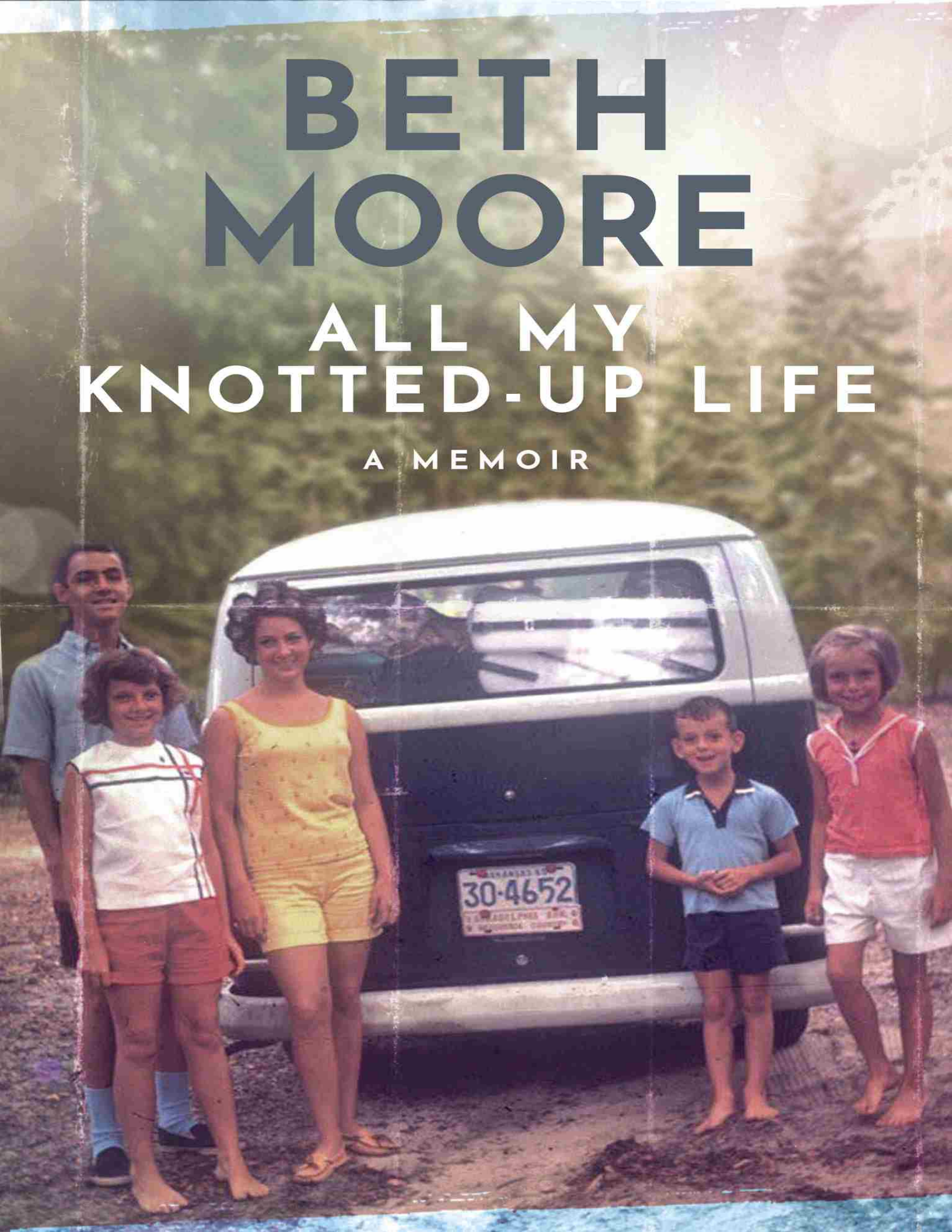
BETH MOORE

ALL MY KNOTTED-UP LIFE

A MEMOIR



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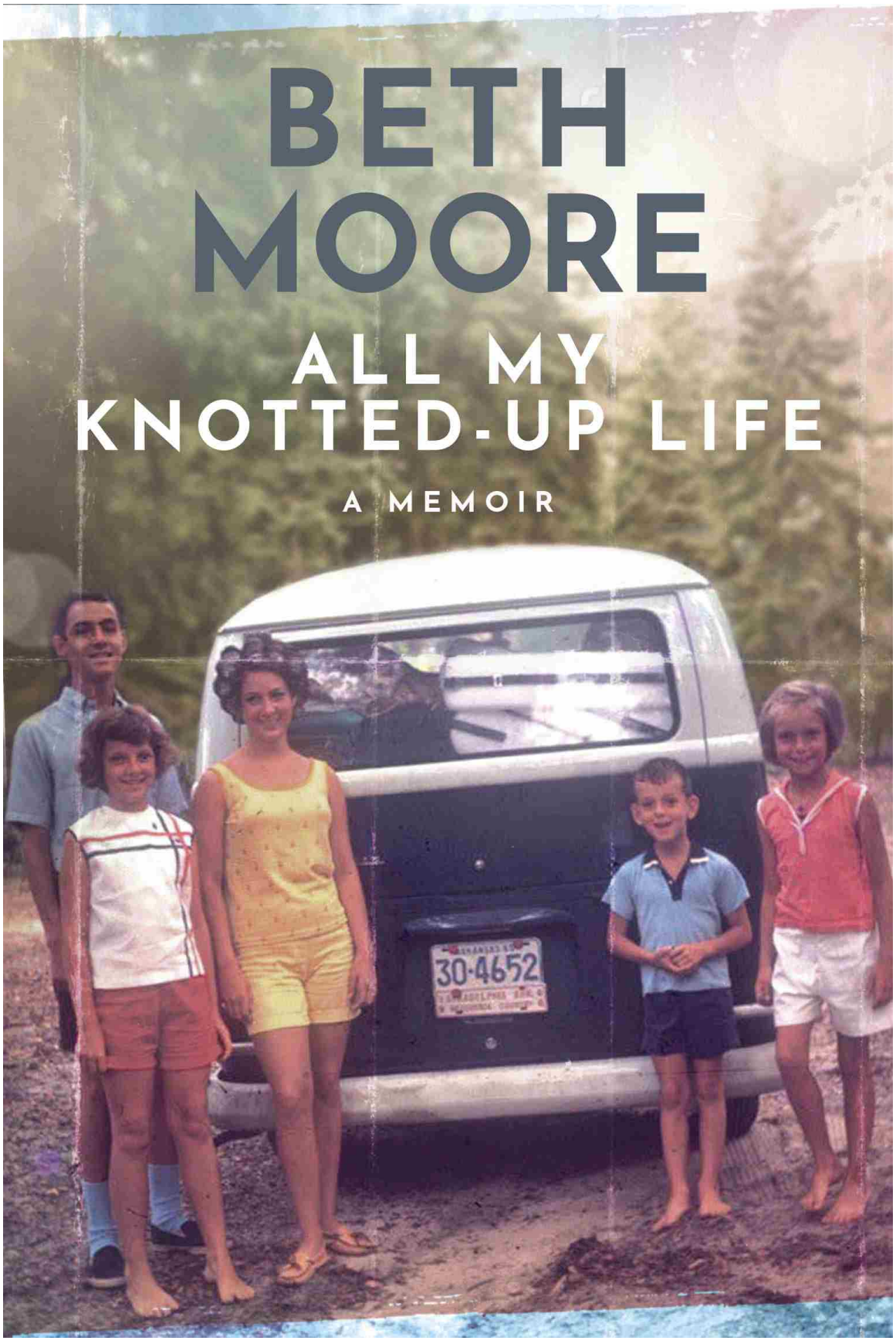

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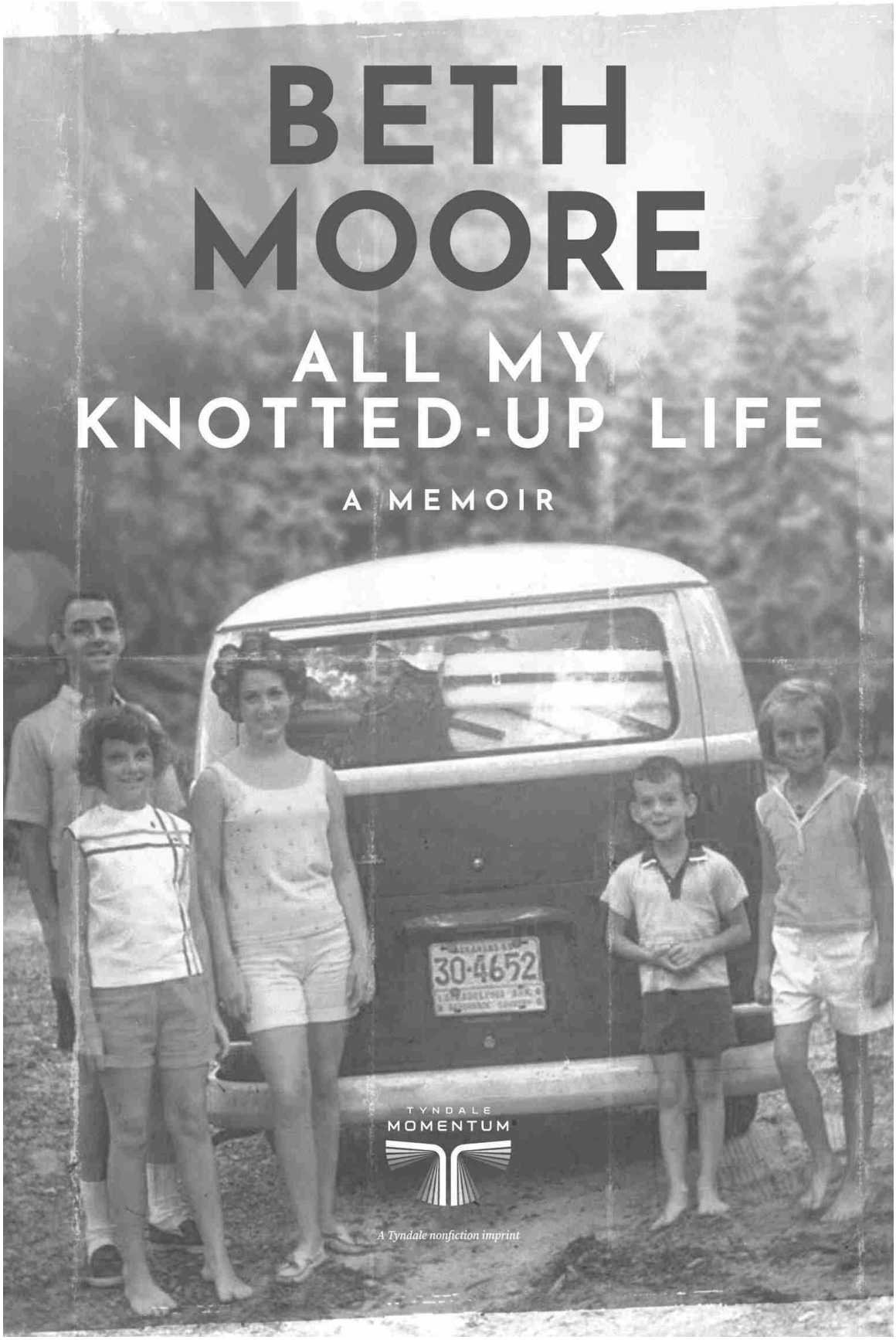

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To Keith:
Through the fire,
through the flood,
God has been faithful to us.
I love you.

With deep gratitude to my siblings,
in the order of appearance on the cover,
Wayne, Gay, Sandra, and Tony.
I do not take lightly your willingness
to allow me to invite a public view
into my corner of our private lives.
I love you all.

CONTENTS

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THE BURDEN IN TELLING OUR INDIVIDUAL STORY is ironically the same thing that made it bearable: we were not alone in it. Perhaps we felt we were, but the truth is, the threads of other people's lives are inevitably knotted into ours even if only by their conspicuous absence. Who, after all, plays a bigger part in our story than one who—whether by sickness, injury, dozing, distraction, occupation, brokenness, divorce, or death—didn't show up? Every life story entails a community of individuals who share one precarious common denominator in the narrative: *you*. Good or bad, *you*. Right or wrong, *you*. The responsibility is immense and, to anyone with a whit of sense, terribly intimidating.

I love a story told, and I love the actual storytelling, but I have not been in a hurry to write a memoir. I think I've been waiting for everything to work out neatly and cleanly. Sensibly. Politely. You hold this book in your hands in large part because I gave up on that. But in a way, the giving up feels more like relief than resignation. I suppose I've also been scared to see the pieces of my story tied together. Scared to discover that what made the whole of it hardest of all was me.

I've waited to write a memoir until my reasons to do so finally exceeded my reasons to refrain. Time had to pass. People had to pass. Others had to age enough to no longer care much what people think. I've worried about hurting people. I've wondered if the kinder thing to do for those who have known my family might be to leave them with better impressions. I lament that telling my story might imply more about the experiences of my family members than either they or I would wish. I've asked their permission and received their blessing and tried my best to leave

the most vulnerable parts of their stories to them, but I'm not blind to the cost of showing up in someone else's book. I wince knowing that a story, once told, cannot be untold.

I've attempted, by the grace of God, to untie some knots in these pages. Several of these knots I've kept clenched in a sweaty fist all my life. They needed air and light perhaps even more than understanding. The same distance that can clarify a story can also cloud it. The trick in writing a memoir is knowing which is which. Am I ready to tell it because it is clearer now or because it is less clear? My deep hope, my determined intention, is the former, but the lens of human perception is inevitably impaired.

