

THE
RED RIBBON



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RED RIBBON

A MEMOIR

BY
NANCY FREUND BILLS



SHE WRITES PRESS

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FOR MY SONS—
WITH MY LOVE AND PROFOUND RESPECT

“Tho’ much is taken, much abides ...”
by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Readers most often ask me if *The Red Ribbon* is true. Yes. It is.

However, I want to share with my readers that I wrote the stories, the chapters, one at a time. Each bubbled up in my mind and heart determined to be written. And only later did I arrange them in a semblance of chronological order. Still, many important events and even significant people are omitted. And the order remains tangential.

The writing process was painful. As I wrote, I cried and laughed. One way I was able to find the courage I needed was to assign everyone in my stories different names. My sons became Simon and Teddy; my husband became Geoff, a name I'm sure he would have liked. And I gave us the family name of Green, a promise that our family would survive and grow. I wanted to hold out hope. (Only the animals, Charlie, the beagle, and Mark, the gray thoroughbred, retain their own names. And me, I'm Nancy.)

I need to confess that there are still unwritten chapters, events too painful to tackle now. Maybe sometime. But maybe not. Some readers are curious about where I began. I wrote "The Emptying and Filling of the Drawer" first (in 2001) when I was taking a memoir class at the University of Southern Maine. And I wrote "Gentle to Market" last (in 2016) for a writing workshop; it was tough going. Close to the end, I wrote "Atonement," and the confession of my regrets was good for my soul.

I have used every fictional tool I know. Sometimes, *The Red Ribbon* reads like memoir, but more often it crosses into the territory of fiction. Of course, I had to create the dialog.

Occasionally, I stumbled onto the perfect words. For instance, when my dad calls me “Nance” and “Girlie” in “The Beaches,” and in “The Old Spaniel,” he sounds so real to me that it is as though he is alive again for a few moments. And I get teary. My goal was to capture the truth, and although I often invent the specifics, I have captured my heart’s truth, which is what I value most.

The Red Ribbon is true.

p r o l o g u e



THE SUMMER SKY

The summer sky of my youth was Montana blue. Its wide expanse like a magnificent tent offered me beauty and usually safety. But on certain afternoons in July and August, meadowlarks stopped their melodies, killdeer hurried back to their nests made of stones, and long-legged jackrabbits fled into their burrows. Thunder rumbled; lightning flashed; the western sky grew dark. A gray wash began in the distant Bear-tooth Mountains and soon colored my world as though a giant brush were painting the sky with diluted black.

By mid-afternoon, the oppressive heat would rise into the high nineties, sometimes even over a hundred, and set off palpable anxiety in me. The afternoon storms rarely delivered a refreshing rain. The wind stirred up sandy grit that blew on my tanned face and against my bare arms and legs; a few sparse drops fell, but that was all. The local weatherman reported again on the black-and-white TV news at dinnertime, “No appreciable rain for Billings and its vicinity.” The banks of the wide Yellowstone River, the fields of alfalfa, and acres of feed corn nearby were dry as tumbleweed.

Early each summer, my father took me aside and said “Nance, soon as it looks like a storm, get yourself home.” He settled his blue eyes on mine, “I mean it. Don’t get stuck at your

friend Susie's. Your mother will worry if you're not home." Neither of us wanted to worry my mother.

So when the sky to the west threatened rain, I ran home closing the screen door carefully behind me while other children in my neighborhood let their screen doors slam. "I'm home," I called out to my mother. And without being told, I began the task of moving from room to room, closing windows.

Almost once a summer, a serious storm arrived; thunder and lightning announced the onslaught of torrential rain, pounding hail. Thumb-sized slugs of ice caused real damage—denting our car, bruising the cedar siding on the west wall of our house, and breaking many of the small panes of glass in our windows. The cruel hail battered our garden, ruining our tomatoes and strawberries, scattering their red flesh onto the dusty pale earth.

One summer during a bad storm, a child running across Pioneer Park tripped into a gully and was pummeled by hail to unconsciousness. My mother read me the news story and showed me the photos published on the front page of *The Billings Gazette*. She said, "That could have been you." Tugging at my shirt, she asked, "And then how would I have felt?" I didn't plan to come home via Pioneer Park or fall down and get banged up, but I heard her. I understood. *Storms arrived; danger came with them.*

During those rare bad storms, we three with our family's springer spaniel sat in the dim light of the basement wondering out loud when the power would fail. My dad and I took turns during the lulls in the storm to assess the glass damage. "Girlie, you go this time," he would say, and I would speed up the stairs to investigate. Our family measured the intensity of the storms by the number of windowpanes we lost—eleven wasn't bad; twenty-seven was our worst.

