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### PUT INTO PLACE

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Heather Carey. PUT INTO PLACE. (Under the direction of Steven P. Faulkner)  
Department of English and Modern Languages, November 2010

The blending of illusion and reality is the most prominent theme in the thesis. A mirror is the introductory metaphor for my perception of self and God; it reflects reality, but does not capture internal conflict. As a character in the work, I internalize others' truths to create my persona; my narrative stance reflects my disconnected, dispassionate view of reality. The cold, stark church building serves as the metaphor for church members' treatment of my family under the guise of religious authority. Elementary school classmates' actions blend with those of men in my dating life to affect this persona and I adapt to meet their expectations, whether consciously in the David Leohr relationship, or subconsciously in my behavior's change as a result of classmates' bullying. In my adolescence, I create an ideal man from books; that ideal colors the reality of the dating relationships I pursue. My persona shifts when real men shatter that ideal. My perception of God in the first several chapters informs my later choices until I am forced to accept that substitutes such as men, alcohol, and self do not replace His truth. My sister's efforts to escape a spoiled marriage are misunderstood by church leaders. The deacons of my father's church pronounce judgment on my sister because hers does not qualify for their version of an acceptable Biblical divorce. My belief that my sister is more privileged because of her marriage is the root of my jealous, selfish behavior toward her through her divorce. My father is betrayed by the illusion of his parishioner's loyalty, and, when he suffers a heart attack because of the stress of twenty years in church ministry, his family is left to support him. The end of the thesis focuses on me at the Grand Canyon recognizing and understanding the depth perception of the Canyon as the final metaphor for my current clarity.

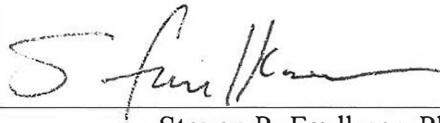
The influence of family and the importance of choice serve as motifs to this theme. I choose opinions, worldviews, and spiritual truths based on my perception of others and self. The deacons' decision to bring my sister to church discipline and to fire my father shapes our family's spiritual, personal, and relational development. These decisions also affect my own developing identity. In the end, my destructive choices are balanced by healthy ones because I have learned to accept God's truth rather than a substitute.

PUT INTO PLACE

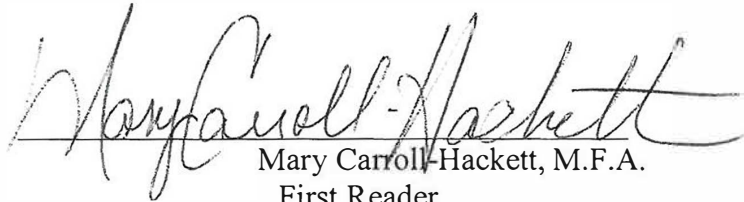
by  
Heather C. Carey

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

Longwood University  
Department of English and Modern Languages



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## Chapter One

I skipped out the front door of the house, slamming the screen door behind me. I winced, then remembered Mom was already at church, so she wouldn't yell. Sunlight filtered through the thick leaves of the massive oak in our side lot as birds whistled and called. I hopped over the one cement step on our porch to the driveway and twirled my dress to let it fan out in ripples of purple and white. My white shoes were a little scuffed, but, being eight years old, I didn't care. I felt and looked pretty, so I smiled and breathed in the early Sunday morning air. Sunday School started at 9:30, so I had ten minutes to walk the half mile down the parking lot separating our house and yard from the church. I looked to the large, rectangular dog lot to my right and yelled at Wendy, our springer spaniel. Her tongue lolled out the right side of her mouth and she cocked her head when I called her name. Her head perked up as her tail whipped brown and white flashes through the air. I hopped over to scratch her soft, curly ears.

"Sorry, girl," I said. "I gotta go to church."

I turned and ran as she yelped and scratched at the fence. I skipped around the bus barn - a large brown-and-beige building originally built to house church vehicles, but now used for children's activities and church functions. A dilapidated old bus sat in the lot between the bus barn and our yard, its back end on cement blocks and its front tires hidden behind long grass and weeds. I could just read the church logo: First Baptist Church of North Terre Haute, written in fading green calligraphy. I slowed to a walk when I got to the pavement marking the end of our yard and the beginning of the church parking lot. Cars were maneuvering for the closest spots available to the brick building in time for Sunday School; the sun flashed off the windows of Oldsmobiles, Buicks, and

a fleet of forest-green, cherry-red, and beige Dodge and Ford minivans. A man in a navy blue suit pushed a woman with black orthopedic shoes in a wheel chair up a ramp.

My seven-year-old sister, Autumn, ran up to my right and grabbed my arm.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were leaving?” she asked, “I was spraying my hair and didn’t hear the door slam.” Her pink dress was just as poufy and girly as mine.

“Why should I have to let you know all the time? You know what time it is,” I said.

Joe Cowan opened the two glass double doors leading into the main hallway of the church and I grinned at him. He smiled and waved.

Autumn stomped toward Joe, her blonde curls springing up and down her back with each step. “Good morning, Joe.”

“Good morning, girls.” He smiled, showing the gap in his two front teeth. He hugged us both and reached in his jacket pocket for two red-and-white-striped mints. We said thank you and unwrapped them, stuffing them into our mouths. I wiped my feet on the big black rug before walking on the light blue carpet of the entrance-way toward the foyer. Two chapel-like rooms flanked my right and left; I looked in to see if I knew anybody. Those in the Durr Chapel were part of the Disciples class, elderly people with tightly-curled grey or white hair and thick, heavy glasses, the women wearing patterned dresses and small black pumps, the men in three-piece suits.

I stepped along the black borders of the gray geometric shapes of the linoleum like Dorothy walking the fence in *The Wizard of Oz*, outlining the patterns while I waited on Mom and Dad to get done with whatever meeting they were in. I held my arms out parallel to the ground and placed one foot directly in front of the other while pretending

to talk to Hunk, Hickory, Zeke, and Auntie Em. Other children ran around me playing tag or chasing one another.

The church was made of cement blocks and steel. Because of this, most of its cavernous main areas were always cold, even in humid, hot Indiana summers. I shivered as I walked into the foyer.

“Hey, where’s Mom?” Autumn asked as she ran up beside me.

“I don’t know. Probably putting on her choir robe. Why?”

“I gotta ask her if I can go over to Heidi’s house after church.”

“Well, she’s probably downstairs.” I looked right toward the sanctuary as people milled about in their Sunday dresses and suits, greeting each other or hurrying through the foyer to the sanctuary. I watched as Barry Cowan, Joe’s son, turned dials on the black soundboard to adjust the volume of the singer practicing before the service.

Autumn ran straight toward the cement stairs leading down to the basement which was a catacomb of dark, cold rooms. The hallways snaked through ominous, silent classrooms where the air was stale and musty with dust and age. The hall was a gaping cave with cement pillars stuck in four or five places through the center of the room like symmetrical stalagmites. During years of candlelight Thanksgiving services, Sunday potluck lunches, or spaghetti dinners put on by the youth of the church to raise money for missions trips, I would stand below the stairs and watch peoples’ legs as they descended, trying to guess their identity before they appeared. Sometimes I would pretend that Samson stood between two of the pillars, ready to push them away to collapse the sanctuary on the people in judgment, like he did with the Philistines.



I whirled around, heading back through the bright light of the hallway toward my Sunday School class. My teacher was a seventy-year-old woman named Clarice Milam. She was a small, wiry woman whose hair swirled into black and white curls, wore glasses, and always smiled, exposing brown teeth and stale, smoky breath. When she talked, she sounded parched, like there was no saliva in her mouth. I always wanted her to drink water.

“Okay, kids, everybody’s here, so let’s put away the Play-Doh,” Clarice said, clapping her hands.

I dragged my tiny metal chair in front of Clarice along with about fifteen other children. She pulled a large felt-covered board out of one of the small closets and a box of paper cutouts of Biblical characters that stuck to the felt. In her cracked voice, she told us a story about Moses bringing The Ten Commandments to the tribes of Israel from the cloud of God’s presence on top of Mt. Sinai. Moses’ flannel-figure white hair and beard flowed around his white tunic and he carried a huge stone tablet that resembled a tombstone in each hand. His face glowed with the light of God. According to Clarice, once he reached the bottom of the mountain after forty days with God, he discovered that the Israelites had fashioned an idol out of their gold jewelry and danced in front of it while offering animal sacrifices. Evidently, he had been gone too long for them and the people were tired of waiting. I thought it was weird that the people couldn’t wait a few days for Moses to come back with a word from an almighty God. Moses was furious and threw the stone tablets at the people. They were shocked, but knew they had betrayed God and Moses. Moses ground the tablets into powder and made the Israelites drink it. I wondered what the chalky mixture would taste like. Would it have chunks of

stone in it? I scrunched my nose. I thought the punishment was too harsh, but didn't care or know enough to say anything. I wondered what it would be like to talk to God directly, like Moses did. Mom and Dad prayed, but whenever I tried, I felt weird. What did God look like? Dad said that God was a spirit, so I couldn't really see him. Could Moses?

Outside the classroom, people started talking, slamming doors, laughing, and walking toward the sanctuary. Dad's deep voice greeted somebody as he walked out of his office. All of us looked to Clarice, who stopped in the middle of her sentence about the people repenting of their betrayal.

"Clarice, can we go?" I asked, twisting in my seat and tapping my right foot.

"Okay, children," she said, squinting behind her heavy glasses, "See you next Sunday." She cackled and pulled the flannel figures off the board.

I dragged my chair back to the table and bolted out the door up the long hallway toward the sanctuary. Joyce Cowan, Joe's wife, came out of the ladies' bathroom in her dark blue belted silk dress and matching heels. Her breast bone jutted out under her dress. Joyce was a small woman with tightly curled, short hair and darting eyes. She and Joe were my sister Autumn's, my brother David's, and my adoptive grandparents in Indiana since my father's parents lived in Virginia and my mother's lived in South Carolina. Joyce often invited us over to spend the night, and sent us birthday cards and presents. Autumn and I would sit in beanbag chairs in their living room eating cheese balls out of our own cups while watching the Disney Channel, then eat at McDonalds and sleep in the spare room while David spent the night with her grandson, Adam, who lived across the street. The next day we would all ride four wheelers around the Cowan's



massive property and explore their company's warehouses. Joe had started a company manufacturing by-products for animal feed using old candy like Sweet-Tarts and gummy worms given to him by candy companies. We climbed mountains of candy in the warehouses covered in white, sugary dust and occasionally I would sneak some while the adults weren't looking.

"Hi, Joyce," I said as I gave her a hug. The silk of her skirt brushed against my cheek as I clasped her waist.

"How are you this morning?" she said as she smoothed a wisp of brown hair from my forehead back into my braid.

"I'm fine," I said. The organist started playing the hymn "Blessed Assurance" and people headed into the double swinging doors leading into the sanctuary. I broke away.

"I gotta go. Mom'll be mad if I'm late," I said. Joyce laughed and turned toward the sanctuary behind me.

The sanctuary yawned in front of me. Heavy, dark, wooden beams supporting the ceiling arched away from the room's center to separate the opaque slivers of blue stained-glass windows surrounding the pews. The sanctuary could seat 400 people, but around 250 attended on Sundays. A dark wooden table carved with "This Do in Remembrance of Me" sat in front of the raised podium flanked by carpeted stairs that fanned out in a circle ending in a piano on the left and an organ on the right. Choir members trailed in from the two side doors in blue choir robes and yellow neck sashes like scholars entering a graduation. Behind the highest rise of the choir loft, a clear plastic sheet set into the high paneled walls kept the rippling turquoise water of the baptistry from spilling on the choir.

Dad sat on one of the pews on the stage, his legs crossed, a Bible in his lap, and a pen in his hand. I slowed as I walked up the middle aisle toward the second row, not stopping to talk to anybody because the music had already started. I plopped down beside my sister and leaned around her to poke my seven-year-old brother, David, in the leg.

“What’d you do that for?” he whispered, his blonde hair bright against the navy blue of his little suit jacket.

“I dunno,” I whispered. Autumn poked me and pointed to Mom sitting in the choir. Mom glared at me and shook her head, her hands folded across her lap. The deep blue of her billowy choir robe made her look like a judge. I sat up straight against the hard back of the pew.

Sam Glover, the music director, walked to the podium and cupped his hands up toward the audience. We stood.

“Everybody turn in your hymnal to Hymn 182: ‘Blessed Assurance’.” He turned toward the choir and cupped his hands upward. Mom stood, her light brown, permed hair shifting on the shoulder of her robe. She glanced at us and reached for a hymnal. Dad stood, cleared his throat and swept his eyes over the crowd, clasping his hands behind his back.

The congregation sang, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine,” as the organist pounded the organ as though hammering nails. I stared at her, then shifted my eyes toward one of the slivered stained-glass windows, trying to imagine what was directly behind the opaque glass.

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I was remembering a Wednesday evening when I strolled down to the church from the parsonage following the cracks in the busted tarmac through the few cars clustered around the church humming Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody".

As I came closer, I saw my parents standing by a long, dark blue car that looked like a limousine parked in Dad's usual space. My eyes widened. Dad stared at a tall, lanky man who was smiling, his hand on Dad's shoulder. Autumn sprinted at me, her long, blonde hair flying, her pink shorts a flash of color in the fading sun.

"Heather – come quick and look! Mr. Bland just gave us a car." She grabbed my hand and yanked me toward the cluster of adults. Dad gripped a car key in his left hand and Mom's hands were clapped over her mouth. She was crying.

The car gleamed in the dimming sunlight, its silver door handles glistening with a coat of fresh wax. The car wasn't brand new, but to me, it was Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and a limousine rolled into one. I stared.

"Okay, kids," Dad said, his eyes wide. "Do you want to go for a drive in our new car?"

The three of us squealed and scrambled for the doors as Mom walked in a daze to the passenger side, her hair blowing a little in the breeze.

Our only car was a Buick Regal that barely held all five of us; when we drove to visit family in South Carolina or Virginia, Autumn and I would sleep in the back seat with our feet in each other's faces while David slept in one of the cubbies in the floor. We had been praying for a new car for several months and now we were sitting in it.

“Guys, do you remember praying for this?” Mom asked, twisting in her seat to beam at us.

“Yeah,” David said, feeling the cloth on the side of the car.

“Absolutely,” Autumn said, bouncing up and down on the plush seat.

“Yeah,” I said, staring at the dashboard.

“Isn’t God good?” Mom asked, her eyes teary.

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“Thank you, you may be seated,” Sam said. I blinked and shifted to the left in my pew, looking down at the floor.

Dad cleared his throat, stood up, and nodded to Sam. He walked to the podium, the sleeves of his black suit coat dangling until he placed his Bible on the podium. He smoothed his red tie and placed his hands on both sides of the podium.

“Good morning. How is everyone today?” he said, his amplified bass voice echoing off the beams. Scattered muted responses rippled through the crowd. Dad’s dark blonde hair receded in two spots around his middle patch of hair. At thirty one, Dad’s belly protruded a little under his suit coat. His wide forehead glistened under the light focused on him. He took a drink from the red glass on the podium and looked out over the people again.

“Will you turn in your Bibles to Hebrews 11?” he asked. Pages shuffled, then Dad said, “Let us pray.”

When Dad got the call offering him senior pastorate of the church, Mom had cried. She did not want to move to the flat plains, corn, soybeans, and chilling cold of Indiana, but she trusted Dad’s guidance and God’s call, so she left Florida, silent as we

passed the orange trees lining the highway out of Tallahassee. I now glanced at her bowed head as Dad prayed and wondered if she still regretted the move, but remembered I was supposed to bow my head. I looked at my feet and squished my shoes together. My prayers to God were usually about my dog, my family, or requests for new books. How could God hear everybody on the whole earth's prayers at the same time? Did an angel catch them all as they shot to Heaven and then bring them to God's massive silver throne or did God hear every prayer as soon as they left the person's lips? If that was true, he probably had a massive headache.

Mom and Dad prayed all the time. Before we left Tallahassee, Mom prayed that God would give us a house with four bedrooms, three bathrooms, a fireplace, and a big yard. He answered with the church's parsonage, which exactly fitted Mom's specifications. I was shocked by how specifically He had answered. I accepted that the house was an answer to Mom's prayer because she was so good at it. To me, God was a mixture of Santa Claus, justice, and bright light and wind. He sifted through our lives like an invisible mist, then returned to Heaven to dole out punishment and blessing based on a person's actions. I didn't try too hard to understand.

Dad finished praying and started preaching; my mind wandered.

The church owned the parsonage; we lived there because Dad was the pastor. It sat on a small rise about a quarter mile from the church. Because it was built in the 1970's, the split-level house was half white slats and half brick with a fenced-in backyard the length of the house, a dog pen adjacent to the backyard. No other houses had been built on our side of the street since the church owned property, so an acre of land stretched out to the left side. A small clearing with the one huge tree near the house was

interrupted by a little grove of trees surrounding the church's picnic shelter; the grove stood isolated in the expanse of land stretching to the end of the street and railroad tracks. Behind our backyard and across a street was Otter Creek Junior High School, so a tennis court and track field lay adjacent to the church's land. We took full advantage of the expanse in the nine years we lived in the house. We moved into the house when I was about to enter third grade, Autumn the second grade, and David kindergarten.

Mom saw the place as a blessing; Autumn, David, and I saw it as a chore. So much more space was available for her to make us clean. Each of us would be assigned a bathroom: the pink, the blue, or the yellow. The pink bathroom was normal; the child to which it was assigned dusted the furniture in the larger half of the house. The yellow bathroom was the biggest – the vanity was covered with hairspray, bottles of makeup, tubes of mascara, combs, brushes, water bottles, and face astringent, so the child cleaning it dusted the smaller half. The blue bathroom was the tiny bathroom attached to my parents' room, so that child vacuumed the house. None of us liked cleaning the yellow bathroom or vacuuming, so we looked forward to cleaning the pink bathroom in the rotation.

When I cleaned the yellow bathroom, I stood in the vanity mirror and looked left and right down the side mirrors at my hundred duplicate selves mimicking my actions. The images went on to infinity, like our future in Heaven was supposed to. I bent my arm, held the hairspray different ways, or squished my face in different poses sitting on the counter staring straight into one of the side mirrors. I talked to future boyfriends, kissing the mirror to sense how it would feel. I imagined what forever in Heaven would be like and shivered at the concept of something never ending. I wasn't sure I wanted to



go there. As I imagined eternity, the gold streets and clear brooks of Heaven would play in my mind like a damaged movie that would click, stop, and then play over and over. I was terrified, but muted the fear with present reality. I was standing in a bathroom holding a can of hairspray and wiping the counter. This task had an ending; I focused on it, and the fear was smashed in a tunnel of my mind, only to resurface just about every time I cleaned the bathroom.

Afternoons differed for the three of us after the cleaning was done. David ran off to play G.I. Joe's with other boys, flood chipmunk holes to keep them as pets, or sell rocks to the neighborhood. Autumn talked on the phone to friends or boyfriends, and I would read. In my older childhood, I could read a book in a couple of hours. I read the *Anne of Avonlea* series, the *Little House on the Prairie* series, Janette Oke books, Frank Peretti's children's books, Nancy Drew and Boxcar Children books, The Babysitter's Club, and the occasional sneaked Sweet Valley High book because my parents didn't approve.

When we were small, Mom read us a chapter from a book like *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan or a children's book like *The Pokey Little Puppy* or *The Little Red Hen*. Our favorite series was about Chippy the Chipmunk. Of these, our favorite was about Chippy's first experience with a babysitter. He was angry that his parents left him, so he was mean to the babysitter. When he was supposed to be sleeping, he crept downstairs to scare her. He hid in a basket, and when she walked in the kitchen to get a drink, he jumped up with a sheet covering his head and screamed. Startled, but not surprised, the babysitter sat Chippy at the table with chocolate chip cookies and a glass of milk to talk about why he was so mean to her. She made him realize how fun it could be to have a

babysitter and he was nice to her the rest of the night. I memorized the book because Mom read it so much, so when Dad read the story and messed up the plot on purpose, I would correct him. One night as he was reading, I stood on the couch by his head and laid my hand on the couch back, Autumn snuggled to his side, and David sprawled across his lap. When he changed something, we all poked him and laughed. When he read the part about Chippy jumping out of the laundry basket, Dad changed the sheet to a pair of underwear and we all yelped with laughter. He insisted that since none of us could read, the book really said that Chippy put underwear on his head. The Underwear Monster was created that night.

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“No, please – no,” Dad said as he stared at us wide-eyed from the kitchen as we sat at the dinner table. “Please don’t come for my children.”

I sat with my spoon in mid-air, Autumn tucked both hands in her lap, and David leaned forward on one elbow. Mom looked at us from the foot of the table, her back to the kitchen. The overhead light illuminated the room with warm light that disappeared in the dimness of the adjacent family room. Supper dishes littered the yellow tablecloth, gravy stains seeped in between plates and dishes.

“Please, my children can’t defend...No...No.” Dad was still, then pulled the phone away from his ear and placed it back in the receiver. He looked at us, then walked into the dining room and placed his hands on the table between Mom and Autumn. We stared.

“I’m sorry, children, but the Underwear Monster just called. He’s coming tonight and I have to stop him. You all stay here with your mother. Hopefully, you’ll be safe

here.” He turned around and we watched his back as he walked through the dark kitchen. Autumn, David, and I looked at each other and scooted back our chairs. We shuffled through the kitchen, our socks scuffing the linoleum floor. We followed Dad’s heavy step through the long hallway leading to my parents’ bedroom. The bedroom door opened and shut as we huddled in the living room.

“Should we go?” David asked. Autumn and I nodded. We slouched through the dark hallway past the pink bathroom on the left, the spare bedroom on the right, and then the yellow bathroom on our left. We paused before the stairs leading up to the bedroom and stood still as we heard Dad yelling.

