

I stood between two towering infernos. Jerry B. Jenkins to my right, and to my left, Byron Williamson, CEO of Worthy Publishing, a touch taller. The two giants bent low to hold the five-foot, \$20,000 check they'd given me for winning the 2011 Christian Writers Guild Operation First Novel contest.

Standing tiptoe to see over the top of the check, I smiled at the photographer.

Shock sent my entire world reeling. I can tell by the dazed look in my eyes, the dilated pupils, my out-of-body experience.

Perhaps it wasn't solely the surprise of hearing my name announced all over the world. Maybe it was I'd lived long enough to experience the moment.

Three months before, I was about to die.

LIVING WITH DEATH

My MO is to move fast—produce—go. The summer before the Operation First Novel contest submissions were due, I ran fifteen miles and called it fun. Writing 10,000 words a day was a sweat, but possible, even working a full time job. I finished my manuscript and surrendered it to the Christian Writers Guild's contest, hoping to make the semi-finals. Maybe the finals. With the feedback from the Guild, I could perfect it—and then who knew—I wanted to be published!

Two weeks later my muscles died. My biceps disappeared. My legs shrunk to toothpicks. I couldn't think straight. Panic attacks struck on a whim.

My wife and two children rushed me to the doctor. Diabetes was a possibility, as was cancer. I started my will, a sad thought at age 35.

We waited several weeks for the diagnosis. I couldn't write, so blogging and noveling were out. Even writing an email was difficult. I couldn't think, so conversations were a challenge. I had little to say, even to my wife and children. And concentrating on a television show was impossible. My drivers license was taken away.

My memory is blurry, but I remember my son and daughter going off to soccer and ballet without me, leaving me alone in the house. Their lives had to go on, even if mine couldn't.

My local ACFW chapter settled on their knees, bowed their heads, and prayed with my friends and family. I prepared my will.

WHO LOVES ME

Alone and helpless, I cried out to God—and received a surprise. Jesus listened. I realized something. I'd never needed Him before. Everything had come so easy. From writing to academics to running, I could do it all myself. But my self-sufficiency was gone. And no matter how much organic food my wife cooked for me, or children cared for my needs, it was never enough to bring back my strength or my mind.

But even though I was no good to anyone, Jesus let me know He still loved me. Through the Bible and prayer, He spoke to me. When that truth of His love sunk in, I didn't care whether I published or not. That was His problem. I would grow closer to Him even if my manuscript never saw the light of day.

Then a man I'd never heard of emailed me. His name was Michael Ehret. "You may want to check out the Christian Writers Guild website today. Good news on it."

I was an Operation First Novel semifinalist. My heart sunk. How would I mentally, emotionally, and physically handle the fame and fortune—fame, anyway—of semifinal status? I gave it to God. Nothing was mine anymore. It was all His.

A FINALIST

Because my memory didn't work well, it suddenly skipped to the next email. Five of them had been sent out—*OFN Finalists Announced*— it said. *Hope you can make it to the conference to receive recognition of this accomplishment.* I read it over and over. From my bed.

The other finalists emailed each other, and we started a prayer group that still exists today. We learned what each other needed, and that I wasn't the only one with health problems. Prayer would uphold us all.

The doctor called. He said I would live—if I received testosterone treatment *immediately*. My body had stopped making the stuff men survive on, the hormone that creates and maintains muscles. And because the heart is a muscle, it was atrophying in sync with my arms and legs. The doctor put in an emergency call, and a bottle of testosterone gel was overnighted into Boise, Idaho, a medicine that would keep me alive.

By faith, I made reservations to attend the Christian Writers Guild conference. Jesus would be there with me—because I needed Him. I know that now. And He loved me. In one week, my body returned to seventy percent my former self. Soon, I was off to the conference of a lifetime.

When the Operation First Novel winner was announced, onlookers saw a short fellow given a second chance at life. Standing between the two giants—behind an equally massive check—I looked at the trio from my out of body experience. I saw a fourth Person standing behind me. And I knew the cameras couldn't pick Him up.

His arms were wrapped around me. Like they always were and always will be.