

After the
**CHEERING
STOPS**

A NOTE TO THE READER

FROM CYNDY FEASEL

If I'd only known that what I loved the most would end up killing me and taking away everything I loved, I would have never done it."

These were among the last words spoken to me by my late husband, Grant Feasel. He was talking about playing professional football.

Grant was the starting center and long snapper for the Seahawks from 1987 to 1992 after starting his pro football career with the old Baltimore Colts in 1983. While playing 117 games in the National Football League, Grant was just another anonymous offensive lineman who toiled in the trenches, banging up his battered body with every snap of the ball. As you're about to read, those jarring collisions with powerful nose guards took their toll on Grant in physical, mental, and spiritual ways.

You see, Grant drank himself to death—a slow, lingering process that took nearly twenty years. He didn't press a gun to his heart and pull the trigger like San Diego Chargers linebacker Junior Seau did, but Grant committed suicide all the same. He drank to dull the pain that began in his brain—a brain muddled by a history of repetitive trauma and symptomatic concussions. He drank and drank . . . until the alcohol killed him.

Grant's death certificate lists "ESLD" (end-stage liver disease, a form of cirrhosis of the liver) as the cause of his demise, but our family later

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learned that he also suffered from a degenerative brain disease known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, which has been the focus of lawsuits from former NFL players and the topic of a Hollywood movie, *Concussion*, starring Will Smith.

And then there was the collateral damage. I can assure you that what happened to Grant during our adult years together destroyed our marriage, devastated my relationship with our three children, and left me destitute. All because he played a violent game that entertains tens of millions of football fans every Sunday.

What you're about to read will be difficult and raw in many ways, but I want to put a human face on what can happen to an NFL player and his family long after the cheering has stopped. My life and our children's lives became a living hell because of the way alcohol became his medication for a disease that had its roots in the scores of concussions he suffered on the football field. His helmet-to-helmet collisions opened the door to brain trauma that impacted his thought processes, accelerated his physical deterioration, and altered his personality. In the end, we realized that football had cost him everything—his life, his relationship with me, and his family.

Those are important points because the Grant Feasel I fell in love with and brought three children into this world with was not the Grant Feasel I said good-bye to at the age of fifty-two. My husband was someone I adored and respected, a godly man of character who wanted to be the best at what he did—until hits to the head and jarring of his brain resulted in a slow, steady progression of subtle changes to his personality, his work ethic, and his ability to think clearly.

Besides telling Grant's story, I also want to raise awareness for parents about the dangers of playing sports that produce concussions. I'm an art teacher at Fort Worth Christian School, a private Christian pre-K through twelfth grade school in North Richland Hills, Texas. As I write this book, a handful of my middle school students have missed up to

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a week of classroom instruction because of concussions they received while playing organized football and soccer. While many think that concussions are synonymous with football, the head-butting sport of soccer produces the most concussive events by virtue of its popularity and the fact that both boys and girls play the sport.

In addition, a study published in the *American Journal of Sports Medicine* showed that girls playing soccer experienced concussions at nearly *twice* the rate of boys. And if you played contact sports in high school and were concussed, then you need to be aware that you could be traveling down the same road that Grant trod—especially if you are using alcohol or prescription drugs to dull those lingering aches and pains.

Finally, I want to make this point: I know that Grant would not want his name to be remembered this way, but I also know that he would want me to warn others about the dangers of CTE. He always admired the way I could talk to anyone about anything, and he liked me to fill in the gaps for him with groups of people.

I consider *After the Cheering Stops* to be a continuation of a relationship that started with such promise but ended so tragically.

CHAPTER 1

NO DEFENSE AGAINST STRESS

It was my therapist who suggested that I start journaling.

I was going through a rocky, unsettled time in my life when my husband, Grant, was constantly drinking and barely hanging on to his job. His addiction to alcohol brought unbelievable stresses on our marriage and produced deep anxiety among our three children who ranged in age from their early twenties to high school.

My therapist said that keeping a diary-like journal would be an effective stress-management tool and would present me with the opportunity to explore my feelings while gathering thoughts about my life, which was a mess. With that idea in mind, I began journaling in 2007 as a way to process the traumatic developments in my life and release any pent-up emotions and frustrations.