Few things are more unnerving than writing a memoir of your life with an unknown measure of it yet unlived. For instance, what if the good parts go belly-up before the book even hits a shelf? Publishing a book is always an act of faith. It's a way of saying, "Dear Reader, here is what I'm thinking right now—what I believe to be true and long to be of value to you—but would you forgive me and not hold it against the God of whom I speak if time or divine Providence proves me wrong or woefully deficient?"

And now, if you'll entrust to me a bit of your time, I'll entrust to you a bit of my story.

PROLOGUE

DON'T LET GO. Whatever you do, don't let go. I crumpled my eyelids in two tight knots then cracked them open enough to get my bearings. The current was milky with sand like someone had topped off a big glass of water with a splash of buttermilk. A clod of seaweed grazed my forehead then tumbled off my nose, and water shot through my head, foamy and thick with brine, meeting no apparent barrier and whirlpooling between my ringing ears.

Forcing an eyeshot behind me, I caught sight of my dad's foot. His skin appeared translucent beneath the water, the noon sun turning his purple veins an anemic lilac. We'd been standing beside one another in the surf seconds earlier. We'd inched further out without even moving somehow. The watermark reached the waist of my red one-piece, but he was little more than knee deep. And he was my dad. He'd know where to stop. I dangled my hands just below the surface, palms forward and fingers outstretched, making rivulets in the curl of the calm waves, dazzled by their constancy. This was my maiden voyage to the sea, the first I'd felt the curious tickle of a shifting floor of sand between my toes.

Then, out of nowhere, I was underwater. My arms were instantly taut, elbowless, jerking my shoulders until they swore they'd snap. *Grab me, Dad, before I let go.* My fingers were laced around his right ankle, knuckles locked. My spine stretched into a thin strip of taffy. At the pull of an unheard trigger, I was a bullet of skin clinging to the end of a barrel, begging not to be shot out to sea.

As swiftly as the undertow had sucked my feet out from under me, the current shifted and I swung around, unbending, like the second hand of a clock dropping from 12 to 6, face planted in the sand. My father's sudden

yank on my arms snapped my hand-lock from his ankle and I swung like a rag doll to my feet, coughing up a salt mine, a mud-pie patch over one eye. I bit my lip to keep from crying.

I don't remember what Dad said. Perhaps something like, "You're okay. You're okay." It would have been true enough. My arms were limp, but they weren't torn away from my shoulders the way I'd pictured. No sea monsters had managed to drive me out to the open sea and into the gullets of great fish with ten-inch teeth. But *something* had happened, and I wanted to know what. I wanted to know what took him so long. I wanted to know if it scared him that the water tried to swallow me. And I wanted him to say he was sorry, even if he couldn't have helped it. He never knew I had any such questions. I couldn't form a word.

I was turned over to my mother, who was perched on a rusty blue and green web-strap chair under a beach umbrella to shield her fair skin and her seventy-seven-year-old mother from the unfiltered rays of the Florida sun. She gently faced me forward and held me securely between her knees, still chatting with Nanny. Something about my cousin Steedy Boy. He sure was going to be tall, they agreed. The frazzled edge of a strap on the folding chair scratched and bit at the back of my leg.

"Reckon does he have a girlfriend?" My grandmother loved knowing that kind of thing. I liked that about her. I wouldn't have minded knowing the answer myself, just not that very minute.

"Well, I don't know," Mom replied to Nanny. "You'll have to ask him."

"Well, I'm asking you."

"Well, Mother, I don't know."

"Well, *why* don't you know?"

My teeth chattered so hard I thought they'd crack, and my throat stung from the saltwater rush like a potato peeler had been taken to it. As Mom toweled off my shivering six-year-old frame, she asked quizzically, "You cold, honey?" I paused a moment trying to figure out if, somewhere beneath the scared, I was just plain-old ordinary cold. Maybe so. I nodded. She rubbed my arms briskly with a turquoise towel that had a blue and yellow turtle on it. "Let me warm you up!" I still couldn't get a word out. I don't

know why, exactly. She would have let me tell her that I thought I was drowning. She wouldn't have made me feel silly. She would have pulled me into her lap and let me cry, and I just know she'd have been hopping mad at my dad. But I couldn't tell her any of it. Never did. My grandmother's question just hung in the air. "Well, why don't you know?"

CHAPTER ONE

WE WERE RIVER PEOPLE. River people don't have any business going to the sea. The state of Arkansas is an innard in the abdomen of North America, a gallbladder maybe or a spleen. Our arteries pool with visible edges. Arkansas waters are crossable, bridgeable, cushioned on every bank. My hometown of Arkadelphia rests at the bumpy toes of the Ouachita Mountains where two rivers converge. The Ouachita, some six hundred miles total, gathers up the shorter Caddo just north of town, and together they run green and curvy down the city's east side on their lazy way to Louisiana.

With my dad's recent purchase of a blue and white Volkswagen bus, we Greens finally had a vehicle with a wide enough mouth for all eight of us. Since we all fit, why not drive for days on end, packed tighter than my great-grandmother Miss Ruthie's chewing tobacco, from our small college town all the way to our cousins in north Florida?

"What's a few more miles?" Dad said, taking a red felt-tip to the map and tracing an additional eight-hour jaunt due south to Miami Beach. He, Major Albert B. Green, took charge of the wheel. My mother, Esther Aletha Rountree Green, rode shotgun, with my four-year-old brother, Tony, wiggling like a caged spider monkey between them.

My maternal grandmother, Minnie Ola Rountree, whom we called Nanny, took a lion's share of the middle seat. She was not a small woman, swore she never had been nor did I ever want her to be. Nanny was squooshy, ample-bosomed, pillowy for napping against. The middle seat was a slightly abbreviated version of the back bench seat, and Nanny bounced on its wealth of springs between my nine-year-old sister, Gay, and me. Born three years apart, we two Green girls were thick as thieves and would prove to be precisely as trustworthy.

Named Aletha Gay after our mom, she favored her in appearance, sharing her pecan-brown hair, fair skin, and fetching swathe of freckles across her cheeks. I, the lone blonde in the family, was told from the time I could walk that I favored a different wing of the family. In an era when laboring moms were knocked out for delivery, I came with a bit of a rush, causing my mom to forego the usual protocol and keeping her wide awake for every contraction. Still woozy-headed from the furious ordeal, she took one look at me and bellowed with clear astonishment, “She looks just like my brother-in-law!” This declaration invited all manner of mischief from the nursing staff, who made eyes at her when my dad visited the hospital then winked at her when he came to drive us home.

Two years later, Tony came along looking a good bit more like Dad and the singular one of us born in our hometown. Gay and I were the only built-in playmates the poor little guy had. He could, therefore, either play what we were playing or play alone. Since we mostly played dolls and he refused to be shut out, he had no recourse but to join us. Tony possessed the maternal touch of a Mack truck, so we assigned him a lesser-cherished baby doll and one durable enough to withstand him. He promptly stuck it all the way to the toe of a long white sock of Dad’s and carried it around by the ribbed cuff each time we played. Watching him knock it clumsily against table legs, doorframes, and tree trunks day in and day out caused Gay and me considerable consternation.

Tony was the baby of a three-generation family well-versed in children, so he was warmly humored. “Whatcha got there, Tony?” the adults and big kids would ask. “Oh, this old thing?” he’d say, shrugging his bony little shoulders. “Just a plain ole doll.” This was, henceforth, the name it bore. We were forbidden to take any toys bigger than our palms on our summer vacation in the VW bus. One can’t be entirely certain that Dad hadn’t contrived such a rule in hopes of leaving Plain Ole Doll home in a sock where he believed it belonged. Luckily, two Matchbox cars fit perfectly in Tony’s palms, so he made motor sounds and crash noises every waking moment of the trip.

Since Tony's head only popped into view when we hit a pothole, Nanny, who'd never procured a license nor once been behind a wheel, had a clear view to aid my father vociferously in his driving from her perch in the middle seat. Her second advantage was full range of motion to swat anyone who proved worthy of it. Old as she was, she aimed more than struck, so the sibling next to the offender may as well have been complicit. Whoever coined the idiom *hitting two birds with one stone* was looking square at the arm of my nanny. The generous amount of flesh that hung from her upper arm flapped winglike when she swung. I figure this was the secret to her momentum.

Riding caboose in the VW bus were the oldest two of us five Green kids. My sister, Sandra, was an exotic eighteen. She knew how to do good hair and makeup, and she had a college-aged boyfriend. Gay and I were in awe of her and had high hopes of her turning out to be deliciously scandalous. She never delivered, but we set the bar low enough for scandal that any drama at all satisfied, and if the Greens were good at anything, it was drama. Next to her in the back seat was my dreamy big brother, Wayne. He was fourteen, the uncontested crush of my entire young life, and through my hazel eyes, Paul McCartney's identical twin. And he was musical. Who on earth would think this a coincidence? Sandra and Wayne were inarguably in their prime because they knew how to dance. They could put a stack of 45s on the record player at home, shake and swing like they were on Dick Clark, then flip those records over and do it all again to another set of songs. They may as well have been hippies.

We were told to pack light, so a mishmash of no less than ten pieces of luggage was strapped hillbilly-like to the top of the van alongside our brand-new tent from the Sears and Roebuck, still in its packaging. None of us had ever camped before except the major, of course, on battlefields in World War II and Korea, though we hoped for a different ambience. Motel expenses for a voluminous family on summer vacation were out of the question on an Army budget. Our kind of people didn't take destination vacations anyhow. We only went to see relatives on account of cheaper food and lodging. It wasn't until much later, after we moved to Houston, that I'd

ever hear anyone say, “We’re going snow skiing for spring break.” *What kin live there?* “Who’s Ken?” they’d say. *I didn’t say Ken. I said kin. Your relatives.* Texans didn’t have the vocabulary God gave a groundhog. “Well, none,” they’d say. *Well, why are you going?* “To ski,” they’d say.

Since I have no vivid memory when this wasn’t so, I don’t think it’s too soon to say that Albert and Aletha were not as fond of one another as one might hope on a two-week vacation or, for that matter, what would turn out to be a fifty-something-year-long marriage. I could offer a good many reasons why this was true, but for now, only one is needful: my father drove with both feet, his right sole on the accelerator and his left on the brake, even when he was privileged to be at the wheel of an automatic.

The erratic spasms of Dad’s two-foot driving made a catnap particularly challenging for passengers on a protracted trip. My mother was the anxious type, at which I, a woman of like ilk, choose to cast no stone. I mean only to paint the picture of my parents, Albert and Aletha, in the front seat of a VW bus for hours. She kept her left arm stretched over my little brother at all times and her right hand braced on the dashboard with a lit cigarette between her index and middle fingers, catching a drag when catch could. And catch always could.

I was raised in a cloudy pillar by day and a lighter by night. To this day, I nurse a fondness for the sound of a match head combusting against the striking strip of a small rectangular box—*tet-szzzzoooo* like a petite bottle rocket on the Fourth of July—and for the pitchy quick-fading scent of sulfur dioxide.

The real work on that summer vacation began when we stopped for the night at the Fort Walton Beach campsite. I suspect saving the expense of motel stays might not have been the solitary reason for the tent purchase. My cousins were campers in the same way ants are insects. They were the sort that could have started a fire rubbing dandelions together, and lost in a forest, weeks of wild berries, grasshoppers, and deer milk would have left them no less robust.

We were more the Piggly Wiggly type. It was never said, “How hard could putting up a tent be?” But what did go without saying was that my father never missed a chance to compete, and my uncle, whom we’d see shortly, was a formidable foe. He was the only one in the entire extended family whose record in the armed services came close to Dad’s, and let no one suppose that a competition’s being “friendly” makes it a whit less serious. Dad didn’t use a lot of profanity, but he had a way of making perfectly respectable slang words sound brazen. He found little aid from the written instructions that came with the tent packaging and what appeared to be no aid at all from the audible instructions that came with Nanny. On the average day, an impressive number of Nanny’s sentences began with the words *Well, why don’t you . . . ?* On this trip, as far as I could tell, she was clocking at a record 98 percent.

Dad was tricolored by now, his face deep red against that one narrow strip of white in a head full of hair that was otherwise the color of cocoa. I’d always thought that one shock of white looked like someone dribbled a tablespoon of trimming paint on his head and, feeling something wet, he’d run his little finger from forehead to crown to wipe it off. I’d been wrong all along. It was as clear as a bell now exactly what it looked like: a single strike of lightning. This was not so much frightening as it was factual.

While Dad tried to figure out which side of the tent was the top, Mom emptied half a carton of Pall Malls. The more he huffed, the more she puffed. The rest of us coped with the taxing assemblage in our own ways. Wayne stood by wide-eyed, fidgeting with an edge of the canvas, scared to help and scared not to. Any second, Dad was going to say, “Are you just going to stand there?” I suspect this quickly approaching inevitability is why Sandra suddenly volunteered to walk Gay to the campground restrooms. Tony threw rocks, which lessened neither the huffing nor the puffing, and I sucked my usual two fingers and stared at the night sky, wondering why Florida had no stars. We had stars in Arkansas.

Having finally triumphed over the tent pegs, Dad entered through the zippered door and was swallowed whole by nylon. A great flailing commenced, a ghost thrashing. Somewhere near the apparition’s rotating

head, the top end of a tent pole searched wretchedly for a point until it was found and affixed. Dad emerged like a slathered newborn from a heavy-labored nylon womb.

