that things are not looking promising right now, and we need to call your family.”

I asked her what the time was and she said ten o’clock.

Immediately and without hesitation I said, “No, you can’t call them — they are in church.”

She gently stressed, “I don’t think you understand. You are running out of time.”

“No,” I responded without hesitation. “I do not want you to call them, please. I need them there — they are praying for me.” Her face changed. Her brow furrowed and she looked perplexed. She moved and sat on the side of my bed, still holding my hand. Her eyes were pleading, and I held my stance. Very determined. The logic of what I was saying made no sense to her, and I understood that. But there was a logic beyond medicine at work, and I trusted it more than I trusted the monitors and the charts.

She suddenly became very tearful. “Please,” she whispered. “There isn’t anything more I can do for you. I don’t know how much longer you can hang on.”

“They will come after church,” I said. Unbeknown to me — and I would only find out once my husband arrived later — it was at that same moment that the whole church was praying for me. Ross had asked everyone to.

When he arrived later I was sitting up in bed, smiling. He stepped into the ward rather gingerly, as they had caught him in the corridor and given him the news. Unsure of what he would find, he most certainly was not expecting me to be sitting up with a huge smile on my face. The relief that swept over his face was visible. His whole body seemed to release a tension it had been holding since the corridor. His face broke out into the biggest smile. He went back to the door: “It’s okay, Tammy — Mum is waiting for us. She is fine.”

The following day a rather grumpy doctor arrived on her academic rounds with her students. She was obviously not a morning person, and definitely not a Monday morning person. She burst forth giving the students a rundown of my history, not once looking at me, as though I were a case study rather than a human being lying in the bed in front of her. She then pronounced that I would die of cancer. I was shocked. Where did she get that from?

As the students were leaving the room I called to her and asked her why she had said that. She was visibly irritated — how dare I question her. Her response was, “Well, if you don’t die now, you will eventually die of cancer. People like you always do.”

I looked straight at her. It took a great deal to restrain myself from saying exactly what came to mind at that moment. I said, “There is no conclusive evidence that I have cancer. I am still due to have the MRI scan.”

“Well, you are dying anyway.”

I shot straight back at her. I was not afraid of her. Doctors of various temperaments had been reporting to me for years. “Firstly, doctor, this is not the way you have been trained to speak to a patient. Secondly, only God decides when someone will die — and not you. God has decided I am not going to die, because if I was, it would have happened last night. Thirdly, I am not afraid of death. Something you do not seem very comfortable with yourself.”

She gave me a piercing look and stormed out of the ward. I lay back against the pillows and let out a breath of exasperation. This would be the start of my journey, and eventually, months

later, I would receive the diagnosis of Catastrophic Antiphospholipid Syndrome.

God walked every step of the way with me, opening doors and leading me to the correct medical team. Eventually, every doctor I saw gave me the same advice: go home — back to South Africa. According to the medical team, it was time for me to say my goodbyes to family and friends.

Here I was at the end of 2012, lying in my sickbed in South Africa. All these questions floating in my head. The turquoise sea outside my window offered no answers, only its steady, indifferent beauty. I allowed my memories to transport me back to when I was seven years old.

Chapter One

Life Can Change in a Heartbeat

John 13:34: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

I was born and grew up in South Africa during the apartheid era. It was a strange time. The white English and Afrikaners despised each other, and both hated the black people, except for a group known as the white liberals, who were comprised of white South Africans. The divisions were not subtle. They were woven into every layer of daily life — into the schools, the buses, the park benches, the hospitals, the queues at the post office. As a child you did not understand the politics of it, but you understood the atmosphere. You understood the silence that fell when certain people walked into certain rooms, and you learned early which silences meant danger.

We were living in the mountains on a mine. I was seven years old at the time of this memory. I would imagine that I was like the Swiss character Heidi who lived in the mountains. Although not Swiss mountains, they too were beautiful, with green peaks. Goats and sheep would wander across the roads as they roamed

freely. The mining village was located in a beautiful green valley at the foot of one of the many mountains around us. The village was self-contained. It had homes, a trading store, a hospital, a police station and a recreational club where the children would gather on weekends to watch movies. It offered every sport one could think of and included a huge swimming pool which was in use permanently in summer as we all frolicked and laughed in the summer sun. There was a pub where the adults would gather, and each evening as the golden African sun rolled down behind the mountain peak, leaving a blaze of red, orange and pink in the sky, this is when we would hear the harmonious singing of the African miners who lived a little further down in the valley in a compound. They would sing to the beating of African drums, a rhythm that would resound deep in my heart and eventually lull me to sleep. The only facilities missing were a school and a church. I would travel to school on a big yellow bus to a neighbouring mine that did have a school in its village. The mining village was a small, enclosed world with its own rhythms — the shift whistle in the morning, the rumble of the trucks on the gravel roads, the particular quiet that settled over the houses in the afternoon heat. The bus was driven by a kind and caring Indian driver who carefully and skillfully navigated the winding mountain road with precision. The school was co-

