

# Stories of Strength

By the writers of [AbsoluteWrite.com](http://AbsoluteWrite.com)

(Excerpts)

*Dedicated to the survivors of Hurricane Katrina and all those who are helping them.*

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## Introduction

The world seems like a callous place sometimes, with strangers cutting each other off in traffic, neighbors arguing about fence lines, and people fighting about everything from favorite sports teams to political views. But things change in times of crisis. Almost instantly, we forget our pettiness and remember we all belong to the human race and are, in some way, brothers and sisters. And we long to help even when we don't have much to give.

This book was born on the AbsoluteWrite.com message boards, where many writers gathered during the days after Hurricane Katrina and agonized over how helpless we felt. Those who had money to give did so, but it didn't feel like enough. Those who didn't have money donated blood, or sold things on eBay to raise money, or gathered items to send to evacuees. But we kept watching those images on television, and the problem didn't go away. It became clear that it wasn't going to go away soon, and we wanted to find a way to help long-term.

I suggested this anthology project. If we could get enough compelling stories to fill a book, I figured, that book's sales could go on for years to come and keep donations rolling in to charities to help with disaster relief. My simple suggestion was met with amazing enthusiasm and we got to work immediately. This project belonged to all of us, and we were going to make something beautiful happen.

What you're about to read comes from writers the world over. Some are long-time professional authors whose names you may recognize. For others, this is their first publication ever. I asked writers to submit essays, poems, and short stories about strength, and within a week, we had more submissions than we could ever fit in this book.

But the generosity didn't end there. No one just submitted a piece and disappeared. Instead, people stuck around and offered help in other areas. A graphic artist offered to do our cover art. Numerous editors wrote to offer to share the duty of editing the work on a quick deadline. Writers spoke to their colleagues and friends to ask for help with formatting, advertising, publicity, corporate sponsorship, and bookstore distribution.

The book matters to us because people matter to us. This is one way for us to use our love for writing to help others, and we are so thankful that you've become part of that effort. Visit [www.storiesofstrength.com](http://www.storiesofstrength.com) to follow our progress.

May you always find the strength you need, with enough left over to lend to others. I hope the stories you read here will inspire you and remind you just how little it can take for strength to blossom in unlikely places.

~Jenna Glatzer

# Let No Hands Be Idle Here

*Prayerfully* ♩ = 60-66

1. Let no hands be id - le here. Let no heart be filled with fear.  
2. Leave no brok - en heart a - lone. Leave no lone - ly soul un - known.  
3. Give the beg - gar what he asks. Give the will - ing work - er tasks.  
4. Like a riv - er life can seem: Dip a cup in - to the stream,

Let no child un - cared for be. Where the need is, O let me!  
Lead all wan - der - ers to Thee. Where the need is, O let me!  
Give to all un - stint - ing - ly. Where the need is, O let me!  
Drink, and share it o - pen - ly: Love of God, so sweet to me!

*after last verse only:*

Love of God, so sweet to me!

*Text:* Orson Scott Card  
*Music:* Mark Mitchell

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Please contact the authors at [www.hatrack.com](http://www.hatrack.com)  
to request permission to perform this hymn in public.

## Strength of Spirit

“Nor stony tower, nor walls of beaten brass,  
Nor airless dungeon, nor strong links of iron,  
Can be retentive to the strength of spirit.”

~ William Shakespeare (*Julius Caesar*)

## The Shrine

By Matthew James

My mom was always fanatical about the refrigerator. It had to be clean, spotlessly clean, and if a wayward milk dribble made its way down the jug and onto the shelf long enough to settle and dry, she would spend an hour removing everything from the inside and scrubbing, scrubbing, *scrubbing* it clean. The outside of the fridge was the same. Nary a mark, scuff, thumbprint, banana sticker was allowed to tarnish the shiny, off-white Kenmore for more than a mere second. And God forbid someone even suggest the use of a magnet. That fridge was her temple, my dad would say. Her special quirk.

Which is why I knew something was terribly wrong the day I came home to find the Post-It note stuck right to the middle of the freezer door.

*Stay Strong*, it said.