Each of us was handed an olive-green air mattress to blow up for our beds. Nanny, being elderly and all, got both an air mattress and a cot to set it on. There is an art to squeezing the mattress valve open while you blow through it that exceeds the mastery of small children. Despite the loudest of efforts, Tony's lips never did seal around the valve, meaning he primarily spit on his mattress. What was left dry, he likely wet during the night. I puffed a few thimblefuls of air into the pillow compartment of mine and grew dramatically faint. By the time we'd wrangled eight mattresses and a cot inside the tent and crawled in for the night, the choppy asthmatic breaths of oxygen-deprived blowers punctured the thick, steamy air.

• • •

Family is a heck of a thing, fierce and frightful. There we are, all zipped up inside the unknown together and not always voluntarily. It can be dark in there, trying to get through the night. We can feel utterly alone, singular and isolated, while crushed and crowded and so close in body that our sweat mingles and we inhale what they exhale, unfiltered. We want to touch, to hold hands, on our own terms, which is our right and ought to be our right, but most times we don't. We go from knowing each other better than we know ourselves, to barely sure if we know each other at all, to precisely sure that we don't. And truth be told, we don't know one another in the same way outsiders might. We know too much to know each other.

Reasonable allowances have to be made amid such nearness. We want to be known but not memorized as if we cannot change. Family has a way of freezing its constituents in time, for better or for worse, confident that what was true twenty years ago is true now and will be true in twenty more. Unchecked, we lose sight of one another's otherness. We're amoebas, constantly swallowing one another or splitting off, simultaneously demanding singularity and intimacy.

These are my people. My original loves, my flesh and my bones. I know their jokes. I know their quirks. We have the same noses. Different slices of the same secrets are on our plates. We've survived the same blows. We speak in strange tongues, syllables of a run-on sentence that began in our infancies, untranslatable to casual visitors.

All my knotted-up life I've longed for the sanity and simplicity of knowing who's good and who's bad. I've wanted to know this about myself as much as anyone. I needed God to clean up the mess, divide the room, sort the mail so all of us can just get on with it and be who we are. Go where we're bent. This was not theological. It was strictly relational. God could do what he wanted with eternity. I was just trying to make it here in the meantime, and what I thought would help me make it was for people to be one thing or the other, good or bad. Keep it simple. As benevolent as he has been in a myriad of ways, God has remained aloof on this uncomplicated request.

Take my dad's grandmother, Miss Ruthie, for example. She was a hard woman to watch, chewing all that tobacco. At times the foaming saliva was as thick and brown as molasses and, instead of committing to the task with a resolute and plosive *puh*, she seemed perfectly happy to let it hang. A quarter teaspoon would suspend from her lower lip like it had no place to go. She held onto her spit can like an old country preacher hanging on to his King James. If she got up, she carried it around with her, sloshing. By *it*, I mean the spit can, not that a Bible can't slosh on occasion. She stuck the whole thing in a brown paper bag with the edges rolled down like nobody would know what was in it. I never once saw her without her hair in a tight knot right on top of her head like a large white spool. I cannot think the topknot was unrelated to the spit can. No woman wants her hair dangling in her chaw.

This was Miss Ruthie, plain as day. We knew all we needed to know about her. She was one thing, not two. Then my brother Wayne told me, "I spent the night with Miss Ruthie one time, and when she took all those pins out of her hair and leaned forward in her chair to brush it, her hair fell all

the way to the floor, silky and beautiful. I was fascinated." My whole family—well, for the most part—is like this. Spitting in a can, all spool-headed, one minute. Sleek and lovely and mesmerizing the next.

That I find measurable security in clean-cut categories, in jet black and blood red and bleached white, explains why most of my life has been a slow baptism in the lukewarm waters of a silty gray Jordan.

• • •

I'm not sure how many of us had fallen asleep when the first clap of thunder came, but my mother shot up from her air mattress like she'd been electrified. The next strip of lightning was a white-hot fillet knife, severing the starless tarp over Fort Walton Beach, dumping a pent-up lake right on top of us.

In our family, fear was a core value. We were tutored and tested on it, unapologetically indoctrinated on how to live life terrified out of our minds, hypervigilant against every threat because one truth was truer than all other truths: life would kill you. No matter what we were in the middle of doing, be it showering or making cinnamon toast, when a thunderstorm hit, everybody in the house had to scurry to the nearest spot to sit and prop our feet up, and God help you if your nearest place was next to a window. You'd be dead, seared to charcoal, in seconds, and the sight of you would scar the rest of us for life. The propping of the feet was an utmost priority because when—not if—lightning struck the house, anyone with sole of feet on wood of floor would perish. This fact was also somehow connected to why we couldn't turn a light switch on and off with one hand while holding a glass of water in the other.

The marvel of our Sears and Roebuck tent was that, in the brief wake of a long, laborious assembly, it disassembled with remarkable ease. There was no waiting around to watch the full collapse, however. Not with Mom yelling the way she was. She bellowed with such volume for us to *run!* to the VW that it's a wonder every camper within a thousand square feet

didn’t beat us to it. Nanny’s mouth ran much faster than her legs, so she put it to use advancing our gait from behind. “Git! Didn’t I say git? I did! I said git!” And we did.

To spare her dignity, I tried not to stare at Nanny once she made it into the van. She couldn’t help that her hair was feathery to start with and, now that it was wet, she appeared not to have hair one. The way I knew her hair was feathery is because, every time Mom teased Nanny’s hair to give it a little height, she’d say, “If your hair wasn’t suh feathery . . .”

I tried to look straight ahead and mind my own affairs, only to catch a glimpse of Dad’s hair in the rearview mirror. The downpour had caused his streak of lightning to slide from the top of his forehead to his eyebrow in a near perfect diagonal, dripping curiously at the tip end. He’d soon pull out his small plastic comb and correct it, but I resolved to ponder the sight for some time.

He slipped the bus into reverse and we sped away from a family-size tent, eight air mattresses, and one cot like we’d never known them. By sheer divine mercy, we happened on an open-all-night diner near Fort Walton Beach and took refuge there until the storm passed and the sun winked sleepily from the east. The diner could’ve used a good sweeping, but years of well-peppered hamburger meat and salty eggs and bacon sizzling on the stainless-steel grill had glazed the walls, tables, and chairs with such a layer of grease that the whole place smelled like we’d died and gone to heaven. Half a dozen crinkle-cut fries were scattered on the floor, but they looked like they’d been pretty good at some point.

Dad’s mood had not improved, but the handwriting was on the wall by way of a thumbtacked menu. No way was this tent-worn family not going to eat. He pulled out his wallet and thumbed through a modest vacation’s worth of dollar bills, and we kids glanced at one another with glee. He didn’t say yes, but Dad’s yes was when he didn’t say no. We ordered the bare minimum straight from the cook. No one dared say the word *Coca-Cola,* let alone *chocolate shake*. We knew we were on our benefactor’s last nerve. By the time our stomachs were full, we were sleepy and grouchy and

bored, so Tony, Gay, and I had little choice but to amuse ourselves by licking the grape and strawberry jelly out of the little packets on the tables. Those were free.

The subject was bound to come up at some point and this was as good a time as any.

"I shoulda flown," Nanny said, perturbed, scooting the metal chair back from the Formica table and folding her arms across her chest. When Nanny made a definitive statement, she ended it by jutting out her jaw and swallowing her upper lip with her lower lip. This was sign language for *That's all there is to it.*

Mom jumped right in like she'd been waiting for it all day. "Flown? Momma, have you forgotten what a lather you got yourself into the last time you flew?"

"When?"

"Two years ago when you flew to Florida!"

"I don't 'member no lather."

"What do you mean, you don't remember? You don't remember packing your burial dress in your suitcase?"

"Wadn't no lather to it. Puredee common sense. I see it ain't as common as it orta be."

Mom rubbed her head.

Dad had all but turned his back to his kin by then, like we hadn't all come in together. When my father's face was only a little flushed, you could see—that is, if you knew what you were looking for—that place where they patched the left side of his face, right there between his cheekbone and his nose, after he took a bullet early in World War II. If it didn't get a good gush of blood supply, it stayed gray, looking just like Silly Putty, like it knew it belonged on a different cheek.

In my family we rightly called any private part of the body *the bunny*. We did not say *bottom*, and we certainly did not say *butt*. Well, all but Tony, who continually spelled it out loud just because he was naughty, but since he spelled it "b-o-t-t," he didn't get fussed at. Me and Gay loved snickering about how Dad's bunny was on his face, especially when we were in

trouble. Mind you, I didn't get in much trouble because I was "overly sensitive" and scared of him, but Gay wasn't scared of the devil. She stayed in a fair amount of trouble on account of her mouth, but whispering "Bunny Face" behind his back was no small consolation.

Mom and Nanny were still going at it in the all-night diner. Now, there was no one on earth my momma loved more than my nanny, but she likely knew that, if she didn't react to Nanny smarting off that she should've flown to Florida, Dad would, and then it would go from a harmless argument to something that wasn't. Everybody knows in-laws can't get away with saying what blood can.

"Who would think an old woman ort not to take a buryin' dress?" Nanny let her voice tremble a bit and feigned a most stricken look, like her feet were already resting lifeless in a casket. "My heart could give out at any time."

"Minnie Rountree," my mother said, "you know good and well taking that burial dress had nothing to do with you being an old woman. Had nothing to do with your heart, either. You said it yourself. You packed your burial dress in the likely case the Cubans planned to hijack the plane."

Things like this had to play out in my mind so I could make sense of them. I guessed the hijackers would bury Nanny in Cuba, and I wasn't sure where that was, but I knew it was a long way from Arkadelphia. I further guessed they'd fetch her burial dress out of her suitcase and put it on her before they put her in the ground in a Cuban casket.

"Load up!" Dad had gone outside and taken a good look at the sky and stuck his head back through the doorway, motioning for us. We were a disheveled bunch and red-eyed, climbing back into the VW bus. Our tires bumped and splashed through wide puddles left by the night storm as we made our way back to the campsite. There was no rescuing the tent. This was strictly a recovery mission. Dad pulled out the cot first, then all eight air mattresses, and that's when we little kids saved the day. We hopped from one mattress to the next, marching on them, stomping on them, and turning somersaults on them with great enthusiasm while those over five feet tall held the nozzles open so they'd deflate. According to my oldest sister, Dad

didn’t bother with the formality of folding the tent. He wadded it up in a big hunk, then roped it to the back with a bungee cord. Sandra declared it was so heavy that every time we hit a bump, the back fender dragged on the pavement.

We drove just like that all the way into the open arms of our cousins, who had a small and spectacularly wonderful little place by the lake. We were Arkansans. We understood lakes. We had a blissful three days with our Rountree cousins whether Aunt Jewel could cook a decent pancake or not. We also managed to make it to Miami, that fast and furious town of renown, though by this time, all hopes of cruising proudly down its palm-lined boulevards proved mockingly vain. The alternator went out on our brand-new blue and white Volkswagen bus, and until we could get to a mechanic who’d extend credit, Sandra and Wayne were enlisted to push it while Dad started it. This was understandably humiliating to them both and untoward for exotics. From the middle seat directly behind Dad, I intuited, young though I was, his pinch-lipped disappointment in their lack of zeal. I tried to sit light on the seat in case it helped. Sandra’s detailed memory of the way the tent was bunched up on the back came on account of it not being all that easy to find a good place to push.

The last stop on our summer vacation was the parking lot of the Sears and Roebuck. Dad, having retrieved his purchase from the bumper of the bus, was seen marching as to war through the thick glass doors with a vinyl tent big enough for eight wadded up in his arms, window flaps dangling at his knees. Our home away from home was returned replete with leaves, sand, and a brisk request for a refund. With one last push, we made it up the hill to a modest red-brick dwelling on the outskirts of our small, familiar town.

Before Nanny could plant her foot steady on the concrete beneath the carport, Mom was turning on the water kettle, Dad was in the bathroom with a newspaper, Sandra was calling her boyfriend, Wayne was playing the piano, Gay was riding her bike, and Tony had a dog by the tail. And I? Well, I was twirling around on the burlap-bag swing hanging from the strong arm of an Arkansas pine, its golden-brown needles between my toes.

CHAPTER TWO

MOM SAID THE REASON WE WERE MOVING from the hill to the Ligon house on Twelfth Street was that driving us kids back and forth to town all day long to school and every other activity known to man was driving her batty. All the back and forth, what Mom called *taxi driving* to us kids who'd never seen a taxi, might not have been as bad if Mom bought more than fifty cents' worth of gas at a time. I cast no blame for this because I figure she only had fifty cents, the way she was always digging in her pocketbook for change, which struck me as strange, because why else would anyone leave the hill except to move into a mansion?

To Gay, Tony, and me, this appeared to be exactly what we were doing since it was three whole rooms bigger. We'd also never heard a house called by a name before, so that had to mean it was fancy. "We're moving to the Ligon house," my parents would say. "The Greens have bought the Ligon house," the neighbors would say. It was Tudor style with a wealth of windows and with white trim accenting two front-facing gables, one a smaller version of the other, beneath a steeply pitched green roof. Wrapped around it were red bricks that looked like they'd been left in the toaster on purpose till they were nearly brown. We were told the place was called the Ligon house because Mrs. Ligon had lived there. This explanation was never satisfactory for the most obvious of reasons. Why weren't the people buying our house on the hill moving into *the Green house*? And why hadn't we ever called the dilapidated place next to us on the hill *the Rountree house* instead of *the old house*? Folks didn't treat houses the same.

I guessed we were rich now since Sandra, going on twenty, had gotten married, and Dad had retired from the Army and been hired as the manager of the Royal Theater on Main Street and the SkyVue Drive-In out on Highway 67. The whole town knew because he'd made the *Siftings Herald*.

