
Chapter One

THE AFTER

WRESTLING WITH FAITH
& QUESTIONS

*“I have found that the significance in our story isn’t just a happily ever after, but rather, for me, it’s a story about what happens **after.**”*

Life is full of ups and downs. As a mother, you learn to deal with sudden surprises: runny noses, screaming fits, tearful moments, and even unexpected vomit. I have a new living room rug because of that last surprise. However, nothing can truly prepare you for the most unpredictable series of events: your child returning from the dead.

The phrase “Happily Ever After” frequently concludes the stories of fairy tales, indicating that what follows is far less thrilling than the tale itself. In our reality, “Happily Ever After” is merely a myth, as the most important events in my story unfolded after the miracle. In this journey of processing, I have found that the significance of this story isn’t just a happily *ever* after, but rather, a story about the transformations that happened *after* my search for answers.

No one tells you what happens after you experience something you can’t scientifically explain. No one tells you how to process something you are not physically and mentally wired to understand.

The discussion about the reality of miracles is not a recent phenomenon; in fact, it has been a central topic for thousands of years with some of the most gifted minds. This book is not my intent to conclude the debate, as countless individuals worldwide and throughout history have remarkable stories like the one you are about to read. Rather, my perspective concerns the journey of faith and healing that followed my experience of a real miracle. As far as I’m concerned, miracles are real and still happen today just like they did 2,000 years ago.

The day I started searching for answers to the miracle my family

experienced marked the two-year anniversary of the event and my son, Vaughn's, big two-year-old birthday. He had just moved to his "big boy" bed, which gave him the opportunity to crawl out of his bed easily without the constraints of the crib railings.

Transitions like these bring their own set of worries to any mother. Will he be safe at night without the confining and safe rails of his crib? Will he understand the rules to stay in his room until morning? Will he be able to safely roll around in his larger bed without standing and jumping up and down on it? Clearly, I've read him the book, *Five Little Monkeys Jumping On The Bed*, one too many times, as it was causing me concern that this was going to become a reality.

The gravity of the significance of that day raised a mix of emotions; some were anxious and slightly upsetting, while others made me want to shout with joy as loudly as I could that my son was alive. But there's much more to the story; the fact that our boy is talking, running, and walking without assistance is the greatest mystery of my life.

Many mornings, I let my mind wander with big questions around what happened while daydreaming for answers, only to realize I put my son's cereal in the fridge and the milk in the pantry, and even worse, I microwaved my cellphone instead of my coffee. No one can give you the right instructions on how to tend to your mind like a gardener, perfectly weeding out the memories of pain and trauma so you can feel the gratitude and joy. Some days, I was left with overwhelming feelings of anxiety trying to process the significance of everything that had happened on my own.

You're probably wondering, if I witnessed a possible miracle, then

how could there be anxiety and pain to follow? Shouldn't there be a limitless wave of gratitude, joy, and peace after receiving such an overwhelming gift like a miracle? While those are part of my experience, the event also supercharged my motherly intuition.

A mother's intuition can be seen as something that defies the natural laws of nature. Most mothers could share stories about how they were able to predict or prevent harm to their child through this magical instinctual hunch.

The day after my boy turned two, my husband, Chris, and I took Vaughn for a walk to our neighborhood park after dinner. Vaughn had a tantrum during dinner because he didn't want to eat the meal I had prepared; granted, I couldn't be too upset, as I knew it was a risk sneaking spinach into a sauce and calling it "dinosaur juice." A change of scenery after a 20-minute series of toddler tantrums was desperately needed for all of us.

We are very fortunate to live just a block from a large community park that features swings, slides, basketball and tennis courts, as well as a spacious football field and track. Vaughn's favorite activity was riding the baby and toddler swing, and he always ran to it first when we would arrive at the park. However, that day, Vaughn surprised us both by wanting to run around the empty field and chase his dad. I followed as a passerby. I pushed the stroller, and watched as they ran together, shouting, and dancing across the empty field. It wasn't long before something else captured Vaughn's two-year-old attention span.

"Wocks, daddy, wocks," Vaughn said as they veered off the field toward the sidewalk where he knew he could find a shiny new prized rock.