Seeing that note was like a punch to the stomach. I knew she'd had an important doctor's visit earlier. I knew about the lump she had found in her breast. I knew my father was worried, but still, that note . . . I was 17 years old, and at that moment I knew life would never be the same.

She had cancer, and it was bad. Stage three, the doctor said. I didn't know what that meant at the time, but I knew the odds were less than even.

She cried a lot, especially right after the surgery and during the chemo. I was helpless. My father was strong, a decorated military officer, but even he crumbled under the pressure of seeing my mother, his wife, in that state. His hair turned gray and thinned noticeably, all in a matter of months.

I began to do terribly in school. I would just sit in class, staring out the window, surprised when the bell would ring. Sometimes I wouldn't want to go home after school or work, and I felt ashamed. I would look at my mother, and I could see her slipping.

A few weeks into her treatment a magnet appeared, about six inches below the Post-it. It was a pink ribbon. Then an American Cancer Society magnet a week after that. She began to trade postcards with other cancer patients, and those all made their way onto the Kenmore. Soon the refrigerator became a temple of another sort. A shrine more than anything. A beacon of strength.

And I don't know why, but with every new addition to the refrigerator, my mother would get better. It was as if she suddenly woke up one morning and decided that she was going to live, and that she was going to pull herself out of it, bit by bit. Every ounce of strength she used to put into cleaning that thing now went into healing herself. And all the little tangible things she used to help herself were put there on that shrine.

This was my cue. My father and I both began to find things and put them on the fridge also. We never talked about it, but we had both found a way to help her, and we did. I found magnets at the mall with silly jokes about shopping. My dad would take the junk-mail magnets advertising pizza delivery and insurance companies and snap them on. Calendars appeared, a bumper sticker that read “I (heart) my Chihuahua” was slapped onto the side, and we didn’t even have a dog. The shrine grew and grew, and when we ran out of room, we began to cover the older with the new.

And my mother lived.

It’s been more than ten years now, and they have since purchased a new refrigerator. It’s a fancy silver one with the side-by-side doors and one of those ice and water things right there. The inside is still pretty clean, but the exterior is another story. Old postcards, magnets for businesses that have closed down years ago, bumper stickers she had collected while she was sick, they all remain, along with every single possible refrigerator accessory known to man. It doesn’t even look like a refrigerator anymore. It’s a shaggy beast, standing there in the kitchen, completely out of place with the rest of the house.

And underneath it all, it’s still there. I know it’s there even though I can’t see it, because I can *feel* it. I can feel it when I look into my mother’s eyes, when I walk into her house and just breathe the air, when I see her put her head on my father’s shoulder. By God, I can feel it.

*Stay Strong.*

*Matthew James lives in Tucson, Arizona with his wife and family. He may be contacted at [bizarizona@gmail.com](mailto:bizarizona@gmail.com).*

## The Organ Man

By Janet Ross-Pilla

His perfect Windsor knot and tailored suit make him a misfit in this world of sterile blue gowns and paper hairnets. Dark hair emphasizes a gleam of excitement in his deep sable eyes. I etch every feature of his incited face into my mind as I wait and cry. I am invisible to him. To me, he is a distortion through teardrops pooling on the ledge of my lids.

Wide pupils dart back and forth in front of the computer screen as if he is underlining data—data that translates into human beings in need of organs— hearts, kidneys, livers, lungs, eyes. Does it matter if the eyes are sparkling blue? I don't think so.

I stand outside the hospital room in ICU and watch elation grow and form the facial features of this young, pristine man. Behind me, methodical pumping of a respirator keeps alive the body of my best friend's son. It seems that with every other hiss of the pump the object of my amazement stops and focuses; his eyes open wide as if they are portals for the transfer of information. The light of the screen focuses back and bathes his face in a Frankenstein, monster-green glow. I am mesmerized. Through swollen lids, I lock on to the small lifts at the corners of his mouth. It's as if the computer is talking to him, telling him stories with happy endings—but not for everyone.

His elation serves as contrast to the heartbreaking pain emanating through a thin cotton barrier. My eyes hold fast while my ears tune into low mournful cries of, "No, not my baby." My heart cracks in empathy.

