

We'd been besties since college. Now she needed me more than ever

the key

BY MELANIE SHANKLE
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I WANTED TO SCREAM. RIGHT there in the middle of the mail store. I'd been guaranteed next-day delivery of my package. By 10:30 A.M. even. But here I was, 24 hours later, and the package I'd expressed was undelivered and unaccounted for. Unbelievable.

I tapped my foot and glared at the long line of people in front of me, many holding Christmas presents. I wasn't much in the spirit of the season.

The package—a key to the vacation house my parents owned in Houston—had been meant for my friend Jen, who lived in Dallas. I lived in San Antonio. Jen and I had been besties ever since our freshman year at Texas A&M, some 20 years earlier. Tall, blonde and striking, Jen was amazing—a force of nature. Back then, she'd talked me into going to Bible study, where I met my husband. I'd never known any per-

son who had a faith as strong as hers.

That's why when, just shy of 40, she'd told me she had breast cancer, I was certain she'd beat it. Only months earlier, she'd given birth to her first child, a son. She'd been nursing him when she felt the lump. She'd done the treatments exactly as her doctors advised: lumpectomy, chemo, radiation. We'd all prayed for her. Almost a year from the date of her diagnosis, in August 2014, she'd gotten the all-clear. A miracle. Or so we believed.

Four months later, the first week of December, I was Christmas shopping when I got a text in the gift wrap aisle of Target. Jen's cancer was back. The news took the breath right out of me.

Then another text. The cancer had spread to her back, ribs, lungs and lymph nodes, plus there were spots on her liver. She and her husband were going for a multiday consultation at the Baylor College of Medicine Cancer Center in Houston. My parents had recently bought a vacation home in the



TWINNING Melanie (right) and Jen share a smile during Jen's cancer treatments.

Now, in line, I stared at my phone, at the text Jen had sent that morning: "The key hasn't come. Sorry. We have to leave. Thanks anyway." It was like a punch to the gut. I felt as if I'd failed her.

Finally, I reached the counter. I explained the situation. The woman typed in the tracking number, and a worried look came over her face. "It looks like your package wasn't scanned before it left here," she said. "I'm sorry, I can't tell you where it is."

It was the final straw. I burst into tears, tears of frustration, tears of anger, tears of sadness.

The woman rushed around from behind the counter and wrapped her arms around me, curious, no doubt, how a lost package could cause such a meltdown. It wasn't only the key, of course. I wanted to know that Jen was going to be okay. That there would be a miracle. But no one could guarantee me that either.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "You'll get a full refund."

A refund? Little solace that would be. I thanked her, still sniffing, trudged

city. It would be perfect, a homey place where they could be alone and be able to rest between appointments. I texted back: "I have just the place for you to stay. I'll overnight you the key." She was leaving the next day.

I got the key from my parents and raced to this very mail store. "It'll be there tomorrow," the lady behind the counter assured me. I'd paid extra to be sure. Ugh.

PHOTOS COURTESY MELANIE SHANKLE

out to my car and called Jen. “They’ve somehow managed to lose the key,” I said. “I’m so sorry...”

“It’s okay,” Jen interrupted, her big voice booming through the phone. “It’s not as if you were sending me some miracle cancer drug, right?”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. That was so Jen. Nothing seemed to faze her, even cancer. It was as though she were trying to comfort me. But as soon as I hung up, I thought about her husband. And her young son. Who would be there for them? It wasn’t fair. That delivery company. They were going to have to make this right.

I got home and fired off an angry e-mail, demanding that the company pay for a hotel room for Jen and her husband. It took more than an hour and several more e-mails before the customer service rep agreed.

I booked a room at a good hotel and texted the news to Jen, then slumped on the living room couch. I was relieved Jen would be somewhere comfortable. But why did everything have to be a battle?

It was nearly dinnertime. I was still shaking from the whole ordeal. I decided to go pick up a pizza. In the car, I felt an overwhelming urge to pray for Jen, an urge that blocked out all the frustration of the day.

“Dear God, I know you’re there,” I whispered. “Please take Jen in your arms and comfort her. That’s what I want most.”

I took a deep breath, started the car and switched on the radio. Turned it up



AWESOME AGGIES Jen (middle) with BFFs Amy Gullely Fisher (left) and Melanie during their Texas A&M days

loud. A Christmas song came on, some group I’d never heard before.

“Do not be afraid, a Savior is born to you this day.” The lyrics, the music filled the car. And the song’s message filled my heart.

I’d always thought of the angels’ proclamation that first Christmas night as being meant for the shepherds. But now I saw it as a promise to all mankind. Do not be afraid. Of life’s challenges, of illness, of loss. There is always something bigger. A savior who was born in a stable because there was no room in the inn. Hadn’t it all worked out all right? I had a sick friend sleeping in a nice hotel for a couple of nights, after all. A kind of Christmas miracle in and of itself to be grateful for. **G**

For more on this story, see FAMILY ROOM



“I used to live for life’s big moments,” says **Melanie Shankle** (*The Key*, page 16). “But I’ve learned they don’t make a life. It’s not decorating a dorm room that makes you an adult; it’s showing up for class and studying for tests. It’s not giving birth or signing adoption papers that make you a parent; it’s braiding hair and kissing scraped knees.” She writes about the significance of these moments in her fourth book, *Church of the Small Things*, available in bookstores and at thebigmamablog.com. Melanie says she has proof God cares about the tiny details too. Just days after her friend Jen lost her battle with cancer, Jen’s grandma, with whom she had a standing Thursday lunch date, also passed away. “I believe God knew Grandma Vanie needed to keep her lunch date with Jen,” Melanie says.



SHANKLE Melanie keeps it simple.

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