It wasn't easy dealing with an alcoholic husband while trying to maintain a steady home environment for our three children, Sean, Sarah, and Spencer. There were other stresses as well: shielding Grant's addiction from our extended family, managing the demands of a full-time teaching position, and keeping the bills paid. We lived in a five-bedroom, five-bath traditional brick home in Colleyville, an affluent suburb near the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. Even though residing in Colleyville—or “Colleywood,” as my kids joked—was like living in

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a bubble, there was a darkness inside our home at 7003 Orchard Hill Court. Consider this journal entry from April 2010:

My life is over as I know it. The past 17 years with Grant have gone downhill. For the past 30 days, he's been drinking heavily. Now he's drinking in the middle of the day. Grant promised that if he relapsed he would go to a treatment center. We are all very afraid.

My entry continued with a description of what happened between Grant and me that Monday morning. I awoke at my usual 6:00 a.m., knowing that I needed to drive Grant to a nine o'clock appointment with a psychiatrist, Dr. Ernest Brown (not his real name). I had already informed the school administration that I would be taking a personal day. I couldn't trust Grant to drive himself to the doctor's office.

Grant used to be an early riser—dating back to his early morning workouts for football—but that all changed when he started drinking morning, noon, and night in the last couple of years. There were times when he struggled to get out of bed at all.

That morning, I wondered if he'd had so much alcohol the previous day and night that he'd have trouble waking up in time for his appointment. Because of his deteriorating condition, I was anxious for him to see the doctor. For weeks I had pleaded, "Grant, you have to see Dr. Brown! You're depressed. You need to see a psychiatrist."

Grant's father had died a couple of months earlier, sending my husband into a deep emotional tailspin. I know Grant felt guilty because he had interacted with his family less as alcohol took control of his life. I closed my eyes and recalled the touching and emotional memorial service for DeWayne Feasel. It was a beautiful day in Grant's hometown, the high desert city of Barstow, California, a hundred miles east of Los Angeles in the middle of the arid Mojave Desert.

Inside the chapel at Mead Mortuary, the words of old hymns like

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“I Come to the Garden Alone” and “The Old Rugged Cross” caused me to cry as I squeezed Grant’s hand. Then my oldest son, Sean, read the Twenty-Third Psalm with its haunting line: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” (NKJV). Throughout the service, Grant was frail and shaky; his skinny hand felt small as I grasped it tightly and sobbed.

Grant, Sean, and Spencer were pallbearers and wore white gloves. I silently prayed Grant would hold up. During the internment ceremony at Mt. View Memorial Park, with the beautiful desert mountains like a perfectly painted backdrop, I stood and sobbed uncontrollably. I wasn’t crying for my seventy-eight-year-old father-in-law, who’d been given a long life. Instead, I couldn’t help but think that Grant would be next.

In the days and weeks following the memorial service, the amount of alcohol Grant drank on a daily basis escalated. Even though Grant had always been a “closet drinker”—someone who did his best to hide his drinking—he was only fooling himself. As much as he tried to conceal his affair with alcohol from me and the kids, the physical toll couldn’t be missed: Grant’s footing wasn’t sure, he stammered and stuttered, his hands trembled, and his eyes remained glassy 24-7. This was the “new normal”—the natural evolution of a forty-nine-year-old alcoholic who began drinking regularly when his pro football career was over.

Grant started out as a Crown and Coke guy—pouring Crown Royal Canadian Whisky into a Big Gulp-sized cup mostly filled with Diet Coke. Then he switched to mixing Jack Daniel’s, the popular Tennessee whiskey, with whatever was on hand—orange juice, cranberry juice, or Diet Coke. After 2005, he became an Absolut Vodka drinker, adding the potent Swedish vodka to Diet Sprite. He had to give up drinking caffeinated Diet Coke after an anxiety issue landed him in the emergency room. Because his stomach bothered him—a symptom of poor nutrition and a liquid-only diet—he started mixing the vodka with Gatorade, a sports drink favored by athletes.

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It was becoming clear that the alcohol was taking a huge toll on Grant, and he needed help. I don't know how I talked him into agreeing to see a psychiatrist since we disagreed on just about everything, but he said yes. On this particular morning, however, he barely moved in bed, so I gave him a good shake, which he didn't appreciate.

"Okay, okay," he said, shielding his eyes from the bright sunlight filling our bedroom. We were having another beautiful spring morning.

I watched him struggle to get upright. At six feet seven inches tall, Grant was a giant compared to most men, but he was far from his playing weight of 295 pounds. He looked to be a rail-thin 240 pounds, a result of the empty calories he received from consuming alcohol-spiked drinks throughout the day.