“No, no, no...you can’t have them.” We heard the bumping of furniture. “Yes, I can,” said a gruff voice that resembled Dad’s, only deeper. The doorknob rattled. We could not move. The door squeaked. A head shrouded in white rounded the open door. The figure growled. We screamed, running back through the hallway toward the dining room, our arms and legs tangled. I pushed against my sister’s arm as I ran. Dad snarled and chortled as he chased us. I scooted around the kitchen counters toward the dining room. Autumn and David shrieked and squealed behind me as I stopped on the rust-colored carpet of the dining room. Dad stomped into the room in a white T-shirt and shorts with a pair of white briefs on his head. He grabbed for my foot and I slipped and fell as he held onto my leg and slid me toward him. He tickled me and I gasped as David lunged onto Dad’s back, Autumn ran around us in circles, and Mom sat laughing at the kitchen table.

My parents also found creative ways to force the three of us to behave. One night after dinner, Dad asked which of the three of us had pushed over Mom’s pillar of clean

laundry that sat on the laundry room floor earlier that day. I looked at Autumn across the table.

"I don't know," I said, twirling my knife in a circle.

"I don't know," Autumn said, shrugging.

We looked at David and he snorted.

"Don't look at me. I didn't do it," he said.

"Okay, well, somebody did it, so if nobody confesses, I guess all three of you will be punished," Dad said as he pushed his plate away from him.

I froze and my eyes widened. Neither Autumn nor David moved.

"Dad, I swear I didn't do it," I said, glaring at Autumn.

"Don't swear," Dad said, rubbing his eyebrows.

A cacophony of protest erupted. Mom rolled her eyes and Dad set his jaw.

"Everybody quiet," Dad said, looking at the tablecloth. "If nobody confesses, then all three of you will go re-fold the laundry and put it up after you all get spankings for lying because somebody did it."

I definitely did not want a spanking. I knew of a way to get out of it, but was unsure how risky I wanted to be.

"I'll drink the water on it," I said, placing my hands on either side of my legs on the wooden chair.

Autumn and David gasped. Dad's head raised and Mom smiled.

"You sure, Heather?" Dad asked.

"Yes." I did not want a spanking.

The water idea was my father's. He found a passage in Exodus about how women accused of cheating on their husbands were brought before the priest to affirm their innocence or guilt. The priest would mix bitter herbs into a glass of water and give it to the woman to drink. If innocent, nothing would happen and the woman would be allowed to return to her husband. If guilty, the woman's entrails would rot. Dad took the idea of the passage and would mix salt in a glass of water. If we were telling the truth, nothing would happen, but if we were lying, then our fate was up to God. All three of us completely bought it.

Dad walked to the kitchen to mix the drink, came back, and set it in front of me. I watched the salt swirl and partially dissolve in the murky water. The hexagonal patterns on our tablecloth were magnified through the glass's thick bottom. I straightened my arms at my sides and took a deep breath. Was I sure I hadn't knocked over the laundry? Maybe my foot had slipped and kicked it when I was rounding the corner to the kitchen. Maybe I had gotten a word wrong when I asserted that I hadn't done it and inadvertently lied. Maybe I used "the" when I should have used "a". I didn't know what would happen to me if I drank the water, but I knew what would happen if I didn't. I'd just get a spanking. I'd been spanked before and knew I could deal with that. I looked up.

"I can't do it," I said.

"Does that mean you kicked over the laundry?" Dad asked.

"No, but I can't drink the water."

"Well, then, you know what that means. Go fold the laundry and put it back."

"No spanking?" I asked.

"Nope. Just re-fold the laundry," Dad said.

Mom stood and picked up my plate and hers. Autumn jumped out of her seat, grabbed the butter dish and ran toward the kitchen. David slid out of his seat and tried to walk through the kitchen.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Mom said, placing the dishes in the sink.

I headed to the laundry room to fold the clothes.

“You come back here when you’re finished to help clean up the kitchen,” Mom said as she turned on the water and the plates shifted with a clink.

“Okay,” I said, knowing exactly how long it would take to fold the clothes.

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Autumn elbowed me in the side. I gasped and jerked my head to the side to glare at her. She opened her eyes wide and nodded to the choir. I didn’t dare look. I blushed and twisted my head back to Dad, each tendon in my neck seeming to pop as I turned.

“Paul says in I Corinthians 13: ‘When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.’ Those words need to be taken literally,” Dad was saying into the microphone that craned toward him from the podium. He paused to take a drink of water, the gulp of his swallow magnified through the silent sanctuary. “We need to grow in love toward one another. We can’t just prophesy and speak against one another, we need to show love in all of its mature forms. In the same passage, Paul says that faith, hope, and love remain, but the greatest of these is love. Let us show that love to our brothers and sister in Christ.”

I fixed my stare on the microphone.



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Mom told us a horrible secret. Since early that particular morning in March of 1989, she had been sewing elaborate dresses for my sister and me for Easter. She usually kept herself holed up in the laundry room with her sewing machine when she worked on a project, morphing into a different creature as she sewed. Once she crossed the threshold separating the hallway from the sewing room, she snapped at us to be quiet and ignored our requests for food. The three of us believed she was allergic to the bright blue walls of the sewing room that swallowed her for hours. That was the only conclusion we could agree on during private conferences about her sputtering, unintelligible behavior. We agreed that we would never bother Mom in the sewing room, and that pact remained unbroken until this particular morning when David decided to violate it to disturb the creature in its habitat.

David thought the house was infested with trolls because of a movie he'd recently seen. He believed it his duty to construct a troll detector to save our family. He was particularly aware of the troll's access to the house through the vents. According to David, slobbering, slimy, sword-wielding monsters could pour out of the vents to tear apart our home and carry what human flesh they could find to far-off places. Of course, Autumn and I didn't believe him since David constantly tried to scare us. Once, he had refused to sleep on the top bunk of his bed because Haley's comet would swoop out of the sky, crash through his window, and engulf him in a blazing haze of smoke, ash, and light. He had persuaded Autumn and me that we would share his fate if the comet mistook our room for his. The three of us then banded together, refusing to sleep in our beds, even though our parents insisted that such phenomena never occurred in human

history and was unlikely to happen now. That night, we slept in sleeping bags in the hallway, far away from the windows. But, our beds were untouched in the morning, so Autumn and I had agreed that David was a liar.

David set up a battle zone of traps and detectors with wiring he found in a junkyard; he coated the wiring with cotton in places where the protective covering had worn thin, placing the devices in the vents in his room. He sat for hours with a stethoscope attached to the wiring listening for the slightest change in the hollow sounds within the vents.

On this particular morning, David sauntered into the sewing room and said, “Hey, Mom, I just made the best troll detector in the world. Nothin’ can get past it. You wanna come see?”

I heard what he said from the spare bedroom where Autumn and I were playing with our Barbies, so we sneaked to the corner of the laundry room to hear what would happen.

Mom snapped the sewing machine off -- the needle bobbed and weaved to a halt as the electric hum slowed and stopped.

“What?” she said. “Why are you interrupting me? Haven’t I told you to never interrupt me when I’m sewing?”

“I made a troll detector, you know, to look out for any trolls that may come up out of the vents to destroy us. I can hear anything they do and I’ll be ready for them. Nothing is gonna get past it – nothing.” David almost shouted his last word.

“Oh, yeah,” said Mom, as if something had just occurred to her, “What about the Man with the Long, Drippy Fingers? He can get through anything, even troll detectors.”

She spoke as if she knew from experience what exactly could occur if this apparition got past the detectors.

“Nuh-uh, my troll detector can catch anything,” said David. He hit the side of the dryer. Autumn and I looked at each other and I shook my head.

“Really,” said Mom, “Did you know that his long fingers let him slide through the vents so he won’t make any noise? Troll detectors can only hear trolls marching, not fingers slithering.”

Silence except for the click and hum of the air conditioner. Autumn shook her Barbie doll’s hair.

“And,” she continued, “his drippy fingers let him stick to anything he wants to drag back down to the basement with him.”

“Nuh-uh,” David said.

“Uh-huh,” Mom said, “Listen to the vents and tell me if you can hear him.”

I envisioned a man dressed in rags with white, clammy skin and shiny, slippery, mucousy hands lurking in our cold, mildew-infested basement. He could have been scuttling around downstairs for all this time unnoticed since our basement ran the entire length of our house and had crevices unexplored by the three of us. Thunderstorms swept over the flat Indiana plains, so this phantom could have crept in the house one night when the wind popped open our back door because Dad forgot to lock it. He sprinted to close it, but the door was located so far down the length of our house that anybody could have wandered in.

I thought of the strange scraping noise I had heard during the afternoon I spent in the basement fashioning a poster for The Good News Club, an organization I was

creating to promote the message of John 3:16. I had decided to advertise by parading around the neighborhood with a sign painted with the club's name and agenda. During my afternoon of work in the basement, I'd heard scurrying sounds, but I thought it was Wendy scratching at the metal enclosure on the basement window for one of her rocks, and I continued scrawling the verse on my white poster board. Why had I not paid more attention to these sounds when our family could be in so much danger?

The days following Mom's revelation were filled with bated apprehension. Our parents tortured the three of us by asking us to continue the chores focused in the basement. Dad had moved the dog food to the bottom of the basement stairs sometime the previous week, and every night, dinner's raucous happiness would disintegrate as the three of us quieted, awaiting our father's edict proclaiming the child chosen to feed the dog. The condemned would hang his or her head, glance up to beg for mercy, and then march to discover his or her fate. The other two would not look up from their plates. Minutes later, the basement door would creak open like a coffin and we heard the cllop of shoes descending into darkness.

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"Let us pray," Dad said. I snapped to attention and looked at Mom. She was staring at me. I bowed my head as Dad asked God to bless the congregation and the day.

After Dad said amen, people rustled to their feet and diverted to the left and right of the pews, trickling down the side aisles. The organist mashed the keys and pushed the pedals of the organ, making it blare. I stayed sitting in the pew and watched Dad. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes several times, then straightened and put them back on as a man stalked toward him. Dad stiffened and shook the man's hand. The man

leaned in and asked Dad something close to his face as he stopped shaking Dad's hand, but still held it. Dad's smile fell just a little.

"Hey, let's go. You wanna go with me to Heidi's house?" Autumn asked. "We gotta go ask Mom if it's okay."

I turned away from Dad to look at my sister.

"Yeah, let's go."

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My father was a good father. My mother, me, and my siblings were his priority. He came home for dinner every night, read to us, played with us, hugged us, and loved us. My memories of our home are filled with Dad playing cowboys and Indians with us, a feather stuck in a sweat band around his head and streaks of red painted on his chest, dressing up in a coonskin cap, Hawaiin shirt, pink and grey swim trunks, knee socks, and loafers to go to parent/teacher conferences as a joke on my sister. I never thought of church as an encumbrance; it was a necessity. My father trained to be a pastor to fulfill God's call; his life and our lives extended from that call. My parents read the Bible to us, prayed with and for us, and treated God as a tangible part of our lives -- He was the invisible sixth person in our family. As a child, I wasn't aware of the difference between a Lutheran, a Catholic, or a Baptist. I didn't know that our church was Independent Baptist, not Southern or any other faction of Baptist. I didn't know that theories on baptism tore churches apart. I didn't comprehend the logistics of the Trinity: God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit or theories related to God's three persons could cause men to be murdered. I just believed Jesus was the Son of God, ignorant that wars were

fought over His divinity. I didn't know how passages of the same Bible my father so fervently believed and supported would be twisted to cause his downfall.



## Chapter Two

My third grade teacher, Mrs. Compton, sat at her desk grading papers. She was nice enough, but I didn't think much of her since she talked to us like we couldn't understand English. Small dark blue desks filled the room, the paint chipping in places. Mrs. Compton had written the multiplication tables in neat, concise cursive on the chalkboard behind her. ABC and 123 posters stuck to the white-washed cement walls. My class of twelve was the only third grade; I was one of three girls in the class. The classroom was one of several in Bible Baptist Church's basement; Bible Baptist was another independent Baptist church that started Terre Haute Christian School to integrate twelve years of education with Biblical principles. The church housed the school.

My boyfriend, Andy Kruzan, and I had recently been elected king and queen of the class. Andy, a pudgy boy with brown hair combed over his eyebrows, flipped open a letter and read it while I sat in the small desk next to him and watched. Lacey Dabelow, a tall, bony girl with big white-and-yellow mottled front teeth and curly brown hair, and Jean Louise Johnson, a redhead with saliva foaming in the corners of her mouth, stood watching over my shoulder. Three boys hunched over a caterpillar's home built out of white poster board, poking the caterpillar with a stick. Several similar poster board homes lined the walls of the small room. Mine was the worst; it had a few rings of poster board glued in swirls to the base and colored mint green with a marker. My caterpillar was probably bored.

"What's it say?" I asked Andy.

“Matthew asks if he can be our son so he can be a prince.” Andy closed the letter, “but I think we have enough sons and daughters, don’t you?” The whole class was full of our pretend children.

“I don’t think he should be our son, but what if we make him a prince?” I asked.

Andy cocked his head a little. “Sure, that’s fine. What should I write him back?”

“Just say that he can be a prince, but not our son.” I looked over to the corner of the room where Matthew knelt over his caterpillar home, his back to us so I could only see the blues and reds of his plaid shirt and short, stubby hairs of his faded bowl cut.

“Okay, I will.” Andy wrote something on the back of the paper. “How’s this: To be or not to be; you can be a prince, but not our son.” He looked up at me and smiled.

“Yeah, that’s great.” I signed the paper beside his. I looked at our names together for a minute: Andy Kruzan and Heather Carey. I grinned and handed the paper back so he could break the news to Matthew.

Third grade was my first school year in Terre Haute. Mom homeschooled me in kindergarten and first grade, then I attended second grade at North Florida Christian School in Talahassee, Florida. Then we had moved to Terre Haute and I was one of only three girls in a class of twelve. Since I was the new girl, the boys liked me and the girls wanted to be my friend. Lacey, Jean Louise, and I had a tentative friendship -- I just didn’t know it yet.

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My parents were pressured to put the three of us in Christian school. It cost about \$6,000 a year in 1988 to have all three children attend a Christian school. My parents couldn’t afford it. Many in our congregation informed my parents that their children

would be corrupted if put in public school, but none offered to pay for our Christian education. Parishioners steadily approached one or both of my parents any time our family was at church to castigate them. They finally relented.

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“Okay, class. Go back to your desks and get out a piece of your lined paper,” Mrs. Compton said as she stood behind her desk, tapping the stack of papers in her hands twice on her desk then placing them in a manila folder to her right. Her brown hair was permed and her bangs poufed in the front. She wore a blue denim jumper with a white turtleneck under it and a necklace made of wooden blocks with A, B, and C painted on them. She stood in the front of the room while we scooted our chairs and reached into the empty square cut out of our desks under our seats for our tablet of paper. We practiced cursive every day after free time.

“Today, we’re going to practice writing your name – capitalizing the first letter of your first and last name and connecting them together,” Mrs. Compton said.

I always liked the learning part of class. I crossed my tennis shoes over each other underneath my plaid jumper. The dress code at Terre Haute Christian required us to wear dresses every day, but we could wear tennis shoes.

“Hey, Heather,” Lacey poked me in the back and I turned around, “Do you have any paper?”

“Um, I don’t know, let me check.” I rummaged in the space under my desk, found some, and handed it to her.

“Hey, just wanted to say great job on being queen of the class,” Lacey said as she took the paper and grabbed a pencil. I stared at the top of her bent head. Jean Louise smirked behind her. I slowly turned back to face the front of the class.

One afternoon during recess, red-headed Jean Louise, tall Lacey, and I sat on the swings while the boys ran around the big tree behind us. I twisted the chains of the swing around to make a helix as Lacey swung beside me, tapping her foot against the swing set’s steel bar. Jean Louise just sat. They talked to each other about Suzy Baker’s birthday party while I twirled in silence. Suzy Baker was Bible Baptist’s pastor’s daughter; she was a year older than us. I wasn’t invited.

“It was so much fun,” Lacey said as the chain of her swing pinged against the bar. Her head was turned away from me; her permed hair blowing and splaying in the slight breeze. Her brown sweater caught on the chain and she fiddled with it.

“I know, wasn’t it?” Jean Louise said, glancing at me. I looked from her to the sky, trying to figure out the shapes of the clouds as they morphed in the wind. One looked like Grumpy and one looked like an ice cream cone from Dairy Queen with the swirl on the end. Grumpy was chasing the swirl. I would too, if I were him.

“My birthday’s next week,” I said, looking down from the sky.

Lacey half-turned to me. “Oh, yeah? What kind of cake are you gonna have?”

“Chocolate chip with chocolate icing.” I stabbed my toe in the sand.

“What if you had lemon cake?” Lacey said as she turned to face me. “It’s my favorite.”

“Yeah, lemon cake’s the best,” Jean Louise said as she nodded.

I hadn't really thought about a lemon cake. Mom always made us our favorite cake for our birthday every year; ever since I could remember, I had wanted chocolate chip with chocolate icing.

"Yeah, maybe," I said. "Would you guys want to come?" I stabbed the sand repeatedly.

"Are you going to have lemon cake?" Lacey asked.

"Yeah. I'll talk to Mom about it," I said. Lacey looked at Jean Louise.

"Then, sure, we'll come."

"Yeah, we'll come," Jean Louise said, leaning in toward Lacey to whisper something in her ear.

I looked behind me at the boys chasing each other through the tall weeds surrounding the tree and wound the swing chain into a spiral again. I swung hard in the opposite direction and let the momentum of the unwinding chain whip me around until I was back to where I started. Ms. Compton yelled at us to come in, so I hopped out of the seat and walked toward the building, the boys a few steps behind me. Jean Louise and Lacey linked arms and walked together.

I went home and told Mom that I wanted a lemon cake.

"What?" she asked. "You said you wanted a chocolate cake when I asked you before. What in the world would make you change your mind?"

"Well, Lacey and Jean Louise said they would come if I had a lemon cake."

Mom set her lips in a hyphen.

"No, absolutely not. Heather, this is your birthday. You should have the cake you want."

My whole body relaxed. All the way home from school, my stomach had rippled. When Mom wouldn't allow me to change my cake, I was relieved.

When I told Lacey and Jean Louise, they didn't come to my party.

I excelled academically. At the Awards Assembly in May, I sat beside my parents in my purple-and-white Easter dress hoping that I had beat Colin Perkins to get the Academic Excellence Award. When our principal, Mr. Harmond, called my name, I smiled and looked at Dad. He patted me on the back and Mom squeezed my arm. The trophy's marble base was inscribed with my name. A genie's lamp stood atop the marble column with a small flame frozen in its spout. I wondered why a genie lamp was the indication of success, so Dad explained that it was the flame of knowledge. I also got a trophy for Bible verse memorization with a cross at the top of the marble column. Mom took a picture of me with my two trophies standing next to Dad in front of the podium surrounded by the red pews and red carpet. I look happy.

When Mom and Dad dropped me off in front of Bible Baptist Church on the first day of fourth grade, I was excited. I tromped up the stairs underneath the awning to the double glass doors with my purple plaid jumper and tennis shoes, my red backpack hanging off one shoulder, and my lunch box in my right hand.

But, fourth grade was horrible. Lacey decided she hated me. She would talk about me to other girls in the different grades during class breaks and recess, make fun of me before everyone in the class on the playground, in the gym, and at lunch. Because I did not attend Bible Baptist Church, I was an outsider, so I was ostracized by Lacey and, because of her influence, by other students in my class. Or, maybe Lacey was just cruel.



The elementary school all ate lunch in the gym adjacent to the church at the same time. Every day, Lacey would do or say something and I tried to laugh it off, but I dreaded lunch. On this particular day, when Mrs. Cullen dismissed us, I slowly put down my pencil and dragged myself to the cupboard where we kept our lunches. I grabbed my yellow Care Bears lunchbox out of its cubby and turned to push the door open that led to the sidewalk. All the other kids had already left. I trudged to the gym, and when I pushed through the doors, I looked around for Lacey. I never wanted to sit with her, but she was the only girl in my grade; Jean Louise left after third grade. I shuffled past the concession stand selling hot sandwiches and chips and made my way to the lines of benches and chairs bustling with the whole elementary school. We weren't allowed on the gym floor or the bleachers, so the benches were set up on the carpet leading to the gym floor. Teachers monitored in the corners or sat at tables eating their salads and sandwiches. As I drug my feet to Lacey's table, she sat up straight and looked at me sideways, her brown hair swaying at her shoulders. The other students at the table kept eating.

"Hey, guys," I said, standing at the end of the table. "Can I sit here?"

There was room at the table, but everybody had shifted around so there wasn't any clear place for me to sit. I stood at the end of the table looking at Lacey, but she ignored me. I blushed and looked down; my heart thumped and I felt everyone behind me staring at me. I looked back up at Lacey, but she was talking to someone next to her. I found a place with some third graders behind their table. I didn't tell my parents.

They knew. They saw me quiet and morose at dinner. I didn't want to go to birthday parties or church activities. They implored the principal and Lacey's parents to

make her stop. Everybody promised that something would be done, but nothing ever was.

Lacey never showed her evil side around adults. The school was about forty minutes from where we lived, so we would carpool with the Dabelows, Lacey's parents, and the Smiths. The Dabelows drove a hatchback station wagon and I always wanted to sit in the hatchback part because I didn't have to look at Lacey or hear her talk. Her mom would play Patch the Pirate tapes and I liked the escape they provided before I was forced to face Lacey's taunts. Her mom barely looked at me when I got in the car and Lacey either wouldn't talk to me at all or would smile and say hello. When my parents picked them up for school, the Dabelow children barely even spoke to us. We never saw each other outside of a school environment.

Fifth and sixth grade were no better. Lacey would never talk to the other girls about me in front of me. They pretended to be my friends.