“Woa, big wock!” Vaughn shouted as he followed the sidewalk to the edge of the park, where a landscaper had beautifully lined the mulch edges with large mixed stones.

Vaughn’s young mind knew that not even an expert rock collector like himself could dig out and lift those.

“Heaby, too heaby!” Vaughn pointed and exclaimed.

I noticed that Vaughn was crouching to look closer at the large quartz rock. I instinctively panicked, seeing in my mind that he was about to lean forward too far and fall face-first into the rocky mulch. My mind tried to reason, thinking that falling into a bed of mulch wouldn’t be the worst way for a toddler to learn about gravity. However, I also saw there was a half-buried rock in his vicinity with a gleaming, sharp edge. I walked toward Chris to warn him of my intuition. But just before I reached them, Vaughn fell exactly as I saw in my mind, face-first into the mulch. Thankfully, he fell across the large rock, not directly onto it. He cried for me to come save him as his mouth was full of dirt and mulch. I hugged him, cleaned out his mouth, and tended to the left side of his face that was slightly scratched from the woodchips.

“This is exactly what I saw happening in my head; I told you I can predict the future!” I facetiously said to Chris as I picked the bits of wood chips off our son’s clothing and hair.

Mother’s intuition is a unique superpower that can effectively detect small dangers in exactly the right moments like that one. However, when a mother experiences maternal trauma, her intuition can become hypervigilant, creating a constant, heightened state that may

lead to overprotective and heightened responses to what she perceives as danger.¹

When Vaughn was five months old, I experienced a terrifying recurrence of spontaneous bouts of intense anxiety and terrifying thoughts as a result of this over-heightened intuition. I later discovered it was post-traumatic stress from experiencing a disturbing event with my child. After five months, enough time had passed for the shock of the experience to wear off, and the trauma was beginning to take hold. Chris and I were going through the motions as any parents would with a new baby, but I didn't realize the significance of what I was trying to process until I found myself with uncontrollable bouts of stress and fear.

One evening, after bathing Vaughn, I carried him over to the nursery to change him and get him ready for bed. I lathered him up with lotions and the latest chamomile- and lavender-scented baby tonics, then wrapped him in his blue quick-fastening swaddle. When I carried him back to our room to place him in the bassinet, I saw Chris cleaning our primary bathroom. He was vigorously wiping down the shower with standard bathroom cleaner you'd find in most homes. Any normal woman would be thrilled that their husband was cleaning and would want to cheer him on and thank him for his service to our family. But my mind did not assess the situation reasonably. I screamed as if I were in pain and he was a stranger going to kill my baby.

My mind immediately raced back to seeing Vaughn's lifeless body in the hospital. When I smelled the clean bathroom, the smell appeared to me like toxic green smoke escaping the bathroom to choke our sleeping baby boy. I was shaking and stunned with fear.

The questions that invaded my fragile mind at the time were too big for me to process. Would God punish me if we accidentally harmed the boy He saved? If Vaughn were back in the hospital, would he be saved a second time, or does he only get one miracle?

When you experience a traumatic event ending with an unexpected result, it isn't easy to understand how to stop your mind from racing back to the event or to try to make sense of the mystery as if you were solving a crime scene. If a crime scene warrants investigation, why shouldn't a suspected miracle also warrant one? Is it not also weighing the gravity of life and death?

During Vaughn's entire first year of life, I was living in this post-traumatic state, fearful of every snuffle and smell. I developed compulsive rituals I knew would keep my mind secure, like washing his bottles, pacifiers, and toys multiple times before I deemed that they were safe enough for my miracle child. I strived to keep the house as clean and sterile as possible. The cleaning and safety compulsive behavior kept me feeling he was physically safe, but it didn't help me get to the root of the pain: accurately processing *what* happened and *why* God saved my son.

I was constantly looking for signs that Vaughn was not normal, that there were lasting effects from everything he went through. I was hyper-sensitive to the growth charts from the pediatrician and the milestones of development, looking for proof that my son was not normal.

Despite my fears, Vaughn continued to meet and exceed all milestones.