

Chapter 18



“Natalie has an ability to creatively communicate, and her talent as an author is clearly seen within the pages of *Pajama School*. Unique life experiences have allowed her to provide an insightful and entertaining read. Her heart is to glorify God and to bless others, and through this book she has done just that.”

Joel Strain

tragedy strikes close to home

It was Sunday afternoon, a little after 3:00. I had just awakened from a nap and was sitting in the living room talking with Mom, Noelle, Naomi, and Joey when the phone rang. Mom answered and after a very brief conversation we learned that it was Andrew Strain, informing us that his parents and two youngest brothers had been in a car accident. He had just received a call from the Chaplain at a hospital in Joplin, Missouri, informing him that his Dad and two brothers had been admitted. His Mom was in the car as well, but her status was unknown.

As soon as Mom got off the phone we called Dad up from his office so she could relay the information to him. We gathered around and began praying fervently for these friends who for years had been like family to us. For as long as I could remember, since moving to Kansas we had spent almost every Thanksgiving and Christmas with the Strains. It was an unlikely match – them with five boys; us with five girls and eventually a boy. But our families became very close and some of my best memories are of our many times together. Now it was with great concern that we pleaded with God for their safety and protection.

As we finished our time of prayer, Nicole called from work. She had heard about the accident and wondered if we had any additional details.

We didn't yet, but Mom was preparing to go to the Strain's house as soon as we got more information about the hospital and the condition of those in the accident. Before we had a chance to get the information, though, Nicole called back, this time as the bearer of the words that would replay themselves over and over in my mind for weeks to come. "Mrs. Strain is dead." Surely she was wrong. Nicole's sober words gave way to silence. This was for real. And I was in shock. I hung up the phone and slowly made my way upstairs where I was obliged to repeat those heart-numbing words to the rest of the family. Almost before I was done Mom was sobbing and crying out, "No! No! No!" Dad wrapped his arms around her and she buried her head in his chest. I was numb. Too numb to cry. But there was work to do.

We quickly determined that all of us would go to the Strain's house to be there and do whatever needed to be done at this point. We had no idea what. We had never experienced anything like this before. But we knew we had to go. I called Nicole to see if she wanted to come with us. She would request permission to leave and come right home. Dad asked me to call the Strain's to see what their plans were and make sure that it was okay for us to come over. I called and spoke with Nicole Strain, the wife of Jacob, the oldest Strain boy. She relayed some additional details to me. Mr. Strain and Joel were being life-watched to the KU Med Center in Kansas City. And then...another blow – Jed had been pronounced dead. Dead. More shock. More numbness. What else, Lord? My mind was racing, trying to process, but Nicole was still talking. She said to please come – they needed it. It was all I could do to climb the stairs again and face my family with the news that Jed, too, was dead. The response was a stunned silence. Was this really happening? Perhaps it was all a mistake. Perhaps the next phone call would be to tell us that everything was fine and everyone would be okay after all. But that phone call never came.

Nicole was on her way home and we were preparing to load into the suburban when Mom mentioned that someone needed to call Nadine, who had moved into her own apartment several months before, and let

her know what was going on. The unpleasant task fell to me. I had barely relayed the news about Mrs. Strain when Nadine became hysterical and would not let me finish explaining the situation. In between her hysterics I managed to arrange to pick her up at her apartment to drive her to the Strains' where we would meet up with the rest of the family. Noelle, five days Jed's junior and deeply affected by word of his death, rode with me to Nadine's apartment. The ride was somber, each of us lost in our thoughts and trying to comprehend the reality of the situation. My heart cried out to God for help – for me, for the remaining Strains', for the many others who would be affected by this tragedy. We picked up an obviously emotionally wrecked Nadine and filled her in on what we knew so far. Then silence again. Each of us lost in our thoughts. My thoughts turned to the weekend before.



I had received a call from Don Hansen, asking me if I knew of someone who could use a free piano. A friend of theirs owned a rental house and had a piano he wanted to get rid of so he could clean the place up and prepare it for the next tenants. I had been considering how helpful it would be to have a second piano so that Noelle, Naomi, and Joey, who were all taking piano lessons from me, could practice during the day while I was teaching. I told him as much and asked about the quality of the piano. It was an old upright, but appeared to be in good condition. The only catch was that it had to be moved before the following Monday. I decided to go take a look.