ed and dual medium: English and Afrikaans. I had made friends with quite a few Afrikaans children, and we would play joyfully together in the big park in front of our house in the afternoons and on weekends. The strife of the adults did not affect us — or so it seemed. In the park, under the wide sky, we were simply children. The fact that the country around us was tearing itself apart along lines of colour and language had not yet reached us. Or so I believed.

One day my mum could not fetch me from the bus stop after school. She sent Miriam, our domestic worker, instead. Miriam had been with our family for as long as I could remember. She was a quiet, steady presence in our home, the kind of person who moved through her work with a grace that made it look effortless. As I disembarked from the bus and walked toward her, she gave me the warmest smile and a big hug. I was aware of someone behind me, and as I turned around, I saw my friends — the Afrikaans girls. I smiled at them, and they stared at me. The friendliness that had been there that morning had vanished, replaced by something cold and deliberate.

The one who had the most beautiful golden curls on her head and a real doll-like face stepped forward. Her dad was the local police constable. She was quite a ringleader — very bossy,

the kind of child who set the tone for the group and expected the others to follow. She slowly started to chant the words “kafir boetie.” Soon the other girls imitated her and they too started chanting “kafir boetie” — a derogatory Afrikaans phrase used for liberal individuals who accepted black people in South Africa. The chanting continued behind us, rhythmic and ugly, and Miriam hastily grabbed hold of my hand. Her grip was tight, almost painful, and I could feel a tremor running through her fingers. Out of the blue, a rock was hurled at her, hitting her on the head. Blood started oozing from under her white doek — a scarf she wore on her head. She started yelling and grabbed my hand tighter, and we started to run. There was a peal of laughter behind us, and then rocks and stones started hailing down on us. I could hear them striking the ground around our feet, bouncing off the road. By the time we got home, Miriam was sobbing uncontrollably. Her white doek was now a pale shade of blush pink. My mum had just returned home and watched on, horrified, as we ran up the driveway — Miriam howling, me in tow.

I explained the ordeal we had just encountered. My mum lifted Miriam’s doek to inspect, and it was evident that she needed medical attention immediately. The gash on her head needed stitches. My mum got the big first aid box out of the

cupboard and had Miriam sit down at the kitchen table whilst she wrapped a big bandage around her head and offered her a cup of sweet tea. Miriam sat there, her hands trembling around the cup, and I stood in the doorway watching, not fully understanding the weight of what had happened but understanding that the world I had known that morning was not the same world I had come home to. Mum then proceeded to phone my granny, who lived in the same mining village.

My grandpa — I called him Papa — and my granny arrived at six o'clock that evening, once my dad had returned from work. I was asked to relay the story of the events that had transpired that afternoon. I stood in the lounge and told it from beginning to end, aware of the way the adults' faces changed as I spoke. I was then ushered out of the room and told to play with my sister as the adults debated the events of the day.

My mother was crying. My dad was getting cross — that was his usual response when upset or stressed — telling her to pull herself together. Papa was silently listening and pondering the situation with a cup of tea in his hand, and Granny, very determined, had made up her mind. No grandchildren of hers would be subjected to such ill treatment. We would be sent to Vryheid, the town closest to us, to a multiracial, co-ed Roman

Catholic boarding school. The decision was made that evening, and the speed of it left no room for argument. Within a week, we met the nuns and were enrolled in the Convent Primary School for the new school year starting in a few months' time. My sister was five years old, and I was nearing my eighth birthday.

Chapter Two

A Little Miracle

Luke 18:16: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

A few months after starting at the convent school, I woke up one morning with blood all over my pillow. The white cotton was stained a deep rust colour, and at first I could not understand where it had come from. I touched my face, my nose, my ears. I was so surprised and felt a little overwhelmed. The nuns were singing in chapel — I could hear the faint rise and fall of their voices through the walls — and Tembi, the lady who helped care for us, had not yet come up to the dorms. I crept out of my room and washed my pillowcase in the bathroom sink, scrubbing at the fabric until the water ran clear, and hid it behind my towel to dry.