Still, the move was no improvement the way I saw it. We were leaving all that breathing space—and walking distance to the Caddo River, where we could dig crawdads out of the mud—in order to live on a city block where Wayne could walk straight across the street to the high school.

"That's not all. The primary school and elementary are right around the corner, too." Mom laid it on thick as molasses there in the kitchen, Nanny looking dubious with her hands in oven mitts waiting for a casserole to bubble. A keen observer could regularly tell what Nanny thought about something by the position of her elbows when her hands were on her hips. If they were pointed behind her, she was fine enough with it, but if they were straight out to the sides like bat wings, she was smelling a rat.

"And Tony's about to go to primary and Beth, elementary, and the junior high where Gay'll go next year is only a block or two further."

If I hadn't known better, I'd have sworn she looked glad we'd soon all be in school.

"Think how we'll be able to play indoors," Gay commented, looking on the bright side.

Who wanted to? Out on the hill, we shot outside the minute we gulped down the sweet milk from our cereal bowls, and if we didn't have school, we played all over that hill for hours on end with unbrushed teeth and crusty milk mustaches, skittering over spiny green balls of sweet gums and the pointy brown cones of pines until the soles of our feet were as tough as whitleather, only darkening the door for snacks. This we did out of preference and also because Nanny would poke us with the needly end of the broom the second we set down our bowls and say, "Scat on outta here or I'll give you something to do." Nanny never wanted a person to do something fun, not even Pappaw, my dad's dad.

Mammaw was long dead and, to hear it told, nobody blamed her. She'd run Green's Café for years by herself. "Yep, worked herself into a nub until she give up and died quick as Christmas of the cancers," people would say. And whoever else was listening would nod and say, "Uh-huh."

Even though Pappaw was at least a decade Nanny's junior, he was always poorly. She'd hear his old pickup clanging up the hill, gears screeching, and she'd say, "Well, here's company, and I reckon that old man'll sit here like a knot on a log and expect me to wait on him all day like I don't have a form thing to do, and right in time for my stories." Nobody with any sense got between Nanny and *Guiding Light* and *The Edge of Night*. If we peeked our heads through the door while she and Mom were in front of the TV with their bread-and-butter fold-overs, they'd shout the word *out!* in one voice.

Pappaw might show up anytime of the week, but he showed up like clockwork on Fridays if Ouachita Baptist University right below us was having a home football game. Small-town football got everybody's blood flowing. Dad and Pappaw would carry lawn chairs from the carport over to the edge of the hill, set them up amid the trees, and watch the football game plain as day for free like they were kings in a skybox. We kids would run circles around them, stealing unshelled peanuts by the handfuls from their brown paper sacks, energized into frenzies by the blaring sounds of announcers calling plays, refs whistling, and bands playing.

Now, Pappaw watched the game with only one eye—not because he wanted to, but because he'd lost the other one to lye soap. He always wore a pair of glasses that had a clear lens on one side and a cloudy lens on the other so you couldn't see what was missing, but I saw it anyway. I would testify to anyone who'd listen that I'd beheld it and it wasn't that bad.

"The eye isn't there, is all." I'd pause and let the thought settle on them, then say, "Everything else is."

His skin was sunk in and hollowed out like someone had taken an ice cream scoop to it but the place where there should've been an eye was just a straight half-inch strip of pink, long ago sewn together. No eyelashes, but I hadn't been expecting any. They were sparse on his good eye.

Gay and I reasoned it like a riddle. "What would you have if you took Popeye from the television set, growed him old, and stoled his spinach?"

"Well," we said, "you'd have Pappaw."

We refused to be sad about it because we'd never gotten to know his bad eye anyway, and he could still watch the Ouachita Tigers play and throw peanut shells at us kids with his good eye. But Nanny said, "It ain't helped his drivin' none."

The important thing was that being one-eyed hadn't hurt Pappaw's treehouse-building. I don't care who had a finer house or a finer car with a fuller tank of gas, no one could boast a better treehouse than the one Dad and Pappaw had built out back for us kids. They'd wedged it between a couple of thick oaks, resting its considerable weight on muscular branches. They'd cut squares out of the side boards for windows and built a hatch door into the floor, the latter of which was met by a fair measure of disapproval from Nanny.

"Hope them old pair a fools'll be happy when these young'uns break their necks."

We three climbed in and out of that treehouse ten times a day. Gay played with me happy as could be, acting like I was fun and not a bit a bother. She was only mean when Megen Riley, who lived right down the hill behind us, came up acting starry-eyed about her. Megen was Tony's age and his best playmate, but her mother didn't make her take a nap like our mother made Tony, so if Tony was unavailable, she was left with us. I wouldn't have minded this mix except that two's company and three's a crowd, causing them, on occasion, to hole up in the treehouse, latch the trapdoor, and refuse to let me in. The worst part was how they'd play Beatles' wives just like Gay and I always played, and they'd claim the two best ones.

"What about me?" I'd plead from down below.

"You can be Ringo's wife," they'd shout from above. I didn't want to be Ringo's wife. I never had to be Ringo's wife except when Megen Riley was over.

"George's then!"

I didn't want to be George's wife either.

"Well, be the maid then."

Meaner than snakes is what they were. I would sit cross-legged below in a pout, mildly comforted that Megen, young as she was, didn't get half the words to the songs right.

I suspected Gay's galling partiality had something to do with Megen getting to have a real pool in her backyard on account of being an only child. This seemed an unnecessary gesture since we got to swim over there often anyway because Mrs. Riley was so nice. After all, she saved my life.

In my family, you didn't get to do a whole lot of tattling. The tattletale was worse than the tattled-on any day, which seemed a shame to me. Simply put, Nanny didn't want to hear it and Mom was taking a five-minute nap, so they were no help at all. Dad was hardly ever home in the daylight, but we wouldn't have tattled to him anyway or he'd wag the slack end of the belt he was wearing as his way of signaling, "Do you want a whuppin'?"

"Why would *anybody* want a whuppin'?" was what I always wanted to ask.

So here's how Mrs. Riley happened to save my life. When Gay and Megen were in the treehouse again and wouldn't let me in, I was left with no choice but to take the matter into my own hands. My arms and legs were as spindly as a chimp's, Nanny said, and I could climb like one. I grabbed a low branch on an adjacent tree with both hands and cupped my feet on the trunk, curling my toes into the bark and inching my way up, quiet and stealth-like, until I was level with the treehouse. It was a superb spot for eavesdropping, and I don't mind saying, I heard an earful. All of a sudden, so did Mrs. Riley. The branch I was perched on snapped so loud, someone may as well have lit a firecracker. The limb hit the ground first and I followed it posthaste, sprawling flat on my back, my lungs expelling air like a popped balloon.

Before I could gather enough oxygen to emit the first wail, Mrs. Riley already had me in her tanned arms, hollering, "Letha!" and running toward the house with my feet dangling at her shins and my chin curved over her shoulder. By this time, my chest was lurching, and according to Nanny, I was "crying loud like she was near kilt," and Mom was swinging the door

wide open and motioning toward the couch. Soon Gay and Megen showed up, looking small and stricken and terribly sorry, staring at me “near kilt” on the couch. I fluttered my eyes and tried to roll them back in my head. Nanny, Mrs. Riley, and Mom were fussing over me, checking my arms and legs.

“Any bones broke?” After a fine inspection, the verdict was pronounced. “Nary a one.”

It was the best day of my life so far, having may as well come back from the dead. I’d just had the wind knocked out of me and that was all there was to it, but the commotion was every bit worth it. I got to be Linda McCartney three times in a row over it, no questions asked, though nobody would say that was why.

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Leaving these kinds of scenes behind would be the worst crying shame. I didn’t want to move off the hill or away from the treehouse or Mrs. Riley or Mrs. Riley’s pool. I didn’t want to leave the bag swing, even though Dad said he’d hang another in town. I had a feeling he wouldn’t, and I’d turn out to be right. Heck, I didn’t even want to leave Megen. She had pool toys.

But Dad had heard through the grapevine that he could expect any time now to receive orders for Vietnam, so he’d decided to retire. “I’d survived two wars,” he penned in a journal. “I thought it best not to try my luck on a third.” And now all our furniture was stacked sky-high and roped to the flatbed of a truck just to move eight blocks to the Ligon house, a stone’s throw from the high school. No doubt in my mind, this was all over fifty cents’ worth of gas.

There was no denying this was a deluxe house. It had two places to eat—a breakfast room and a dining room—and two places to sit—a den and a living room. You could think to yourself, *What couch should I sit on right now?* and you could just go sit on it. We never said “living room” because Mom called it the music room from the start. It was divided from the den by a set of French doors with sheer white curtains hanging over the glass and

had another set that faced the front yard. This was the special room where Wayne's piano stood. Everybody knew it was Wayne's piano even though the rest of us knew our way around the keys. Mom made all of us kids take lessons, but none of us were the natural he was. I didn't hit a single wrong note of "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" at my recital and, considering the B-flats, that should've said something, but it wasn't easy practicing with a colored-chalk portrait of Wayne over the piano. I didn't blame him for it because I liked him so much, and he couldn't help that he was a genius.

Wayne was already the rehearsal pianist for *The Sound of Music* by the time he was twelve. Lord-a-mercy, there was no keeping a body that talented backstage. His first out-front role in the Arkadelphia community theater was as the cadaver in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and he did so fine a job playing dead that he made the River City boys' band in *Music Man*. After that, he was the Artful Dodger in *Oliver!*; the crown prince in *The King and I*; Mordred in *Camelot*; Barnaby Tucker in *Hello, Dolly!*; and Junior Babcock in *Mame*. People were all the time saying about Wayne, "Reckon what he'll become?" and "Famous, that's what." They were right to say it, too.

Eventually, Mother set a music stand in front of a chair to the right of the piano where Wayne could set his sheet music and practice the French horn he'd added to his repertoire.

What removed any doubt of his talent at all was how Wayne took high school French and sounded just like he'd been to Paris. Gay was second in talent to Wayne, and soon she'd take French, too. It didn't matter that we couldn't understand a single word they were saying because we were under their spell. There was no telling what Nanny or Pappaw thought about how far we'd come in life, being from the bowels of Arkansas, now that we'd gone French.

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With the move to Twelfth Street came my official promotion in family status: I got to move into a room with my big sister, Gay. This was a groundbreaking shift, a clear acknowledgment that I, a full seven going on eight, had come into girlhood, a needed boost for me since Gay was about to get to wear a bra. This way the future was bright for both of us.

Gay and I had managed to land a whole wing of the house by ourselves next to the driveway, though we would not realize the full potential of our distance from Mom and Dad's and Nanny's rooms until Gay's legs grew long enough to reach from the driver's seat to the pedal.

During the day, I basked proudly and loudly in the new rooming arrangements, but the nights took some getting used to. The mattress wasn't the same on the bed Gay and I now shared and nowhere near as warm. And, frankly, we were so far from everyone else, a kidnapper could have us in Fayetteville by breakfast. I kept these concerns to myself for fear of losing what social progress I'd gained in the eyes of my family members.

Out on the hill, Sandra and Gay had shared a room. Mom and Dad also shared a room with a crib in the corner for Tony. Once Tony could crawl in and out of the crib at will, he volleyed between Wayne's room and our parents' room, depending on a sophisticated teenage boy's tolerance level for a rowdy toddler. These arrangements had left one last bedroom for one final pair: Nanny and me.

In our family, sharing a room equaled sharing a bed. Most of our bed frames and headboards first belonged to other close kin, usually Greens or Rountrees. The same was true for our chests of drawers and end tables. We didn't have much new-bought furniture, and I can't think of a single bed we hadn't inherited. For instance, any one of us or our cousins might end up with Dead-Mammaw's bed and if so, likely where she'd succumbed. These were things we expected. The idea that mattresses should be retired at some reasonable point hadn't occurred to the general population.

All this is to explain how Nanny and I ended up sleeping together on her and Granddaddy Micajah's feather mattress that looked suspiciously like an oversized pillow. There was no actual organization to the stuffing. No buttons, seams, or springs, and no stitching, except on the edges. This

meant you were not in control of your mattress. Your mattress was in control of you. When you got ready for bed, you heaved yourself upon it and sunk until it swallowed you whole. Make no mistake, this could be a heavenly respite from the day's evils—unless there was a widely uneven weight distribution between occupants.

By normal practice, I climbed in the bed before Nanny. And by *climbed*, I mean to paint the picture that this bed, like most of its contemporaries, reached halfway to the low ceiling. Having scaled the knoll, I'd curl up on the edge, my eyes droopy, and try to stay awake until Nanny finished her evening toilette. This entailed the usual things like brushing her teeth, soaking her partials, changing from her day dress to her nightgown (Nanny never once wore pants), and setting a mason jar of ice water on her bedside table that would bead up and sweat through the night, drawing the same circle deeper in the varnish.

I always faced away from her and pretended I was asleep to give Nanny privacy, because you weren't to just flit about in front of everybody in your gowntail. I also found it more difficult to sleep if I saw her underpants. I loved Nanny gobs more than I loved Pappaw, but I'd rather stare at his lost eye for a solid minute. I'd never seen any underpants like Nanny's before, nor have I since. They were shaped like Dad's undershorts, big and roomy, with four- or five-inch legs, only they were beige nylon like a woman's slip. This seemed untoward to me, which is why I mostly kept my back to her at changing time.

When I could tell from a series of short grunts that Nanny was in the preliminary stages of launching onto the bed, I'd gather up what mattress I could fit in my fingers and hold on with both hands. Hers was a dramatic entrance. Once the bed stopped quaking, I'd fall asleep, and, naturally, my grip on the mattress would loosen. Then, lost in slumber's sweet bliss, I'd gradually roll down duck hill, sleeping safe and sound in the cleft of the rock.