One day in the sixth grade, I asked Mrs. Whitesell if I could get a drink of water and I heard girls talking in the restroom. I put my ear to the door and heard Lacey talking to one of the other girls about how hideous my clothes were. I pushed away from the door and looked down at the red plaid jumper and matching blue shirt that my mother had sewn for me. With three children in Christian school, my parents didn't have money to buy new clothes from a department store. Mom spent a lot of time sewing our clothes. Suddenly, I was livid. I wanted to defend my mother. Lacey had no idea what my mother did for us. I walked backwards a few steps, then turned and drank water until the girls came out of the bathroom. Lacey stopped when she saw me. I glared at her.

"I heard what you said in the bathroom about my clothes," I said.

“Oh,” Lacey said.

“It wasn’t nice and you’re mean and...” I couldn’t think of anything mean enough to say to her, so I rambled something and turned away from them to walk to class. As I walked away, the girls whispered to each other and laughed. I did not turn back.

Once, Lacey and Suzy Baker, who was in the sixth grade when Lacey and I were in the fifth, asked me to help Suzy cheat on her Bible verse. The fifth and sixth grade classes were combined into one classroom; Ms. Whitesell, a smiley woman with popcorn-colored blonde hair, would teach one grade while the other did class work. Every week, Ms. Whitesell would allow us to come to her desk to recite the Bible verse she chose for the week. If we memorized all the verses for the year, we would get a trophy at the awards assembly at the end of the year. I earned one in third grade and one in fourth. Suzy had forgotten to memorize her verse for the week, so she planned on putting her Bible on the edge of Ms. Whitesell’s desk with her, me, and Lacey to cover it. They concocted this plan without me, then approached me at my desk in the downtime after lunch.

“I don’t know, guys,” I said. I was finishing up some work for the next block of class time.

“Come on,” Lacey said. “She won’t even see it. It’s just a Bible verse.” Both girls stood on either side of my desk. My insides and face tightened. My decision had already been chosen.

“Hey, Ms. Whitesell,” Suzy said. “I’m ready to say my verse now, if you’re ready.”

“Come on over.” Ms. Whitesell smiled at us from her desk.

Suzy slipped a Bible in her jumper pocket and the three of us walked to the desk. I looked at the floor. Other students moseyed in from lunch, swishing empty, squishy, insulated lunch bags or tin boxes with a thermos rattling inside. No partition divided the room to divide the different grades; we just sat facing the front of the room with a slight space between two rows of desks. Each grade's assignments were written on two identical boards, one in front of the twelve fifth graders and in front of the ten sixth graders. Ms. Whitesell's desk was in the back behind both grades. Students stuck their lunch containers in cubby holes, congregated in groups, or sat at their desks rifling through papers.

Suzy stood at the side of Ms. Whitesell's desk, her hand in the front pocket of her jumper with her finger marking the page she needed. Lacey flanked her right and I stood at her left facing Ms. Whitesell.

"But God demonstrates...His..." Suzy's head was straight down, facing her pocket. Lacey stared at something behind my head. I stared at the desk.

"Suzy, what is in your pocket?" Ms. Whitesell still smiled, her voice calm.

"Um, nothing, Ms. Whitesell." Suzy glanced at Lacey. Lacey's face remained unchanged. I tapped my fingernails on the desk.

"Suzy, are you telling me the truth?" Ms. Whitesell asked. I breathed deep and stopped tapping. Suzy placed the Bible on the desk.

"Lacey and Heather, did you know Suzy had a Bible in her pocket?" Ms. Whitesell asked.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. Lacey did not respond.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to turn this situation over to Mr. Harmond, girls.”

Ms. Whitesell’s voice was still calm, her smile unchanged. I could not look her in the eye. I could not move. What would my parents say?

My choice of school punishment was getting spanked by Mr. Harmond or spending the afternoon helping the janitor clean. Horrified at the alternative, my parents chose the afternoon of cleaning. I washed chalkboards with hot soap and water, slopping water on my dress, socks, and tennis shoes. I beat erasers together outside and wiped off the bottom rungs of desks with more hot and soapy water. Lacey and Suzy did not receive the same punishment. Suzy’s father explained the “mistake” away and Lacey’s parents refused to admit to her wrongdoing. My parents made me take responsibility for my actions. They figured the school punishment and the accompanying humiliation was enough.

I wasn’t sure how God could help me. Though my parents eventually pulled us out of Terre Haute Christian after my sixth grade year, I floated through my late grade school and middle school years knowing I should be self-sufficient and independent, but not knowing how. My conscious life was covered with a light gauze through which I saw the world. I *could* break, but I chose to stay wrapped; I was more comfortable reading about fictional people’s lives than I was living my own. I could watch my sister interact with our peers and date boys without the pressure of doing it myself. As the years passed, the gauze became a web.

### Chapter Three

I was the smart one. My twelve-year old sister, Autumn, was the pretty cheerleader with the blonde hair. She bounced around her life with an infectious energy that I envied. She would be elected student council vice-president her senior year of high school, would be on homecoming court, and get more detentions for talking than I could ever track. She was continually grounded for her constant string of D's on report cards. Once, the hottest boy in school broke up with her because she was grounded. I remember her yelling out the passenger-side window of our minivan one afternoon after school that he was a big loser as he walked into the gym amid a crowd of other kids. I laughed while crouching in the back seat, obscured from view.

My ten-year-old brother David would be the off-beat one who took Thoreau's philosophies seriously, even though I'm sure at the time he hadn't read Thoreau. He wore clothes from Goodwill, was in a band called Glass Onion that mimicked Nirvana, idolized the Beatles, and mocked everybody in the school. He lived for his guitar, so he cared about school to the extent that it would allow him to play in his band; he made mostly B's and C's. I took all of the advanced classes in middle and high school, but good grades came easily to me, and my parents weren't as neurotic about me getting a perfect score on the SAT's as my fellow classmates' parents, so I was free to escape in books.

During middle school, my interaction with my peers was painful and awkward because of my insecurities after enduring Lacey's bullying. I knew it, too. I could sense their hesitation as they pulled away from me in conversation and recognized the looks of



bewilderment on their faces as they turned to their friends. Middle school students aren't subtle and I wasn't stupid, so I knew of my social shortcomings.

Books weren't my escape from my social awkwardness - they were the reason for it. When I was in elementary and middle school, I lived at the little corner library in the Plaza North Shopping Center in the north end of Terre Haute, Indiana. I can still remember the showcase books in little wire stands on the bookshelves, the tiny children's section with little red, green, and blue chairs around a white wooden table, and the adult fiction section to the left of the librarians' desk where I would find all of my favorite books. Everything smelled like plastic, musty paper, and ink from the librarian's stamp; the only sounds I could hear were pages turning and keys tapping on the computers. Occasionally, I heard one of the librarians murmuring to one another or to another patron.

I checked out the library's limit of eight books every time my parents would let me, read them all within three days, and begged to go back for more. My dad got tired of me always asking to borrow his library card, so, in a burst of questionable parenting, he offered me my own card with one stipulation: I had to read the entire *Chronicles of Narnia*. I assume most parents would be overjoyed their child asked to have their own library card, but my father knew me well; I read the entire series of seven books within two weeks. When the librarian handed me the light blue plastic card emblazoned with Vigo County Public Library and I got to sign my name on the card bearer's line, I beamed and stared at the card. The librarian probably thought I was as weird as my peers did.

I was the girl who read books while walking through the mall; I was the girl who got books for Christmas presents, would disappear to my room and have at least one book

read by the next day. I was the girl who, when visiting people's houses, walked straight to their bookshelves to see what they owned; I was the girl who read while on vacation at my grandparents' house whom I only saw twice a year. I didn't interact with peers because there was no need. I read because it didn't hurt as much as living.

I entered the world of fantasy and romance anytime I wanted and the characters in the books didn't judge me. Concerned, my parents talked to me about the issue several times, but during those years, my mind was filled with the far-off places of the books I was reading and names of characters as romantic and exciting as Avril, Hope, Freeman, and Porter. All of the women were beautiful, their long chestnut hair curling around their peachy shoulders, their green or sapphire eyes sparkling. The men were barrel-chested with dark hair and piercing gray eyes. The damsels were nice, sweet, and kind; when distress entered their lives, they were rescued by a handsome man gazing with intense love and passion at them. Some complication like parental disapproval or another love always stood between the Avrils and Hopes and true love, but the Freemans and Porters always pursued her because the compulsion to do so was too great to ignore.

My father reached his limit when one day in the car on a road trip to see my grandparents, I said that I was going to name my son Wexal – the name of a man in the book I was reading – *Hope Will Come*. Wexal was a dashing, golden-haired, bronzed statue that was whisking one of my many heroines away. I had no real intention of naming a son Wexal – he was actually the one I wanted to marry. It was too much for Dad. As soon as I said it, he exploded.

“No, no, no,” he turned his head to look at me, but I was directly behind the driver’s seat and he was driving. “Absolutely not. No grandson of mine is going to be named Wexal.”

“Dad, are you kidding?” Shocked, I stared at the back of the leather seat. I wasn’t serious at all.

“No. Wexal is such a stupid name. You can’t name a boy Wexal. He’ll get made fun of every day of his life.”

“Ha! Heather wants to name a son Wexal. What a stupid name,” David said from the protection of two seats over. My sister separated us; he was lucky I wasn’t sitting beside him.

“See, Heather. Your own brother would make fun of him,” Dad said. I stared at the rocky side of the mountain off the interstate. Irritated at my stupid brother, I thought I would antagonize my father.

“Dad, if you don’t want to call him Wexal, you could call him Wex.” I kept looking out the window.

His reaction was ridiculous.

“No! No Wexal! You will not name a grandson Wexal!” he said.

I didn’t see what the big deal was, but the repercussions of that comment were soon felt.

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The day started out like any other Saturday. We ate pancakes for breakfast; my family laughed and talked like this was any other Saturday; I mainly sat. Then, my parents blindsided me with their idea to graft me into the world of teenagers. Their plan

was as follows: I would play basketball on a league team at the YWCA and magically sprout social skills. I was to call the Y to enroll myself. Performing such a task would further connect me to society.

I hunched in the corner of the spare bedroom, eyes puffy, glaring at my father. He stood by the plastic white phone in his “cleaning-the-house” clothes -- a stained white T-shirt and basketball shorts -- the coils of cord snaking out of his hand to the receiver on the nightstand. My dad was intimidating in those days – he was 6’2” and weighed over 200 pounds. His voice, resonant and deep, incited the fear of everything holy in my mind. When he was convinced about a matter involving us children, he was unswerving and we knew better than to cross him. Still wearing the ratty, oversized shirt and baggy grey shorts with the frayed hem I slept in, my hair pulled in a sloppy ponytail, I brushed cobwebs from the corner of the room with one hand while tugging at my shirt with the other. I was furious.

“I am not going to play basketball at the Y, Dad.” I was emphatic in all my thirteen-year-old agony. My DNA was not athletically-programmed; the thought of any type of contact sport involving social interaction terrified me.

“Heather, your mother and I have thought a lot about this and we think that in order for you to be able to interact in social settings, you should play basketball. It’ll get you involved in something other than reading and your mother and I think you need the exercise. You don’t get out much since you’re only interested in your books.” He looked at me, the cord still dangling from his wrist. I stared at his goatee and thought about pulling it all out.

Dad waited, the phone in hand, and I knew I wasn't going to win this one. My world was about to topple. I was doomed to play basketball at the YWCA and my life as a bookworm was over.

Playing on the league team turned out to be a nightmare, an actual recurring nightmare in my book-crazy life. My freshman year, the ninth graders were moved to the high school for the first time. To offset the delay in practice, all of the players that would eventually start the varsity team at my high school as freshmen all played on my league team. They were phenomenal; I think the WNBA drafted some of them. Every night I went to practice, these girls would run drills and finish a good five minutes before me. Irritated, they watched from the sidelines as I ran my puny little suicides. I didn't match, was overweight, and didn't have the right shoes.

My athletic abilities were so poor that I didn't even know how to dribble. On the first day of practice, I walked into the gym at Otter Creek Junior High in my cloth shorts with pink and green zigzags on the hip, baggy green T-shirt and cheap tennis shoes with my hair in a ponytail and my shoulders slumped. The girls were running up and down the court, their expensive Nike shoes squeaking and echoing as they shot the basketball first at one basket and then the other. The shortest girl was probably 5'11" and the tallest was 6'2". They shouted and pummeled each other with each pass of the basketball, their muscled arms shooting the ball like a torpedo out of a submarine. My mouth open and eyes wide, I stood frozen like David facing twelve Goliaths. The coach saw me standing in the shadows of the bleachers and sauntered over to me, her windbreaker pants and jacket swishing against each other. She held a clipboard in one hand and a pencil in the

other. A whistle hung around her neck swaying from side to side as she walked. She was smiling.

“Hi. My name is Mrs. Huddleston. What’s your name?” Her raspy voice was that of a smoker; her blonde hair was clipped and curled close to her head.

“H-Heather Carey,” she said.

“Heather...Heather,” she said, searching the clipboard for my name, then checking it off once she found it. “Okay, Heather, just grab a basketball and get on out there.”

My mouth went dry and I looked from the girls on the court to the rack holding all of the basketballs located about fifteen feet from me. Mrs. Huddleston turned and walked back to the bench with the assumption that I would do as I was told. My feet were cement blocks; each step toward the rack was a punishment. I walked from under the bleachers into the glaring artificial light of the court and grabbed a basketball with my right hand, feeling the bumpy surface broken by the smoothness of the black lines. My hand, accustomed to holding books, rebelled against holding the foreign object and I dropped the basketball. I looked around; nobody had seen me. I hurried after the ball and scooped it into the crook of my arm. I plodded onto the court amid the flurry of white shorts and shoes, shying away from the squeaking, running, and shouting if I came within five feet of a girl. I pounded the basketball into the scuffed surface of the court once and the ball went scuttling away amid the shuffling feet. One of the girls jumped to miss the ball and stopped to stare at me. My face flushed as I hunched even lower and scurried to get the ball. I picked it up with my fingers and loped back to the court to resume my punishment. Again, I pounded the ball too hard and it bounced high into the



air to hit one of the girls in the bicep. This time, Mrs. Huddleston stared at me from the sidelines and I knew that she knew. The other girls sniffed and glanced at me, then resumed their drills. I was mortified.

I blocked out their stares until Saturday's games and Mrs. Huddleston was forced to let me play. When I shot the ball, it flew a good two feet under the basket. All I ever did was run up and down the court looking lost and confused, stressed out about being thrown the ball. I longed for the coach to pull me out of the game. My parents attended all my games to witness the destruction of my self esteem. Their smiles fizzled to blank stares by the end of the first game. Before basketball, I hadn't cared about the stares and laughs of others because of my books. Now I was forced to face my insecurities every Saturday morning amid the squeaks of hundred-dollar shoes and the echoing dribbles of a basketball. The sounds of the game grew more ominous and dreadful so that each time I played, I felt a pendulum swinging ever closer to my midsection. Where was my broad-shouldered man when I needed him? Playing basketball forced me to evaluate what I was - a mousy, scared, shy little girl who looked or acted nothing like the girls being rescued. What man the likes of a Freeman or a Wexal would look twice at a girl like me?

Several Saturdays into my tenure in hell, I woke up early enough to go to the YWCA, my chest tight and face pinched. I put my zigzag shorts on one leg at a time and pulled my permed hair back; the entire process took me fifteen minutes. Forcing one foot in front of the other, I plunked down our stairs, down the long hallway, and into the kitchen. Mom was flipping pancakes on a griddle and smiled when I skulked in. This was weird. Mom never made pancakes on Saturdays anymore because there wasn't enough time to eat them before the game. Usually I ate Frosted Mini-Wheats.

“Hey, sweetie! Good morning. Are Autumn and David awake?” Mom turned the pancake sizzling on the griddle and swished eggs around in a pan on the stove.

“Um, I don’t think so.” I wasn’t about to ask why she was making such a big breakfast.

“Could you go get them up and then come to breakfast?” she said.

I did as I was told, coming back to the kitchen a good twenty minutes later. Mom didn’t say anything about basketball. I glanced at the clock to see that it was 9:20. We needed to leave at 9:30 if we were going to make it on time. Mom transferred the platters of food into the dining room as Autumn bounded into the kitchen followed by a sullen, stooping David.

“Come on, everybody, let’s eat. David, go tell your father that everything’s ready,” Mom said.

I looked at the clock – it was 9:25. Still, Mom said nothing. My heart pounded as each second ticked by. Slowly, very slowly, I walked to my seat. Dad tromped into the dining room followed by David and both sat down. It was 9:30. Nobody said anything. I watched bite after bite of food go to my parents’ mouths but still no words.

I never played another game and no questions were ever asked about my time in practice. My parents let my athletic career die along with my confidence. For a short time, I was allowed to re-enter my world of Wexals.

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My parents tried. My mother hurt to see me outcast and withdrawn. She agonized over ways to help me grow into the young woman she knew God could make me. Basketball just wasn’t the right method. In my seventh and eighth grade years, she

encouraged me to take advanced English classes and join the yearbook staff. I resisted then, too, but she was determined to push me beyond my comfort levels. I've asked her one question in the years since the basketball debacle: why? She rolls her eyes and says, "Because we were desperate."

## Chapter Four

I graduated from high school in June of 1997 among 350 of my classmates in Hulman Center, the basketball arena for the Indiana State Sycamores. I stood with my fellow graduates, some of them classmates and some of them friends, lost within the billows of my blue robe, small and insignificant. I was petrified that my future was not as promising as theirs, so I didn't talk or laugh with them as they straightened each others' hats and tassels. We all stood in the tunnel connected to the arena floor. I stared at the rows of folding chairs laid out in symmetry like the crosses in Arlington National Cemetery. The crowd of waiting families talked, shouted, and laughed – the sound echoed in the arena's open space, creating a wind of hopeful expectation; at any moment, I felt I would collapse from the gale of sound. Then the band started the graduation theme – chairs flipped and squealed as the crowd stood. I swallowed and touched my cap.

I marched out into the massive open space and almost turned from the weight of the crowd's hope. Cameras clicked and flashed as an occasional clap or hoot rippled through the crowd. There are few moments in life when all the expectations, hopes, and promises for your future are sighted on you from multiple angles like the high-powered weapon of a sniper – high school graduation is one of them. Many fellow graduates smiled and waved, seemingly unaware of these pressures. My friends were attending Indiana schools like Indiana University, Notre Dame, and Purdue. One was going to Dartmouth. I was going to Liberty University, an evangelical Christian university in Lynchburg, Virginia founded in 1972 by Jerry Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church and prominent church leader. The university was my parents' alma mater; they

met and married there in 1978. Liberty was part of my family's DNA – we had planned on me attending the school for years. However, the school was not as academically rigorous as the others my friends were attending and I felt the discrepancy. My friends didn't judge or patronize me – I did. As I walked across the rubber mats on the arena's floor, I knew my future was trivial. I didn't even look for my family as I stood in front of the tin folding chair. Many of my friends, wearing yellow chords, medals, pins, and multi-colored silk sashes, sat on the platform with the principals of the school because they were in the top ten percent of the class academically. My unadorned blue robe was identical to every other mediocre graduates' in the barrage of blue. Matt Nartker, our valedictorian, spoke on the road less traveled while Vitamin C's "Graduation Song" played in the background. My future wasn't special, so why should my graduation be? I didn't cry because I didn't know that I probably should.

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My parents drove me to Lynchburg in our green Ford Windstar minivan crammed with plastic storage bins filled with my clothes, plastic furniture with drawers for my toiletries, and a plastic toothbrush and soap holder. I stared out the window for the majority of the ten-hour trip, watching the landscape switch from the plains of Indiana to the hills and mountains of Virginia. I wondered where the other cars were going, headed toward, or away from? When a car pulled away from the flow of traffic to take an exit or turn down an alternate street, I twisted around in my seat until I couldn't see it anymore. The rhythmic bumps and jostles of the minivan as it sped along I-64 rocked me into a sense of security. Mom cried periodically, but I didn't.

When we pulled into my Grandma Carey's driveway after ten hours of driving, she was standing in the window wrapped in her sweater. She flipped on the side light as we pulled down the pavement to the garage at the back. Her back deck was elevated several feet above the ground. Three wrought-iron chairs sat on the deck like giant bowls. Grandma walked onto the deck, her strawberry blonde hair light against the encroaching twilight.

"Hi, son," she said in her Lynchburg drawl. "What can I help you get?"

"Hi, Mom," Dad said. "Don't worry about it. We'll bring all the stuff in a little bit. Let's just go sit and talk."

I would discover that Grandma's house was a constant eighty degrees. The house was an oven, baking the smell of the moth balls into every fabric, crevice, and sill. I sat on her brick of a couch, my posture forced into a straight line by its rigid back. One lamp lit the room. Grandma shuffled to her recliner, Dad slumped in a light blue, hard-backed chair opposite hers, and Mom sat straight at the other end of the couch. We talked about the drive, where to put my stuff, and about my brother and sister. I sat and looked at my locked fingers in my lap when conversation lulled.

Dad wanted me to have a job before they left, so the next day, he dragged me around town looking for one. My cousin, Megan, worked at Country Cookin', a restaurant with an all-you-can-eat salad bar and buffet for \$3.99. She had said that I could get a job there, so Dad and I drove there first. We pulled into the vacant parking lot and Dad slowed the car as he drove by the glass front doors to look for the hours of operation painted on the front. The front of the building looked like a cheap recreation of



the kitchen from the Ingall's house. Carved wooden banisters splintered and peeled in places, but the white wooden door frame had been newly painted.

"I'm going to see if anyone's working," Dad said, his hand on the door handle.

"No, Dad. No way – they're not open yet." I pulled at his shirt, but he didn't change his posture.

"We're not here to eat, Heather," he said as he opened the door and got out.

"We're here to get you a job. We can at least ask if you can fill out an application."