This would become a morning ritual. I would wake up at five in the morning, when the nuns started singing, and sneak to the bathroom. The risks were high. If caught, the punishment was to be locked up in the “dark room” — a room used to store luggage, with no windows or ventilation, a cement floor, and

shelves from floor to ceiling. A blanket and small stretcher were in the room. Anyone contravening any rule would be locked up there for the night. I wanted to avoid this punishment as much as I possibly could. The dark room was two doors down from my dorm, and I could hear the sobs emanating from it every night. The sound carried through the walls, thin and hopeless, and it conjured a great feeling of fear within me.

I noticed my gums had started bleeding, and I would wake up with blood all over my front teeth. When I brushed them, blood would ooze out of my gums, discolouring my white toothpaste and giving it a pink hue. I learned to brush gently, to rinse quickly, and to check my reflection before leaving the bathroom.

Bruises started to appear on my body. They arrived without explanation — I had not fallen, had not bumped into anything. They simply appeared, purple and tender, on my arms, my legs, my torso. It was almost July — winter holidays. I was due to go home. I counted the bruises one evening, lifting my pyjama sleeves in the dim dormitory light: twenty-three. How on earth was I going to explain all of this to my mum?

One morning whilst I was washing my pillowcase, Tembi suddenly appeared. It was much earlier than her usual time.

Tembi — a sweet and direct twenty-two-year-old young Zulu woman — asked me what I was doing. I could not conjure a convincing excuse quickly enough, so I explained. She looked at the stained fabric in my hands, then at my face, and after a bit of negotiation she agreed not to tell anyone. Tembi would help me every morning to get rid of the evidence. She became my protective angel. When she went on her days off, Regina, a Zulu woman in her early thirties, would stand in. I managed to convince Regina to help me too. In return, I would teach her German in the suitcase room every Wednesday afternoon after homework. I had convinced her that it was not good for her not to know what the nuns were speaking about, just in case they were gossiping about her. I became a German tutor — my German was far from proficient, as I was still learning it myself — and she would make sure I had a clean, dry pillowcase on my bed every day. It was a fair arrangement, struck between a sick child and a kind woman, and it held.

It was eventually time to go on holiday. Thankfully, it was winter, and I wore my long-sleeved tops and jeans to hide my bruises. At home, I would sneak into the bathroom early in the morning to wash my pillowcase once my dad had left for work at five. One morning my mum caught me. She stood in the doorway and looked at the bloodied fabric in the sink, and then

at me. Oh my word, the sky was falling! Out came the Reader's Digest medical encyclopedia — the old version of Google. Within a few hours, both grannies knew I had a problem. My mother had already diagnosed me, or at least arrived at a suspicion grim enough to act upon, and I was duly shipped off to our general practitioner in Vryheid, the closest town.

He gave the disturbing news to my parents that I had leukaemia. I was not told I had leukaemia; I just knew that I was sick. Monitoring started with regular blood tests. Once I was back at school, I would take myself off to the doctor once a week. The nuns gave me permission to leave the property directly after school at two o'clock. I would walk the route alone, a small girl with a school bag over her shoulder and a purpose she could not fully explain to anyone.

On one of my walks to the doctor, I noticed a sign on a beautiful old red-brick building about two blocks from the school. The inscription on the building read: "The Child Welfare Society" — protecting children. This puzzled me, and I remember thinking: I wonder what that means. I did not yet have the vocabulary or the understanding to grasp the full weight of those words.

One day, my best friend at school confided in me that her stepfather was abusing her. She told me how he would abuse her every weekend when she went home. She hated nights, she said, as this is when he would creep into her bedroom. As she was explaining in great detail what he would do to her, I felt a wave of nausea, followed by total disgust and then panic and anguish. What was she talking about? My head was spinning. I did not understand. As she continued, I felt a slight tremble begin in my body. I remember staring at her in total bewilderment. This beautiful, caring girl sitting next to me was going through so much. Hearing her story made my illness pale into insignificance. My immediate reaction was: what can I do to help her? I was very much a person of action — and I still am to this day.

The story brought on a whole new dynamic within my own life. I began to fear my own dad. What if he made me do this? The fear was irrational, rooted in a child's inability to separate one man from another once the concept of danger had been introduced. No one explained the difference to me. No adult sat me down and drew a line between what my friend had suffered and what was normal. The silence around the subject allowed my confusion to harden into something that would take years to undo.

One day, whilst walking past the red-brick building on my way back from the doctor after having my regular blood tests done, I decided to pop in. A very kind Afrikaans lady was behind the desk. She had an unhurried, gentle manner that put me at ease. I explained my friend's dilemma, and the lady urged me to bring my friend in to see her. I went off with a skip in my step. Maybe I could help my friend.

