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STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Preparing for a brief respite Kristen Strauss comforts her daughter Gloria, who has been using a hospital bed in the den. After a particularly rough night, Kristen was leaving to join her husband, Doug, at a friend's apartment so they could sleep. She was telling Gloria about who would stay to help her.

## **A prayer for Gloria | "You're God. You can do anything."**

**By Jerry Brewer**

*Seattle Times staff columnist*

Asleep in the family den, tucked in a hospital bed, Gloria Strauss dreams she can walk again.

She does not need a wheelchair. She does not need her parents to guide her to the bathroom. She is herself once more — 11 years old, chipper and liberated.

She awakens in the middle of the night, excited and motivated. She tries to rise on her own. She gets to the edge of the bed, legs dangling, but then she pauses. The pain is too much. The cancer is too strong.

Gloria cries for her parents.

### **HER PARENTS CRY FOR GLORIA, TOO.**

Doug and Kristen Strauss realize their daughter is fading. They estimate she sleeps 70 percent of the day now.

Gloria had an IV sending 120 milligrams of morphine per hour into a medical port located just below her right collarbone. Two days ago, she switched to Dilaudid, a stronger medicine. She is given hourly doses of 35 milligrams. If that is not enough, she can press a button every eight minutes that shoots 20 more milligrams into her body.

Neuroblastoma is overwhelming Gloria. She has fought this childhood cancer for more than four years, but true to its dogged form, the disease keeps coming after her life.

"I can't say I don't fear death," Doug says. "Whenever I fear it, I pray. There are moments that are just

gut-wrenching. You don't want to go anywhere. You don't want to see anybody."

Three months ago, Dr. Julie Park, Gloria's oncologist, told the Strauss family Gloria's cancer was killing her. Since then, Gloria and her parents have abandoned last-ditch cancer treatments because they have no history of healing in cases as advanced as hers. Instead, they have turned fervently to their Catholic faith.

For nearly two weeks, Gloria has been mostly immobile. She last walked without assistance July 10, when the family went to see a special preview of the new Harry Potter movie. Since then, she has been trapped in the den, in a borrowed hospital bed, in her body.

Even now, the Strausses believe God will heal Gloria. They continue to pray for what they want. Religion is their reality. They snap back to faith, always.

"We're not walking blind," Doug says. "We're not defending ourselves from the worst-case scenario. We're turning ourselves to the miracle."

The longer they must wait, the harder it is to remain resolute.

### **AFTER HELPING GLORIA,**

Doug walks into the bedroom and sobs. He looks at his wife and collapses on the bed.

"Where's my faith?" he asks. "Where's my trust?"

Kristen grabs a booklet called the Magnificat, a collection of spiritual writings that she reads daily. She opens it and surprisingly, she flips to a page headlined "What doubt saves us from," written in red letters. She recites the text to her husband.

Doug's tears stop, and he falls asleep. Once Kristen finishes the passage, she turns to the back of the booklet in search of the day's Scripture. It is from Matthew 9:18-26. She begins reading.

*While Jesus was speaking, an official came forward, knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come, lay your hand on her, and she will live." Jesus rose and followed him, and so did his disciples.*

Kristen underlines the quote "My daughter has just died. But come lay your hand on her, and she will live." She figures she was meant to read this Scripture. She continues.

*A woman suffering hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the tassel on his cloak. She said to herself, "If only I can touch his cloak, I shall be cured." Jesus turned around and saw her, and said, "Courage, daughter! Your faith has saved you." And from that hour the woman was cured.*

Kristen underlines the quote "Courage daughter! Your faith has saved you." She believes this Scripture must be speaking to her situation.

*When Jesus arrived at the official's house and saw the flute players and the crowd who were making a commotion, he said, "Go away! The girl is not dead but sleeping." And they ridiculed him. When the crowd was put out, he came and took her by the hand, and the little girl arose. And news of this spread throughout all that land. The Gospel of The Lord.*

Kristen underlines the quote "The girl is not dead but sleeping." She vows, as soon as morning breaks, to share this Scripture with her husband.

**DOUG CHECKS HIS CELLPHONE VOICE MAIL THE NEXT MORNING.** There is a message from Jason Prouty, his friend and assistant boys basketball coach at Kennedy High School in Burien.

"Doug Streezy," Prouty says, tweaking his friend's last name, "how you make it look so easy?"

Doug laughs. His knees are not shaking anymore. He is himself once more, sturdy.

He has a new game for his three oldest boys — Joe, 6; Anthony, 5; and Sam, 3. Hot packs soothe Gloria's legs, and the boys can assist in this area. Dad tells them to run to the microwave in shifts, press four-four-start, wait those 44 seconds and run back to the den with their hot packs.

"It's our production line," Dad says.

It also keeps Gloria and her siblings engaged. Throughout the day, Doug and Kristen carry 9-month-old Vincent over to her, so Gloria can kiss him. Gloria's sisters — Alissa, 13, and Maria, 9 — sit with her often.

Their Federal Way home is like a hospital. Nurses and counselors from Stepping Stones, the pediatric and palliative limb of Providence Hospice of Seattle, visit regularly. Each night, one of the parents sleeps on the couch to be close to Gloria.