I shout, "Damn you, look up from that screen and wipe that smile off your face. He is more than data running through organ banks. He is a special child, more than you will ever know." The organ man might have heard me if my lips had opened beyond a quiver.

An innocuous white bag appears as if dinner has been ordered, another callous reason to hate him. Organ man nods to the bearer, then strides by me down the hallway to a balding courier who paces impatiently. Organ man's impeccable dark blue suit screams perfection and control. "Get this to the University," he tells the courier. I am surprised at the edge of command in a voice I think of as being barely beyond the squeak of change to adulthood. I hear him say the name of the beautiful boy lying behind the curtain, the victim of youth and the speed of a fast car. *Brain dead*, they told my friend an hour earlier, *say your goodbyes*. How can a parent ever say goodbye to a child? A vibrant 28-year-old child named Chad.

I watch the balding man hurry away and wonder what information a nondescript paper bag can hold. If it is any reflection of the love Chad's mother feels for him, it should be mindfully cradled away in a gilded box covered in

precious jewels and lined in velvet. Organ man whisks past me with a bead on the computer as if it is calling his name. He still does not acknowledge the sounds of impending death that are so close he could reach out and wipe away the tears surrounding it.

He's so young, I think. His baby face says he is younger than the boy behind me being held by his mother for as long as they will leave her to grieve. How can the organ man do this for a living? What drives a person to choose a career of matching organs from accidental death victims?

Two weeks later an answer comes, if an answer is ever possible. I am busy with my life—laundry the priority of the day—when I hear the television say, “Thanks to the courage of a donor’s family this 12-year-old girl has a new heart.” I backtrack to the voice. Could it be Chad’s heart? I listen for a clue but it doesn’t seem to matter to the girl’s family. They are filled with joy that their baby girl has another chance—a purpose in life to fulfill. The mother and father praise the donor family’s strength in the face of their own pain and sorrow.

I decide it doesn’t matter if I never find out if it is Chad’s heart. I pick up the phone and dial the number of my friend, the number of a courageous mother whose son filled her purpose in life for 28 short years.

*Janet Ross-Pilla is a writer of fiction, including screenwriting. Awards for her writings include: finalist in 2005 Moondance Competition, Storyteller Award from the Hollywood Black Film Festival. Published stories appear in Summit Avenue Review and Ariston.*

## **Trust in This Dark Night**

By Aviva Rifka Bhandari

Now that I am faced with this trial of the moment, let me pause.  
Reflect on previous trials.

The race forward is not about the hurdles already jumped,  
It is about the confidence and skill at jumping acquired.

Now that I am faced with this impossibly high wall, let me think.  
Remember previous walls.

The difficulty of scaling any height or distance can be shrunk;  
It is ever as simple as deciding where to place the next step.

Now that I am faced with this sorrow of the moment, let me stop.  
Consider previous sorrows.

Didn't I learn that joy always resurfaces?  
Give joy a space and it will place itself there unaided.

Let me trust.

Even as I am faced with this darkness  
Don't I already know that the sun is rising?

*Aviva Rifka Bhandari has donated this poetic meditation to the 'Stories of Strength' anthology in the hope that it might be a help to all those waiting for the sun to rise.*

## The Wonderful Transformation of the Library Troll

By Amy Mullis

*Sometimes the lessons we learn in childhood are the ones we remember when the chips are down and the “o” is all that’s left of our gusto. When I face challenges, which seem to occur with increasing ferocity as I get older, I think back to a little girl who climbed her own Matterhorn and came out on top. This is her story.*

The town where I grew up was big enough to support one elementary school, one post office, and one Library Troll. The public library was approximately the size of a rattlesnake’s cage and the way the wicked librarian, Miss Wentz, presided over it you’d have thought she was Queen Venom. She was about 800 years old and my big brother, with the wisdom of a boy who has assailed to the heights of second grade, told me she wore her wiry gray hair in those little tight curls because the pain of her hairdo helped her stay tough. Her desk was like a tollbooth, and she sat there like a dragon on a treasure chest, presiding over lost books and past-due fines. You’d have thought she was St. Peter taking roll at the gates of heaven the way she looked over her half-moon glasses to see if you were worthy of a book.