Home insurance paid for materials and labor to repair our modest house, but most summers, my parents delayed the replacement of the siding. My mother, who managed the budget, reasoned that a little money could be made if my father patched the holes and painted the clapboards. "It'll just happen again next summer," she reasoned. "We'll wait." By doing temporary repairs, my father could create a windfall income while he was on summer vacation from teaching. He attempted the repairs atop an aluminum ladder that trembled; it made me nervous. I wondered that my mother didn't see how inexperienced he was, two stories up in the air.

I acted as my dad's assistant, and we talked as he worked. "I get as much paint on the ground as I do on the siding," he joked as he dripped Sagebrush Green in random circles on the concrete walkway. "Careful, Dad," I said each time I handed up a brush or a can of paint.

In 1959, the August I turned sixteen, the Hebgen Lake Earthquake in Yellowstone Park caused a landslide that claimed the lives of twenty-eight, some of them campers caught in their tents asleep; the earthquake sundered roads and ripped the forest floor apart. Although my hometown was one hundred and fifty miles northeast of the epicenter, my family was awakened late at night, the walls of our house in Billings shaking.

"Get under a doorway," my father shouted at me. And so we stood, my parents in the doorway of their bedroom, me in mine, listening to fragile objects fall and break all around the house until the initial shocks of the quake subsided. "That sure was something," my dad said.

One summer afternoon when I was in high school, I experienced my first tornado. I stood on our upper patio with a view of the western sky. Beyond our lilac hedges, beyond the neighbors' backyards and farmers' fields of cornstalks and wheat, I caught sight of the horizon. I had seen the curtain of

sky blackened with storm clouds before, but now for the first time I viewed long black threads morphing into swirling funnels, watched them reaching down grazing the land.

“Come downstairs,” my mother shouted at me from the basement. And when I didn’t show up, I heard her yell, “Go get her, John.”

My father came to the back door. “Nance, you’ve got to come in.” But now, I was older. I said, “Dad, you’re going to want to see this.” And for a few minutes, we stood side by side, the wind whipping our cotton clothes as we watched classic funnels grow bigger and bigger, closer and closer. I was mesmerized, fascinated, frozen. My dad took me by the wrist and pulled me inside the house; behind us, the screen slapped shut.

As a girl, I learned that my Montana sky was wide and beautiful. Some summer afternoons, dangerous storms came. They came right out of the blue.

PART I



ARCS AND SPARKS

Nancy, wake up,” Sarah says shaking me by the shoulder. “Get out of bed.”

Her somber tone catches my attention. In one motion, I sit up on the guest room’s twin mattress, causing a quilt to fall away from my thin cotton gown. I hold up the face of my watch to the narrow slit of light streaming in from the upstairs hallway. It’s three o’clock in the morning. Sarah is waking me at three in the morning.

“Get up. Get dressed as fast as you can,” Sarah, my husband’s older sister, says and she closes the door. With only the light of the moon, I fumble in my overnight bag and search for underpants and a bra. I’m thinking, *I’m tired and want to go back to bed.* To slip into my jeans, I lean against a wall to avoid stumbling. Even as I pull a T-shirt over my head, I’m thinking, *What’s happened? Are Geoff and the boys safe?*

I haul on a sweatshirt; even a July night is chilly in Maine. As I kneel on the new-smelling carpeting to lace up my sneakers, my fingers feel thick.

In the bathroom, I splash water on my face and rake through my mouth with my toothbrush not taking time for toothpaste. I position myself outside Sarah and Marshall’s

closed bedroom door waiting, listening. I hear a few words: “nurse . . . emergency room . . . York Hospital.” I tilt my head to hear better. More words: “lightning . . . accident . . . not good.”

Marshall, my brother-in-law, emerges from the bedroom squinting away sleep. He puts on his wire-rimmed glasses. “Ready?” he asks me avoiding eye contact.

“Yes, ready,” I say although I’m not sure for what.

As we three stand together on the second floor landing, Sarah says, “A nurse from York Hospital called.” As we race down the steep stairway, she calls out, “Geoff and Teddy have been in an accident.” Geoff, my husband. Teddy, my twenty-year-old son.

As the screen door slams behind us, I try to process the information. I am jumping ahead of myself, putting words together, enough words to know I wish to go backward in time. I want to retrace my steps, to cover myself in the white gauze of my nightgown and to burrow under the safety of the quilt; I want to escape back in time before three o’clock in the morning of July 24, 1994.