Grant drank constantly from a forty-four-ounce Styrofoam cup with a red-and-yellow logo from Sonic Drive-In. He would withdraw to his home office and fill and refill his mega-sized "Route 44" cup with Diet Sprite and Absolut Vodka throughout the day. Just the sound of a pop-top being pulled would tell me that the alcohol was flowing. Come bedtime, he'd set his Route 44 on the nightstand, topped off and readily available to drink from during the night. It was all about maintaining the buzz—and never having a hangover.

"We only have an hour before we have to—"

"Leave me alone," he said. Grant didn't like me hovering around his space. He constantly ridiculed me for "micromanaging" him, and he resented how I hunted down bottles of Absolut Vodka that he hid in his office drawers or stashed in his huge walk-in closet's minifridge—which had a combination lock that he had added.

Whenever I found his booze, I poured the big bottle of vodka—1.75 liters—down the bathroom sink. When he caught me doing that, he usually went ballistic, yelling at me about wasting another forty bucks we didn't have.

On this particular morning, I looked at my husband's gaunt face and

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glazed eyes. “Grant, please get ready,” I said. With that, I left to get myself my morning coffee.

A half hour later, Grant staggered into the kitchen, dressed in his usual around-the-house attire—a loose-fitting, long-sleeved Nike T-shirt and Nike navy-blue sweatpants. He was so skinny that he looked swallowed up in his clothes.

Now that he was on his feet, I got a better measure of how he was doing. Grant was drunk—at eight thirty in the morning. He must have been sipping Diet Sprite and vodka throughout the night or taken long gulps after I left our bedroom.

“Where are my keys?” he demanded.

“I’ve got them.” I held up the keys, which I had started hiding whenever I thought he was too drunk to drive. I couldn’t live with myself if he got behind the wheel. “You’re not driving anywhere in your condition. I told you last night that I’ll drive.” I was adamant.

Grant wasn’t having it. “I’m driving myself!”

“No, you’re not. I’m driving.”

I wasn’t going to argue with someone who was in no shape to get behind the wheel. I stepped through the garage and onto our driveway, where Grant’s company car—a run-of-the-mill Ford Taurus—was parked.

Grant chased after me. “Give me those keys!”

I was gripping the car keys in my right hand when Grant wrestled me for them. We pushed and pulled, neither of us giving in until Grant wrenched them out of my hand, the metal key ring scraping my fingers and causing them to bleed. The keys fell to the pavement, and I let out some sort of scream from the pain. My heart was beating fast; I was afraid.

I didn’t care if the whole neighborhood saw us. This wouldn’t have been our first public quarrel anyway. Grant scooped up the keys, opened the car door, and sat down in the driver’s seat. Then he sat there, too drunk to process what to do next. We had an automatic gate to our driveway, and there were times when he couldn’t remember how to open the gate.

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I ran back inside the house and called for our oldest child.

“Sean, you have to come help me with Dad! He’s trying to drive himself to the doctor, and he’s drunk.”

Sean came running from his upstairs bedroom. Twenty-five years old at the time, our son had graduated from Abilene Christian University and lived in Austin. He came home for a long weekend because he knew I’d been having a lot of problems with Grant and needed backup. When the two of us reached the driveway, I was relieved to see that Grant had stepped out of the car, although I had no idea why.

Sean, who was strong-willed, took charge. “Dad, you’re not driving. You’re in no shape to do this.”

Grant didn’t see what the problem was. “There’s nothing wrong with me. I can drive.”

“No, Dad. Give me the keys—now.”

My son spoke with a firm-but-under-control voice. Then Sean reached for the keys, and father and son tussled for a moment. Sean wasn’t as tall as Grant, but he was a stout six feet and had played defensive back at ACU, the same school where Grant had played his college ball.

Their grappling was short-lived. Sean seized the car keys from Grant’s clasp and told his father, “Get in the car. I’m driving.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as the Ford Taurus pulled out of the driveway. As I watched our son and my drunken husband leave the neighborhood, I thought about how we had gotten to this tragic point in our lives and our marriage.

Since he retired from the NFL, Grant had a sales position with Fujifilm Medical Systems, a manufacturer of digital X-ray and mammography equipment. He mainly worked out of his home office, although he’d also go on the road to meet and take care of his clients. Most of the time, though, he holed up in his office off the master bedroom, answering e-mails and returning sales calls. The lack of managerial supervision meant that Grant could get an early start on his Route 44s.