He peered through the glass and knocked on the door. I was mortified. After a few seconds, a tall, thin young man with feathery blonde hair came to the door. He wore a purple polo shirt with green rings around the ends of the short sleeves and black, soiled dress pants and black shoes. Dad spoke to him and the guy turned toward the car and shielded his eyes. He looked back to Dad and said something. Dad turned and gestured for me to join them. I shut my eyes and opened the door.

The place smelled of grease, propane, and bleach. The guy, whose nametag said Lance, pointed toward the closest booth. I sat down while Lance bent behind the front hostess podium. Dad sat beside me and interlaced his fingers on top of the booth's table.

"Here you go," Lance said as he placed an application in front of me. "You can just fill it out here."

I had nodded at Lance as I walked past him into the building, but hadn't said anything. Not talking wasn't good. He wasn't hiring my dad. I took the pencil he offered and filled out the application. Applications are a bloodless interpretation of a person – they don't accurately represent the complexities of the actual man or woman it is supposed to represent. As I filled in my last name, first name, middle initial, and social

security number, I felt just as insignificant as I had at graduation. I was nondescript and the application backed that perception.

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Going to class at Liberty was a blur. I got lost in the swirls of people milling around campus – I didn't have friends because I lived with my grandmother and didn't know how to push myself beyond my paranoia of what others thought of me. I painted my 1980 Dodge Aries a bright royal blue before I came to Liberty because I thought it was cool, but when I drove my little car onto campus amid the SUV's, vans, Hondas, and trucks, I was even more lost. I took GNED – a class for freshmen about defining your worldview, a British literature class taught by a guy with wiry salt-and-pepper hair and glasses, and survey classes on philosophy and the New Testament.

And then there was the Old Testament class with Dr. Harvey Hartmann. His passion for the class material was infectious – at the class's introductory session, he declared that it was not possible to adequately do justice to the beautiful intricacy that was the Old Testament in one semester, but he would try. I sat in DeMoss 1112, a lecture hall in the center of Liberty's DeMoss building, with three hundred other freshmen and sophomores just as nervous as me. Rippled movable partitions in the middle of the room had to be pushed back for the class because it filled the circular room. Dr. Hartmann would speak using a microphone that cracked and whistled. His hair was a bristly black, grey, and white patchwork of craziness. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 12:00-12:50, he enthralled the class with historical background on any of the Old Testament books; my favorite was Ruth. Dr. Hartmann talked at length about Ruth's history, of how brave she was to leave her home in Moab to follow her mother-in-law,

Naomi, to Israel to start a new life. Ruth married Boaz, a close kinsman to Naomi, who redeemed her past by marriage. Their direct descendant was David, the Israelite king who was an ancestor of Jesus Christ. I listened in rapt attention as he spoke of Esther, an Israelite chosen by a Persian king to be his wife after a nation-wide contest, elevating her to be queen of Persia. When one of the king's advisors threatened the entire Jewish people with annihilation, Esther stood up for her people at the risk of her own life, saving them from death. Women of the Old Testament were far from weak. I was mesmerized. Sitting in his class, I felt special, like the stories were just for me. But, I couldn't figure out how to transfer the inspiration to my own life. I couldn't be like Ruth or Esther because I wasn't chosen or special.

Right after class, I'd go straight to Grandma's house because I didn't know what to do on campus. On a typical afternoon, I would pull into the driveway and trudge up the deck stairs to the back door. The chairs wobbled and felt like you were sitting with your seat sunk into a toilet. Grandma lived in Poplar Forest, a neighborhood surrounding what had been Thomas Jefferson's summer home. As I waited for her to shuffle to the door to unlock the deadbolt, I would absorb the beauty of the afternoon. Virginia is a beautiful state filled with flowering trees, the soft blues, pinks, and greys of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and red clay. It smells fresh and earthy, especially after a sudden spring rain storm – Virginia smells like nowhere else.

One afternoon, when Grandma finally opened the door, she peered around the edge, and said, "Hey, Sugar."

“Hey, Grandma,” I said as I shifted my backpack from my shoulder to my hip and leaned toward the opening door. The screen door creaked as I pushed the heavy wooden door partly open.

She hobbled back to her recliner wearing a sweater, elastic-waist cotton jeans, and bright white tennis shoes. I stood on the plastic protective covering in the entryway as I wiped the non-existent dirt off my feet. I walked toward the couch, slinging my bag beside me.

“How was your day?” Grandma asked as she muted QVC.

“It was fine,” I said, looking out the kitchen window.

“Do you have to work tonight?” Grandma asked, placing the remote on the arm of the recliner.

“Yeah,” I said.

“What time do you have to go in?” she said.

“In about a half hour.”

“Do you want something to eat? There’s some turkey in the fridge.”

“Yeah, I might eat something soon,” I said, wanting the conversation to be over.

“Okay.”

I got up, grabbed my bag and headed downstairs to my room. My living quarters included a bedroom and a bathroom with a scalloped glass shower door. The basement was chilly in sharp contrast to the upper level of the house and the blotchy brown and beige carpet smelled like mold. When I was here, I sequestered myself in the basement doing nothing. To have no direction, no plan, no real dreams that you believe you can attain is terrifying. Sometimes I would walk in a square around my bed, hoping that

somewhere in the jumble of my thoughts I'd find one I could hold onto. I wished I could be brave like Ruth and Esther, but had not the slightest idea how to merge who I was with who I desired to be.

I was required to attend convocation, a one-hour chapel service, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 10-11 in the morning. Because I drove to school, I sat in the commuter section watching other students meander through the stands to find their dorm. I envied them – they belonged to something, even if they rolled their eyes as they checked in with their RA. Other students had friends automatically built into their college experience, while I floundered searching for one. Nobody looked me in the eye, nobody cared to know me, and I was too self-conscious to try to befriend anybody. I watched the commotion around the podium and heard the conversation around me while I sat alone. I listened to every word the various pastors, preachers, evangelists, and speakers said because I pretended they were speaking directly to me, hoping to glean some bit of truth that would speak to my loneliness.

I attended all of the night services offered at the school. Missions Emphasis Week was the second week of the semester -- services were held every night in the Vines Center, the school's massive basketball arena. The keynote speaker for the week spoke on the advantages of going as missionaries to countries needing the Gospel. The service started by the campus band playing "Shout to the Lord" and "Better is One Day," the new, hip Christian songs of the time. I didn't know any of them. I sat in the bleachers surrounded by sun-tanned girls with teased bouffants and guys with beanies and conductor hats. Most wore clothes from Hollister, Abercrombie and Fitch, or Goodwill. Most of the girls' eyelashes stuck together like furry tentacles because of their clumped

mascara. Students sang, their faces scrunched with their hands raised and eyes closed. I stood, my hair in that sloppy ponytail with drugstore makeup on my face, wondering if I would look foolish if I raised my hand. The band stopped playing, the crescendo faded, so students put down their hands and opened their eyes. I relaxed.

The speaker spoke on the overwhelming need for missionaries in various third-world countries. After speaking for over an hour about Christians' responsibility to spread the news of Christ, Rob Morris, our campus pastor, asked the band to come back.

"Tonight, we've heard the plea for people to go," he said, his head cocked as he scanned the crowd. The lights dimmed as the guitarist strummed a few chords. My breathing quickened – Was Rob speaking to me?

"Is that you tonight?" Rob asked, "Are you ready to commit yourself to taking the message of the Gospel to distant lands?" He paused and looked to the opposite side of the arena. My breathing stopped.

"If that's you tonight, then right now, make your way down to the stage. Pledge your service to God tonight. Don't be afraid or intimidated. If the Lord is speaking to your heart, obey." He paused. "Just come."

Students tromped down the steps toward the platform. While they cried, raised their hands, or slumped to the floor, I stared at their backs, my eyes wide. Every eye in the Vines Center seemed targeted on my back. My body wanted to move – muscles in my legs tensed to walk toward the aisle. I was a marionette being controlled by other forces, whether it was God, the crowd, Rob, or my own insecurities. I was poised, my foot ready to step, when the lights came back up. I wasn't relieved. I was scared that I'd missed my one opportunity to serve God – I would now be relegated to a life of



mediocrity because of my inability to commit to the great plan He had for my mealy, worm of a self. What was I supposed to do?

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I was numb as I brushed my teeth before bed that night. I couldn't feel the bristles. I just stared at my reflection as I moved the brush in my mouth, my arms used to the motion. I put the toothbrush into its holder, grabbed the sides of the sink, and shook my head.

I got into bed, reached for my Bible, and thumbed through the mid-section looking for Psalms. I was sure God condemned me for not offering myself to the mission field. I paused, my hand resting on the thin pages of my Bible, and thought about being a missionary. Visions of living in a hut surrounded by dirt, a hole in the floor for a toilet, mosquitoes, humidity, flies, and people in rags flashed through my mind like a crazy kaleidoscope I wasn't controlling. I cringed, slammed my Bible shut, and cried. I knelt by my bed and spread myself across the sheets and blanket.

"God, please. Don't make me be a missionary. I don't want to go. Please, please, please don't make me." I sobbed and twisted my head in the blanket's ridges.

And then I sensed a calming presence. I stilled. I breathed into the blanket as my heart slowed. I had heard people say that God spoke to them, but I'd never experienced such a phenomenon before. I felt, rather than heard, a quiet voice fill me. I knew I wouldn't have to do something I hated. God loved me. He wanted to fulfill the deepest desires of my heart. Plenty of people wanted to minister in other countries – He would use me in some other way. I didn't know how or why, but I felt like I would know soon.

## Chapter Five

Three years later, I sat slumped in the middle of the living room staring at the small, oily window opposite me. I was still dressed in my Cracker Barrel work clothes; the greasy smell of food emanated from my stained, dark blue work pants, faded yellow shirt and folded-down burgundy apron. Change jingled in my apron pockets when I shifted. My shoes, folded under my legs, were sodden with dirty water and flecks of food; I could feel the hard knobs of their ridges biting into my backside. I had not turned on the overhead light, so a small strand of Christmas lights draped on top of our old TV coupled with a far-off street lamp provided the minimal illumination. The carpet was caked with dirt from years of former residents' neglect. It would never come completely out, nor did I ever have the desire to clean it. Our TV sat on a crate, our couch was ragged and sagging, and the room was cold because we never turned on the heat. How had I gotten here? My parents lived thirty minutes away in the northern end of Terre Haute, and here I sat like a tramp. I hated my life, I hated my roommate Stephanie, and I hated my ex-boyfriend David. But, most of all, I hated myself.

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I started dating David Leohr after he made good and sure I was available. He was 20 and I was 19 when we first started "officially" dating, but we'd been attracted to each other for a while before. I met him on my first night at Cracker Barrel in Terre Haute the first summer after I'd flunked out of my first year of college at Liberty. I was standing in the restaurant's kitchen, smiling at the flurry of servers flying by with trays of drinks and food, blinking under the harsh fluorescent lights, when an arm slipped around my shoulders. Shocked, I looked to my right. A guy stood with his hand resting on the top

of my arm. He had brown hair that curled over his collar and his ears, was 6'4" and built like a swimmer, and his eyes crinkled into slits as he grinned. David was the ladies' man of the local restaurant scene, but I wouldn't know that for at least another hour. At this moment, I was his focus, and the touch he was so flippant about meant so much to me. I looked into his eyes and was mesmerized. Why? Because I was attracted to him. No other criteria existed. My attention was fixated on him and would remain so for the next two years.

I soon discovered he lived with his girlfriend. I watched him flirt with every girl in the store, but I didn't care, partly because I thought he was so wonderful and partly because I thought he'd never look at me again. He rubbed girls' backs in the dark vestibules that housed server computers, brooms and dustpans, and booster seats, slipped his arm around their shoulders as casually as he had mine, and teased them. I yearned for the moments when I would feel his fingers touch *my* back and his whispers in *my* ear. No other guy could break through. He broke up with his live-in girlfriend to date a cashier at Cracker Barrel, and, about a year later, he broke up with her to date me.

My parents, brother, and sister hovered in disapproval in the background, never actually saying they didn't like David, but never being very supportive either. Occasionally, they would ask me if I should be dating him and I would blow off their comments. He attended church with me a few times. He was polite.

I walked around in a haze that first month of dating. Every time he touched my arm at work or I would see him lift a tray of food, I smiled. He was mine. I had no intention of breaking up with him and my parents knew it.

They called me down to the living room one afternoon in September; they were both sitting on one of the couches. Mom sat straight against the couch's back, her shoulder-length hair falling around the neck of her sweatshirt. She looked to Dad as he shifted his forearms onto his legs, his hands clutched between them. His blue eyes pierced mine; I looked away. I sat on the big floor rug in the middle of the room, the TV to my right, light from the French doors illuminating my back.

"Yeah, what's up?" I asked.

"Heather, we need to talk to you about David," Dad said, his eyes not leaving mine. Mom looked at me, her chin starting to shake.

"Yeah, what?" I said, looking from Dad to Mom and back again.

"We don't agree with you dating him," Dad said as he interlaced his fingers between his knees. "He's not a Christian, Heather, so we just cannot support this relationship." He paused, looked down at his hands, then back at me. "We want you to break up with him."

"What – are you serious?" I said. "There is no way I'm breaking up with him. We just started dating."

"Well, we don't agree because we can't support it." He paused, "We want you to either break up with him or move out."

Stunned, I turned my head toward the fireplace and stared for several minutes. One thing was certain: I would not break up with David. I had no other place to live, though. Rage fired in my chest. The light in the room turned to a glare as tears fogged the corners of my vision. I picked at the toe of my sock. I could not believe they were

doing this. They hadn't said anything negative when Autumn was dating Dusty. This was so unfair.

"Thanks for dropping this on me right before I have to go to work," I spat at them. "I have to go." I stumbled to my feet and tripped up the stairs, my hands shaking as I got dressed.

I spent the night with David. Stephanie, a fellow server at Cracker Barrel, had been looking for a roommate and agreed to let me live with her, so, the next day, David and I just showed up at my parent's house with his dad's truck. Dad didn't say anything as he and David dismantled my bed and I grabbed stacks of my clothes. Mom stayed in the kitchen cooking dinner—she never said anything to either one of us. Two hours later, David and I drove away.

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I lay awake and alert in my frigid room at 1408 S. 8<sup>th</sup> Street, scared and alone again. I fought sleep just about every night because I was scared I wouldn't wake up. I drank a six pack of Miller Lite that night on the couch on the decrepit front porch. I drank a lot that year. I would buy a six pack when I got off work, come home, and sit on my porch in the dark. Sometimes my neighbor with a poodle mullet would stand at the front door of his side of the duplex and stare, so I would go inside. If I wasn't drinking alone, I drank in one of the many seedy bars on Terre Haute's south side. Bars and liquor stores like 7<sup>th</sup> and 70 were on just about every block, the name a play on how 7<sup>th</sup> Street ran parallel to I-70, the interstate that intersected the city. Most bars were dark, dank dives with sagging paneled exteriors and neon signs with names like Bev's, Mr. Jigg's, and Elm Grove Tavern – Where Friends Meet. Juke boxes with Alan Jackson, Garth

Brooks, Johnny Cash, and Elvis sat in corners of these bars, crusted with grime. Dark gravel parking lots surrounded back entrances, doors squealed open, but, I was hidden from anybody who might notice me. I also hid from me. I wasn't Heather Carey, Paul Carey's daughter, while sitting on a green bar stool with the seat ripped up and the tan foam insides sticking out drinking a 22 oz. Miller Lite. I was some woman I chose not to recognize. This life gave me friends and a boyfriend. Being a good Christian girl had got me bullied; being a pastor's daughter had heaped expectations of Christian behavior on me to which I wasn't fully willing to commit. I wanted control and I took it. Every time I drove my car to 7<sup>th</sup> and 70, walked in, and bought the biggest bottle of Absolut available, I was choosing for myself the life I thought I wanted. Every time I walked through the haze of smoke in Mr. Jigg's with a cold beer in my hand, I felt powerful.

Three months after David and I started dating and two months after I moved out, David worked all day. He'd been distant at work and had stayed two hours after he was supposed to get off. I called his cell phone many times and Cracker Barrel at least three times. No response.

We were supposed to go out to eat with my roommate and her boyfriend, so I was surprised that he wasn't making an effort to get off work. When he finally did show up, he barely smiled. I tried to rub his back during dinner, but he pulled away. Stephanie mentioned that the four of us should go skiing and he was quiet. I asked if he was fine and he'd say yes.

Later, at my house, he stood in the middle of my living room in heavy work boots and heavy coat, his hands in his pockets. "Heather, we need to talk." he said, not looking at me.



“Um, okay. Do you want to go out on the porch?” I took a couple of steps toward him.

“Sure.”

We sat on my decaying front porch. The porch light, covered by a heavy, ridged cap, spread muted yellow light over the concrete. Strips of grey raked through the red of the floor and the cracked green of the walls. The couch squealed under our weight. David immediately slumped forward, his hands clasped between his open knees. He hung his head, then looked at me.

“I think we should break up.” His eyes searched mine.

I couldn’t look away from his face. My whole body went numb.

“Is it because I’m not pretty enough?” I said.

“No, no, no,” he said, shaking his head and dropping it back between his knees.

“Why?” I stared at the space between the two sagging screen doors of our front door and the screened-in porch. A car door slammed and somebody shouted.

He couldn’t give me an answer. I pleaded with him for what seemed like hours, but he never really answered me. He said it wasn’t me, that he wanted to be single after years of being in relationships. He wouldn’t change his mind.

We went back inside and I stood staring at his shoes as he stood with his hands by his sides.

“There’s nothing else to really say, Heather, so, um, I’m gonna go,” he said.

I couldn’t talk, so he turned and left. I couldn’t cry. Earlier that evening, I had told my mother that if he didn’t start coming to church, I would break up with him. But, I wasn’t *really* ready to give him up, I wanted to break up with him on my time and on my

terms. As I stood in the middle of the room staring at the space where his legs used to be, I knew I had a choice. I could go home and be who I really was or I could try to get David back. I chose David.

I stalked him. I showed up at his house way out in the country or at bars when he was there whether I was invited or not. I prowled around any possible love interest; making it known that he was my ex. I was bitter, angry, and closed off. I didn't want to accept that he wasn't with me anymore, so I didn't. I knew that the life I was living wasn't authentic. I was a preacher's daughter, had grown up in church, and claimed to be a believer in Christ. When I was three years old, I was sitting on the kitchen counter eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, turned to my mother and said, "Mom, I want to get saved." She asked if I was sure and I said yes. She prayed with me. I told Jesus that I was a sinner and that I believed He came to earth to die for my sin. I asked Him to forgive me of my sin and live in my heart.

During that year I lived on my own in Terre Haute, I was sharply, almost painfully, aware that this was true. I knew I was not living a life in congruence with who I was as a child of God. I knew I was dishonoring Him with my life, and I knew that He wouldn't tolerate my disobedience much longer. I had been taught that God is loving, gracious, and merciful, but He has a limit to how much rebellion He allows. So, lying in bed on many nights, I was afraid He would kill me as I slept.

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I remained in the center of the floor that December night after work staring out the window, one of many nights I knew I had a choice to change. David and I would not

get back together. I was broke, miserable, and defeated. I could choose my real or fake self. I pushed myself up onto my feet, walked to the kitchen, and grabbed a beer.

## Chapter Six

One day, I called Dad to come get me. I was ready to move out. My roommate, Stephanie, was so angry with me that she walked to her room and slammed the door, refusing to speak to me. I didn't care. I started packing my clothes, shoving them into an egg carton box from Cracker Barrel. Dad called -- he was outside. I walked out the screen door, down the crumbling concrete steps, to meet him standing by his car in the twilight of that Sunday evening in February of 2001. Nothing significant was said to commemorate the moment, but we both felt the weight of the evening's importance. I was the prodigal child coming home. He hugged me and helped me put the box in the car. Not all of my stuff was ready to go, but I was, so, after a few more bags were loaded, we left. I drove away from that place with the specter of me hanging in the shadows of the weeds clinging to the side of the building.

Dad wanted to let me continue smoking my Camel Special Lights, but Mom's response was, "Absolutely not," so I quit after a few months back home. I still worked at Cracker Barrel, but I severed all ties to the party girl I had been. I had to decide what to do with my relationship with Jesus, but I wasn't ready, so I distracted myself with television and work until April, after my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. I went to my room after dinner and got in bed. The comforting hum of the evening news anchor's muffled voice blanketed my closed door. The blinds on my window were pulled up, so I could see the setting sun splaying the sky with its deepening hues of orange, pink, and yellow. Long strips of cloud mixed into the sun's colors like the swirls in cotton candy ice cream. I wasn't staying in my old room; after I moved out, my parents turned it into Dad's office. I was staying in my sister's old room. I pushed the blue and pink kitten blanket on the

bed to my knees. The blanket was a relic from childhood; Mom bought two for me and my sister to coordinate with our matching pink canopy beds. It was unraveling at the ends and it scratched my leg, but it reminded me of the innocence of my and Autumn's years spent in a shared bedroom.

I turned on the lamp by my bed and grabbed my Bible. My stomach churned as I sat the Bible on my knees. I was sure that the choice I was about to make was final. If I chose to open my Bible, I chose God. I was sure that if I wallowed back into my selfish way of living, the shell of myself that had been masquerading as me this past year would become permanent. God would not allow me to dishonor Him again; I did not know how that would happen, but I somehow knew the better self that I was would be lost. I prayed before I opened my Bible. I can't remember the exact words I said, but I know I asked for strength. Strength to make the choice to redefine myself according to His definition, not who I tried to make myself. The strength to accept consequences for the betraying of the family I loved and shattering my reputation as a child of God.

For the first time in a year, I opened my Bible, not a beer.

## Chapter Seven

Fall of 2001, I packed my bright blue Chevrolet Cavalier with most of the same plastic stuff with which I had carted to Lynchburg four years before. I had registered at ISU in the spring of 2001, thinking I would finish my degree. However, when I prayed, I felt I should return to Lynchburg. But, I wanted more support than my parents -- I needed friends my age facing the same fears and expectations. I was torn.