"There's a hospital bed in our home. There's a wheelchair in our home. There's medical equipment in our home," Doug says, sounding stunned as he states these facts. "We're sponge-bathing her. We're brushing her hair. It's never been this bad."

**TOM CURRAN, A STRAUSS FAMILY FRIEND**, has been directing a ministry to Catholics for almost two decades. For the past few weeks, he and his wife, Kari, have held a Tuesday-night prayer session about Gloria at their home. He visits the Strausses often to pray with them. In some ways, he is the family's spiritual adviser, but he refuses any credit.

Curran encounters a common question while praying for Gloria with others: What do you pray for?

He says people fear they are praying wrong. They wonder if they are good enough to be asking for a miracle. Curran explains the idea behind praying for Gloria.

"You're asking for Jesus to come close to this situation and to be who he is," Curran says. "You're saying, 'I want you, Jesus. Come close. Be who you are. And bring salvation.' That's the first miracle. When we say yes to Jesus and we come and we pray, in some mysterious way, God uses that.

"I pray with great confidence. I don't come seeking some thing. I come seeking someone."

A healing miracle can occur in two ways, Curran says:

"It can come in the form of a complete medical healing or a complete final healing. God will heal Gloria. You're praying in a way that flows with God's healing."

In March, Curran found himself asking for a healing miracle just like the Strausses. His father-in-law, Larry DeLorenzo, had suffered serious injuries after falling down steps at Curran's home. But while praying, Tom realized God was telling him to let his father-in-law go home. He and his family changed their prayers. DeLorenzo died shortly thereafter.

### **DOUG IS AT HOME**

praying one night with Kristen and Curran. He decides to ask God something he never has before. He always has prayed for a miracle while trusting God will do what is best. On this night, he demands it in clear terms.

"If your will is to take her," Doug says to God, "please change it."

He grows bolder.

"You're Jesus," he says. "You're God. You can do anything."

Later, Doug clarifies his shift in prayer. "I've always been afraid to pray against the will of God," he says. "Then I thought, 'Why would I come this far and not demand a miracle?'"

Kristen's faith has strengthened him, Doug says. Now he must lift her.

A few days after their prayer session, Kristen has a discouraging phone conversation with Dr. Park and starts crying. Doug comes into the kitchen, hugs his wife and whispers in her ear. Kristen starts laughing through the tears.

"Get it out," Doug says to his wife. "You just get it out. Cry all you want, baby."

They acknowledge their fears. Kristen protects her spirit better, but it is not impenetrable. Doug breaks down more frequently, but he recovers quickly. They never crash together; one is always there to repair the other.

They do fight, however. Silly stuff, they say. They never can remember the genesis of their arguments. Recently, they became so upset with each other they retreated to separate rooms. An hour later, they talked.

Doug told Kristen that he said the Rosary while they were apart. Kristen laughed. She did, too. Then they prayed together.

In 13 years of marriage, they never have been so close. When they finished praying, they looked at each other like they were high-school sweethearts again.

Their faith replenishes them.

"I don't fear death," Kristen says. "On the other side, it's life everlasting. Oh, it's beautiful! Oh, we can't even imagine! If that's God's will, I know God will prepare us. But we have to remember nothing is impossible with God.

"We're not being stupid. I always worry about what others think, but then I get this stubbornness, and I say, 'Who cares?'"

### **ON A RELAXING AFTERNOON,**

Alissa paints her sister's toenails. Gloria talks more and tells her parents exactly what she needs. Doug and Kristen successfully dress her in one of her favorite outfits. Gloria's pain is manageable, and she looks pretty.

She feels well enough to sit on the couch with Alissa. After about an hour, she falls asleep. When Gloria awakens, she realizes the aches have returned. She groans.

Despite the pain, Gloria seems revitalized. She is not moping anymore. She explains why while Mom sits on her bed and reads to her.

"Wait, Mom," she says. "Before you continue, I just wanted to say this is how I always imagined it."

Mom urges Gloria to tell her more.

Remember, Gloria asks, back to our April conversation? Mom nods. Before I was told my cancer had spread? Mmm hmm. When I said it's going to get worse before I get better? Yes.

"This is how I imagined it," Gloria says.

Gloria details her vision. She always saw herself in bed, attached to an IV, with people surrounding her and

praying.

Mom smiles. Kristen guesses Gloria's miracle will come at a dire hour. Maybe this is the background for a healing.

Gloria repeats the story to Dad. Doug finds himself believing in his daughter at the oddest times. One afternoon, he goes to the bathroom. The house is empty except for him, Kristen and Gloria, so he figures it is fine to leave the door open. Then he thinks again and closes the door.

"Just in case Gloria walks," Dad says.

**GLORIA AWAKENS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT AGAIN.** It is 3 a.m. Her body has been locked for nine days, but she rises for another try at walking.

Kristen is asleep on a nearby couch. When Mom opens her eyes, Gloria is sitting up.

"Honey, are you OK?" Mom asks.

Gloria nods. Then she stands and uses a walker to guide her to the bathroom. Mom is giddy, but she does not tell Dad.

When Doug wakes up and wanders into the den, Gloria is sitting on the couch. She walks toward him. Tears rim Dad's eyes.

"You're walking!" he exclaims.

"Yeah, I am," Gloria replies.

Dad and daughter tap fists.

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