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Right around the time that Grant's father died on January 30, 2010, my husband told me that I couldn't call him on his work phone because someone in human resources was after him.

"After you for what?" I asked.

"I don't know. They're trying to get me and give someone else my job! I know they're looking at my phone and the text messages you send me. Don't talk about my drinking in your text messages!"

Grant was clearly paranoid that someone in HR would find out about his addiction to alcohol. And the filter that protected him from using bad language in public and with our kids was impaired as well.

One night I was at the gym working out when our daughter, Sarah, went into the master bathroom to borrow my fingernail polish. Grant heard her making some noise and confronted her.

"What the @\$% are you doing here?" he roared. "Get the @\$% out of my bathroom!"

Sarah had never been spoken to in such a manner. When she heard her father drop the f-bomb on her, she was momentarily stunned and then started crying hysterically. She ran out of the bathroom in tears and called me at the gym to tell me the story. She was still upset when I arrived home.

When I went to talk to Grant about how he treated Sarah, he was drunk and half-asleep in our bed. He said he thought HR was breaking into the house. This type of odd behavior had been building for a long time. Paranoia about people out to get him, using vile language, and hands that shook like he had full-blown Parkinson's—Grant needed serious help.

Since my efforts to convince him to enter rehab had fallen on deaf ears, I tried a different tactic: perhaps he would agree to see a psychiatrist. Maybe a shrink could unearth any genetic, physiological, psychological, or social factors behind his problem drinking. When he said yes to my suggestion, I thought we were moving in the right direction.

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After the driveway scuffle, Sean drove him to his appointment with Dr. Brown. I wasn't there, but I do know this: instead of noticing that my husband was drunk in the middle of the morning—and sending him straight to a rehab facility like I hoped—the psychiatrist asked a few basic questions and handed my husband a prescription for Prozac, an anti-depressant, and Xanax, an antianxiety medication. In other words, all the “help” my husband received were two bottles of mood-relaxing pills, which are easy to become addicted to and easier to abuse—especially if you take them in conjunction with alcohol.

A week later, I saw the bottle of Xanax near his bathroom sink. I shook it—empty. One hundred potent antianxiety pills were gone in less than seven days.

I called Dr. Brown's office and spoke with a nurse. “I'm Grant Feasel's wife, and I'm sure he said that I can't talk to you, but I want Dr. Brown to know that Grant's going to end up dead from those prescriptions he gave him. My husband is mixing them with vodka.”

The nurse stopped me. “He's drinking with those?”

“Yes. He's taking those pills with vodka. The entire prescription for Xanax you gave him a week ago is gone.”

“Okay, Mrs. Feasel. I'll put a red flag on his folder and make sure when he comes in next time that Dr. Brown discusses this with him.”

The next time Grant saw Dr. Brown, my impaired husband left the office with a different antianxiety prescription in hand—for Klonopin, which turned out to be something new to mix with Grant's vodka-spiked Gatorade. When I called Dr. Brown's office, I was put through to the psychiatrist, who said that he had told Grant that he needed to get into a rehab facility *quickly*. Grant never told me about that conversation.

And then Grant was hit by another thunderbolt—the sudden death of his good friend Keli McGregor, who was just two years younger than he. Keli and Grant were teammates on the Seattle Seahawks and got on so well that Keli's wife, Lori, and I called them soul mates. Keli was a

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wonderful Christian man of high character and a magnetic personality who drew people to him.

Our bond continued after football was over. We saw Keli and Lori occasionally in Texas and cheered Keli's move into baseball when he became the senior director of operations for the Colorado Rockies in 1993. Keli proved to be an excellent administrator and was ultimately named president and CEO of the Rockies in 2001. We couldn't have been happier for him and his family.

Here's where Keli's story takes an interesting twist: Back in 1996, Keli was instrumental in the hiring of Grant's brother, Greg, as the Rockies' vice president of sales and marketing, and Greg has worked in the front office ever since. Then on April 20, 2010, Keli was in a Salt Lake City hotel room on a routine business trip for the Rockies when he suddenly died of a heart attack. He was forty-seven years old.

The news of Keli's death descended like a thick fog upon my husband, who was weakening each day from depression.

I wrote this in my journal:

Grant's lost.

I miss him.

I'm lonely.