I'm horrible at making decisions, so I asked Dad for help. In one of the sage sentences that have become his hallmark, he replied, "Heather, I can't tell you God's will for your life. You need to decide on your own." I walked away from that conversation, applied to LU, was accepted in two weeks, cancelled my schedule at ISU, and packed my car for Virginia. My parents didn't travel with me, having already fulfilled the obligatory "take your daughter to college" trip that ended in disaster, so I went alone. I imagined I was on a great adventure with God as my fearless leader. I sang Avalon's "I Don't Want to Go" repeatedly with the fervor of an explorer heading toward the promise of gold. The lines of the chorus are:

I don't want to go somewhere  
If I know that You're not there  
'Cause I know that me without You is a lie  
And I don't want to walk that road  
Be a million miles from home  
'Cause my heart needs to be where You are  
So I don't want to go



About ten hours later, I pulled onto Liberty's campus for the second time. I passed the dorms on the hill and drove down to the Vines Center, the huge domed basketball arena. I walked in amid the other transfer students and sat in one of the seats surrounding the main floor. I did not have a room assignment or a schedule and classes started in one week. I prayed that God would provide a dorm and a schedule. Nervous and excited, I listened to the speaker on the arena's main floor give directions to find our room assignments. I approached the table labeled "Housing" and told them my name; the girl rifled through small manila envelopes until she found my name. Since I was 22, I would be staying in a senior dorm. I had no idea that I was being handed a leper's sentence—girls who were past the marrying age were sent there to commiserate on their lonely existence. I was just excited that God had answered my prayer.

Since Liberty is an evangelical university, talk of dating is equated with marriage. Students don't just date at LU; they date to find a spouse. I didn't know that I was past my prime – that there was an unspoken, accepted age of eligible young women on campus. Students were already in relationships, headed toward relationships, or avoiding relationships. After two or three dates, young men routinely told the young woman they were courting that God told them in prayer that she was "the one" for them. If the girl liked this boy, then everything was wonderful; if she did not, then she would be "dating God" to avoid the confrontation of just saying no. Dating God involved spending as much time with God as possible including reading the Bible, praying, and attending many church services. Dating God was Liberty code for "leave me alone, loser". Men in Terre Haute found me attractive and I knew it, so I had developed an overblown confidence in my feminine power. I was not prepared to be in a world where young men just wanted to

be friends until God told them that they were to be something more. I did not know how to cope.

As soon as I arrived that fall, I met one of my brother's friends at Liberty, Lee Steele, and thought he was cute. He looked like a little, muscular Val Kilmer. He was 5'7, wore clothes he bought at Goodwill, and spoke with a South Carolina accent. He was the third of five children raised in Chesterfield, South Carolina, the son of parents who wanted their children to appreciate hard work and value money. Lee and his siblings were assigned chores at a young age and were expected to leave the home when they graduated from high school. Lee's father knew how to fix anything, tended a garden and chickens, and taught eighth grade English. Lee's mother was health-conscious, tenacious, wise, and constantly curious about politics, religion, and how both affected society. The Steele family worked hard, proud to live off what they earned. As a result, Lee was confident and witty, but aloof. He did not need anybody to validate him and that fascinated me.

Lee didn't seem to be attracted to me, so, on Valentine's Day, I fashioned a little packet of stuff for him including a box of his favorite candy, Nerds, and a few coupons that I had clipped out of a newspaper. One was good for a free hug, and one was good for a free smooch. I put it in his campus mail box. We usually ate lunch together every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, but after Valentine's Day, I didn't see him. I knew my gesture had freaked him out, so I needed to do some damage control. On my way back to my dorm, I paused on the sidewalk outside of his. I looked at the empty space between the sidewalk and the dorm window; I looked stupid standing on the sidewalk, but, if I walked to the window, I would be desperate. I embraced the desperate single girl inside

of me and walked toward the window. He heard my footsteps crush the shrubbery outside because he looked uncomfortable when he saw me standing there.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” he said.

“So...how are you?” I said. I was very aware that I was standing like a criminal or stalker outside of a boy’s window lit by the florescent street light.

“I’m okay,” he said from the comfort and warmth of the room. He strummed a few notes on his guitar. Lee was not a guy prone to talking, so I would have to extract the information from him.

“So, I haven’t seen you at lunch for the past few days. Where’ve you been?” I placed my right foot on top of my left.

“Yeah, I’ve been eating a little bit earlier than usual. Had to get my practice time,” he said. Silence. I shuffled my feet and looked at the dirt and dead bugs in the groove of the window sill. He looked down at his guitar.

“Listen, about that packet of stuff I left in your mailbox – it was just a joke,” I said.

His face looked like a man just healed of his blindness or his leprosy.

“Really? It was just a joke, because I asked some people about what they thought it meant and they said you liked me.” I was losing control like firefighter battling a forest fire. I was alone with a bucket of water.

“Me? Like you?” I laughed, not the cool laugh of someone who doesn’t care, but the mannered laugh of someone who’s been caught. “Seriously, Lee, it was just a joke.”

“Really? It was just a joke.” He pronounced it with the finality of a judge’s sentence.

“Yes, Lee, geez, it was a joke.”

Our life resumed its normal routine of lunch on Monday and Wednesday, but I was tired of waiting for this guy to come around. So, I decided I would forget about him. After avoiding him during a missions trip to Guatemala, he asked me to hang out with him when we returned to Virginia. One week later, we sat in my car in the pouring rain outside his dorm and he kissed me under the same light that had illuminated my shame two months before.

We started dating or, in Liberty culture terms, planning for marriage. My parents didn’t like him, even after they met him, because he was taciturn and uncommunicative. We dated for a tumultuous three years and broke up more times than I remember. I was always torn between my supposed feelings for him and the knowledge that he wasn’t right for me. He wouldn’t challenge me to be better. At twenty-four years old, I had no concept of the complexities of a romantic relationship. I was battered by my self-perception and poisoned by my relationship with David Leohr. The persona I had morphed into in Terre Haute did not fully understand the nuances of Christianity, but was desperate to become the Liberty ideal, so it grasped for any semblance of that life. Lee fit. He was a Christian: the only criteria I needed. I was pushing him into the role of my Wexal, but didn’t consider him as a whole person. The Wexal types from the Christian fiction I read had damaged my model of a romance just as much as the David Leohr relationship because they were sugary fluff. I created the ideal relationship from these fictional men and twisted bits of other things – celebrities, childhood and teen crushes,

scraps of conversations, glances, touches – into an airbrushed Frankenstein of an ideal.

Our relationship was Christian varnish. I held onto him because he didn't know any better, because I resented my parent's disapproval, and because I didn't want to start again.

## Chapter Eight

I stared at the white Styrofoam cup as condensation beaded on the bottom. I couldn't look her in the eye. Her voice was too calm, her eyes too peaceful, and her hands too perfectly draped on the splintered wood of the picnic table.

"I think Dusty might kill me," she said. "I think this is the way I'm going to die."

I did not respond. I thought about how it was too cold that October afternoon to be sipping a peanut butter shake, but I did not respond. I willed myself to make a comment, any comment at all to reflect the gravity of my sister's statement, but I sat mute.

"Dusty's been threatening to kill me for a while now. I know he keeps a gun in the spare bedroom of the house, but if I were to try to hide it, he'd know and I'd be in a lot of trouble." She sat staring straight at me, talking at me, calm, vacant, and determined.

The wind whipped our collars and banged at the tin roof of the picnic shelter. The sagging fence rattled like a little keychain and the big oak next to us swished. Cars smashed the gravel of the small parking lot outside Green Acres, the local dairy bar in North Terre Haute, Indiana. The serving window slammed open and shut as voices took and gave orders. In between the yells for chili cheese dogs and Oreo shakes, I spoke.

"Autumn, why don't you just leave him?" I poked at my melting shake with my plastic spoon.

"I can't."



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The night before Autumn's wedding on September 18, 1999, we dyed her hair a bright, platinum blonde, obliterating her natural hair color -- a beautiful, soft blonde that lightened toward the ends. I didn't think she needed to color it at all. She was eighteen, I was twenty, she was getting married, and I was not; she wanted to color her hair to look beautiful for her new husband, so we did. She sat on the toilet seat, her hair gritty with dye, a towel wrapped around her shoulders. She was the lucky one. Dusty would be waiting for her tomorrow at the church; she was living the life I craved. My belief in the beauty of the bride superseded the reality of marriage. I longed to wear a white dress billowing to the floor in folds of fabric that glided behind me as I floated to my groom in small satin slippers. I was jealous of my sister. I appraised her movements that night as though I was a judge deeming her worthy of marriage. Why was she chosen and I not? What was so special about her?

She flipped her head under the warm water in the tub and I washed the dye out of her hair with robotic hands. The platinum dye blended with the pale yellow of the tub, so the swirling water turned murky. Mom laughed on the phone with my Aunt Barbara, Dad and my brother David hammered something in the garage, the dishwasher sloshed and swished, and the timer on the dryer buzzed. Autumn and I sat in silence, watching the water drain.

The next morning, I shuffled downstairs to the kitchen wearing no makeup and heavy glasses to see my sister sitting ramrod-straight at the kitchen table. Mom had spread the table with a mint green tablecloth and cheap vinyl placemats decorated with pears and vines. She stirred a skillet of eggs on the stove. Biscuits baked in the oven,

their warm, buttery smell permeating the room, and bacon popped in the microwave. Dad drank coffee at the head of the table in front of the glass French doors. David was still asleep. My sister was the epicenter – on this day, every action would revolve around or involve her. She radiated. She grinned when she saw me in the archway of the kitchen, her bright hair pulled straight back in a ponytail.

“Hey, it’s my wedding day!”

“How early did you get up?” I asked, angry at her for being her.

“I got up at like five. I just couldn’t sleep. It’s my wedding day!” She turned to my Dad and hugged him, almost falling out of her seat.

I don’t remember if I said anything after that. I don’t remember what my mother or my father said. I stared at her, seething. I raged at God for not letting me be the one getting married. For years, I had drawn my dream wedding dress on the church bulletin while Dad preached. I sketched different dresses among announcements about the Fall Harvest Party, Children’s Church, upcoming deacon and trustee meetings, and the church’s weekly budget, many of them resembling Cinderella’s ball gown from the Disney version of the film. On many nights, I forced Autumn to listen to my intricate plan for my wedding day, lulling her to sleep with my droning about the order of the ceremony, the cake, and my dress. I deserved a wedding and she didn’t because I was more fervent in my desire. Doesn’t the Bible say that the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much? To me, desire equaled prayer. God knew I deserved it more because He was God. I was angry with them both: Autumn for having the audacity to marry before me and God for allowing it. I don’t know how Autumn didn’t realize I

was so angry. Maybe her joy in her wedding fogged all her awareness of me or maybe God was merciful.

I stood at my sister's side that day in my pale blue gown and matching opera-length gloves, gripping a bouquet of the same color flowers. Like a good maid of honor, I knelt to adjust her train when she shifted, held her heavy white bouquet in my left hand while she used hers to grip her groom, and slipped the ring from my pinkie to her palm when my father asked for it. I sang Steven Curtis Chapman's "I Will Be Here" at the appropriate time, leaving her side to face the crowd that included my weeping mother dabbing at her eyes with a soggy tissue. I watched my father shift from father to preacher as he read his wedding script out of a little black book, consecrating his middle daughter's marriage before his Lord, his family, and his congregation. "I do's", rings, and kisses were exchanged before my father introduced Mr. and Mrs. Dustin Zigler to the world, officially ending his protectorship of my little sister.

Standing in the receiving line, Dusty squinted and shifted, shaking hands when they were offered and dropping back when they were not. Autumn leaned toward her guests, smiling and laughing, her eyes shining in the ceremony's glow. The photographer herded the wedding party into the sanctuary for pictures. Soft blue ribbon draped the ends of the dark brown pews. The trampled white runner furred in between the rows of aisles on the flat blue carpet. The piano still sat on the left of the stage with the organ on the right. The photographer squatted and stood like an accordion, his camera lens jutting up from his arm like a viewfinder on a submarine.

"Okay, can I have the bride's family come on up. The bride's immediate family, please," he said, flipping the curling camera cord.

I joined my family on the staggered steps of the platform. Light from the oblong stained-glass windows washed out parts of our faces while shading other parts in shadow. My father, mother, brother, sister, and new brother-in-law squished into one another – a new family. In unison, we grinned as the camera clicked.

“All right, thank you very much. Let’s just have the bride’s father, the brother, and the new brother-in-law,” the photographer said, adjusting his lens and squinting in the glare.

Dusty gripped Autumn’s elbow, pulling her back. She looked in his eyes. I looked from his eyes to hers, watching some message shifting between them. She pulled her arm free and turned to me, smiling. I scooted over to make room for her rippling white dress beside me on the pew, wondering what had just happened. I sat forward, glancing from Autumn to Dusty. Then, one of Dusty’s brothers almost fell off the step, so I laughed and leaned back.

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“What do you mean you can’t leave him?” I asked on that chilly fall day in 2001. “That’s ridiculous. He’s threatening to kill you and you can’t leave?”

I had driven ten hours to visit my family on my fall break from Liberty. Autumn and Dusty had been married two years; I had not spoken to her about her marriage since her wedding because I was so absorbed in my own life. Since we had not talked much, Autumn suggested we go to Green Acres. I was twenty-two and she was twenty-one.

“I don’t know. I just can’t leave.” Her brow furrowed. “I know it sounds ridiculous. I know it does. But, you know what the Bible says about divorce.” She unclasped her hands, closed her eyes and touched her fingers to the sides of her head.

I was silent again. I knew what the Bible said. God hates divorce. Jesus says in Matthew 5:32: “But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.” If she left Dusty, she would be sinning; God would not tolerate Autumn divorcing Dusty unless he was unfaithful. We had been indoctrinated in a culture that demanded she stay with her husband. Our belief system was saturated in the teachings of evangelical Christianity. I would condemn my sister if she divorced because God would not forgive such treason against His name. I ignored every Biblical passage about God’s love, forgiveness, and mercy. I overlooked His compassion for the weak and His disdain for the proud. I passed judgment on my sister that October afternoon with not a thought to the terror gripping every moment of her life or the courage it took her to breathe.

“Yeah, you’re right.” I raised my eyebrows and looked out to the small slope of the hill in the distance. The late afternoon sun burnished it with deep gold, but we were hidden underneath a cloud rippling in the wind. “God hates divorce. I don’t know what to tell you.”

She nodded as she stared at the green stripe on the brick of the building.

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She left him. After Autumn and my parents visited my brother and me at Liberty in the spring of 2002, she went back to Indiana, left Dusty and moved in with my parents. I noticed a change on her face at Liberty’s convocation on the Wednesday before they left – when she realized she could be joyful.

Wednesday's convocation service was broadcast throughout central Virginia. Students streamed into the many doors that rounded the building, like ants heading into a hill. Girls with dark tans and bright blonde hair moved in packs together, big black totes slung over their shoulders. Guys with rumpled brown or spiked blonde hair passed in solid-colored dress shirts tucked into khaki pants with dress shoes. Many students clasped coffee and their Bibles. The mid-morning sun shone in the east, illuminating the silver mound and mirroring its own reflection. Autumn looked at me.

"Everybody seems so happy." Her eyes were wide, her own blonde hair a shade darker than on her wedding day.

"Yeah, I guess." I was immune to the mass of people since I attended convocation three times a week.

We entered the building from one of the many side doors. Autumn stared at the podium in the far left of the Center's floor where Jerry Falwell sat, a large screen shuddering behind him and our brother's campus band, Light Ministries, tuning up around him. Students swarmed around the seats that fanned out from the stage to the circular cement walk on which we stood. Dad walked to the edge of one of the sections of seats, his black leather jacket zipped to his blue and black plaid scarf, his salt and pepper hair and glasses in stark contrast to the students around him. Mom stood with Autumn and me, looking from right to left as voices echoed on the loudspeaker, drowned out by the cacophony of voices. Mom and Dad, both students at Liberty in the late 1970s, were overwhelmed by the mass of people. Autumn stood, her eyes wide, nodding to the young people walking by. Her long hair was pulled into a low ponytail over the collar of her turtleneck sweater. We sat in the middle of a section and watched our 6'4"



blonde-headed brother play the electric guitar as the ministry team sang before Dr. Falwell's message. Autumn did not say a word. I kept glancing at her face throughout the sermon; she sat in wide-eyed attention.

I don't know what Dr. Falwell preached about that Wednesday, nor did I know about the abuse. I didn't know that Dusty had tried to lock her in a room, or how he threw their Boston terrier against the wall in front of her because he said she loved the dog more than him. I didn't know he forced intimacy and she complied because she was terrified of his temper or how she worked three jobs to pay off credit card debt she amassed to anesthetize herself to his coldness. She realized their future was doomed on their honeymoon when he screamed at her about their seat assignment on the plane. For two years, she had been a zombie in her own life, feeding off the shreds of her former self for survival. I didn't know that when she vacationed with Dusty and his family that past fall in Florida he screamed at her in front of his family, or how she floated in a tube in the ocean staring at the moon, begging God to save her. I didn't know she had prayed three hours a day since that vacation, her face in her spare bedroom carpet, her Bible open to the Psalms, imploring God for guidance. I didn't know that before she left Virginia she would know she didn't have to do it anymore. I just knew that she was different.

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Mom called the next week to tell me that Autumn was getting a divorce. I sat supported by my wooden bunk bed on my hard cement floor, the phone limp in my hand. God couldn't forgive her for this. She was making a huge mistake. She could not divorce Dusty.

“Mom, are you sure this is the right thing to do? Has she thought this through?” I asked, staring out the window at the budding trees.

“Yes, Heather, of course she’s thought this through. You don’t just leave your husband without thinking and praying about it. Your father and I agree with her. We don’t think Dusty is a Christian. There’s a passage in 1 Corinthians that says if a husband is willing to live with his wife then she shouldn’t leave him, but I don’t think Dusty is content living with your sister the way she is. I think she has every right to leave him.” Mom’s voice was raspy.

“Yeah, but, Mom, the Bible specifically says that God hates divorce. He didn’t cheat on her, did he, because that’s the only way she can divorce him.” I was confident I knew God’s ruling.

“Heather, did you know your sister went back to get the rest of her clothes after she moved out and he had changed the locks on the doors? Does that sound like someone who loves and wants to stay married to your sister?”

I was indifferent. Through the rest of our conversation, I kept thinking that Autumn was making a mistake. The deacons of our church agreed. I found out that Dad had advised Autumn to take her situation to the deacons, confident they would take her side. At first, they did. The deacons were in their mid to upper 30s, many of whom were fathers to small daughters. My parents allowed Autumn to face the deacons’ questioning over the next several months because they trusted them. She would sit alone with the deacons while they asked her about her home life, her motivations for desiring a divorce, and the Biblical ramifications for her decision. They did the same with Dusty. They told him to give Autumn their Jeep. He left it in Mom and Dad’s driveway dirty and in need

of gas. They asked him what would prompt his wife to want to divorce him. He would cry and say he would do better. In the midst of all this talking, Autumn filed for divorce.

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Autumn sat scrunched against the headboard of her borrowed bed in my parents' house. Her face was a blotchy red. Mom stood blocking the wall mirror on the left side of the room, her arms crossed. Dad stood slumped at the foot of the bed, his arms limp at his sides, his graying hair hidden in the antique lamp's shadow. The ceiling fan whipped the stale air. The blinds were shoved to the top of the bay window on the right, the house across the street framed in its borders, its living room light glowing a muted orange against the grey of the night sky. My sister sobbed and sucked in her breath with her mouth wide.

"I can't do it. They cannot possibly ask me to do this." She looked from Mom to Dad, searching, waiting, hoping.

"Sugar, it's just for a little while. If you rescind the divorce, the deacons won't bring you to church discipline. They told us they wouldn't." Mom took a step toward the bed.

"Oh, yeah, and they've been so good to their word before," Autumn glared at Mom like a rabid dog. "Do they have any idea what they're asking me to do? Stay married to a man I hate just so they can say they've won? I won't do it; I can't." She shook and bent her head toward the white, puffy comforter.

Mom and Dad didn't even notice I was standing in the doorway. They both watched my sister, imploring her to understand what their words were doing nothing to assuage. My parents were asking my sister to comply with a request with which they

disagreed, but they believed in the righteousness of God's men and they believed in justice. Church discipline meant she would be called in front of the congregation at the next business meeting and publicly chastised for her sin. She would be excommunicated from the church.

I chimed in. "Autumn, Mom and Dad are right. If you just rescinded the divorce for a little while, the deacons would see you were serious." My hand gripped and twisted the doorknob.

"What – you too?" Autumn turned her faced toward me and choked on the saliva in her throat.

Tears pooled in the middle of her chin and dripped onto the comforter. Tendrils of blonde hair stuck to her cheek where they had fallen out of the tangled knot on top of her head. She wheezed through her open mouth.

She was supposed to be the lucky one. She had worn the white dress, said the "I do's", and taken a man's ring. She had taken the life I wanted and now she wanted out. I believed she was wrong and told her so that June night in 2002. I told her I wasn't sure what God would think if she divorced him and wasn't sure of His punishment should she leave. My words hit her like a punch to the face. I wasn't her sister, her family, her blood. I was a Pharisee, passing judgment on her actions and not caring about her soul. I was taking her left finger and clamping it to two passages of Scripture so I could be vindicated in my self righteousness. I was reading from a script instead of speaking to my sister. I was still jealous. Jealous that she was struggling to free herself from a life she could recognize was toxic, while I floundered in my life, never sure. I had a routine of waking up, showering, talking to my roommate, passing judgment, attending class,

drinking coffee, crying out to God for guidance, working at Cracker Barrel, wondering why I wasn't married, smiling at customers, and sleeping. I was stuck on repeat. I could never clean the muck out of my cluttered life to be sure of anything. So, I told her to rescind the divorce.