My body is tossed across the backseat of the Ford Explorer as Marshall makes a sharp left turn onto Route 77. As we pass under the blinking light near Cape Elizabeth’s town hall, I ask, “What else did the nurse say?”

I count ten seconds as Marshall and Sarah each wait for the other to answer. Sarah says deliberately, “The nurse said, ‘Get to the hospital as fast as you can.’”

I take in that news, but can’t keep from asking, “What else?”

“She said they were hit by lightning.”

“Oh, God,” I say. Solemn silence follows.

As Marshall takes the shortcut to avoid Crescent Beach, as Fowler Road winds and dips, I lift myself out of my body. No

longer dressed in the pastels of summer, no longer inside flesh at all, I watch the woman who sits in the blackness of the back-seat. I observe her with compassion and watch the shadow of her head bow in silent prayer.

Please, I hear her beg God. Please, don't let it be both of them.

I HAD DRIVEN up to Cape Elizabeth, Maine, from Deerfield, New Hampshire, because I needed Sarah's loving support; she was my husband's older sister but also my friend. After twenty-six years of marriage, Geoff and I were estranged and yes, separated. Ostensibly, I went to help Sarah and Marshall unpack boxes and settle into their summer home, but I knew I was going for their support and company.

I wasn't sure what direction my life was taking. Day by day, I felt like I was camping out.

Marshall spent his time unpacking books and wine. Sarah and I worked side by side pulling out storm windows, washing the multiple panes and inserting screens. With each exchange, we felt the fleeting warmth of summer sun on our faces and hands; we inhaled the sea air and sensed the seasons of our lives shift.

For dinner, we three went to Joe's Boathouse in South Portland, a marina-restaurant with an excellent view of Casco Bay. On the porch waiting among tourists, we toasted their new home with a crisp Pinot Grigio. For starters, we shared garlicky steamed mussels and for entrées, shellfish and pasta. Over coffee, we concluded that the Maine coast was a place of peace and perfection.

It was a beautiful day—no rain, no thunder, no lightning.



WHEN MARSHALL HALTS the Explorer at the tollgate near the Maine Mall, none of us can find two quarters so a frustrated attendant waves us on. On the straightaway of the Maine Turnpike, I witness the SUV's speedometer jiggle between 90 and 95.

But my body wearies of sitting on the edge of my seat and holding onto Sarah's headrest for balance. Barely aware of time and place, I watch the traffic signs as they whiz past like shaky ghosts in the extra black of the night.

"How much farther is it?" Sarah asks.

"I don't know," Marshall answers. He is the kind of man who always knows. But now, he doesn't.

"Careful," Sarah says twice—first as we pass the exit at Biddeford and then at Wells. I think I can read her mind. She is thinking we needn't kill ourselves racing to the hospital if Geoff and Teddy are already dead.

As a social worker, I know the drill. You don't tell relatives their loved ones have died. Not until they arrive at the hospital. Tell them there's been an accident. Tell them their relative—father, mother, husband, wife, child, is seriously, even critically injured. But wait, wait with the news of death.

My mind analyzes the data—it is three o'clock in the morning, my husband and son have been in an accident, and it is pitch dark on the coast of Maine. Can they still be alive?

I close my eyes and pray. "Please, God," I ask. "Geoff would want Teddy to live. If he had a choice, he would choose Teddy." And I add, "If it were me, I would choose to die." Then I am afraid. I think, *What if God hears me and is repulsed by my thoughts, my prayers? What if I am praying for the wrong thing?* So I begin the mantra, *Please, God, your will. Let it be your will.*

Absently, I begin patting and stroking the velvety upholstery of the backseat. It reminds me of hugging and kissing Teddy goodbye as he loaded the kayaks; I feel him warm in my arms.

And on the phone with Geoff, I said, "I can't keep up with

the raspberries. Help yourself when you come to cut the grass.” I hope he knew those were words of conciliation. After the images of kayaks and black water, I see arcs and sparks of lightning and love. And then nothing.

The Explorer is following blue-and-white rectangular signs to York Hospital via York Beach. When it turns a corner, I can see the York amusement park. How strange the Ferris wheel looks spinning like an enormous roulette wheel as we roll by. I want to be lucky tonight, but I am afraid to pray for luck. Someone is going to be unlucky, and I don’t want to be the one to tilt the odds.

Outside York Hospital, when the SUV brakes, I stumble out; my legs break into a run, but inside the vacuum of the emergency room doorways, they slow down. I walk through the ER entrance and head for the admitting desk.

Joanna, a friend and colleague, stops me. I lean down to receive her embrace; our cheeks touch, and I feel her tears. Joanna is petite so I must bend myself in two. “Geoff’s dead,” she whispers into my ear. Then she hurries to add, “But Teddy is alive.”