In the midst of my pain, I recalled the last time that I saw Keli. It had been a couple of months earlier when he flew to California for DeWayne's funeral. He honored the family by offering a heartfelt prayer during the memorial service.

After the internment, Keli found me in the crowd and pulled me aside. I immediately noticed the great worry in his face.

"Cyndy, something's wrong with Grant," he said. "What is it? What's going on with him? His hands are shaking, and I've watched how he keeps them in his pockets so others don't notice, but I have.

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I'm worried about him! He doesn't look well. He's too thin. Just tell me what's wrong."

I wish Keli and I could have had a few minutes of privacy so that I could tell him everything. "I can't talk here," I said. "Let me call you in a few days."

"That's a promise," Keli said, a look of concern still etched in his expression.

"Yes, that's a promise."

Due to Grant's deterioration, I never made that phone call, and we never spoke again. Then came the shocking news of Keli's sudden and unexpected death.

His words haunt me to this day.

LOSING CONTROL

A few weeks later, on Sunday, May 2, 2010, Grant went to church with me for the first time in months.

I was raised in the church—and so was Grant. We had that common bond, so I was encouraged when he joined me to worship at Gateway Church, a nondenominational congregation. Perhaps we were turning a corner.

I could tell that Grant had been drinking that morning, but I kept my thoughts to myself to maintain peace between us. We took separate cars because Sarah—who was attending the University of North Texas but living at home—and I were planning to go out to lunch and see a movie together after church. We both said we needed some "girl time."

Inside Gateway, the three of us sat together, and I noticed that Grant raised his hands and arms while the worship band played with great emotion. That was totally out of character for him, and he also sang loud—way too loud. I didn't know what to think.

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When the service was over, Sarah whispered in my ear, “Dad’s drunk. He’s acting weird.”

We couldn’t make a scene at church, so all we could do was watch Grant drive away. We were both very upset about him driving drunk. He did it regularly though.

Sarah and I got in my car, and we had a good cry. Then I called my sister and father and told them how afraid I was about the situation. What was happening was insane—and I felt powerless to do anything about it. Life was spinning out of control for him and for the rest of us.

That evening, I wrote this entry in my journal:

When Sarah and I came home from the movie, Grant must have mixed meds with his vodka because he was totally out of it. That night, he fell once again into the nightstand, crushing the lampshade and knocking all the pictures off the wall, along with a huge Gatorade bottle full of vodka. He also wet our bed.

Nighttime was worse with Grant for several reasons. By then, the accumulation of vodka in his system was at its highest—and his ability to be cognizant or maintain physical control of his body was at its lowest. More than once I heard him stir in the night and waked to the sight of him standing at the foot of our bed—and peeing onto our bedding and mattress.

The first time I witnessed this bizarre behavior in the middle of the night, I asked him, “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Grant, you’re peeing on our bed.”

“Oh.”

That’s how out of it Grant was. Each time he soaked our sheets, I flipped on a light switch and got out another set of sheets for our king-size bed.



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My next journal entry was from May 5, 2010, written when our youngest child, Spencer, was finishing his sophomore year at Fort Worth Christian.

Spencer and I were coming up to the house when we saw two police cars in front of our home. As we drove up, two policemen were loitering at our front door.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

One of the cops replied, “We’re looking for Grant Feasel.”

“I’m his wife.”

“Ma’am, we got a call from a coworker of Grant’s who said she was afraid for his safety. She said he sounded very depressed on the phone, and there were loud noises in the background. Do you have any guns in the home, ma’am?”

“No, I don’t believe so.”

“Can you let us in?”

“Of course.”

I’ll admit to feeling icy fear when we stepped into the quiet house. We found Grant in the master bedroom, lying perfectly still on our bed and totally out of reality. That night, I wrote this in my journal:

After the cops leave, Grant falls two or three times really badly. He tried to have a phone call but dropped the phone, which sounded like a gunshot when it hit the hardwood floor. I am terrified that he is going to hurt himself seriously. He just crashed into the bathroom door and knocked a hole in the wall. Earlier, it was a broken office door handle and a broken fax machine.

I have a picture on my phone of Grant drunk, passed out on the carpet. He fell out of bed and hit his head and ribs. He told me the next morning that I’d broken his ribs. God help us.

How low could he go? How horrible could things get?

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This was not the life or the marriage I expected when I met a tall, blond, and good-looking football player from California on the Abilene Christian University campus.

The football player who wanted to become a dentist.