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My sister divorced Dusty, married a wonderful man named Eddie Miles, has two children, and lives in Dallas, Texas. I never told my parents about our conversation at Green Acres. I'm haunted by the ghost of that day as it flits through my subconscious memory. My inaction could have killed her. I was numb to her fear, partly because I was in shock and partly because it wasn't me. The things I didn't say to her that afternoon scream at me. Things like: I love you; I will do anything to help you. Let's call the police. We have to tell Mom and Dad. I love you. Nobody should have to live this way. I love you. I love you. I love you.

## Chapter Nine

He walked into the room, the lights flickering and sparking as he turned them on. He squinted. His pin-striped dark blue suit coat covered his wrists; his wedding ring glinted in the fluorescent light. The room had no windows and the cement walls were painted white. He pulled metal chairs out from the table, the legs scraping the linoleum floor. The front glass door squeaked and muffled voices sounded through the dark hallway. He breathed in once and relaxed his face, each murky blue eye lined with three craggy ridges fading into the sag of his cheek. His dirty blonde hair had two patches of dull white at each temple and was slicked back, the patch in between his receding hair line spiked with gel. Dad did not sit.

The first man entered; he was tall, but broad with a striped shirt and khaki pants. The hair on his crown was sparse, stunted like dying grass. He half-smiled at Dad and shifted his Bible from the crook of his arm to his right hand. The man in his shadow was short with dark hair and a bulbous nose. He also wore a striped shirt and khaki pants. He glanced at Dad and sat down.

“Hello, Brad, Nic. How are you this evening?” Dad said, looking at each man and smiling.

“Fine.” said the tall one. “How are you, Paul?” He sat down, the chair scuffing the floor.

“Fine. How was the school today, Brad?” Dad said. Other men entered the room, hurrying to available seats, not talking.

“It was good. No real problems today.” Brad looked to the man opposite him, greeting him so softly that it was hardly audible in the stillness of the room.



The room smelled of disinfectant spray and cologne. Dust from the chalkboard filtered through the room in the stagnant air. Six men sat checking watches, shifting leg positions, grunting, and coughing. Sporadic conversation about football, the church's new parking lot, Norma Jean Fulton being sick, and the Easter cantata flared then died, any small chuckle suppressed before it could turn to laughter. Conversation stalled.

"Okay, gentlemen." Dad said. "Let's get this meeting started. But before we begin, let's pray."

Six heads fell to knotted hands on the white plastic table. Dad closed his eyes.

"Father, thank you for allowing us another day to serve You. Thank you for the willingness of these men to help me as I lead the people of First Baptist to a deeper understanding of You and Your plan for our church, our community, our nation, and our world. I pray that you would be with each of these men, their wives, and their families, as they continue to serve You as deacons of this church. I pray that what will be shared tonight would honor You and that You will unify us together as pastor and deacons to lead this church to all You have planned for us. I pray this in Jesus' holy name, Amen."

Heads lifted and hands relaxed into laps as each man sat back in his chair. All were in their late thirties to middle forties, all had families, and all were new to the deacon board. Some stared at Dad, while some looked at the brick. Nobody spoke.

"Okay, gentlemen. I just have a few things on the agenda to discuss," Dad said. "I didn't really think it necessary to have a meeting, but, Chris, you wanted it, so I wanted to talk mainly about the direction I feel God is leading me for spiritual growth of the church. After that, let's call it a night because I'm headed to Virginia for my daughter's wedding tomorrow and it's a ten-hour drive. Let's get started."

One of the men immediately shifted in his chair and half stood. He looked to the others and they stared back at him. Oppression was in the arch of their backs as they sat shoved in the unforgiving chairs.

“Paul, before you start, we think you should read this.” Chris handed a tri-folded letter to the pastor.

He unfolded the letter, scanning the first page. Listed were reasons the men seated in front of him did not agree with his leadership of the church, including a general consensus that they as a deacon board could not follow his leadership because he was weak. Cited as a reason was his support of his middle daughter when she left an abusive husband and needed somewhere to go. He let her come home. Other reasons were listed, but he stopped reading and looked up. None of the six looked back, but twitched and turned almost imperceptibly.

“Well, gentlemen. This changes things, doesn’t it?” He placed the letter on the table and placed his hands on either side. His sleeves covered the backs of his hands. He let his head drop before raising it and looking each man in the eye.

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I was ignorant to the opposition my father faced in our church because he was not supposed to face any. I thought everyone loved my father as much as I did. My parents shouldered the gossip, the pettiness, the meanness, and the ugliness because they did not want me and my siblings’ perception of church members we considered family to be tainted. So, Autumn, David, and I ate dinner and went shopping with Joe and Joyce Cowan, while Joyce tried to pry gossip about church members out of us. I attended youth group activities with the youth pastor, Andy McQuaid, as he rallied a faction of the

congregation against my father so he could take over the senior pastorate. I waved to the deacons as I passed them in the hallways on Sunday before Tuesday nights when they sequestered my father in his office in meetings grilling him with questions about his direction for the church, his leadership, and his morals. I walked through the church ignorant to the greed of its people and the motives of its leaders. Church members were so willing to condemn murder, divorce, alcohol, drugs, and extra-marital sex, but not willing to address the greed, selfishness, and pettiness of their own hearts. I wish I could have protected my father from all this, but I thought the church was supposed to do that for me.

## Chapter Ten

My back deck was dark. It was around ten pm on a Sunday night in March of 2006. I had just gotten off work at my second job at Texas Roadhouse in Lynchburg. My clothes were damp from the constant grease permeating the kitchen and my face was slick with it. I smelled like butter. I slammed the porch door and bumped into one of my deck chairs on my way back to the railing. Bugs chirped and buzzed in the long tufts of grass, hiding in the darkness.

“Mom, I don’t know what else to do,” I yelled into my phone, “I need to be with Lee. I cannot imagine my life without him. It is torture not being able to be with him.”

“Heather,” Mom said, her voice soft, but firm, “You cannot go on living like this. You have to give this Lee situation to the Lord.”

I was silent, fuming. I scrambled to find a place for my rage. The bugs’ chirping seemed to fill my head and I wanted to scream.

“Heather, you there?” Mom asked.

“Yes.” I stood with one hand gripping the wooden banister of the deck and one holding the phone. The receiver barely touched my ear. I closed my eyes hard. Coils of tension twisted all of my energy into my core and face. I breathed deep, held it, then let the breath out.

“Mom, I’ve gotta let you go,” I said.

“Okay. I’ll call you later,” Mom said. I slid the phone down in front of me and slapped it shut. I pushed away from the banister and stood. I ripped the shirttails out of my jeans. I walked toward the door leading back into the townhouse, but stopped, yanked a chair from the table and sat down hard. I stared at the street light my landlord

bought to stand between the two duplexes he owned. Why had he put it there? To keep our homes from getting robbed or to keep his property from getting damaged? What would a street light do to protect us?

I shifted back in my chair.

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In November of 2003, at nine pm, I started question seventy-five on a Transcendentalism test I was creating for the honors juniors. A copy of my cooperating teacher's test lay by the computer keyboard. I stared at the stapled, folded-back page of Mrs. Thurman's test, then at the number seventy-five on the computer screen, the cursor blinking where the period should have been. Students sat around at other consoles in Liberty's computer lab; the tapping and clicking of keys annoyed me. I could not believe that I had been writing one test for this one class for seven hours. I still had a quiz on Emerson's "Nature" to write for the regular juniors and a worksheet on the characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* to write for the freshmen. I still had twenty-five more compelling multiple choice questions on this to write and an essay topic to formulate. The guy sitting next to me got out his earphones and plugged them into his computer. Tinny music played and the guy hummed a few bars. I glared at him, then stacked the papers by my side and pushed away from the desk. I had to get away. I pulled my phone out of my pocket. Lee had just tried to call, but I didn't call him back. I had too much to do.

I walked around the circular stand of PHAROS printing computers in the middle of the lab. My advisor, Dr. Gribbin, told me that student teaching was going to be "challenging", but my life was never-ending work. I felt like a character in Greek mythology being tortured by a stack of automatically-replenishing papers. I was teaching

three separate levels of classes: freshmen, regular juniors, and honors juniors; trying to juggle all three was wearing me down. I just wanted to quit.

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I majored in English because I loved to read. I tacked on the teacher licensure because I wasn't sure what else I could do with an English degree. By the time I finished my coursework in the spring of 2003, I didn't want to student teach because I didn't want to pay for it. But, Dr. Gribbin, also the English department chairperson at LU, was insistent. I needed to student teach or I would be blindsided by the pressure of the job once I entered the profession. He was right. I was always writing lessons that led students into deeper understanding of the content, reading the content to understand it for myself so that I could prepare good lessons, writing assessments that tested the students' knowledge of the content, taking attendance, delivering lessons, distributing class materials to maximize the forty-five minutes of class time, dealing with students popping gum or spinning highlighter caps on the desks when they should have been getting paper, answering the same question fourteen times, settling the class into the routine of the lesson, trying to understand the ability of the students to comprehend the material and adjust my expectations accordingly – the list never ended. I wanted to be creative, to be the teacher that opened students' eyes to the deeper meaning of life through discussion of literature, but, when I did that, they just complained.

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Several days later, I squinted my eyes in the fluorescent light in the windowless classroom. No natural light lit up the hall outside because it was seven o'clock on a



Thursday. Sunlight faded fast this time of year. My phone buzzed on the textbook behind me; I closed my eyes and breathed deep. I had to talk to him.

I flipped around in the swivel chair and grabbed the phone.

“Hey, what’s up?” I asked, smashing the phone between my face and my shoulder. I continued typing grades into Integrate, the computer program designed to calculate students’ averages.

“Hey,” Lee said. “You gonna be done anytime soon?”

“No,” I said. “I still have that Transcendentalism test to grade.” I turned around to grab a pen from the front desk. Papers fell to the floor and I switched the phone to my left ear so I could pick them up.

“You know there’s only an hour left until this concert, right?” Lee asked.

“Yeah...I don’t think I’m going to go,” I said as I slammed the papers back on the desk.

“Fine, then I’m going to go without you.” Lee said.

“Fine. Talk to you later.” I said, clapping the phone shut.

I looked at the papers scattered all over the desk, at the stack of pastel sticky notes with the top note creased at the corner, at the pens, pencils, colored pencils, Expo markers, and highlighters in the pen cup, and slumped forward in the chair. My back hurt, my feet hurt, and I was sure my body was atrophying from the lack of exercise and exposure to artificial light. I scanned the classroom, noting the metal of the blue-backed desks and the bookshelf in the back. When I was a little girl, I would have run to that bookshelf, eager to discover and explore the books’ imaginary worlds. Now, those same beautiful worlds were a chore. I hated that my love for literature had been stripped by the

requirements of public education and the university. Again, I wanted to quit; I wanted to escape into somebody else's reality, to live through their trial and triumph in their hope. But, I couldn't. My life, my reality, wasn't imaginary; it was here in the stale classroom, in the long hours, in the work, the tedium, and the strain. My reality was in the crumbling relationship with Lee. I wasn't dating a Wexal who would stand by me through anything; I was dating a guy who wanted me to be present with him now and who was annoyed that my time and attention was focused on school. But, Lee was not as important to me as being successful in teaching. I quit school, my family, and my Christianity to pursue a boy before. I was not going to do that now.

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"Why are we going outside?" A boy with curly, unruly hair near the back of the class said. He had not raised his hand. His head was propped on the back brick wall.

"Because I want you to understand why the Transcendentalists were so enthralled with nature," I said, shifting papers on the desk and looking for a pen.

Thirty juniors shifted and pushed themselves out of their desks, their backpacks falling over and desks squeaking with the alleviation of the weight. I grabbed my attendance book and walked to the side door. I walked out the door, hoping the class would follow. Mrs. Thurman was in the teachers' lounge. It was still November. I was almost done.

Once outside, I told them to walk around for about ten minutes to think about nature. Some students looked at each other and shrugged. Others whispered. Some students immediately walked away from the group. Some just stayed. I walked to a little puddle and sat with my attendance book. I stared at the water, not wanting to look at the

students to see if they were following my directions. But, I knew I should. So, I took a deep breath, looked up, and scanned the class. Students were trudging through the grass, kicking leaves, snapping twigs off the trees, whispering to each other in small groups, or standing with their hands in their pockets. I looked at my watch. We were only five minutes into the lesson and they were already bored. What did I do? Did I call them over? What if the conversation about what they experienced didn't last until the end of class? I had nothing else to fill the time. I assumed the students would be excited to go outside. I also assumed that they would see nature as the Transcendentalists saw it – a place of spiritual inspiration. I assumed that conversation would spontaneously flow as we all experienced nature together. But, they were bored, uncomfortable, and restless. They wanted to go back inside and I knew it. I blushed and started digging a stick into the dirt beside me, writing my name over and over again. No student spoke to me. I knew that I had to maintain my composure.

I kept looking at my watch. Time would not match my expectation for it. I still had two minutes left in my designated ten. I couldn't take it anymore.

"Come on, class. Come back over," I said, throwing the stick to the ground. They rushed over, relieved to be finished with this break from the normal routine.

I did not want to ask the next question, but knew I must. The next twenty minutes of class demanded that I must.

"So, how did you like being in nature?" I said.

Silence. Every rustle of leaves or car driving by on the main road was louder than normal. What was I going to do? I didn't think that the students would find

Transcendentalism weird. I thought, since they were honors students, that they would glorify and revere Thoreau and Emerson automatically. I was wrong.

“Seriously, guys, what did you experience?” I asked.

“Um, what were we supposed to get?” A girl asked.

“Well, um, you were supposed to understand how Transcendentalist thinkers found inspiration, beauty, and fulfillment in simplicity and nature,” I said.

“What?” The same student whose head was propped on the wall earlier blurted.

“Couldn’t you feel that as you were walking around?” I asked. “Couldn’t you feel it in the wind and in the power of the trees? Did you feel the trees speak to you?” I asked.

“Trees can talk?” The head propper said. That comment started a murmur among the throng.

“Um, well, yes, to some degree.” I said. I just wanted to go inside. I had thought of some questions in the textbook that they could answer on Emerson’s aphorisms and how they compared with Ben Franklin’s. I was done.

“Weird,” another student said.

“On that note, let’s go back inside,” I said. I felt like I had successfully completed my own assignment.

We all trooped back in the building and back into the safety and sanctuary of the brick walls and fluorescent lights.

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I neared the end of student teaching in early December of 2004. Mrs. Thurman had resumed teaching all eleventh-grade classes; I was finishing *To Kill a Mockingbird*

with the freshmen. I didn't know what I was going to do once I graduated. I wasn't planning to look for a teaching job in January since I assumed that none would be available. My impression from fellow student-teaching candidates and the few teachers I knew was that it was difficult to get hired in the Lynchburg area. I didn't want to get a teaching job immediately because I needed a break. I also did not want to continue working at Texas Roadhouse; I wanted my life to move forward. I was halfheartedly thinking and praying about what to do next because I was so focused on finishing student teaching well and completing the paperwork for graduation.

I didn't even factor a future with Lee into this plan. Our relationship was a seesaw; we took turns sitting on the emotional control. I was now in control, determined to redeem myself to God and my family through the completion of my education. The relationship was never stable, always teetering around my relational insecurities, held in place by a tentative attraction that wasn't able to support the strain. We broke up.

About two weeks before the end of student teaching, a fellow classmate asked if I would be interested in teaching ninth and tenth grade English at Jefferson Forest High School. The principal had approached her about taking the job, but she wasn't interested. This would move my professional life forward; so, I applied. The principal, Tony Francis, called me a few days later to ask if I would come in for an interview. I agreed. I took my portfolio of lessons, my educational philosophy, and my student-teaching journal with me to JF one afternoon after finishing at Brookville. My mom had bought me a long, heavy black coat for Christmas the year before. I did not remove it, even when I entered the main office and sat in a chair to wait. Mr. Francis walked to the front desk and ushered me back into his office. What I thought was going to be an informal

interview with him alone turned out to be a formal interview with him and three other people. I did not remove my coat before sitting in one of the chairs surrounding a circular table. I set my heavy portfolio down in front of me and held onto the edges. I was petrified. Mr. Francis introduced Mr. Crider and Mrs. Calvert, the two assistant principals, and Mrs. Singleton, the English department chairperson. The questions began.

“Heather, what is your philosophy of education?”

“How would you handle a student with an IEP? Would you follow the accommodations or would you refuse?”

“Would you be willing to sponsor clubs or other activities within the school?”

“What are some of the strategies that you will implement in your teaching?”

Most of the questions were asked by Mr. Francis and Mr. Crider. My answers included: to differentiate instruction to accommodate every student, I would follow the accommodations accordingly, I would be willing to sponsor school activities, and quizzes, tests, and journals that facilitate and support analytical thinking. I started to sweat around the collar of my purple dress shirt. I was glad my hair was in a ponytail.

Mrs. Singleton and Mrs. Calvert flipped through my portfolio and smiled at me. Mrs. Calvert commented about how funny my journal was. I smiled in return. Mr. Francis thanked me for the interview and everybody stood. I shook their hands, grabbed my huge binder, and walked out of the office. Mr. Francis shut the door behind me. I felt like a fragment of something was being put into place.

He called two days later to tell me I was hired. I accepted, elated that the interviewing team had recognized some confidence in me that I had not felt. They hired me, not some beautiful girl from a book, my sister, or the haunted version of me that had



been hiding. They hired the me that had finished her college degree, that was vindicated by that success, and redeemed by a grace she could not comprehend.

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“Ms. Carey, this study guide was really hard,” Mary Burr, a sophomore in my first period class said.

“Yeah, Mrs. Hindenlang never gave us work that was this hard,” another blonde-haired student said.

I looked out over the class of twenty-four students. They all looked back, their hopes pinned on the two that were willing to speak. I shrugged.

“Yes, but I’m not Mrs. Hindenlang.” I said. “Get out your study guides.”

Students murmured while they rooted in their bags for the questions to the first several chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I took Mrs. Thurman’s study guides that she used with her freshmen at Brookville and gave them to the sophomores at JF. Since Mrs. Thurman expected her freshmen to complete the work, I was confident that sophomores could handle it. So, I was unfazed by the questioning.

I didn’t realize that the expectations of the students of Jefferson Forest High School were not the same as the ones at Brookville High School. I was also not aware that the parents of Jefferson Forest High School students were different than most other schools in the area. I had not dealt with one parent complaint at Brookville, partly because I wasn’t the responsible teacher, but partly because the parents were not as involved. JF parents were over-involved. Once my students told their parents that my expectations were ridiculous compared to their previous teacher, a faction of the parents started planning how to pressure me into weakening my academic expectations. I

assigned an essay attached to the *To Kill a Mockingbird* test that I knew I had scored too low. Most of the students' grades were Cs, Ds, and Fs. After I handed the papers back, the students were angry and I knew it. I had to decide if I curved their scores or kept the grades the same. I knew that if I curved the scores, I would be setting myself up for a barrage of complaints every time the students received scores with which they were unhappy. I figured I would add in some extra credit points somewhere over the course of the six weeks grading period so their grades would average to what they deserved. I did not tell them this.

I was bombarded at the first parent-teacher conference. Parent after parent walked into the classroom questioning the validity of my grading. I was kind, courteous, and tried to be professional. I told each parent that the grades would remain the same. Several parents emailed me with complaints. One woman informed me that she held a doctorate in psychology, had read over her daughter's paper, and was convinced that her daughter deserved a higher grade. The parent also believed that her daughter's overall D in my class was indicative of this one essay. I responded with a list of assignments that were missing from the average because her daughter had not submitted the work and another refusal to compromise on the essay's grade. I informed her that my degree was in education. Was hers? Because of my qualifications to teach the class, my grade would stand. The parent never responded.

Because I was ignorant to the parents' attempted bullying, I answered every charge. I did not relent, the students and parents understood that I would not relent, and the uproar calmed. I had no idea that I was standing up to a faction of parents that wanted me to cower and bend to their will – I was just trying to live with integrity, to

make decisions based on my limited knowledge of the teaching profession and my understanding of literature, and to conduct my classes with academic excellence. I stood my ground, not quitting or retreating when confronted. I won the battle without even knowing it. Another piece of my confidence was restored.

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In the summer of 2004, Lee and I worked at River Valley Ranch in Millers, Maryland, about thirty minutes from Washington D.C. I had wanted to be a camp counselor ever since I started attending Liberty, but thought I was too old for the job. Working in summer camps was usually a job for nineteen or twenty-year-olds, not twenty-five-year-olds with a college degree. Lee's brother, Dan, worked at RVR, so I asked if I could apply. I was much older than the other counselors, so I was hired to be the head counselor of the horsemanship camp. I would spend the summer overseeing three female counselors and learning to ride horses, run barrels, muck stalls, and wear cowboy gear. Lee was hired as the head lifeguard.

I drove to camp two weeks before the campers arrived to go through counselor orientation, get familiar with the camp, and meet everybody on staff. The nucleus of the camp buildings was nestled in a little clearing amid acres of hills and forest. A multi-purpose building mainly used for break-out sessions, talent shows, and afternoon mail calls connected to a miniature paved road running to the camp office and main boys' dorm. Girls' dorms sat on either side of the road. The basement of the boys' dorm housed the kitchen and main mess hall; a dining tent was connected to the building. A rodeo arena sat opposite a pool about a quarter mile past the dining tent. RVR consisted of Fort Roller, the children's camp, Adventure Camp, for teenagers who enjoyed the

outdoors, ropes courses, and zip lines, Horsemanship Camp, for young women who enjoyed riding horses, X Camp, for young men who skateboarded, and Classic Camp, a co-ed camp that included big group games and activities. Lots of staff was needed for the hundreds of kids who swarmed over the campus for eight consecutive weeks each summer. For now, the camp was quiet; only staff milled around the main buildings and dorms, cleaning and organizing in preparation for the campers.