Sometimes we made it through the night without Nanny having to use the Folgers can. She kept it right in the room with us. I never once asked about this practice nor thought ill of her, but I did calculate that by the time

she situated herself just right over the can so as to aim as a woman is disadvantaged to do, she could have twice coursed the fifteen-foot distance down the hall to the bathroom. I concluded that the practice was a perfectly reasonable way to avoid walking the house in the middle of the night and waking the baby, whoever the baby was at the time. Nanny had moved in with Mom and Dad before the signature on their marriage license could dry. They'd earned such a reward, I have to believe, for shaming her with an elopement. With Nanny's seven children and their five, she'd lived with a dozen babies over the years. So if anyone knew how to keep from waking babies, it was Nanny.

Come morning, my mother would often ask my grandmother, "Momma, how'd you sleep last night?"

"Purt near well, I guess," she'd report. "That Bethie's the awfullest thing about wantin' to sleep right on your person, though."

With our move into town, Nanny got her own room, and I acquired a new bedmate and a later-model mattress that wasn't fifty pounds of bird feathers sewn up loose in a sheet. I didn't sleep on the small of Gay's back nearly as much as I had Nanny's, and had I, her patience would have understandably run thin. It was time for growing up. But this sudden sleeping independence was no small adjustment. It was scary over there on my side.

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During the daytime, I play with Gay's makeup and try on her shoes. She won't care. If she is outside with her friend Robin, I read the folded notes hidden not-too-good in her pajama drawer. All of them are written on notebook paper with smudgy number-two pencils. I can't say anything to Gay on account of how she'd know I'd been into her notes again but her friends orta think of using pencil sharpeners once in a while and they wouldn't make such a mess.

I move from Gay's pajama drawer to her macramé purse and find a tampon with a torn wrapper and study it. I find loose change in the bottom corners with the potato-chip crumbs, but I don't take it. I'd never take it. I just count it. The lunch tokens don't count as real money, even though they look like quarters. They only count in the school cafeteria. I pull out two torn ticket stubs from football games.

I have a great idea. I'll dig thumbtacks out of that one kitchen drawer and tack the stubs right on our bedroom wall, and I might even find me a blue streamer to hang between them. All this is just right, being as the Arkadelphia High School Mighty Badgers football team is on what everybody in town's calling a winnin' streak. Lordy, we put those Malvern Leopards to shame.

If Gay walks in and catches me in her purse, she'll act mad, but she won't be. She won't holler or anything. I like daytime in the room I share with Gay. It's at bedtime I get butterflies in my stomach. At bedtime I wish I still slept with Nanny. Because on the other side of bedtime comes the Shadow, breaking into my dreams like a burglar with a house key.

The dream is always the same.

I'm in my same house. In my same room. In our same bed. But the shapes and sizes are all wrong. The doors and windows are enormous, like in a giant's room. The ticket stubs on the wall look like big puzzle pieces now, spinning round and round the tacks. Gay is in the same bed with me. I reach out my arm and twinkle my fingertips to touch her sleeve, but she's too far for me to reach. No one is home but us. *Where does everyone go?*

I hear something down the long corridor, a faraway door opening. I don't know how I hear the hinge squeak or why those closer to it can't hear it, but they don't.

There's the sound again. A thumping. Maybe it's my heart. *Shhhh. Listen, listen. Which way is it going?* Sometimes the Shadow turns. Not this time. My heart quickens.

I can hear the creaking of the wooden floor in the hall. The thumping is getting louder, closer. The Shadow is just on the other side of our door now. The doorknob turns slowly, the spindle whines, and the latch retracts. The

air in the room changes.

I feel Gay stiffen next to me. I wonder if she feels it, too. I pull the covers up to my nose. *It's a dream, it's just a dream. Go away, Shadow. You are a big knot of terrible bad thoughts. That's all you are. A knot of terrible bad thoughts.*

The room is dark—the spackled ceiling flat now, moonless, starless—but it's a thin kind of dark I can wave my arm through, walk through, find my way through, tear through.

The Shadow is not like that. The Shadow is a dense darkness. Thick. Stuffed. It doesn't speak. It breathes. It wheezes. Its nose whistles.

It draws closer now. Blacker now. Thicker now. It's hovering now. It moves over our bed like the world's blackest cloud. I pull the covers up higher. *I want my mom . . . I want my nanny . . . I want my Wayne.*

I hear the clock on the mantel strike the hour. It's midnight. I hold my breath. Maybe if the Shadow thinks I'm already dead, he'll leave. Trembling, I lower the covers just enough to steal a peek. There it is. The Shadow. Hovering. Wheezing. My eyes widen in terror. The Shadow draws closer. That's when I see it. Plain as the nose on my face. A single strike of lightning on its head. I take a quick breath and squeeze my eyes shut . . . *waiting for the thunder*.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT WE GREENS LOST in free seats to Ouachita football games when we left the hill, we made up for in free admission to the movies. I don't care who says different, Arkadelphia did not have a hotter spot year-round than the Royal Theater. Name any weekend and as many as twenty people might be lined up at the ticket booth for the seven o'clock. With our flair for the dramatic, our family took to movie theater life like Elvis Presley took to Ann-Margret.

The Royal Theater was the pearl of Main Street. Fuller Drugstore across the street was its solitary competition and only because it had a soda fountain that served root beer floats and said so in white paint on the window. The other businesses on Main—Sterling's five-and-dime, the Dew-Orr Department Store, and Tom Chandler's Shoes, for instance, the latter of which declared itself *America's finest footwear*—had common glass fronts, one no different than the other, and names overhead in plain fonts. These were not eyesores, just nothing special. (The one exception might have been Sterling's, since Sandra had worked there for fifty cents an hour on Saturdays when she was in high school. The way I saw it, this hire had been good for their reputation. Nobody could say she wasn't popular. No telling how it had gone downhill since she'd married.)

The theater was the opposite of "nothing special." It was signature art deco with the word *Royal* in giant cursive letters on the second story accenting a double marquee where, if Dad had enough letters, the titles were spelled right. He ran short on *K*s, but the problem was readily solved when he took a pair of scissors and cut the tops off two *R*s. Improvising was Dad's specialty, and it showed. The triangular space beneath the marquee allowed room for moviegoers to line up at the booth without clogging up the sidewalk. On most days, customers could find Agnes Cox behind the

glass, propped on a stool, taking money and sliding tickets through a half-circle opening. No one could accuse her of being young, but folks couldn't hold it against her since it was plain to see she went to Cathryn's House of Beauty every week. Prize in hand, privileged customers entered a set of double doors with small round windows that added a certain showboat mystique. Mr. Brantley, a silver-haired man with a slight build and gentle demeanor, tore tickets and welcomed patrons behind the red velvet cord with a sweep of his right hand. Nothing at all was run-of-the-mill about the Royal Theater. It was Arkadelphia's main event, where dreams were sold and stars were seen.

For seventy cents apiece, anyone was welcome. Whites were welcome to take the official entrance with the doorman and sit downstairs in the main auditorium, and Blacks were welcome to enter a separate door with no doorman at all and buy their tickets and treats at the back of concessions, then follow the Colored signs and climb a set of narrow stairs to the balcony.

Ten years had passed since the Supreme Court declared segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional, but Arkansas, generally speaking, was a bit slow-footed. The molasses at the ankles thickened considerably several years after the ruling when, in 1957, Governor Faubus summoned the Arkansas National Guard to block Black students from the doors of Little Rock's Central High on the first day of school. Arkadelphia was sixty-nine miles downwind and the forecast was relentlessly windy. By 1970, Arkadelphia public schools would fully integrate. But our time at the Royal began in the midsixties, when the shadows of Black and white children together on a playground barely touched.

I was in the lobby when one of the three Black children in my class at school entered the Royal with her family. I looked at her and she looked at me, each with recognition, but not knowing what to do from there, we quickly looked away. I studied the candy selection under the glass like I didn't know every piece by heart. I didn't peek back at my classmate until she and her family filed up the steep stairs, decked in Sunday best, her with white eyelet socks folded above shiny Mary Janes.

Clunky, thick-soled corrective shoes weighed heavy on my feet. I'd still have to wear those awful saddle oxfords another year on account of my bad case of pigeon toes wasn't quite cleared up. "That right foot's still a-turnin' innerd, Letha," Nanny would say, purt near staring a hole through my big toes. "Ain't gonna do that young'un a bit'a good rushin' her outta them shoes."

Mom let me wear Mary Janes on special occasions, like Christmas and Easter, or on a rare Sunday here and there when Gay and I had new matching dresses, fresh off Nanny's sewing machine. Don't imagine I didn't show those shoes off real good. Oh, I did. I sat tall as I could, sticking my feet straight out in front of me, clicking the tips together. I bet the girl from my class was upstairs that very moment clicking hers. Bet she liked the way the patent leather stuck together just a tad, too, like they'd been polished with some Elmer's glue.

Fancy shoes ought not be hid, seemed to me. Families ought not be hid. Folks ought not be hid. Oftentimes nobody has to say something is wrong for a child to know it. I could feel the shame in my chest. It's just that people can have a strange way of outgrowing what they once knew.

Every now and then, when the theater was nearly empty and no one was looking, I'd sneak up the stairs and sit, wondering what the movies looked like from there. There was no pretending the upstairs was kept as nice as the downstairs. The seats were old and stained and the floor sooty. I'd turn my face up and stare at the tubular beam of light coming from the projector in the curious inner sanctum behind the balcony, mesmerized by dust particles afloat like tiny feathers. Sometimes I'd sit in this seat, sometimes that, and tilt my head and squint my eyes toward the screen.

"Well, they can see pretty good." Always *they*. That's the way it was. We soothed our wounded consciences the best we could.

My siblings probably stole up those stairs and wondered similar things, but we wouldn't have told each other. Didn't make any difference anyway. There are some things all the sitting in the world in someone else's seat can't tell you. You'd have to sit in the same skin.

Multiple screens were still figments of wild imaginations. The Royal was a typical one-screen, running a single movie anywhere from two days on, depending on how it was faring at the box office. *Lawrence of Arabia* stayed a whole week and most of the musicals did, too. *Mary Poppins* stayed till Sterling's all but ran out of umbrellas. The long-running hits were how my siblings and I knew movie scripts like real actors, one step removed. We'd carry on during the sad parts like we'd never seen them. I bawled and blew my nose in the girls' restroom for fifteen minutes after *Romeo and Juliet*. Who'd ever seen such a tragedy? In my mind it was me and the boy I liked best at elementary school up on that screen, faint with love, and he hated awful bad to see me go. I stared at him in class come Monday, thinking how he was just fidgeting at his desk, making paper airplanes, like we hadn't died together.

Dad must have been a good soldier, the way he'd won a stack of medals and stayed in the Army so long, but I can't think he ever did anything in his life, first to last, as well as he made popcorn. He could pop every kernel without burning a one and with three simple ingredients: fresh quality corn (don't imagine he didn't know the difference), enough coconut oil to generously bathe the bottom of the aluminum kettle, and a thick blanket of powder-fine, butter-flavored salt. Search the world over and nothing, I'll declare to the death, smells better than movie popcorn just beginning to crack open the hinged lid and spill onto the stainless-steel deck. Dad would turn the pan over at precisely the right second and empty it, while folks stood at the concession stand with mouths agape and glands watering. Then, while the popcorn was nice and hot and as yellow as a bed of daffodils, he'd take his butter-flavored-salt shaker and finish it off with a good dusting.

This exhibition was good business, not only because Dad sold buckets and buckets of popcorn but also because the salt made people thirsty and sent them right back to the counter for soft drinks. All of us kids liked to work when we were at the Royal, as long as we could dart in and out. Wayne was the only one old enough to work real hours and get paid actual money, but this was fair since nobody else got a bad scar from the hot

popper. Mr. Brantley had the patience of Job and he'd let Tony tear tickets with him, if for no other reason than to keep him from being a Green Bay Packer and running full steam into the legs of customers. He could bring grown men to their knees playing Bart Starr. Gay and I, on the other hand, worked in the concession stand with mature sophistication, and no job ever had better perks. We could drink all the coke and eat all the popcorn we wanted as long as we used a Dixie cup and a pickle bag.

Now, in those days and in our region every soda pop was called a coke. To misunderstand the meaning was to waste considerable product, and Dad wasn't fond of waste. The process went like this.

We'd say, "May I have your order, please?" Mom taught us, "Never *can I*, always *may I*." It was better manners, she insisted, and we didn't want Nanny to say, "Them young'uns ain't got manner one."

The customers would then say, "Let's see," pausing for what felt like five minutes and tapping their chins like we'd gotten new choices since they were here last week. Finally, they'd say some variation of, "I'll have a Snickers, a dill pickle, a medium popcorn, and a large coke."

This is when we'd say, "What kind of coke?" And they'd specify.

Orange coke.

Grape coke.

Sprite coke.

Dr. Pepper coke.

If you wanted a Coca-Cola, you had to say so. On occasion someone ordered *a suicide,* meaning living on the edge with a shot of every kind of soda in one cup. The only beverage we kept out of the suicide was pickle juice. That wasn't considered a coke on account of it being a juice. It had to be ordered separately and only while supplies lasted. We'd pour it straight out of the pickle jar—yellow-green with a few stray seeds—into a cup of crushed ice. If we said, "May I serve you a pickle with it?" I could bet a dime and two nickels they'd say, "No, just the juice." "Why not?" I'd want to ask, but I knew the answer. They hated pickles.