In the children’s section, we whispered rumors of how she hated children so much she couldn’t even eat them for dinner like in the storybooks because she’d get a rash and stomach cramps and have to swallow one of the antidote pills she kept in her pocketbook. She would give us stern looks from her gallows and sharpen her pencils meaningfully to a terrifyingly sharp point, admiring the weapons gleefully under the fluorescent lights.

I had a habit of checking out stacks of books at a time. Not only did I figure that would keep me from having to go back to the library so often, but if one book turned out to be unable to deliver a story as enchanting as the cover art suggested, I could toss that book aside and move on to the next one in the pile. Of course an occasional misguided book, separated by fate, would end up in a corner, or wedged in the cushions of an easy chair, or stuffed under the seat of the car. This book relocation habit resulted in overdue fines payable in blood. (Rumor had it that Miss Wentz was partial to O positive.) In these circumstances, I would throw myself on the mercy of my older brother or sisters or my parents, who were strong and brave enough to bear the brunt of Miss Wentz’s wrath. I sure didn’t have a death wish of my own.

One day, tunneling under my bed in search of a lost treasure, I came upon a forgotten library book. I brushed off the dust bunnies, opened the cover, and peeked at the card. It was months overdue. I was doomed. Miss Wentz was probably on her way to my house that very second, dragging her scythe of death behind her. There was only one thing to do. I begged my dad,

who had never before displayed traitorous tendencies, to return the book for me.

Parents pick the worst times to teach life lessons. I don't know why he didn't pick a time when the consequences were less dire, but apparently my life, short as my time on Earth had been, was worth sacrificing to the Child-Hating Library Troll. He drove me to the library. On the way I decided he probably got a commission for every fresh body he delivered. Unfortunately we found a parking spot near the building, and I trudged down the sidewalk until I reached the steps.

There's a mountain in Switzerland known as the Matterhorn, a mountain so craggy and dangerous that only the strongest and bravest dare attempt to climb even its most accessible face. It resembles nothing more than the sore tooth of a giant, and the ghosts of men who have died trying to defeat this landmark litter the surrounding area like fruit flies on a rotten orange. Compared to the library steps that day, the Matterhorn was a freckle on the face of the earth.

I stood at the bottom of those steps on shaky 6-year-old legs, craned my neck to see the peak, and started my ascent. Talk about a bittersweet victory. I scaled the Matterhorn and still had to face the Ice Monster. I hoped the library would be closed, I hoped Miss Wentz would be away from her desk (even though anybody that knew anything about trolls and dragons knew they never deserted their posts), I hoped Jesus had the good sense to pick this moment to return to Earth and would sweep me away in triumph on his white horses to a place where libraries didn't exist. I checked the sky, but didn't notice any indication of help from above. The air was thick and still in the Southern summer heat. I pushed open the heavy door and went inside to face certain death. True to my rotten luck, the Library Troll was working in her laboratory, probably poisoning library paste, as I trudged up to her desk and laid the wretched volume on the corner.

"This is overdue," I whispered, not wanting to add prohibited library volume to my list of offenses, and also because I was too afraid to speak any louder.

She reached out and grasped the book in her talons, opened the cover and looked down at me over her glasses in order to better hex me. She opened her mouth and I closed my eyes and ducked to miss the noxious gasses that I heard she used to paralyze little children.

"Thank you for returning this book."

I peeked through one eye. "What?"

"Thank you for returning this book. I was afraid it was lost. I won't charge you this time, but please be more careful from now on."

She was letting me go. I tried to say thank you, stuttered, tripped on my words and raced out of the building, sailing down the small steps two at a time. All the way home, I wondered at the strange turnaround in the librarian's behavior. After that, whenever I visited the library, Miss Wentz and I exchanged a secret smile, and she would often hold out special books that she thought I might like. Sometimes I would say hello to her when I came in and she would say hello right back. And she never once put a hex on me.

*Amy Mullis lives in a small town in South Carolina that has almost as many inhabitants as off-brand noodle soup has chicken bits. She has published humor in The Christian Science Monitor, on ParenttoParent.com and in the Just for Fun section of AbsoluteWrite.*