Saturday evening I met the Hansen's at the location and we looked over the piano. Even though it hadn't been tuned in almost 20 years, it had held its tune surprisingly well and had a good touch. It was definitely worth the price – free! As I left the place, I had to figure out how I would get it moved, especially in such a short period of time. I decided to give the Strain's a call and see if

they would be willing to help me out. I spoke with Mrs. Strain and after explaining the situation, she volunteered that they could help me move it that night. They had been planning to go shopping for a fan, but would be happy to postpone the excursion to help me get the piano moved first. I arrived at their house a short while later. She had called Jacob to see if he would help as well. He was on his way and while we waited for him to arrive, she and I walked around her garden, looking at how the vegetable garden was doing, and admiring the flowers she had planted. Of all the women I knew, she was perhaps the closest to what I envisioned the Proverbs 31 virtuous woman being. She loved being at home and caring for her household, and it showed.

*I had come from a wedding, so she gave me some of her clothes and shoes to wear so that my dress wouldn't get messed up in the move. I had to squeeze my way into the pants and shoes, but they would work. Jacob arrived and we all loaded up into several vehicles – me leading the way in my car, a couple of the boys following behind in the pick-up truck and the rest riding in their white minivan. Once we arrived at the place where the piano was located, I pretended to help as they got the piano moved and loaded into the pick-up in no time at all. They got it covered and secured and we began the slow drive back to our house. It normally would have taken about 30 minutes, but it took closer to an hour since special care had to be taken with the piano perched in the back of the truck. Jed rode with me and we enjoyed a variety of conversation topics – from what he was working on in piano (he was one of my piano students) to how he was doing on his lines for one of the lead roles in the upcoming *Adventures In Character* drama.*

Once we arrived back at our house, the Strains were joined by Dad and they carefully maneuvered their way through the front door, down the hallway, and into the back bedroom. How they actually got the piano in that room, I have no idea. All of the ladies

and girls stood outside and visited while they accomplished that feat! We were now the grateful and excited owners of two pianos. It had taken longer than expected and was late now, but the adventure had been fun and well worth it. The Strain's prepared to leave, but their pick-up refused to start. It was backed up to our front porch for the unloading of the piano and had been overworked! Apparently this was not the first time this had happened and the solution was for it to sit and cool off for a longer period of time and then it would run fine again. Mr. and Mrs. Strain and Joel and Jed decided to head home while the others stayed. Nicole and I joined Jacob and his wife Nicole, Andrew, and Jonathan for a late night dinner at a local Mexican restaurant where we enjoyed a good time of discussion and fellowship. By the time we got back to the house, the truck had fully recovered and everyone left for home.



Now we had arrived at the Strain's house – abuzz with people and activity. The memories quickly faded and gave way to the stark reality of the day's events. As I walked into the house I saw everything from a new perspective. Every way I turned I saw Mrs. Strain. She had made their house a beautiful home and her touch was on every detail. I remembered back to that Easter when Mom and Dad and the three younger ones were in Colorado on vacation and Nicole, Nadine, and I had spent the afternoon at the Strain's. We were eating snacks in the living room while playing a game and Mrs. Strain had gotten a few crumbs on her pants. She carefully cupped that part of the fabric and half-walked-half hobbled across the room to the front door where she opened it and released the crumbs onto the front porch. (Little did she know that while she so meticulously avoided making a mess, Andrew remained in the living room, swiping crumbs from the table onto the floor...) But that was how Mrs. Strain was – neat and conscientious, yet always welcoming and hospitable. Now she was gone. Gone from this world forever.

The kitchen was the hub of activity and many friends were already gathered, manning the phones, gathering information and taking care of details. The oldest three Strain boys had just left for the KU Med Center in Kansas City so they could see their Dad and Joel. I was given an address book and asked to make phone calls to people who needed to be told of what had happened. The task was unpleasant, but I was glad to have something to do; anything to help. Eventually there was nothing left to do at the house. Almost everyone had left, including the rest of our family, except Noelle. Finally we left too. I wanted so much to do something more. To fix everything and make it all better. But instead I had to go home. There was nothing more I could do. Our home became a gathering place that evening for several families as we grieved together, prayed, and tried to talk through what had happened and what to do next. It was late by the time everyone was gone, and I found myself tucked away in the corner of my room on my bed. And then the tears began to flow.