Lee arrived at the same time. We talked a few times, then, one day mid week, as I was sweeping the porch of my cabin, he asked me to talk. We sat together on one of the benches, he in his lifeguard shorts and shirt he bought from Goodwill, and me in my red paisley Western shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots covered in layers of mud, manure, and hay.

“Hey,” he said. “I was thinking that we should get married.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I was thinking the same thing. We’ve been through enough. I know that I want to be with you, so let’s do it.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. Both our hands were knotted between our knees as we leaned forward, peering at the expanse of undulating hills in front of us. A wide expanse of lawn separated the main area of camp from the forest; the hills folded into the tree line.

“I was thinking that we should get married as soon as possible; I mean, why wait?”

“Yeah,” I said as I turned to smile at him. “I agree.”

We decided to get married that November. I didn’t have a ring because he didn’t have any money and I was just cool enough to not care. We called our parents to inform them of our decision. They accepted the news without joy, but without resentment; I chose to believe this was good.

I was ignoring the spiritual side of the struggle. I chose to ignore the fifth commandment instructing children to honor their parents. I ignored the many passages in Proverbs admonishing against hasty decisions and wisdom in counsel. I also ignored the small voice of the Holy Spirit as He tried to convict me of my pride and selfishness. I wasn't being fair to Lee either. I was settling. Did I live my daily life consciously thinking these things? No. But, somewhere in the part of me that I didn't want to acknowledge, I knew I was wrong.

That subconscious tension erupted when I bought my wedding dress in Indiana in August after the summer camp season was over. I stood at the cash register with my wallet on the table and my debit card in my hand. The sales lady pardoned herself as she typed keys and adjusted the contents of the drawer. Her entire concentration was on the register; I envied her because she wasn't on my side of the counter. I gripped the debit card and did not speak. Mom and Autumn talked about something to my right and Dad stood looking out the glass doors with his hands in his pockets, probably thinking about dinner. Twilight shadowed the parking lot; the lights kicked on. I felt alone again, stuck in an emotional void. What was I getting ready to do?

The sales lady turned her attention back to me and asked for my card. As soon as the card transferred hands, I felt nauseous. I consciously recognized that marrying Lee was wrong. The sales lady handed my card back to me with a receipt and a pen. She asked me to sign by the x. I did.

I waited six months to finally end the relationship. First, I pushed the wedding from November to April. Lee's mother immediately recognized this as the end. Then, I postponed it indefinitely; finally, I ended it.

Arrogant and cocky, I figured I had done God a favor. After three years, I *finally* did what He wanted me to do; for that, He should be grateful. I assumed that I would meet my future husband immediately; God blesses the obedient, right?

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That November, Lee called to ask me if he could come over to retrieve *Mother Carey's Chickens*, an antique children's book that he had inherited from his parents. He had left it at the town home we had rented to share as a married couple, but where I now lived alone. I knew this was a weird request. When I asked how he was doing, he told me that "actually, I'm seeing this girl and I might marry her." I froze, my hands on a hanger in my closet, half a shirt draped over one end of its plastic triangle, my phone sandwiched between my shoulder and ear. How did I feel about this? I said I was happy for him. He came over to get the book.

Over the next two months, my feelings about this started churning. Was I really okay with him marrying another woman? I would swat at this idea mentally, like a bumblebee that would annoy me while I was reading on the back deck. Soon, that bumbling insect of a thought turned to silent mosquitoes. The thoughts I allowed to swarm in my mind began sucking the capacity to care for other layers of my life, leaving welts that I could never scratch enough. I could not let him go. He needed to know how I felt.

I prayed that God would anoint one Saturday night in early January with His blessing. I spent all day in my pajamas, wandering around my house, intermittently praying and watching TV. I tried to eat some tomato soup and saltine crackers, but, after



a few bites, I just sat and watched the soup congeal on the sides of the bowl. I drank Sprite.

Finally, I sat down in my recliner to make the call. I curled my feet under me and leaned on the arm rest as I held the phone in my right hand. I could feel the blood pumping in my face and neck. I prayed that God's will be done. No matter what, I wanted His will for my life. I dialed Lee's number and listened to the click of the connection and waited for the ring. I could hear my breath whooshing out of my mouth into the receiver as my thoughts kept repeating, "Please pick up, please pick up, please pick..."

"Uh, hello?" Lee's South Carolina drawl shouted. I tensed even more.

"Hi, Lee, how are you?" I asked.

"Fine. Just drove home from working all day on my house and now I'm just driving back to my brother's for the night," he said. I was about to start spouting out words when he said, "What's up?"

"Um, I know you have a girlfriend and all, but I think I made a mistake. I think we should get back together. I know what I want now. It's you. I know that I told you that it was over, but just hearing you say that you were going to get married to some other woman just made me feel like somebody had punched me, you know? And I just can't stop thinking about how I made such a huge mistake. I want to be with you. I want to marry you, grow old with you, have your children. So, what do you think?" I sucked in my breath.

"Well," he said. "I don't think so, Heather. I think I want to stay with Rachel and see how this works out."

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I knew Mom was right. I had to relinquish Lee. I had grappled for so long with everything he represented: stability, marriage, an antidote for loneliness, a warm body to hold. But, now I was alone on my back porch in the dark. I could not control him. I was so angry at God. I felt like I had given up so much for His stupid will. Every prayer was not answered the way I wanted. Wasn't God supposed to give some kind of blessing to His children? Hadn't I gone through enough anguish?

"God, I just want you to know that I hate you right now," I bawled. I was stuck at the edge of the Red Sea: before me was obeying God and surrendering Lee's hold and behind me were the years I had wasted dragging us both through emotional hell. I started sobbing, choking on the slobber in the back of my throat, my head between my clasped hands on the glass table. My head was almost in my shirt front. My tears boiled on my cheeks.

"Okay, God, fine. I give him up." I pulled my head up and then dropped it back down again. "I do. I surrender him." I slanted my head toward the sky and looked at the moon. My eyes burned. Then, I got up and went inside, locking the door to the deck behind me.

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I did not start teaching because I loved the profession and I did not date Lee because I loved him. They were both stand-ins for a life that I thought would be fulfilling. I stayed in Lynchburg and accepted the teaching job to move forward in my professional life. The end of my romantic relationship was what I needed to move forward in my personal life. God knew that I needed the outcome of both.

Over the years, I have realized that all things really do work together for good to those that are called according to God's purpose. The teaching profession has taught me to be organized, to effectively multi-task, to anticipate any question, to be kind, to understand and accommodate a person's strengths and weaknesses, to have convictions about everything from bathroom passes to cheating and to make decisions based on those convictions, to facilitate conversations about literature that relate to fifteen and sixteen-year-olds, to challenge, to motivate, to be consistent, to adapt, and to appreciate the process of the perfection of a craft.

My failed relationship with Lee taught me to be unselfish, to value others' feelings over mine, to not be so fixed on my own agenda that other relationships suffer. I cannot use someone else as a substitute for feeling whole. I really can do all things through Christ because I did. I graduated from college, got a job on my own merit, and lived independently in a city without the safety net of a family or a boyfriend. I did it on my own.

Teenagers think it's weird that Emerson talked to the grass and trees, that he found himself part and particle of nature, or that he felt connected to the Over-soul through a transparent eyeball. Why would anybody want to live by themselves in a cabin for two years watching ants fight and tending beans like Thoreau did at Walden Pond?

But, they respond to the freedom inherent in these men's words, to the power of the individual, to the concept that nobody can define you, that every person should appreciate and develop their individual strengths, that simplicity is a virtue, not a vice, that their voices and opinions matter. I trust that the students can appreciate and discuss these concepts. I trust that they can make their own decisions with the information we

discuss in class. I trust what teaching has taught me about myself, human nature, and God's investment in the process of things. I trust the woman who tries to respects herself and others in relationships. I trust the woman who has grown from it all.

## Chapter Eleven

In October of 2004, when I was 25 and my father was 47, I drove ten hours to Indiana from Lynchburg on fall break from my first full year of teaching to find my parents' garage door open and a car missing. I walked inside the house looking for my parents, but was greeted by silence. The gas logs in the fireplace flickered; the fan kicked on, blowing hot air through the room and rippling the curtains on the French door. I yelled for Mom and Dad: no response. I walked up the stairs to the bedrooms to find them empty. I turned around, got in my car, and drove to Union Hospital.

I walked to the front desk and asked where Paul Carey's room was located and they told me a number that I don't remember, but that night, as soon as the number left the receptionist's lips, I could not forget. I repeated it as I walked to the elevator, pressed the floor number, and waited. The doors to my right swung open and hospital personnel in green scrubs sauntered out, talking and laughing. I looked, following them as they passed the hospital gift shop. Cards stood in one of those multi-faced racks. All of them were white with calligraphic gold writing and sprays of lilies, roses, daisies, and numerous other unidentifiable flowers. The elevator door dinged open, I walked on, smiled at the man getting off, and pressed the floor button, still repeating the number to Dad's room. I walked off the elevator to the waiting room of couches, low-lit lamps, and magazines splayed out in fan shapes on the plethora of end tables. The waiting room was painted in stripes of dull forest green and magenta, but the surrounding stark halls had stripped its life and the sheen of medicine and machine had dulled its luster. I stopped in front of Dad's room; Mom spoke, but I couldn't hear Dad, so I rounded the corner.

Dad lay in the tiny hospital bed that could barely contain him, the back of his bed cranked up to allow him to sit upright. He wore a green gown; a thin white blanket was pulled up to his midsection. IVs dripped clear fluid into his arm and the monitor behind his head flashed red on a field of black. His eyes were closed and his graying hair splayed on the pillow like the blooms from a dead dandelion. His face was colorless. Tears flashed into my eyes. In the seconds before his eyes opened and my mother turned around, I was overcome with the reality of his mortality. He was so human - he could bruise and bleed – he could die.

His eyes opened and he saw me. I have no idea how my face looked.

“Hey, sugar,” he said. I could not stop the tears, but I felt somehow detached from the overwhelming emotion that should be connected to such a flow. I couldn’t even speak.

“Heather, sugar, you found us.” Mom twisted in the fake leather green seat by the wall. Her face was strained and tired, but she wore makeup and her shoulder-length hair was fixed. My mother, the soldier.

“Heather, I’m okay,” Dad said. I couldn’t stop crying and I couldn’t move. “Oh, sugar, come here.”

I walked over to the side of his bed by the window and sat on the little bit of space left by his legs. I leaned over to hug him, to feel him breathe, to hear his heart beat. He hugged me as best he could since his arms were handcuffed to the fluids dripping into them.

I leaned back and looked in his pale blue eyes. His heart had betrayed him, but I would not, so I sniffed and sat up straight.



“Are you going to be okay?” I asked.

“They’re doing an angioplasty tomorrow to determine if he’s had a heart attack.

We’ll know then,” Mom said. “How did you know we were here?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “I just knew.”

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As I drove back to my parents’ house that night, I was disgusted at how unaffected I had been during and after my father’s firing from First Baptist. I wasn’t physically in Terre Haute to suffer through the embarrassment, anguish, shock, and anger of my parent’s ordeal, but I had not struggled vicariously through the situation with them in prayer. I was so consumed with facing my life as a single woman and surviving the panic of loneliness that I had not been as affected by their pain as I should have been as their daughter. I listened while they told me that Chris Conner, the deacons’ chairman, told Dad that they didn’t want him to stay for two months until they found a new pastor, and they could not give him a party honoring his years of service because of their public humiliation at having to read the letter. I nodded during phone calls when Mom told me how painful it was to watch Dad clean out his office and how she cried periodically as she helped him dismantle the room, removing his books, boxing his pictures of us, and taking his undergraduate and master’s degrees down from the nails on which they hung. I loved my parents, but I loved myself more. I wanted God’s peace and blessing in my life more than I wanted it for my parents. How did I know this? My prayers. I hadn’t cried out to God for His judgment on the men that robbed my father of his dignity; I was praying that He would bring a man into my life. I didn’t beg the Lord for a reprieve from their pain; I prayed for a reprieve from mine. And now, Dad could die. I prayed

that God would forgive my idiotic selfishness. I prayed that God would save my father's life.

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At 7:00 AM the next morning, the nurses came to take him to the procedure. They asked us to leave so they could prep him, so Mom and I stepped into the cave-like chill of the hallway, wrapping our jackets tighter around us. We didn't say much. I hugged her a few times as we heard the nurses' muffled conversation and the ticking, beeping, and humming of the surrounding rooms. One of Dad's pastoral friends, Jim Caldwell, walked up the hall, a smile on his face like he was forcing benevolence for our sakes. Mom said the obligatory thank-you for coming and talked briefly about Dad's condition. Dad's door opened, and the nurses wheeled him out. He looked tired, pale, and scared. Although a big man physically, the circumstances dwarfed him, forcing him to live as something he was not. I don't think he knew how to act toward all of us and I didn't know what to say.

"Can I pray for you, Paul?" Jim asked. I looked at Mom, her shoulders slumped and her jacket slightly drooping as she grasped Dad's hand and looked at him – his face relaxed and the tension left. I bowed my head as Jim prayed for wisdom for the doctors and healing for my father. He prayed on our behalf because we knew what to say and how to say it, but were crippled by the weight of our words' expectations.

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His heart attack was no accident: twenty years of internalizing parishioners' complaints about the church's temperature, the immorality of a drum set on a stage, the volume of the music, the heresy of his children attending public school, or the time that

he didn't call when they had a stuffy nose, ate into his body like a flesh-eating virus. Dad must have felt like Moses with the children of Israel. Nothing he did was ever good enough. Dad wanted the church to grow – he had a vision of where Christ was leading the church body to minister to the hurting people of Terre Haute. He was stopped by parishioner contentment with the status quo. First Baptist Church of North Terre Haute resisted change because change meant they were wrong. The deacons weren't wrong to poll the congregation for several months in early 2004 to assure a majority would vote Dad out if he wouldn't leave – they were justified. Joe Cowan wasn't greedy or proud to advise them to hijack my Dad's position – he was dispensing his wisdom. Harper Lee writes in *To Kill a Mockingbird* that, "The Bible in the hands of one man is worse than the whiskey bottle in the hands of another." In white-washed church culture, war is not labeled as such– power usurpation is called a "difference of opinion." Conflicts are not wrangled over openly, but are fought with rhetoric, paper, and cowardice. The men locked in battle wear suits, ties, Jesus pins, and carry Bibles.

In May of 2004, the deacons of First Baptist hid behind their Bible instead of standing with it as they asked my father to resign. They handed him their theses on his sin; he left for Virginia to walk his daughter down the aisle for the second time.

When Dad returned to Indiana, he agreed to resign. He asked one thing: the deacons read their letter to the congregation; Dad did not want his parishioners to believe that he was abandoning them. The deacons balked, but Dad insisted. The following Sunday morning, Dad preached and the deacons waited. Dad read his letter of resignation before the deacons read their list. Mom cried on the front row.

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A few days after Dad's heart surgery, I sat on a couch in Dominick and Beth DaCosta's living room. The leather from the couch stuck to the back of my jeans. About twenty people sat murmuring to each other in the living room while muted light from the couple of lamps lit the room. .

I waited for my father's next words.

"Folks, I'm thankful that you all are here tonight. Sharon and I thank you." Dad grabbed Mom's hand. "As you know, I'm recovering from a heart attack and am still a little weak." He glanced at several faces, cleared his throat, and looked up.

"As you also know, a couple of months ago I was asked to leave First Baptist. I never thought I'd preach again. I was done with preaching and told the Lord so. Then, you all approached me to start a church. I was resistant. The last thing I wanted was to go through another situation like I faced at First. I was stressed all of the time, broken down, and defeated. I wanted to leave Terre Haute. I wanted to go back to the South, to find solace in Virginia, to go home. But, God started to speak to my heart, encouraging me that He wasn't finished with me yet and not granting peace about leaving Indiana." Dad started to cry. "I feel sick, feeble, and old. My body and spirit are broken. I have no words of encouragement, but I know the Lord is my strength and support. I have no idea why you would want a man like me to lead your church, but if you want me to, I will." He gripped my mother's hand and they both cried. I could not move. "Let's pray."

As everyone crowded close together, holding hands and softly crying, I closed my eyes and thanked God for my father.

## Chapter Twelve

In October of 2006, my entire family including Dad, Mom, Autumn, my brother-in-law, Eddie, their baby girl Grace, and David crushed into my sister's Saturn Vue to drive to the Covered Bridge Festival. Conversation about David's band, Dad's new church, and Grace's adventures mixed with "Always Be My Baby" by Mariah Carey playing on the radio. We sat surrounded by plastic sippie cups, crushed crackers, and bottles of hand sanitizer laughing about pumpkin ice cream, funnel cakes, two dollar socks, and five dollar leather wallets.

The Covered Bridge Festival first became part of our family's history in 1991. We lived about twenty minutes from Mansfield, Indiana, one of the festival's sites. My mother is obsessed with tradition and nature: every year we would spend one Saturday looking for the "perfect" Christmas tree. She would place Autumn, David, and me in front of different trees she liked and we would stand stationary while she searched the rest of the lot. She discovered the Festival the year I was twelve, Autumn was eleven, and David was nine because she wanted to start a new Carey family fall tradition. She heard a chorus of the following:

"Mom, we already go to Brown County and you make us look at the leaves there. Isn't that enough?"

"I don't want to go. I want to watch TV."

"I don't want to walk that much."

"It's too cold."

Mom smiled, told us to get in the car, and started the first of many years dedicated to the festival, some forced and some fun. Over time, the festival became part of the

marrow of our family life. After Autumn's divorce and Dad's firing, it came to stand for our family's endurance, a time of year where we could celebrate that we were still together. That year, I took time off from teaching and drove from Lynchburg, Autumn and Eddie flew in from Phoenix, and David drove in from Columbus, Ohio to stay with our parents for three days.

Leaves in Parke County, Indiana in October are burnished gold, the tips of some of the trees dipped crimson as if to paint their own landscape. Bouquets of such trees clustered around the highway, festooning the cracked pavement with ribbons of rich color. The warmth of the foliage mixed with the sharp, cold blue of the sky and temperature. We pulled into Jim's Parking, and Eddie handed three dollars to a man with an oily ponytail wearing a bright orange vest. We unbuckled our seatbelts, preparing to enjoy the day together.

My sister and I wanted to go to the Mary Kay tent, Dad wanted to look for the perfect deal on his annual fake Nike sweatshirt, and my brother wanted two dollar socks. All of us wanted food. According to Carey family tradition, we stick together, so we debated what to do first. Food won. Our family joined the mass of people clambering toward the red and white-painted covered bridge. My father and mother held hands; my sister linked arms with her husband. David attempted to guide Grace, who was one, through the throng, but she wanted no help. She charged through the mob, stumbling on gravel and the wooden boards of the bridge, fiercely fighting for an independence she might not have wanted because of the dangerous crowd. Sometimes she fell forward and sometimes she tottered and fell on her diaper-cushioned rear, but she pushed her little



hands in the ground and walked again, stumbling toward the bridge. I watched her and smiled. I wondered if I would want to be that innocent again.

Once on the bridge, the coolness of fall filtered through its open windows, and we paused to look at the water.

“Isn’t this beautiful?” Mom said, laying her head on Dad’s shoulder

“Grace, Grace, no, don’t do that,” Autumn said as Grace tried to pull at the top of a stroller to see the baby inside.

I breathed in the freshness of the swirling water. People laughed and shouted.

We moved toward the other end of the bridge. The scene exploded with vibrant life.

An overweight couple, their stomachs spilling out of their shirts, charged toward us with enormous dripping turkey legs in their hands. Women wearing vests decorated with miniature puffy symbols of the season – pumpkins, corn, black cats, and ghosts - migrated in groups of four or five to vendors selling crafts like antique house signs painted with slogans such as *Happy Fall, Ya’ll* or *If I’m Not Here, Try Wal-Mart*, gigantic red and blue stars, and sleighs painted to resemble the American flag. Parents dressed in North Face gear pushed children in strollers laden with purchases while two women passed wearing ponytails of synthetic curls contrasting with their natural hair color. Older couples clutched each others’ hands or canes, shuffling through the gravel to purvey socks and sweatshirts. Vendors smoked cigars and cigarettes while watching the crowd. Men with microphones clipped to their ear proclaimed the “magnificent cleaning powers” of products such as PowerClean that can “clean anything, anytime, anywhere, and anyplace!”

We stayed close to each other amid the frivolous chaos of the Covered Bridge Festival and clung to each other amid the real chaos of life. Though the previous few years drained our family emotionally and spiritually, we were not defeated. We were welded together with adversity, betrayal, love, hope, misunderstanding, and redemption. And now we were just together.

After a day of shopping and eating, Mom and Autumn walked back to the car as I pushed Grace in her stroller. We heard the thump of dance music and walked in its direction to see a man covered in spray paint sitting surrounded by cans; he was situated diagonally from the covered bridge. He wore a mask to protect himself from the fumes and made money by the novelty of his speed. He sprayed pieces of cardboard paper in intermittent blasts of orange, green, and brown, using a bucket to create contours. I watched, wondering what the finished product would be. He snaked the strips of paper through the paint, sprayed more, made circles with the bucket, and used his fingers to smooth out rough edges. Grace wanted to run away, but Autumn held onto her little hand. He flourished the painting for the crowd. It was a sparkly UFO trailing galactic dust. I rolled my eyes that an artist would sacrifice his integrity for a gimmick. I didn't need the hype.

Our family had not sacrificed our integrity. We weren't flashy like a spray-painted UFO; we were solid and real. My family's belief in integrity taught me that I could believe in mine. Our decisions influenced, shaped, and challenged each individual member and the family as a whole. We moved in our own rhythm with a sensitivity borne out of our circumstance. We were at peace for the first time in a long time.