I could not wait to tell her, and we came up with a plan on how we would get permission for her to leave the school grounds. My doctor visits had increased to twice a week, and I told the nun on duty that I was feeling a bit weak and asked if I could take my friend with me in case I felt worse. She agreed, so off the two of us set. We arrived at the red building, and I bounced in happily and introduced my friend to the kind Afrikaans lady. I explained that I was going to the doctor and I would return for my friend on my way back. I urged my friend to share everything she had told me. I had my blood tests done, and on my way back I collected my friend. The friendly lady squeezed my arm as we left, and my friend had a look of relief on her face that I had not seen before.

On our way back to the boarding, she told me that the lady had said that what her stepfather was doing to her was not

normal, and no little girl should go through what she was going through. She had given the lady consent to phone her granny. A week later, my friend was moved to her granny's house for weekends and holidays. She and her little brother were safe at last.

She went to live with her biological father's parents — the most caring and amazing people. Slowly, she could start to heal from the trauma she had experienced. This event left a lasting impression on me and would affect my relationship with my own father forever, as no one explained it to me. I would be reluctant to hug or kiss him, and I would watch him like a hawk with my friends. My father loved giving hugs, and I resisted. So sad, as he was a gentle and kind soul who had done nothing to warrant my suspicion. The distance I created between us was born from a misunderstanding that nobody thought to address, and by the time I was old enough to understand it on my own, the habit had already taken root.

My illness continued to progress, and the doctors gave me three months to live. Blood would ooze from my ears too. My platelets plummeted, and our doctor referred me to a paediatrician. He was based in a big city, Pietermaritzburg, which was a four-hour drive away.

My health was deteriorating, and although no one spoke to me about it, I knew. Children are more perceptive than adults give them credit for. I could read the worry in my mother's face, the way conversations stopped when I entered a room, the too-bright cheerfulness in voices that were trying to hide something. My platelet count was decreasing significantly and rapidly. I had generalised pain in my body, especially in my legs. I would feel strange and very weak, and it felt like my blood was draining from my body. I would stand with my back against a cold wall just to feel the coldness run down my spine. It gave me the reassurance that if I could still feel the cold, I must still be alive. It was a small test I administered to myself each day, a private ritual of survival that no one else knew about.

I found a small empty shoebox. I had heard my grandparents speaking about a "will" to my parents. I took myself off to our school library and did some research on what it was, and I decided that I needed to write my own. I wrote a very rudimentary list of my belongings and who each item should go to. I put all my precious belongings into the shoebox — there were not many — and stapled names on each and left my "will" in the box. My Bible, bookmarks, a rosary, my bag of marbles... were a few of the items. I knew it would not be much longer. I could feel it. I knew I was dying. I was not afraid. I longed to

meet Jesus, but I felt sad for my mum and dad. I did not want them to feel sad.

I was in the habit of going to the chapel each afternoon after homework. I loved the church — the smell of the polish on the pews, the smell of burning wax mingled with the smell of incense. These were scents that had become sacred to me, bound up with the feeling of safety and closeness to God. It lifted my spirits every time I pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped inside.

One afternoon, the church was locked by the time I had finished homework at school. I wandered across the road back to the boarding, rather disappointed. I decided I would sneak upstairs to my room. We were not allowed upstairs at all — if caught, it would be punishment for me. But I was desperate to spend time with God: to tell Him of my day, to thank Him for all He was doing for me and my little sister, to thank Him for healing my body — I was totally convinced that He was — and to ask Him to continue. I would ask Him to help me be a witness among my friends.

That particular afternoon, I was in my dorm, kneeling in front of my bed on the cold, hard tile floor. I had a crucifix above my bed, and I was speaking to God and looking at the

face of Jesus, who was looking down at me, when a bright light filled my room. It did not come from the window. It did not come from the passage. It was simply there, occupying the space around me with a warmth that had nothing to do with temperature. A sense of perfect peace came over me. I stayed very still. I did not want to disturb whatever was happening, as though any sudden movement might break the connection. When it passed, I finished my prayers and skipped downstairs with a lighter heart and a certainty that God was with me and all would be well.

I had to stay in boarding school that particular weekend and walked to the Anglican church with the other children from the boarding on Sunday morning to attend the service. After the service, I was outside getting ready to go back to school when the priest stopped all of us and asked if I could go back into the church with him. The other children looked at me with curiosity and mild concern. I followed him inside.

The church was dark, as all the lights had been turned off except for the little red light glowing above the tabernacle, signifying that the blessed host was present. We walked up the aisle. The beautiful stained-glass windows reflected a rainbow of colour across the room. The smell of snuffed candles lingered