Having taken the order, we'd then say, "Comin' right up" as cheerful as you please and we'd get busy. The first year Dad ran the Royal, my forehead barely reached the counter and I'd have to stand on my tiptoes to push the rim of the cup against the fountain lever. The only way I could know if the cup was full was to let it overflow. The customers didn't seem to mind. They'd just snatch extra napkins from the silver container—*one-two-three* brisk-like—and dry off the cup, leaving the damp wads right on the glass counter. I'd thank them, and then, if the wads weren't too wet, I'd use them to dry off the underside of my arm and my armpit.

The job all of us liked the least was cleaning up the auditorium between movie showings. If we had the foresight, this was prime time to shoot out the door and across the street to the five-and-dime to admire the toys. You wouldn't believe how people would knock over their cokes, spill their popcorn, and throw their candy wrappers on the floor and just leave it all there like they didn't have manner one. Every pair of shoes we owned had two or three flattened kernels stuck to the bottoms, still daffodil yellow. Monday through Friday, 8:30 to 3:30, our shoes stuck to the floor when we got up from our desks, making crackling sounds the whole class could hear.

All us kids except Sandra came of age at the Royal Theater doing things we ought not to have done and right under our dad's nose. Wayne was first. He told me himself how he came into manhood.

"It was right there on the back row of the center section during a matinee showing of *Rome Adventure*," he told me later. "I waited for a dark moment."

My eyes widened, knowing just how certain scenes could make the auditorium feel like nighttime.

"My heart was thumping," he said.

Mine was, too.

"Then there it was."

"There *what* was?" I asked, on pins and needles.

"Troy Donahue and Suzanne Pleshette were on a Vespa, speeding off to parts unknown, and disappeared through a tunnel."

I pictured the scene like I was there. "Then what?"

That’s when he said it straight out. “I jumped on the opportunity and laid a big kiss right on Belinda Bippus’s pillowy lips.”

Things like Belinda Bippus’s pillowy lips were why the pluses of hanging out at the Royal outweighed the minuses by a country mile, unless a kid ate too many treats and threw up in the aisle. Best you could do was hope it was Tootsie Dots. If it was a hot dog, there was almost no recovering.

The goods, however, belonged to those of us with a keen eye. We knew who’d come with who, who was dating who, who’d broken up with who, who put his arm around who, and whose mom snuck in late and sat in the back and was about to catch who and who. And that’s not all. If we happened by the lobby on the weekend of a naughtier movie, we knew who’d bought a ticket on Saturday night and sat in church on Sunday morning like they hadn’t.

CHAPTER FOUR

I COULD EXIT THE ROYAL THEATER with a pickle bag full of popcorn, take an immediate left on the sidewalk of Main, a quick right on North Seventh after looking both ways, make a beeline down a few blocks and, before I got down to the kernels, enter the doors of a place homier to me than the red-brick Tudor on Twelfth would ever be. School aside, the only place I spent more time than the Royal Theater was First Baptist Church of Arkadelphia. The building was nothing less than palatial, bouncing off the pupils of a child's wide eyes. The traditional tan-brick structure stood erect, several stories high, with tall, slender stained-glass windows encasing a sanctuary meant to be taken seriously. Wings to the right and left held scads of educational space, a fine church library, a spacious preschool department and nursery, and, on the bottom floor, a full church kitchen adjoining the fellowship hall. Big as it was to a small child, I knew every square inch of it, save the boys' restroom. We who were raised in those halls in those days roamed and ran them freely.

When it came to sophistication, we were right up there with the Presbyterians. We were walking distance from Ouachita Baptist University, whose students were required to attend church, and lucky for us only a handful of them had cars. Jesus walked everywhere he went and they could, too. Some impressive Ouachita professors also graced our halls and warmed our pews, including those from a music department of fine repute. These often sang our solos and fed and led our choirs.

We Greens were not overzealous with religious talk at home. Zeal within our walls was reserved primarily for good manners, saying *yessir* and *no sir*, *yes ma'am* and *no ma'am*, and *may I be excused* when we were done eating supper. But rain or shine, sleet or snow, we were taken to church no less than two and a half hours three times a week—Sunday

mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesdays right after school and all evening. Tossed like softballs nearly fresh from the womb to church nursery workers, we never knew anything different. They may as well have been midwives standing in the delivery rooms with our mother.

In those days, churches didn't have a robust theology of germs. We were exposed to every possible malady as early as possible. As kids, if we had colds: "Here's you a handkerchief. Blow hard, wipe good, and I'll be by to get you in a few hours." If we had what my people called the bowel complaint: "Don't wait too long to get to the bathroom. Blow hard, wipe good, and I'll be by to get you in a few hours." That's just how it was. No amount of whining was going to change it.

But I think all the time, what if something *had* changed it? What if I'd whined my way out of spending what seemed half my young life within those walls?

My church believed in doing stuff in front of people. That could mean showing off with five-dollar words only a few knew, or singing loud enough to be heard from ten pews away, or never looking at a hymnal even for third and fourth verses, or sitting spit-distance from the pulpit every single service, or laying a check faceup in the offering plate, or looking badly pained while playing the organ during the offertory. These we practiced on a regular basis. But there were other times at our church when doing stuff in front of people was a way to let them know you'd made a big decision. Sometimes it wasn't until we made it public to our congregation that we knew just how big a decision it was. The first time this happened to me, I was nine years old.

I slid my hand down the wooden rail of the small pool behind the choir loft and stuck the tip of my toes in the water and wiggled them. I was scared it would be cold even though I was told different. It wasn't hot like a bath, but it wasn't freezing like the swimming pool on the first day of summer break either.

"Go ahead, honey," whispered the woman who was in charge of helping the girls and ladies get their white robes on, her hand gently patting my back. Mom had dropped me off with her a half hour earlier, giving me a

quick reassuring squeeze then hurrying out the door so she could sit with the rest of our family in the sanctuary. I don't recall the lady's name, but I remember her comfortable way as she helped me out of my Sunday dress and my slip. I wrapped my arms around my bare tummy, glad I got to keep on my unders. Anyway, she didn't seem creepy or scary or like she really even noticed my belly button was an outie.

"You'll wear the ones you have on right into the water," Mom had said. "I put another pair in this little sack." I nodded as she handed it to me. I decided to imagine myself wearing swimsuit bottoms. A swimsuit would have been a good idea. Somebody should have thought of that because what if Mom had dropped the paper sack in the hall? And what if she'd put my name on the tag of the unders with a black marker like at summer camp? How was I supposed to recover from one of the Neel boys picking up that sack?

The woman chatted softly as she pulled the robe down over my head and I stuck my arms through the sleeves. "You doing okay, sweetie?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Today's a big day."

I nodded.

"You'll get to take home a New Testament from the church. Isn't that something?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Brother Reeves—that's what we called our preacher—was standing waist-deep in the water where everyone could see him. He was addressing the congregation while an older kid, drenched and dripping from head to toe, was climbing the short set of stairs to the boys' side. The pool stirred with his retreat, and small waves broke against the glass front of the baptismal. Brother Reeves was finishing up what he'd been saying and was now reaching toward me with his left hand, twinkling the tips of his fingers just like I was twinkling the tips of my toes.

I put my right foot down on the first step, my left on the second, still holding tight to the rail. I took a quick glimpse beyond the glass and saw choir members in their robes and stoles, necks craned to face us. There was

Peggy Horton, a high soprano. She did the special music at our church on a regular basis and her name would be in the bulletin just like this: *Special Music: Peggy Horton*. Brother Reeves was always in the bulletin, too, under *Sermon* but never as Brother Reeves. In writing he was always *Dr. Sam Reeves*. I didn't know whose doctor he was. He wasn't ours. We saw Dr. Ross when we were sick. He came right to the house. I don't believe Dr. Reeves had once been to our house in town nor had he ever looked in our ears. This is not to say I didn't like him. I did. I just didn't know if he was a fit doctor. He was a fit preacher, though, the way he stood tall at the pulpit like his mother raised him for it and used important words and knew when to get loud and when to get quiet according to how sleepy we were getting. He also usually ended on time, which was how my family calculated who was called to preach and who wasn't.

I took the third step and reached out my hand, returning Brother Reeves's twinkle fingers. I couldn't see the congregation, but I wondered if they were standing or sitting. I hoped they were sitting because of Nanny.

"Looks to me like them folks could make up their mind," Nanny would say, "whether they want us a-settin' or standin'." Nanny should not be blamed for feeling this way. She and all her friends from Sunday school who sat together during the worship service were as old as Moses and just as white-haired, only they wore hats and he didn't. By the time they'd help each other to their feet, weaving and wobbling and rattling the pew, the rest of us were breaking into the third verse of "Blessed Assurance": *Perfect submission, all is at rest. I in my Savior am happy and blest.* "I'm plum worn out by 'Blest Be the Tie.'" That was the song we sang at the very end of the service, all standing and holding hands.

Indeed all were not at rest nor happy and blest if you asked Nanny. But I couldn't do anything about it, up there in the baptistry with Brother Reeves, him in a white gown with bare feet and no more a doctor than I was. He had my hand now and gently tugged me toward the center of the small pool. His familiar face widened with a smile. The water was dense against me, slow-moving like honey, its warmth creeping up the fabric on my back. As he steered me directly in front of him, I rehearsed the

instructions in my mind one last time, slipping my feet under a small bar on the baptismal floor. This feature was supposed to keep me from turning a backward flip when the time came, but I didn't know if the plan was going to work. I felt like it was made for bigger feet than mine. From the space I was detecting between my feet and the bar, I was pretty sure that if Brother Reeves got too enthusiastic, even a grown man was at risk of flipping. I curled both sets of toes up around the bar as tight as I could, then cupped my hands over my nose and mouth the way they'd said to do.

Brother Reeves put one hand steady between my shoulder blades and the other one up in the air like he was waving at Mrs. Reeves. "In obedience to the command of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and upon your profession of faith, I now baptize you, my sister, Beth Green, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, for the forgiveness of your sins . . ."

He said other words, too, but I missed them. For one thing, I got distracted by Brother Reeves calling me his sister. I needed to think on that a minute. Second thing, even though this is what I'd come for, I was still a good bit surprised by the swiftness of the dunking. Whatever God does during a water baptism, I hoped he was paying attention right then or he'd have missed his opportunity. Brother Reeves, who was usually inclined toward slow motion, threw his waving hand over my nose, bent me backward, stuck my whole head under water, then swung me up in a whiplash. There was no *ready, set, go*. There was no *on the count of three*. In two seconds flat, I'd been buried with Christ in baptism and raised—and I do mean raised in every way since my feet had instantly come out from under the bar—to walk in newness of life. I could tell you this much about the First Baptist Church of Arkadelphia: there was no changing your mind once you got in that water with Brother Reeves. He was coming for your nose and you were going under. This was just as well. I didn't want to change my mind anyway.

They said I wouldn't get water in my nose, but yes, I did, and I figure I swallowed some of it, too, and they may as well have allowed it since they caused it. I was baptized inside and outside, through and through, and in my

nose and down my throat. My baptism was in my stomach, in my arms, and in my legs. That's how I was sure it took and that I never needed another one as long as I lived. I didn't know how Brother Reeves could see with a spray of droplets on his bifocals, but apparently he could, since he steered me by the hand back to those same steps where the woman in charge of baptized girls was waiting for me with a white towel. By the look on her face, I must have done just fine. I could hear the curtain closing over the baptistry, and I guessed Peggy Horton was heading to the microphone for special music, giving Brother Reeves time to get back in his church clothes over there on the boys' side.

I was shaking by now, cold from the air-conditioning hitting my sopped skin, but I was content. I'd done what my grandparents and parents and my brother and sisters before me had done, and I was soaked to the bone to prove it. In no time at all, Mom was there to get me. She finished drying me off and got me redressed and combed my hair in a hurry so we could go back into the service. You didn't get to miss the sermon just because you got baptized. You didn't even get a snack. You just got a New Testament.

Mom and I tiptoed into the service from the back while the ushers were passing the offering plate. What would normally be rude, like wet hair at church, was perfectly fine for people who'd just been baptized. You were allowed to do almost anything, and everybody would just look at you and smile. You could step on their feet all you wanted getting down the pew. Mom and I made it to our usual row and scooted in with our people. As I settled in next to Gay, I could see Nanny tucked amid her friends further down the row, her big King James in her lap. Pretty soon she leaned forward just enough for me to see through the pale blue net of her pillbox hat that she was happy. I fought a grin and squeezed strands of hair between two fingers, dripping water on page 204 of the Baptist hymnal, "Nothing but the Blood."

I couldn't concentrate on the sermon that day. My gaze flew like a butterfly in spring around the sanctuary, landing on the shoulder of this person and that. In an end seat of the loft sat Mrs. Shambarger, my church choir teacher. By the time I'd turn twelve, she would also be my handbell

teacher, assigning me F, F-sharp, and G. I'd be decent at them, too. In the side section and several rows up, I could see the back of Mrs. Mary King's head. I'd have known Mrs. King's head anywhere, so I lowered my wings and landed there for a good while. Nobody at First Baptist Church was more familiar to me than she was. She taught missions classes for girls every Wednesday night, and she kept moving up with my age group. I never knew if she kept promoting with us because she loved us or to spare another teacher the grief, but it seemed to me she wouldn't have us over for slumber parties if she didn't like us. We'd spend the night on her den floor with our pillows and pallets more times than we could count, and she'd always fix a foreign food so we could talk about missionaries in that country. She had two wiener dogs that were a little heavy on their feet, I guessed from us dropping them our foreign foods.

