

## *Prologue*

I first met Renee Bosworth in the autumn of 1974. She was twenty-nine; I was twenty-three. Renee was the person I encountered as I walked through the door of Trinity College Bristol to begin my training for ordained ministry. As a resident student, her role was to allocate new students to their rooms. After I had talked with her, I knew I wanted to get to know this intelligent, forceful, pretty woman whose twinkling blue eyes, long brown hair, button nose and ability to hold her own in conversation captivated me from the start. Thus began an adventure that was to last almost twenty-nine years.

Six weeks after we met, I proposed and she accepted. Ten weeks later, we were publicly engaged. Seven months after that, we married: it was a rapid romance. In the quarter of a century that followed, Renee served as a lay parish minister, was subsequently ordained deacon, then priest, became the adoptive mother of three children and grandmother of two grandchildren, travelled to Asia, Australia and the United States while disabled and finally returned to Trinity College as the Principal's wife. It was a life fully lived for God.

So when she died just twenty-three days after being diagnosed with cancer, my world imploded. Renee had suffered from breast cancer four years before but had been clear of it for the last three. During this time, we had spoken frequently about the possibility of its coming back and had even expected it. But we had assumed that it would be the same type of cancer as before: slow-growing, straightforward to diagnose and treatable. It was on this basis that we had planned how to deal with it should it again make an appearance. Ironically, the one eventuality we didn't anticipate was the one that actually occurred: a rapid and aggressive cancer that was determined to take no

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prisoners and that the medical profession would prove unable to treat.

This book is the story of those twenty-three days and the months that followed. In part one, I tell of the period between Renee's diagnosis and death. Inevitably, it is a story of great sadness, but it is also one of faithfulness – the faithfulness of friends, colleagues, family and God.

In part two, I set out my thoughts as they appeared in the journal I kept while in the United States during April and May shortly after Renee's funeral. This was a time of unprecedented agony. I had nothing to do except grieve from the moment I woke in the morning to the moment I went to bed. To be sure, there were distractions; but essentially in these weeks I did more 'grief work' than I would have expected in a year had I been living my normal routine. But, by the grace of God, I was on a pre-planned sabbatical that lasted until the end of August – five months that had originally been scheduled for research but which, in the event, turned out to provide the space that enabled me to face the trauma of bereavement. At the time, it did not *feel* like a gracious gift, but even in the midst of intense pain, I knew it was. Paradoxically, it was when the pain felt at its most soul-destroying that the process of healing began.

My thoughts from this period do not make easy reading: I have been honest in expressing the reality of the feelings I recorded. But from the moment Renee died, I knew I had to keep a journal so that I could write about what had happened and offer reflections upon it. When I came to write up my notes in June and July, I did so with many tears. However, they were tears of healing as well as grief.

Part three records my later reflections on the issues that were raised during this time. They take the form of letters addressed to Alex, a figure who represents a composite of two people who have courageously and unfailingly walked with me on my journey and who have borne my sorrows when they have all but crushed me. To them I owe so much, not least my sanity, and to

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them I record my deepest gratitude. I would not be writing this today had it not been for their unbounded generosity and kindness. C and K (real initials) – you know who you are. You will always have my thanks.

It should be said that these letters raise difficult questions in ways that some readers may find disturbing. If that is the case, I hope they will accept my apologies but, at the same time, will respect my attempt to speak honestly. I have not sought to gloss over the intensity of the emotions of the past fourteen months; but neither have I written out of a desire to appear sensationalist. I have expressed what I have felt in the belief that it is far better to be honest about these things than to pretend to a false piety. If this helps others to be real about their grief as well, the book will have done its work. Nonetheless, the reader will be relieved to know that the intensity of those negative emotions has now passed and has given way to a stable reflectiveness that is the outcome of a movement from extreme grief (and all that entails) to a genuine hopefulness about the future. This is not to deny that periods of darkness will return – all the evidence from grief studies is that they will. But, to use a meteorological metaphor, the worst of the storm has passed. Heavy clouds may return from time to time and dump their load. But these will be short-lived by comparison; and when they appear, I know they will move on.

In the final chapter, I offer some brief reflections to leave the reader with seeds for continuing thought. When Renee went to meet her Lord, I determined that the cancer should not have the last word and that even in death her ministry should continue. This book is testimony to the redeeming work of God in enabling me to fulfil this desire and to honour the woman who was my wife for almost twenty-eight years. It is to her that I dedicate it.

FRANCIS BRIDGER

*Ascension Day*

20 May 2004