“Geoff’s dead?” I ask, and Joanna hugs me tight. Sarah approaches us, and I tell her, “Geoff is dead.” It comes out more question than statement. “I’m sorry,” I tell Sarah. Geoff is her younger brother.

Joanna tugs at the sleeve of my sweatshirt. “Go say good-bye to Geoff,” she points me toward a nurse who leads me down a labyrinth of hallways. I hurry to keep up, but I have trouble moving my legs because inside my head a voice is screaming, *This can’t be true*. The voice, my voice is repeating, *Geoff can’t be dead. This must be a mistake. He can’t be dead*.

The nurse motions me into a small sterile room. I step inside. Geoff’s body lies on a gurney draped in a white sheet. Only his head is exposed. I pause several steps from the gurney. *Kiss him*

goodbye, my mind tells my lips. *You can do this*. I approach him; his face is badly swollen. He doesn't look like himself at all. *You must do this, and then you can go to Teddy*.

I lean toward his face, I close my eyes and my lips kiss his cheek; it is cool.

The nurse waits for me at the doorway where Joanna says to me, "You need to sign the forms for an autopsy." I feel my face frown in confusion; my head shakes no, but she says, "The nurse needs your signature so Geoff's body can be taken to the morgue." In spite of my doubts, I do what she asks. I must sign my name.

As I follow the nurse out of the emergency room, across the hallway, and into the ICU, Joanna follows as far as the ICU station. When the nurse with the power of life and death draws back a curtain, I see Teddy, my Teddy, lying on a hospital bed, a bed cranked upward as far as it will go. Medical apparatus are crowded around him.

Teddy's face is obscured by the mouthpiece of a ventilator. And he's pale, but his hair, dark and curly, is reassuring. His shoulders are broad like his father's. *But his eyes*, I tell myself, *his eyes under closed lids, the eyes I can't see, are like mine not his dad's. Not hazel and gone. But blue, alive*.

I sit down in a plastic chair and reach out to hold Teddy's hand. I hold it carefully; it is warm. At first, my attention is absorbed by his heartbeat beeping and scrolling on the heart monitor's screen. When its alarm goes off, I stand and cry out for a nurse. One comes. She checks Teddy and waves a practiced hand at me. Her gesture says my son is all right; his heart is beating. The other machine, the one responsible for Teddy's breathing makes *whoosh*-like noises. I am so thankful for these two machines.

I sit and reposition my hand. I close my eyes and remember the last time holding Teddy's hand seemed so critical. I had

walked him the few blocks from our big white house on Airport Hill to Teague Park Elementary School. That fall day in Caribou, Maine, was cool; the air was dry. We took turns clasping each other's hands, but as our fingers reached out in practiced ritual, I knew our lives were changing forever.

On the way home, returning down the dusty gravel road after I had delivered him to kindergarten, I knew my life as a woman and as a mother had plunged into a new season. I saw a stand of Japanese lanterns against a neighbor's fence; the orange air-filled bells were delicate, their veins visible in the sunlight; they hung from slender, painful stems. Now, here I was holding his hand again.

Sometime later, a nurse slides in beside me. I'm startled and jam my chair against the hospital bed. Smiling down at me, she taps the IV bag, follows the tubing with her fingertips to Teddy's tan, muscular arm. She seems satisfied.

I drift. Minutes, hours later, I'm unsure when, Sarah kisses my cheek. She asks, "Would you like me to sit with him? You need a break?"

"No," I say. "I can't leave him."

"We'll need to call the family," she says. "Not now. But in the morning."

"Not now," I say. "Later." And I see concern on her face. She disappears.

I'M NOT SURE for how long I sit and watch the heart monitor, listen to the ventilator. Perhaps I drift off, but sometime near sunrise, my eyes shift from the magic machines to a nurse in blue scrubs. I study her as she takes note of Teddy's vital signs and records them on his chart. With all my impaired ability, I struggle to look inside her eyes to see what she sees in Teddy's future. Yes, I can tell she believes that this

young life will continue. And I begin to have hope that Teddy is going to make it.

AROUND EIGHT O'CLOCK in the morning, Simon, Teddy's older brother, arrives with his wife, Emily, from Lake George, all the way from New York State, a long ride for them. My exhausted and worried older son relieves me, taking up my post; he holds Teddy's hand as lovingly as I have.

Outside the curtains, next to the patients' charts, an ICU nurse offers me tea and hands me tissues. Her kindness melts all my resolve to keep control of my emotions. I weep.