Scattered all over the sanctuary were kids and grown-ups we ate alongside every week at Wednesday night supper in the fellowship hall. Same people and, most of the time, the same menu: a pale slice of ham, a scoop of green beans, one split roll, one pat of margarine, and one red cinnamon apple ring arranged on heavy white plates in our church kitchen by fast-moving women.

I couldn't see where Mrs. Lizzie, a little sparrow of a woman, was perched in the sanctuary, but I'd already seen her flitting about our department that morning anyway. She was my Sunday school teacher and had the same luck getting our class to pay attention as Mrs. King did. I don't know why she never told us to quit trading arm tickles. I feel like we might have stopped if she'd scared the living daylights out of us occasionally, but she had other fine qualities to make up for failing at fussing. She always had extra Sunday school quarterlies because hardly any of us could find ours at home. She knew all our families and could recall our prayer requests from last week about things like how the cat had coughed up a hair ball on the chenille bedspread. She hadn't done a bit of good about our lying and cheating, though. We'd still check off *Read Sunday school lesson* and *Read Bible daily* on the attendance sheet every week, like it was fine to sin at church.

These were the people, and these were the things, my wandering mind had landed on that Sunday during the sermon with my wet hair when I heard a disembodied voice coming from somewhere in the back of the sanctuary giving Brother Reeves a loud throaty *a-a-a-a-men*. I never knew what old man the voice belonged to, but it came like clockwork every week, midsermon then again at the end. Not many people at First Baptist could talk during church service without getting in trouble. Luckily this was the amen signaling the sermon's end, and we were standing to our feet, turning to the hymn of invitation. That week it was page 363, "I Surrender All." It usually was.

This was the point in the service that Brother Reeves would ask the congregation if we'd turned from our sins and accepted Jesus and been born again, and if you hadn't and wanted to, you were invited to walk the aisle straight to him and tell him so. He made it easy, too, stepping down from the platform to floor level.

No one wanted to turn from their sins that particular day. I always felt sorry for Brother Reeves when no one wanted to turn from their sins. Several weeks earlier I'd wanted to, though, the best I knew how and the best I'd sinned. I'd told my mom I was ready to join the church just like the rest of the Greens besides Tony, just seven after all, and that I wanted to take the Lord's Supper next round. She'd asked me a few questions. Had I accepted Jesus as my personal Savior? Well, yes, I had. Well, when then? I couldn't pinpoint the precise moment, but I knew I had.

I'd believed my preschool Sunday school teachers when they held up those posters and told stories about how Jesus could call tiny men down from trees and make the leopards clean and cause the blind to see. We sat there and heard every third word in a circle of baby-bear-size chairs, drinking orange Hi-C and twirling Nabisco butter cookies on our fingers. I'd believed my Sunday school teachers again in first grade, and second and third, when they told us about how Jesus died and rose again so we could be forgiven and live with God forever. Now, I didn't know much about heaven,

but I knew from the way Brother Reeves scowled when he threatened sinners with the bad place that heaven was the better of the two. Mom said I could walk the aisle next Sunday.

Brother Reeves always had those who'd come forward stay in the front of the sanctuary after the closing prayer so the congregation could line up and give them "the right hand of fellowship." Gay and I would snicker in line and dare each other to offer our left hand instead, but we lost the courage when it came time. When I walked the aisle myself, little kids and teenagers and grown-ups as far as eye could see came to shake my hand and the hands of others who'd come. Old folks with bodies bent over canes shuffled forward and reached out bony hands speckled with purple spots and striped with inky veins.

"How wonderful," this and that one would say.

"Welcome to the family!"

"I worked in the nursery when you were two," one lady said.

"Congratulations, young lady," scads of people said.

I did fine at first, then something came over me. A knot the size of a kid's fist clogged my throat and refused to be swallowed. My lip started quivering, and tears began rolling down my cheeks in Caddo rivers. This did nothing to stop the line. People acted like it was normal and just kept coming. I received their fellowship with my right hand and tried to hide my face and dry my tears with my left forearm.

I knew from the faces, words, and handshakes of those who'd long since made the same decision and stood in the same spot as me that something more important than I knew was happening. I'd thought to join the church that day and to publicly say I was a Christian. Christ had thought to call me forward that day to start saving my scrawny neck.

That day I walked the aisle, nobody in my family said a word on the way home about how I'd acted a fool and been a crybaby. Nanny just did what she always did. She squirmed in her seat in our VW bus, pulled at her dress and snapped the elastic at her waistline, then said, "Don't nobody get between me and the house when we pull up and I don't mean maybe. This

girdle’s killing me. Purt near ain’t took a breath all mornin’. I reckon it shrunk in the warsher.” Momma amened nice and long and low, sounding just like that old man at church and meaning to, funny like she was.

The best days of my young childhood would be lived up and down the heel-scuffed halls of First Baptist Church and in and out the swinging doors of the Royal. But *best* would shortly become a relative term, as it does in every life, and no haven of playfulness would remain unscathed.

CHAPTER FIVE

I'D SEEN IT BEFORE, how the daylight could turn as dark as night and the wind lose its temper, pulling shrubs from the garden and ripping picket fences off a yard, and a whole house could lift swiftly off the ground, sucked into the tail of a furious twister. I'd seen how a house could whirl round and round in a raging storm, the terrified insider clawing for anything holding still. I'd seen how a kid's whole world and the people she knew best could be caught up in the fury, debris flying and heavens roaring like a freight train. Whole trees could be plucked from the ground by their roots, sent hurling through the atmosphere like tumbleweeds. Grown-ups just outside a wide-open window, little more than arms' reach away, deafened to the child's pleas.

Something happens up there in the dark, stormy air that can turn an average bully pedaling a bike into an ugly witch riding a broom. Minds can go missing in a storm like that. A heart can fly out from under a rib cage. Courage can be ripped away like a sheet off a clothesline.

I'd seen it all splayed on a silver screen, how a house could spin off its slab and enter a vortex of violent imaginations. Then I felt it from within my own walls. I saw it with my own eyes. I reeled to its whirling. I lived it in my own skin, there in our house on Twelfth Street.

Madness came for us. It descended on our roof, spilled over our gutters, and surrounded our house. It seeped through the cracks around our windows. This madness layered our faces, blanketed our bodies, entered our pores, and infected our blood. It haunted our rooms at night like a ghoul. It hammered, then shattered, our security. I was eleven, in the passenger seat of our car coming home from Little Rock, when I'd never again have the luxury of simply wondering if something was wrong. But somewhere,

stuffed deep inside a drawer of my mind, I'd always known. A child doesn't pull chunks of her hair and chunks of her memory out of her head over nothing.

Mom told me that morning our plans had changed. Dad was taking me to my regularly scheduled orthodontist appointment to have my braces tightened. Arkadelphia was too small a town for its own orthodontist, so we made the one-hour drive every few weeks. We were house poor and up to our necks in debt, so Dad, understandably, would have preferred to forego the expense, but Mom convinced him of the necessity. "We're not talking about crooked teeth, Al. The child can't close her lips over them."

None of my siblings required braces, but I'd tripped and fallen mouth-first into a coffee table at age six, shoving the top set of my baby teeth into my gums and displacing the permanent teeth above them. My fate was sealed. I could either wear corrective wires for years to come or have the world's worst overbite.

I didn't want Dad to take me by myself. I reminded Mom how they'd both gone every other time. "And after my appointment, we go lickety-split to Casa Bonita, all three of us, so I can eat before my teeth get sore, remember, Mom? Then we head straight home so you can be here when Tony and Gay get out of school. It always works, doesn't it, Mom? We're always back on time."

"I know, I know," she said.

I kept insisting we could manage it. "And Nanny's here anyway if we're a few minutes late. But we won't be, I promise. We don't even have to go out to eat."

"Aw," she said. "Aren't you sweet." She wished she could go, and I knew it was true, but something had come up at one of the schools. She laid out my favorite outfit: a bright-green sleeveless jumper with culottes and big white polka dots. It was sailor style with a square-knot tie at the bottom of the V-neck collar. I'd just gotten my first training bra. I wouldn't start my period for another year.

The drive up to Little Rock, just me and Dad, went fine, mostly because we listened to the radio till it got too staticky. Even then, long as I could tell what song was playing under the pop and crackle, I still knew all the words on account of Gay being a teenager and us sharing a room. Dad got cranky about finding a parking place at the orthodontist's office, but before I could chew my fingernails plumb off like Nanny declared I was going to, me and Dad were in the waiting room. Soon I was lying back in the light-green chair, getting my wires cranked tight as a drum. I liked my orthodontist. He had a lot of good teeth and was always smiley, and this seemed just right to me, him being in the mouth business.

It was on our way home from Little Rock, just after the buildings and concrete turned to countryside and cows, that my dad switched off the radio and got quiet. We were still getting a signal clear as a whistle on KAAY-AM 1090, so I thought Dad was about to say something. But he didn't.

There's a good kind of quiet that has nothing at all inside it to weigh it down. It's the kind of quiet where a mind is alight with all sorts of thoughts, like what exotic animals your mom might let you keep in your room if you promised to feed them yourself, and wouldn't it be something if cars could fly. But this wasn't that kind of quiet. This was the kind of quiet where the air got thick in the car like I was breathing cotton.

I looked at Dad out of the corner of my eye, trying to decipher what he was concentrating on, the way his jaw was clenching and loosening.

"Come over here and sit next to me," he said, patting the seat, the corner of his mouth twitching up and down unnaturally—grin to frown, grin to frown—him still looking straight ahead like he was right there and somewhere else all at once. I didn't want to scoot over because I liked where I was sitting just fine, but Dad's way was bossing, not asking. He pulled me by my bare arm, tugged at my collar.

No, no, I don't want to. I want to sit by the door. I want my mom. I want my nanny. I want my Wayne. My thoughts screamed but my mouth was stuck shut. The cotton I'd breathed turned to glue. I cried, and he laughed.

Maybe a dad can do a lot of things and a child can think he's still okay in other ways, but not the kind of things my dad did to me. No kind of good dad does what my dad did to me. I knew that, even without knowing names for what he'd done. Names for what he was. He was a no-count dad. Only dad I had. And he was a no-count dad.

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The Ligon house looked different after we got home, like it had shifted ten degrees off the concrete, betraying a crooked roofline. The brick was darker than I'd remembered. I'd thought all along it was red, but I could see now that it wasn't. It was as brown as mud. The light bulbs were dimmer in the lamps on the end tables and in the ceiling fixtures overhead. The filaments were starting to flicker now. The off-white paint on the walls had no white at all.

Maybe a little time went by. In my memory, gale-force winds began to whistle instantly, and pebbles and twigs pecked our windowpanes like hail, but traumatic events have a way of jumbling time. What I know for certain is that no time in a child's upbringing is a good time for her mother to drop out of sight. And no time is worse than when a child's been traumatized by her father and needs her mother to know it. What I also know is that a mother can't always help herself. A hatch opens up under her feet.

Mom took ill. That much is clear to me now. Hindsight can dispel a certain measure of thick haze, but no explanation was ever given at the time to help Gay, Tony, and me process what was happening. Everything became shadows and secrets and tightly shut doors. All we were able to recognize was that our attentive mother, whose children had been her whole world, folded up inside herself, becoming as fragile as papershell for the larger part of four years.

Wayne had gone to college and, with him, our theatrical stage light and the sound of a piano soothing the night. He was in and out of the house through those years and no stranger to the sting of the swarming storm, but even if he'd remained, he couldn't possibly have saved us. He couldn't have

saved himself. The madness was bigger than the sum of us. Sandra was many miles away, starting her family. It was the six of us—Dad, Mom, Nanny, Gay, Tony, and me—under a roof that was blowing off in sheets of shingles. Nanny grew increasingly frantic but also old, and her wringing hands were tied. Dad lent himself, practically nothing withholding, to a pitch-black bent. Mom went to bed and left the three of us wide awake and, with a rabid ferocity, a house ajar became a house unhinged.

Mom would emerge for periods of time and seem a lot like her old self. Relieved and overjoyed, we kids would reciprocate and act like our old young selves. *Ask no questions and tell no troubles.* She'd do all the regular tasks and go all the usual places. She'd watch her favorite stories and chirp with her delicious wit. And, for this while, we'd have our mother back, coherent, cooking and washing clothes, but still too fragile around the edges for us to ever settle in and think we'd be all right. Something about the twitching of her eyes and fingertips.

Without any further warning, the sun wouldn't come up the next morning or the next, and we'd swear on a King James we'd never be all right again. She'd do baffling, bone-rattling things like writing a name across a wall or marking a face out of a picture or leaving a nonsensical note or laughing with an unsettling cackle. She placed a phone call to Wayne in a state of hysteria telling him she was ending her life. He sped recklessly through stop signs, ran a light, and jumped curbs to make it in time to intervene. When he bolted into the house, he found Mom sipping coffee, smashing the butt of a cigarette into the bowl of a brown ashtray and blowing its last mouthful of smoke, chin upward, lower lip outward, like nothing ever happened.

We could go days spared of the more unsettling acts, but we had little respite from the black cloud that held Mom hostage, and she had none at all. We would never have answers to many of our questions. We'd never know whether her symptoms were of chronic mental illness alone or exacerbated by the misuse of over-the-counter and prescription drugs. We were so young the latter wouldn't have dawned on us had it not been almost impossible to awaken her at times. She wasn't drinking. We knew that

much. The one thing Dad did not allow—the unpardonable sin in his eyes—was alcohol in our home. While this would explain its later appeal to his children, it did not explain our mother's lapses into sleep too deep to stir.

