

# DATE with GOD!

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NNIE, MY EIGHT-YEAR- OLD, PUSHED THE MAKE-SHIFT CROSS of twigs and twine into the fresh dirt covering the tiny grave next to our old shed. We'd done the right thing, rescuing Helen. That's what Annie had named the injured loon we found on the beach the night before. Not that there was any other choice but to try to save the dying bird, not with a passionate kid like my Annie. But I worried. Hadn't she and her five-year-old sister, Lily, already endured too great a loss? Their dad and I had gone through a difficult divorce. After-ward, I decided to move with the girls from New Mexico to North Carolina. We needed a new beginning.

"I forgot something!" Annie said as our prayer concluded. She ran to the house and emerged moments later waving her favorite pink glitter pen in one hand and a letter she'd written in the other. Annie embellished the letter with a few sparkling pen strokes and set it beside the grave. I kneeled to take a closer look. "Dear God, I hope you are doing good:' it read . "What is it like in heaven? Can you write back and tell me? And, God, I love you. Thank you, God, for letting me be in the world. Thank you, God, for making me part of my family. And thank you, God, for letting me be me. Love, Annie."

My girls had gone to church all their lives. I tried to instill a strong faith in them, a faith they could depend on throughout their lives. Yet now I found myself wondering about the strength of my own faith. The pain of my divorce was very much with me. I was still angry, very angry. The stress of moving, unpacking and get-ting the girls settled in a new school had left me feeling like I'd put God on hold. Meanwhile my daughter was writing him letters. Not make-believe letters either.

Annie expected an answer.

**E**VERY TIME WE LEFT THE HOUSE OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Annie and Lily

would dash to Helen's grave to say a prayer. "It goes directly to heaven and into a big prayer book," Annie explained to her sister one day. "And then God calls out Helen's name and she comes over and reads her new prayer." Lily nodded her curly head in earnest agreement.

The next morning we were in a rush to get to school. “C’mon, girls,” I said. “We gotta run.” I helped them into their coats and shut the porch door behind us. “But we need to say a prayer,” Lily protested. “For Helen.” “Short and sweet,” I said.

The girls raced through a prayer. Then I urged them toward the car. “Wait!” Annie said, snatching something off the damp ground. “What’s this?” It was a letter, next to the one she’d written. “Dear Annie, I love you,” she read aloud. “Yes, heaven is a wonderful place. It is made of gold and there are angels everywhere.

Love, your best friend, God.” Annie’s reading slowed with each word. Her eyes wide with awe, her mouth open in amazement. Whoever did this means well, I thought, but I don’t have a good feeling about it.

By the time Annie burst through the door that afternoon, she couldn’t wait to tell me her plan. Dropping her Barbie backpack to the floor, she said, “Know what? I’m going to write God another letter and I’m going to ask him to meet me in the back-yard so we can play!”

Just what I’d been afraid of. I didn’t want to discourage Annie, but I couldn’t just stand by and watch my daughter set herself up for disappointment. She had so very much trust. Divorce had taught me that too much trust can be a dangerous thing.

Before I knew it she was at the kitchen table, jacket still on, scribbling intently. She ended with, “Please try and meet me in the shed in a half hour. Love, Annie.” I watched through the window as she raced out and left the letter by Helen’s grave, with a blank piece of paper and her pink glitter pen, presumably so God could reply. She ran back inside and into her room, only to return wearing the special white dress she put on for big occasions, with the bow in back.

“Tie my bow for me, Mom!” she said. “Please! I’ve got to get ready for God!” She brushed her hair until it shone, put on her favorite sparkly headband and zoomed back out. Next time I glanced out the window, Annie was sitting on the back porch steps, looking solemn. I got up to join her and noticed two kitchen chairs were missing.

“You okay?” I asked.

“He hasn’t shown up yet, Mom.” She adjusted her headband and slumped her little shoulders.

“Sweetie, nobody ever gets to really see God except when they go to heaven, and you’re too young to go:’ Annie didn’t buy it . She brightened when she spotted an older man strolling up the street Perhaps he was God? I had to tell her he was just a neighbor, then asked, “You don’t happen to know where those kitchen A chairs are, do you?”

**A** NNIE LED ME TO THE SHED. I CREAKED OPEN THE DOOR. There they were, my two kitchen chairs. Annie had emptied everything else out—the bicycles, the scooters, the old stroller—and placed the two chairs face-to-face, waiting for God. I held her hand as we walked slowly back to the porch. Later I brought her dinner out.

Annie came inside when the sun had set, changed into her Tweety bird pajamas and brushed her teeth. “I’ve been thinking, Morn,” she confided to me as she got into bed. “I can still write and pray to God anytime, right?” “Anytime,” I assured her, tucking her in with a hug. “That’s the thing about God He is always there. You can always talk to him.” I watched Annie fall asleep, content and peaceful, then checked in on Lily . She was sleeping soundly too. I threw on a sweater and trudged across the yard to drag the chairs back in from the shed.

I flipped on the light switch and went inside. But instead of grabbing the chairs, I sat down. How long had it been since I’d reached out to God with the same pure and passionate faith as my daughter? “Maybe you and I need to talk,” I said to the chair opposite me. I sat there, letting my anger, disappointment and fear pour out , handing it all over to God. **Yes, you are always with me,** I prayed. **Through the difficulty of divorce, through the challenge of starting over Always.** It would take a long time for my heart to heal, I understood that. But I knew what I needed to do. **God,** I asked, **help me to trust again.** Rain fell softly and rhythmically against the shed roof. It sounded like peace.

We never found out who wrote the note to Annie, and we like it that way. A neighbor or maybe a classmate who walked by Helen’s grave on the way to school. But I do know one thing, since I overheard Annie on the phone with her grandmother. “Grandma, don’t tell anyone I said this,” she lowered her voice to a whisper, “but God

doesn't have very good handwriting." I'll bet Grandma smiled. I did. And you know what? I'm pretty sure I felt God smiling on us too.

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