

## **A Single Mother, Her Friend and Their First Day**

I woke up scared and excited. It was my first day of real work after a long, long time of what seemed like endless difficulty. When my husband left, what I had was no house, no car, no job, no completed education and three very small children. Forced into the world, unarmed, I had been supporting my children for two years on welfare, babysitting and selling plant hangers and hand-made necklaces at craft shows.

I woke at 4:00 a.m., and dressed. I tried to look my very best. I woke each of the children in turn, as gently as possible, dressed them and took them with their sleepy eyes and lax bodies to the kitchen for breakfast. I had to be at work by 7:30.

I had managed to get on a wait list for a state funded pre-school and finally a place had opened so that I could gain employment. While my new job was, mercifully, only 10 blocks away from the school, we lived almost 40 miles away. The commute was over an hour's drive in dense traffic into the city, and today, of all days, it was pouring rain.

A friend I had recently met had graciously located a car, a small truck, to borrow until I could get together enough money to buy one on my own.

After breakfast, spilt coffee, a change of clothes and gathering up my chickens, who had now scattered around the house, I put us all into the small cab of the truck, buckling the two smaller ones into one seatbelt, and started off on the long drive.

During that drive, my anticipation was palpable. This was my first real chance at some kind of life. I wondered how it would go. Would they like me? I agonized whether I would be on time and not make a bad first impression. I wondered if the children would adjust to the school. Would my son stop being mad at me now that I was working? I wondered a thousand minute details about the life potential before me. I told myself to just be quiet and, as my friend had suggested, believe. It was my turn to become a part of life again; to have some small respect again, to be seen as a member of society, not one of its losers.

In that moment, my dreams disappeared. The traffic abruptly stopped quite a ways ahead of us. I put on the breaks, but they did not hold. It was the

first rain of the season; these roads were covered with oil from the millions of commuters who had traveled them in the last year. My tires hydroplaned, and rather than stopping, as I should have, with plenty of room to spare, I plowed right into the back of the car ahead of me.

In that wet surrealistic moment, on the blue-black street, in the pouring rain, the flying glass sparkling everywhere, the grind of metal against metal, and the dead thump of flesh against the dashboard, it felt like everything died.

The truck now motionless, I looked quickly to my children. The baby was firmly in her seatbelt and crying. My son and older daughter had come out of the seatbelt, but only had little bumps on their heads. My face had cracked the steering wheel and I was growing a fat lip. I tried to start the car, but the engine was destroyed.

The owner of the other car came back to my truck screaming profanities. He was mad. I got out of the car and tried in every way I could to placate him. He had no interest in my children or me. He summarily took my information. Pledged that he would sue, and with the help of another commuter, he pushed his car off the road and was driven away.

As he left, I stood there in the rain. I tried to flag down drivers to help, but the cars just drove around me, a solid stream of passing headlights. As a single woman with children, I had learned to accept that I was alone. But few moments have ever driven that fact home as much as this one.

Why didn't they stop? Was it because of the rain? That I was a woman who could call her husband on her cell phone? That I had children? If they actually stopped to help me, I already knew how complicated THAT would be.

It did not matter. The three principals of being a single mother came home to me: 1) you are alone, 2) it is up to you, and you only, and 3) life is difficult. Fighting off the fear that surged down to the bottom of my toes, I steeled myself for what I had to do.

I got back in the cab and comforted my children and then began the task of getting them across 4 lanes of moving traffic to a self-serve gas station on the corner. The attempt to stop the cars so that I could get across was terrifying. Once there, I asked for help from the attendant, who informed me that he

could not leave the station to assist. I asked to use the phone. He told me that there was a pay phone at the corner. I asked him if I the children could dry off inside for a moment. He said “No.”

I had to get the car off the street. I told the children to stand under the eaves of the attendant’s station and went back into the rain to get the truck. Once back at the car, I began pushing from the driver’s side, trying to steer the car over to the side while trying to see my children at the same time. No one stopped to help, many honked at me and yelled from their cars. The agonizing trip took more than 15 minutes.

Finally, back with my now anxious children, I covered them with kisses, assuring them that everything would be all right. I was scared and felt like I was lying to them, but they needed comfort and a feeling of safety and those assurances were all I could give.

The attendant sold us a newspaper, and we all walked the to the pay phone carrying the day’s news over our heads.

As we all piled into the phone booth, the alarming sense of fear came on me again. Fighting to hold back the tears, I panicked. Have I lost the job? What about the truck? How will I pay for it? She had trusted me with such a responsibility and I had proven to be untrustworthy, or so it seemed to me.

Keep that chin up,” I coached myself as I fumbled in my purse trying to find the change I needed. I called my new work and told them what had happened. I told them that I would not be late. I had 45 minutes to be on time.

Then I called my friend. All I could feel was the humiliating burn of each word, “There has been an accident. I totaled your car. I am so sorry.” The silence at the other end screamed in my ear.

“Are you all right? What about the children?” she asked. Those words for my personal concern felt, at that moment like they came straight from an angel.

“Yes. We are all right. But your car...  
I was determined to take care of my responsibility.

“Thank God everyone is in one piece,” she said. “Now, where are you?” she continued, and I told her. “Do you have any money?” she asked, and I said that I did.

“ Call a cab and get your kids to school and yourself to work.”

“What about the car?” I couldn’t leave it there!

“Bother the car. I will call a tow truck. You make sure you get where you need to go.”

“Aren’t you angry?” I asked.

“Of course not. It is just a car. Off you go, this is your first day.”

The absolute aloneness momentarily lifted and a wind of energy created a “Thank you” as I hung up the phone. Gathering my babies in my arms for a further shot of momentum, I called for a cab.

*A couple of years later:*

As evidenced in my own experience, the loss of self-respect and the sense of complete aloneness engendered a protective response in me that filtered down to the actions I took in the face of difficulties.

While my friend turned what would have been a complete defeat of my efforts and provided a stepping stone for me to trust again, believe again, and, yes, achieve again, it was her focus on love, forgiveness and hope that eventually overcame my fears; fears that were evoked by real as well as imagined admonitions from other men and women. Instead of applying intelligent thought to my difficulties, she expressed real value for my life and that of my children.

As our friendship grew, we began the process of reclaiming our own perceptions of ourselves, each other, and the lives we impacted. Our lives demonstrated a love, a forgiveness, and a hope and in others a desire to know Jesus.

I have a friend. Many of us single moms do not. Who can they call?