I had held up fine throughout the day when there were things that needed to be done, when I was surrounded by people, and didn't have time to ponder all that had transpired. But now, in the quietness of my room, when I sat alone, helpless and pitiful before God, my heart was wrenched from within me and I sobbed uncontrollably. I could try to appear strong on the outside, but the reality of my weakness was not hidden from God. He knew. He knew the agony of my soul. He knew the pain of the loss I felt. He knew. And He alone could comfort my shattered heart. At some point that night, as I cried out to God, I believe He prompted me to write a letter to the rest of the families in my studio, sharing with them what had happened. I was hopeful that somehow God would use this tragedy to bring great glory to Himself. This is the letter I penned the following morning, before my students arrived:

Dear students and families,

It is with great sadness that I write this newsletter update. Yesterday (Sunday), the Strain family (many of you know Joel and Jed from piano lessons and recitals, etc.) was in a car accident. Mrs.

Strain and Jed were killed. Mr. Strain and Joel were taken to the KU Medical Center in Kansas City and have undergone surgeries. Mr. Strain is recovering from a broken hand and punctured lung. Joel is recovering from intestinal bleeding and still has a severe back injury. As of now, his lower body is paralyzed. Please pray for Joel and Mr. Strain and their other family members – Jacob and his wife, Nicole, Andrew, and Jonathan.

Though this has hit many people very hard, including myself, I know that God has a purpose for all things. He has allowed this for a reason. Mrs. Strain and Jed both knew Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and so I know that I will one day see them again in Heaven. Their lives have impacted many people and I know that their death was not in vain. I pray that each of you will examine your own life and if you have not already, that you may come to know Jesus as your Lord and Savior – the Son of God who lived a perfect life and died, taking upon Himself the penalty for our sins and conquering death through His resurrection. Because of this, we have the promise that if we believe in Him, we too may live eternally with Him in Heaven.

Jesus said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death into life.” John 5:24

*Love,
Natalie*

I continued with my regular teaching schedule that week. It was the only thing I knew to do. All day I taught and conducted lessons as normally as I could. And every night I cried myself to sleep. I thought often of Jed and what an incredible young man he was – one of the most teachable, disciplined, and respectful students I have had. He had flown through his books, asking questions at the end of each lesson to make sure he understood his assignments, and faithfully practicing every day.

He had performed excellently for a festival at one of our universities earlier that year and received the highest rating given. He always brightened my day with his ready smile and sincere “thank you” offered at the end of every lesson. Never again would I look up to see him walk through my studio door. Never again would his fingers touch the keys of my piano. Jed was gone.

I had never experienced death so closely before and it shook my world. The funeral for Mrs. Strain and Jed was held a week later. Hundreds of people came to mourn the loss of two amazing people. But we also came to celebrate – celebrate two lives lived for the glory of God and now transported to heaven to live for all eternity with their Lord.

As time passed I began to see God’s hand at work in various ways. After months of rehab, Joel was functioning well and adjusted to life in a wheelchair with an amazing attitude and a quick sense of humor. He decided to continue taking piano lessons, and we saw God’s perfect provision in that the week before the accident Joel had helped move into our house the piano that he would now be using since it would be impractical for him to take his lessons in my downstairs studio.

In the summer of that year I was teaching at a music camp and had a particularly difficult group of students for one of my theory classes. It was hard to keep their attention, and certain students in the group were constantly distracting the others. I prayed for wisdom and creativity, and asked the Lord to show me what I could do to make a difference in their lives. As I sat in the car one morning before the last day of camp the idea was clearly implanted in my mind, “tell them about Jed.” The Lord wanted me to tell them about Jed and use it as a springboard to share the Gospel with them. I argued with Him for a few minutes. After all, it was not a Christian camp. Would it be appropriate for me to share something like that? His answer came back clearly, “Do it for My glory.” Why did I even hesitate? Christians in other countries are dying for their faith every day and I was worried about sharing Jesus with a group of Jr. High students at a camp. I was thoroughly convicted.

That afternoon, as the time with this class drew to a close, I told them that I wanted to share a story with them. They sat transfixed as I told them about my student Jed. I told them about all of his fine qualities. I told them of his untimely death in a car accident. I told them that I knew I would see Jed again some day because Jed had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I told them that they can never know for sure when their day will come, but they can have hope for eternity if they give their life to Jesus Christ like Jed did.

It was a somber way to end the week and I don't know what effect it had on each of the students in the class. But I know that God was glorified. And I know that neither Mrs. Strain nor Jed died in vain. Their testimony lives on in their family and in the many people whose lives were touched by them – both in life and also in death.

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