## Chapter Thirteen

Douglas looked like a life-size puppet; his facial features alone would get him a job at Disney World as a cartoon character. At sixteen, he was thin, about 6'6" tall, had hair the color of dried mud and walked like he was on stilts. His nose dominated a pimple-pocked face, but his eyes, slanted downward and hidden by wire glasses and caterpillar eyebrows, defined him. His eyes were a blank chalkboard waiting to be filled with anything.

Douglas was part of a delegation of central Virginia students selected for the People to People Student Ambassador program, an organization started by Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 to promote international peace through personal relationships. Students were selected by their teachers, interviewed by People to People representatives, and submitted letters of recommendation from teachers and adult leaders in their community affirming their leadership qualities to qualify them to travel. If chosen, students would spend up to three weeks in other countries learning about the customs that defined the culture of a particular region. The students traveled without their parents in delegations of approximately forty students and four teachers, or, as People to People defined them, delegation leaders. Only certified teachers were allowed to travel with the program; they had to be interviewed and submit letters of professional recommendation as well.

In August of 2006, my brother told me he was moving to Columbus, Ohio. When he left, I would be alone. I looked for jobs in the Columbus area so that I could go with him, but I was not at peace with the move. Moving to Columbus was David's dream, not mine; I knew that if I went with him, I would be stepping sideways in life, not forward.

Staying in Lynchburg gave me the opportunity to go to graduate school and to hone my teaching skill. I stayed.

After school started that fall, I got an email one day from a woman I didn't know saying I would be perfect to travel with this program called People to People. I was now in my third year of teaching and was qualified to travel, information I learned when I researched the particulars of the program. The trip sounded exactly like what I wanted in a travel experience: we would visit museums, interact with local citizens and politicians to learn about each country's unique culture; the program was organized, safe, and free to me as a delegation leader. But, I had no desire to go anywhere but the British Isles. When I asked Nikole Mason, a junior whom I had taught the previous year, which countries were on the itinerary, she told me England, Ireland, and Wales. My eyes widened and I wanted to look to the ceiling. I would get to travel for free to countries I had dreamed of visiting; I was still single, so I wouldn't have to worry about anyone else. I applied and was accepted for the summer trip.

During our monthly orientation meetings in the spring and early summer of 2007 to get ready for the three-week trip, Douglas was quiet. When asked to speak, he needed a few minutes to collect himself and the entire room full of delegates and parents would wait for him to painfully form words. He reminded me of my middle school self. I was now twenty-eight.

He was the one delegate I didn't want to ask questions because I knew how much he struggled with forming sentences, but education classes taught me that my duty as a leader and teacher is to push students out of their comfort zones, so I tried, just like my own mother had tried. He was also the one delegate I worried about prior to travel

because I didn't know how he would interact socially given his processing issues and quiet nature. Just like me.

On the trip he stayed with a few chosen students or was content to be left alone. Since he lacked an iPod or portable CD player and most of the other delegates brought some sort of device on the trip, he would sing when we traveled on the coach. I even heard him singing one morning through the flimsy wall of the dorm room of the college in Wales where our delegation stayed on one of the last nights of our trip. But, scanning the lines of security for him in the midst of the chaos in London, I was frightened.

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"Okay, guys, we're going to have to split up, but we'll re-group on the other side of security," I told my group of seventeen student ambassadors as we headed up the escalator to Heathrow security. "Just keep your stuff together and don't have any liquids and gels in your carry-ons."

The seventeen of them mumbled replies, bored with the routine of security and ready to go back to America. Three weeks together proved to me that they were responsible and mature; I did not worry about their ability to successfully navigate their way through the airport. We didn't have any idea what we were about to face.

I leaned on the wall of the escalator, looking at all of my delegates in their maroon People to People polo shirts and thought about how much I was going to miss them. The trip had run so smoothly; nobody got lost on the busy, noisy streets of London, nobody had been sick, nobody was homesick, and there were no major fights between any of the students. When I was asked to lead a delegation of fifteen to seventeen-year-old students across the British Isles, I was scared that, at twenty-eight, I

wouldn't be able to successfully meet the program's leadership expectations. More importantly, I would be completely responsible for these seventeen children for three weeks in three foreign countries; I was petrified I wouldn't meet the parents' expectations. Was I capable enough for thirty-four adults to trust me with their children? How would I accomplish winning their trust in two-hour monthly orientation meetings? Although People to People is a well-organized, efficient organization, I had doubted my leadership capabilities on such a level. I taught over 100 students in my English classroom daily, but was only responsible for them for an hour. I would basically parent these teenagers for three weeks. The responsibility had crushed down on me. However, as I leaned against the side of the escalator, I smiled as I looked at the students clutching backpacks, listening to iPods while looking out over the terminals, and talking and laughing with each other.

Cresting the top of the escalator, we were immediately bombarded. Two security guards waved plastic bags in my face shouting, "Liquids and gels! Liquids and gels!" Confused, I looked at them just long enough to be swept to the next two officers shouting the same mechanical catchphrase. I ran through an obstacle course of crazed liquids-and-gels security personnel; I wove like a character in a video game through the twenty plus officers. I couldn't even see my maroon-shirted delegates through all the plastic and had no time to warn them about staying together. In a haze, I pushed through all of the confusion.

As I came to the end of the liquids-and-gels attack, I saw three huge steel doors in front of me; they looked like the portal to another world or the heavy steel doors to the Tower of London where the crown jewels are kept. We were headed into those doors. I



caught my breath for one moment before being pushed into the hive of security. Behind the steel doors, thirty lines spread out before us like constantly moving keys on a piano. Every single one of the lines was busy with people taking off belts, putting metal objects in plastic trays, slamming carry-on luggage onto conveyer belts, and walking through beeping metal detectors. The light was bright and harsh in contrast to the dark shadows of the hall. I blinked a few times, but was ushered into a line by one of the approximately two hundred airport security personnel working that day in July. I didn't have time to scan around for my teenage delegates; I did as I was told.

I took off my belt and shrugged my backpack onto the conveyor belt while looking around for the maroon shirts. The man at the other end of the metal detector was signaling for me to move through and I sucked in my breath and walked. When I got to the other side and grabbed my backpack, I saw a group of my delegates waiting for me in between the myriad lines of security and the shoe checkpoint. Heathrow was so busy that the initial lines of security could not handle every passenger taking off their shoes, so a separate checkpoint was set up to perform that function. The kids started a count-off and we realized somebody was missing. All of our heads turned toward the lines of people looking for Douglas. We couldn't see him.

The security guards were staring at us, wanting us to move, but I was absolutely not going to budge until I knew something about Douglas. The students had been instructed to always let the leaders know their whereabouts, but with Heathrow so busy, I understood why he might have gotten lost or preoccupied. We searched the lines of people for quite some time before we finally accepted he was lost. I told the kids to stay put while I asked one of the security guards for help. I had to do something.

“Excuse me, sir, but I seem to have lost one of the boys traveling with us. He hasn’t come through the lines yet. Can you help me look for him?” I was sweating and pale. “One of my students said that he lost his passport and went back to the United Desk. Is there any way I can go back to look for him?”

“Is your student a teenager?” he asked. He was a bald man with black-rimmed glasses and a heavy Cockney accent; he looked to be in his forties.

“Yes, sir,” I said. I was not smiling, but he was. I wanted to punch the smirk off his face.

“Yeah, teenagers these days seem to get lost in their own house. I have teenagers myself. Is that your group?” he asked, pointing to the students in matching maroon shirts behind me. I nodded, turning to them. They stared at me, their eyebrows raised, many of them shifting their weight by the second. Several of the students were bumped by the harried masses, but they didn’t budge. “You all can go through this way. You don’t have to go through this checkpoint. If you give me his passport, then I can go try to find him,” the guard said.

I signaled for the others as he disengaged the rope barrier separating him from the rest of the line waiting to have their feet scanned. My group rushed through as I handed a photocopy of Douglas’s passport to the bald guard. I followed my students, promising him I would come back once I got them to the right gate.

The crowds swirling around the terminals immediately overwhelmed us. People swarmed around tables placed in the huge commons area surrounded by the glaring lights and pinks, reds, blues, and greens of the varying shops and restaurants in the area. We ran for a console and I searched frantically for our departure gate but couldn’t find it.

Our flight was leaving at 10:20 that morning and I knew the time had to be around 9:30. The rest of our delegation was way ahead of us. I couldn't stay with my sixteen kids for fear that I'd miss Douglas, but had nowhere to tell them to go. The kids shouted ideas at me; Nikole suggested the rest of them stay at a huge yellow demo car in the middle of the commons area while I went back for Douglas since it was so ostentatious that nobody could get confused as to the group's location.

"That's a good idea. Stay here and not one of you leave this area until I come back for you," I yelled amid the echoing clamor of hundreds of voices.

"What about our passports? Do you want to take our passports?" a delegate yelled. During the trip, I guarded their passports, distributing them when needed and collecting them once they were not. The People to People program enforced this rule on all of their programs. I was currently finding out why.

"Yes, yes. Everybody give me their passports," I shouted. I didn't even stop to think that if I got stuck in England with Douglas, they would all be stuck with me. One of the boys glared at me, his jaw set and lips a thin line in his taut face.

"What's wrong, Taylor?" I asked, shoving passports into a wrinkled, dog-eared manila folder.

"I just...I mean...Just wait until I see Douglas." His eyes narrowed and I stopped zipping my backpack.

"No, no, no. Nobody is going to yell at Douglas. He is scared to death, tired, and by himself. That's punishment enough. If anybody yells at him, it'll be me," I said, looking from one angry face to the next.

"I thought you said that we shouldn't...." another girl protested.

“YOU can’t say anything, but I’m the leader and can say whatever I want,” I snapped at her. I knew I was being irrational and cruel, but at this point, I didn’t care. “Nobody move one inch from this spot until I come back with Douglas.”

I charged back to security, pushing through crowds of people coming out. Annoyed and curious, chunks of people waiting to come through shot glances in my direction as I craned my neck to look for the bald security guy – my one flare of hope in this mess. I couldn’t yell or signal to him because of the people, so I stared at him as though my eyes could turn his head in my direction through some magical power. He glanced up from his podium and walked behind the line pressing toward the shoe checkpoint shaking his head.

“I took his picture to the guys on the other side and they said he headed back to the United Desk when he realized he lost his passport. I went down there, but couldn’t find him. The guys at United found his passport and are paging him now,” he said.

“Can I go back through to look for him?” I asked, wiping the hair away from my face and shifting my backpack.

“No, I’m sorry, but I had them page him to the United Desk,” he said.

“Where else would he possibly go?” I asked.

“This is a big airport. He could be anywhere.” The bald man spoke what I had feared to even think.

“I know he could be anywhere, but why would he go anywhere else? He knew he was supposed to let me know if he had to go anywhere and the United desk is the only place we’ve been in this entire airport,” I almost shrieked.

“I’m sorry, miss, but we really don’t have a lot of communication with United. Security works independently from all of the airlines, but I assure you they’re paging him about every five minutes. I took his passport down to them so they have it when he comes to them.” He backed to his terminal, shrugging his shoulders.

All I could do was wait. I couldn’t hear Douglas being paged since I was on the other side of the wall and the slamming, smacking, and beeping of the security lines overwhelmed any other sound. I strained my eyes trying to see every single person walking through security and finally had to stop looking. I squinted to see beyond the doors to the liquids-and-gels people, but could see only shadows. I felt every second of time pass as I watched people unclasp their belts, pull them through belt-loops, put them in plastic tins, and shove carry-ons, lap-tops, purses, and other bags through the tentacles of the X-ray machine. I watched people of every ethnicity stride through the metal detectors and saw the red lights at the top flicker to green and back to red. I watched their faces relax and resume the detachment necessary to survive a busy airport. I wanted to panic. I wanted to start running around the little space I was in between the lines of security and yell at them to let me through. I couldn’t. If I shoved through security, I risked missing Douglas in passing. If I ran back to my other delegates, I risked missing Douglas again. I realized in those interminable minutes watching people come and go that I was an adult. I was not allowed to panic. I had to think of what to do if we missed our flight including: me staying behind with Douglas for a day or two while People to People figured out a flight back for us. At the time, I didn’t realize I had all of the students’ passports, so they were stuck with me. He had to come through those doors, he just had to. I didn’t want to think of staying in London for longer; I wanted to go home,

too. What would I tell his parents? How would I tell the other part of the delegation where I was? How would my delegates waiting by the yellow car figure out where they were going? I shifted my weight to my other foot and stood, tense and rigid, watching the door. All I could pray was God, God, God, God, God. Adrenaline pumped through me; I believed I could see every line of security at once. I knew it was close to 10:00. This was my worst fear realized.

He was right in front of me. How did I miss him? I looked up and there he was with an airport guard grabbing his backpack. Tension drained from my body as I jumped towards him. I couldn't get to him at first because he was walking through the metal detector, so I just balanced on the tips of my feet, every ounce of energy holding me back from pouncing on him.

"Where have you been?" I yelled, grabbing his arm to make sure he was real.

"This your guy, miss?" a security guard standing by Douglas asked. I looked at him and cocked my head. Of course this was my guy; why else would I be freaking out?

"Yes, yes he is." I watched as Douglas moved to slowly pick up his belongings. Should I yell? Shriek? Call him a moron? Again, I was the adult. Everything I had learned about God and His character needed to inform my actions. I watched the scared, trembling teenager in front of me and knew that I couldn't be selfish. I wanted to yell about how much he'd scared us and how he knew better than to walk back to the United desk without telling me where he was going and how he knew not to leave his passport lying around and where was he and why didn't he go back to the United desk, but I was silent. His mannerisms and actions for six months foreshadowed this moment and instinctively I knew he had reached the limits of what a sixteen-year old could



emotionally handle. I forced back my own feelings and grabbed his trembling arm again, pulling him into a hug.

“I’m so glad you’re safe.” I pushed back to look at him. His lip trembled. “Are you okay?”

I waited for him to form a word – for Douglas, I would accept any word at all.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding his shaggy head.

“Then let’s go.”

## Chapter Fourteen

One Thursday morning during a visit with Autumn in Phoenix, Arizona in July of 2008, I woke at 6 AM to drive to the Grand Canyon. Autumn couldn't go with me since she was eight months pregnant with her son, Jude, so I was going alone. We drank coffee together, regular for me and decaffeinated for her, while her two-year-old daughter, Grace watched cartoons in the living room.

I drove north on I-85 to Sedona in the arid morning air. Phoenix is a beautiful, developing city. I assumed that my drive would be boring since it would be through a wasteland of dirt and small cacti. After Phoenix, the terrain switched from desert to hills; the change happened suddenly, as if the land was tired of being cranky and changed moods. I exited off I-85 to a highway into the center of Sedona, a little mountain town that boasts of its beautiful, massive red rock formations. As I was driving through the winding roads leading to the most famous of the formations, shops advertising New Age crystals and psychic readings popped up on the side of the road, becoming more prevalent as I moved toward town. Neon green aliens with huge, teardrop-shaped black eyes were painted on the sides of several buildings; I later learned that Sedona is considered a center of psychic energy. Many people make pilgrimages to Sedona to ruminate in its aura. I was there to reflect on the beauty of God's creation.

The first rock formation appeared as I rounded a curve in the highway. By now, the landscape had sprouted trees and shrubbery that almost carpeted the desert sand. The red rock was more like an orange-sienna hybrid, but the color burned against the azure blue of the sky. The colors intensified because of the contrast in hue. The rock was the burning top of Sinai where God bid Moses come speak to Him. I pulled the SUV into

one of the parking spots on the circular drive and jumped out of the car, camera in hand. I snapped picture after picture with my cheap Kodak camera with its cracked lens, even though I knew family and friends wouldn't care as much me. The rock formation through the viewfinder was tiny, the minute detail of the rocky crags gone. The pictures could not recreate it, but to not capture the view felt like an injustice, so I continued moving and clicking, moving and clicking.

I circled the town of Sedona on my way north. The hippie villages and UFO signs seemed in the right place and proximity for them to appreciate the beauty of the landscape. I drove through the construction sites and holes where men dug or blasted through the concrete as part of a massive street renovation. I was diverted through several detours, roadblocks, and street lights before I exited.

I knew it was another two hours until the Grand Canyon. I drove, surrounded by tall pine trees, through the mountains rising out of the Arizona flatlands. Nature seemed to feel the south's barrenness and dry heat and attempted balance it with the vegetation and cooler temperatures of the north. Trees stretched for miles along the circular highway through the mountains. I stopped at a lookout point that showed the sprawling expanse of trees for miles. I looked over the horizon to look for the wasteland of the desert, but couldn't see it. Here, nature was peaceful and new.

I continued my drive; the land plateaued and remained flat leading toward the Canyon. I occasionally passed solitary gas stations, but they looked run-down and barely used. I stopped at one with antiquated dial gas pumps. The store smelled old, with fly tape swinging from the door. The lanes of peanuts, chips, beef jerky, and cans of Campbell's soup were dusty. After paying, I left.

I could not sit still when I continued driving. I kept adjusting in my seat and craning my neck to see if I could tell where the Canyon lay. Shifting gears was a nice distraction until I got to fifth and had to stop. I sat upright and forward in the driver's seat. Green highway signs that marked the miles to the Canyon's lip teased me. I drove right into the Grand Canyon village and scanned every possible eye line for the Canyon's edge. Instead, the National Geographic Center for the exploration of the Canyon and the explanation of its history was the first thing I saw on the left of the street. On the right was a hotel/restaurant combination. I didn't know that I could buy a park pass at one of the ranger stations on the outskirts of the National Park, so I stopped at the National Geographic Center. People milled about in the gift shop with its screen-printed pink, blue, green, and white Grand Canyon T-shirts, Grand Canyon key chains, and Grand Canyon baseball caps. Crowds waited for the screening of the Canyon informational movie which would begin again in fifteen minutes. Red numbers on a digital clock ticked off the seconds until the next showing.

After I bought my ticket, I ran to the SUV. I barely stopped to put on my seat belt. My hands shook and I could not put the key in the car. The line of the National Park was shaded by trees; the park rangers' huts were hidden. I waited in another line to enter the Park and almost threw my pass at the attending ranger. He told me the southern route was almost ten minutes in front of me. I was stuck behind a car that seemed to be stalling; I could hardly calm myself. Both hands gripped the wheel. I passed a sign indicating the route I was to go, but my instinct told me not to turn. I kept driving.

Suddenly, there it was – the first lookout station on the southern route. No sign marked the beginning of the trail and no designation of the lookout's name was

anywhere. I barely shut the door to the Saturn Vue and raced to the metal barrier. Tears fogged the corners of my eyes and I blinked. The Canyon lay before me with its crevices, gaps, plateaus, and ledges. The rock formations were colored in muted oranges, pinks, russets, and beige. A soft haze covered the horizon. Hawks soared, buoyed by the air currents that shifted over the Canyon's open spaces. The silence and stillness were overwhelming, even with the presence of people. The metal barrier only extended so far, so I walked to the edge and sat down, letting my legs extend over the downward face. I sat. Emotions that I could not make sense of overwhelmed me. I sat in awe of the beauty and majesty of God's creation. Little jutting pieces of rock poked me in the leg, but I spread my hands on the sparse grass behind me. The air rushed through my hair and I tilted my head toward the fading sun. I closed my eyes.

I could not see the future, but I could be present in the now. In my early twenties, I would not have come here alone. I had existed in the shadow of a stronger personality as long as that person would let me. My siblings both knew their identity in Christ long before me and that confidence attracted people; I found obscene comfort in hiding from who I needed to be in their aura. Now, I was in Lynchburg without my family to build an identity of my own, hanging on a spiritual cliff like the one I was sitting on, exposed, fearful, excited, thrilled.

I was hungry, but the only thing I had brought with me was some trail mix. I knew it wouldn't be filling, but I pulled it out of my pocket anyway figuring it would appease my hunger until I could eat something more substantial. I peeled open the bag, watching the peanuts, raisins, and chocolate pieces settle in the middle, the salt from the peanuts coating the plastic. The little mound in the middle looked whole and I almost

didn't want to ruin the shape by scooping some of the mixture into my hand. But, I was hungry, so I began picking out individual pieces. I ate a chocolate piece and raisin together, but didn't like the combination, so I started pairing a peanut with a chocolate and then a peanut with a raisin. The mound was ruined, little divots running in the mixture like the carvings in the Canyon, so I poured the mixture into my hand and ate it in large mouthfuls, the salt and melting chocolate sticking to my hand. I put the bag beside me, the plastic crinkling, and wiped my hands on the grass, leaving them spread behind me again. The air was about twenty degrees cooler here than in Phoenix and the breeze was more like a soft, compelling wind. I looked down to the Canyon's core, to the strip of the Colorado River visible at the base. The river looked small and helpless, but I knew that up close it rushed with relentless force through the ridge. The depth perception of the Canyon was messing with my vision. I smiled and cocked my head, still staring at the river.

The expectations and illusions that I had created about life were just that: my expectations. Reality hadn't always matched. God had used my failures, heartbreaks, choices, triumphs, and joys to nudge me into a comprehension of who He really was. Did my family deserve what happened to us? Only God could judge. Had my family forsaken God? No. My Dad was betrayed, scorned, ridiculed, laughed at, gossiped about, and lied to. So was Jesus. My sister was screamed at and cussed, locked into a room, terrified into believing she was worthless, and chastised by men twice her age. She was maligned and misunderstood. So was Jesus. I wanted to marry, to have children, to create a life and family with a man willing to forge one with me. That hadn't happened yet. I was at the edge of the spiritually possible, just as I sat at the edge of the physically



possible, the wilderness stretching before me in miles and miles of undulating canyon.

The children of Israel wandered in a wilderness like this for forty years before entering the land of God's promise. I too had been drifting in a desert of my disillusionments, just now ready to accept that God's promise of an abundant life could come true. I was willing to wait, to renew my strength with the waiting, to not faint in the reality of conflict or the fear in calm, and to stand, not hide, in the reality of grace.