Sometimes Gay, Tony, or I would need something parental that couldn't wait. Maybe it was a required signature on a school document or permission to spend the night with a friend. We'd need a ride to an activity or perhaps just an excuse to make sure she was breathing. We had two parents, but without question, Gay and I trusted our worn and weary sleeping beauty far more than our fully functioning father. We wished to be in no way beholden to him. During the apex of these four mean years, if he happened to be home when Mom was holed up in their room, neither we nor Nanny were allowed access to her.

"Don't touch that door," he'd say, all snarled up like a dog about to bite, if we were tarrying in the hall by their room, us kids wanting our mom and Nanny wanting her girl awful bad.

I wasn't about to give him any back talk, but Nanny would try to reason with him. "Al," she'd say, most uncharacteristically pleading, "that's my daughter in there. I need to check on her."

"I just did!" he'd growl. Then he'd come up with some way to make it sound like leaving Mom alone in that deep, dark hole was in her best interest. "She's sick and needs to sleep!" And that would be the end of it, as long as he was around.

But when he wasn't home, which was often the case, we three kids would brave the deep if we were desperate enough.

This is how it would go: Gay first, me right behind her, my hands on her shoulders, and Tony right behind me, his hands on my shoulders, like a three-car train. We made it a game for Tony's sake. For all our sakes. We'd open the door quietly, and the creaking hinges would set off a familiar repartee.

"Shhhhhhh!"

"I am shushing. You shush your own self."

"Would you shut up?"

"*You* shut up!"

“You’re gonna wake her up!”

“We came to wake her up!”

“Well, we’re not ready to wake her up!” That much was true, and we all knew it, so we shut up.

We’d let our eyes adjust to the darkness that she maintained with heavy curtains drawn. We’d then move our tiny train—*tiptoes, everybody*—toward the side of the bed with the lump of human clay beneath the covers. Gay was not only the eldest. She was also the bravest. “Mom?” she’d say, then we three would break train and sprint back to the doorway, waiting for her to answer. We knew that when she did, it would come with a startled and disoriented shriek of “What? What? What?” and scare us half to death.

We’d repeat this procedure about four times, increasing the volume, and occasionally getting so tickled we laughed ourselves into three little balls. Laughing was how we coped with the absurdity of living. Sure enough, she’d finally wake up with a shout and sit straight up like a corpse in an open coffin on Alfred Hitchcock, and we’d have the jitters for the next solid hour.

Dad told us Mom was crazy. He’d told her so, too. He claimed she’d lost her mind and was making things up, like how he was up to no good with another woman.

“Well, *are* you?” This was Gay. She’d go eye to eye with him. Braver than Tarzan. Just one time I saw Dad haul off and slap her right in the face for talking to him that way. Didn’t scare her none. She was dog-tired of him about now. I figure he knew she had it in her to slap him back.

“Am I *what*?” he retorted angrily.

“Are you having an affair?” She spit each word out separately, almost like she was banging the heel of a shoe to the linoleum with every syllable.

“Hell, no!” He said it just like that, and he didn’t cuss much, him being churchy, so when he did, I knew he was lying like a plump cat on a warm windowsill.

It would take Gay and me weeks to stumble on proof he’d done exactly what he’d said he didn’t. He was wrong about Mom. She wasn’t crazy. She was caught. Chained in a cell that had become unbearable. And her mind,

for a time, suffered a compound fracture as surely as a skull hitting a windshield in a head-on collision. She'd live, but for no short while, she wouldn't wish to.

• • •

One evening when Dad was at work and the rest of us were preoccupied, Mom walked out the front door and vanished into the dusk. Nanny alerted Gay and me, explaining how she'd heard the front door and thought nothing of it, then realized Mom was the only one missing. She'd waited a few minutes, hoping she'd return quickly without incident so Gay and I could be none the wiser. Gay was a licensed driver by now, but her normal enthusiasm to take the wheel was suddenly drenched by an awful apprehension. We phoned Dad at the Royal, told him what had transpired, and begged him to find Mom. He came home "to get the full story," he said, and to wait for her to walk through the door. We didn't talk back to Dad sass-mouth unless we were looking for a fight. But that night we were sufficiently inconsolable to insist he take to the car and search for our mother and Nanny's daughter *and your wife, Dad. Remember her?*

Never once did we step toward the phone in the breakfast room to call the police. We Greens were a well-known family in a small college town. A Christian family, with high visibility at church. Dad was in the Lions Club. He was an officer in the Chamber of Commerce. He was head of his Sunday school department, for crying out loud. Wayne was already legendary in Arkadelphia and he'd barely cracked twenty. Gay was drum majorette of the Arkadelphia High School Badger Marching Band. To our knowledge, no one was onto us yet. I suppose, the way we saw ourselves, we weren't the kind of people who get the police involved. If you asked us, it would have been the kiss of death in that town, no living it down.

It's an oddity how one small detail can melt your heart like wax. With an angst that had gathered the loose skin of her face into a tight knot, Nanny said, "I think Letha was barefooted." No way under heaven would Mom

head out the front door without shoes. Not if she were in her right mind. Disgruntled, Dad acquiesced to our urging, our shaming, and left in pursuit of our mom.

Helplessness hollowed our chests of all things hopeful, giving panic a place to pool and roil. We distracted Tony as long as we could. He knew little to nothing about Dad's suspected double life. He knew our family was out of kilter. He knew Mom was often unavailable and seemed unwell, but he was Dad's shadow, often at the Royal and shielded from much that had come to light in our home. The two of them shared a relationship the rest of us hadn't had. Wayne was musical and artistic, a momma's boy. Tony was athletic and rough-and-tumble, a daddy's boy. Gay and I didn't tinker with that. It kept our little brother less aware and more insulated. Though only a few years older than he, we protected him the best we knew how and kept our mouths shut except for the secrets we told in hushed tones to each other.

Neither Gay, Nanny, nor I sat down for the next hour. We took turns pacing the den floor and standing at the picture window, leaning over the couch, looking for a familiar figure to emerge across the schoolyard. When our panic surpassed what could be hidden from Tony, he entered the mayhem with us. It's an awful thing to watch a knowing that no child should ever have to know take place on a child's face.

"We can't find Mom" is all we said. What else had to be said? When your mom is missing, what else matters?

Tony's infectious smile, adorably crooked, first went flat then flipped upside down like a boot had kicked over a dog's bowl. His lower lip rolled out and quivered. When Tony cried, a most curious thing happened to his eyes. The tears gathered his thick brown lashes into points that made his pupils look like the centers of two twinkling stars. Mom may have been missing, but I guess the way Gay saw it, his big sisters weren't. She took hold of his hand and did not let it go, but neither did she panic one iota less. She dragged him along with her, every compulsive step she took, darting from window to window, from front door to back. He went willingly, apparently feeling safer in it than outside it.

Please, God, please, God, we're begging now. Can you hear us now? Please, Lord.

What I recall with complete clarity in those grueling minutes waiting for some word on Mom is lighting up a cigarette and puffing it like I'd smoked my entire young life. It seemed the thing to do. The thing Mother would have done. She'd left her cigarettes and matchbook at home. *Why would she have done that?*

We heard a car in the driveway and froze. A minute or so later, Dad walked through the back door with Mom, neither of them saying a word. Dazed, Mom walked straight past us and into the kitchen and we heard the kettle clang and the clicking of the stove burner lighting. "Where was she?" Nanny asked Dad, her voice high and feverish, a crumpled tissue in her hand.

"I found her at the river." Sometimes there aren't enough cigarettes.

I'd never see those waters the same way again. They'd been infected with fear now, the gentle lapping at the shore becoming ghostly whispers of *what if, what if, what if, what if*. We were a different kind of river people now.

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I'd transition from junior high to early high school during this protracted season of instability. Every school morning of the ninth grade, I'd take a deep breath, open the front door, walk down the concrete steps, cross Twelfth Street then the schoolyard, consciously trying to drop off the most obvious pieces of my brokenness. They'd be waiting for me like bread crumbs to pick up on the way home, making sure I found the right house with all the right wrongs.

I couldn't have fooled any adult paying attention. I was a strong, successful student suddenly making Ds in two classes. I was a people person no longer able to look people in the eye. I wore grown-up makeup and my skirts too short. I had no shortage of boyfriends but no tools for handling them. I was going places I had no business going with a sister

three years older. She reasoned—and she was right—that my going with her was safer than my staying at home without her. I was a good girl doing bad things. I was a bad girl doing good things. I was spiraling in our spinning house, there in the air where witches fly.

The only thing that terrified me more than getting caught was nobody caring enough to catch me. On one occasion, my boyfriend and I, too young to drive but old enough and dumb enough to look for a dark place to hide, met up at the Royal for a matinee showing I knew would be sparsely populated. We scooted all the way to one side about ten rows down, virtually alone in the auditorium. I didn't feel nearly as free as I'd hoped, however. The more we kissed, the more I worried that Dad would walk in and catch us, and I'd get in the worst trouble for acting naughty and being a bad girl. He'd been out when we'd come in.

Butterflies were starting to gather in my stomach, so I turned my head to make sure the coast was clear. And there he was. About six rows back, just watching us.

CHAPTER SIX

"GOOD MORNING TO THE BIGGEST CITY IN THE SOUTH!" Tony and I shot straight up in the back seat of the car to the abrupt awakening of KILT 610 radio. Dad needed the volume to shake the fatigue from his bones and the grogginess out of his head while he navigated four lanes of bumper-to-bumper traffic, the likes of which we'd never spied in our lives. He'd driven Mom, Tony, and me throughout the night hours down the endless monotony of I-10 West, all the way from Arkadelphia. The storms had not ended for us Greens, but the tornado that had spun our family madly for almost four years finally spit us out and landed us in the sprawling metroplex of Houston, Texas. It was just as well. The house on Twelfth was haunted now. Bad memories that hid behind the drapes during the day came out at night to hiss and dance and play. Dad was moving up in the world, not so much in salary as in status. He would oversee all the AMC multiscreen theaters in Houston, and there were no few.

The move was almost inexplicable. We were Arkansans and would be to our deaths. Our dearly departed were buried in Arkansas's loamy soil. Nearly all our living relatives were still there. Our heritage was there. The roots of the family trees of the Rountrees and the Greens plumbed the deepest depths of the rural hills of Arkansas from the time our ancestors migrated from America's eastern seaboard. For better and for worse, for both the richer and the poorer, it was home to our people. And one thing was startlingly clear. We were no longer home.

Tony and I stared speechless out the windows of the back seat, our bloodshot eyes big and round and the acid in our stomachs spitting flames. The sights and sounds were so foreign to us that we wouldn't have been much more startled had we awakened on Neptune. An 18-wheeler blared at Dad from behind, signaling for him to speed up or get out of the way. He

got out of the way, rattled and, I'd imagine, wondering what on earth he was doing in that hot, congested city. It was late August, and the windows of businesses on both sides of the freeway were boarded up from a hurricane threat only a few days old. We'd come to die. That much was apparent to us.

We were still in yesterday's clothes, crumpled and sticky, and we were in considerable need of toothbrushes. Our parents had agreed, rather atypically, to drive through the night to allow Tony and me to attend going-away parties thrown by our friends. We'd sobbed into our pillows the first two hours of the drive until the cases were drenched, our bodies limp.

Nanny was back at the Ligon house overseeing the packing. Gay was in her freshman year at Henderson State in Arkadelphia. We'd come at this precise time so Tony and I could start the school year in Houston. I was entering my sophomore year of high school and Tony, the eighth grade, and Mom had until midmorning to get us registered. We'd grab a quick lunch, then she and Dad would drop us off with church friends who'd moved to Houston several years earlier. Our parents would head back to Arkadelphia posthaste to finalize the sale of our house and facilitate the move. Tony and I would start school the very next day and stay with the Turners for several weeks.

That year Spring Woods High School in Houston, Texas, boasted some 4,700 students, spilling from the main building into a series of one-room structures they called T-shacks, T being short for *temporary*. The district would split the school the next year and, still, the head count would be three times the size of Arkadelphia High. When the bell rang at the end of each class, Spring Woods erupted like a cowboy boot had stomped an ant hill. It took weeks for me to get the hang of the hall traffic, continually going against the flow and getting hit so many times by massive sets of shoulders that I spun like a red plastic arrow on a game board. I learned fast that they grew dudes big in Texas. These guys were the size of the full-grown football players at Henderson and Ouachita. They ate stuff like chicken-fried steak and double-meat cheeseburgers for lunch and put chili on their fries. It was unseemly.

Tony's induction to Texas public schools was about the same. We'd have sobbed, whined, and woed-is-me fiercely if we hadn't been at the Turners', but we were guests under their roof and good manners severely limited our liberties.

Out of close to 4,700 kids, only a handful of them were Black. The sight was instantly conspicuous and surreal. By the time we left Arkadelphia, our public schools had been thoroughly integrated. Whatever admittedly small progress we had made in our friendships and classroom relationships back in Arkadelphia—nearness having become our new normal—we'd unfortunately no longer need to navigate in those early years in Houston. They'd claim they didn't have race problems in our school district, like avoidance wasn't a top-of-the-line name brand.

I'd not hear the term "white flight" for a couple of decades, but the week I entered my new school, I certainly beheld it. I didn't know what it was called, but as deep as my ignorance and my Arkansas-born-and-bred prejudices were, I knew something about it seemed sketchy. We had a bright-white welcome to suburban life in one of the most diverse cities in America. How does that make any sense to a newcomer? Just a few exits further west on I-10, you'll find yourself officially outside of Houston. The whole idea of progress in those days was to keep moving to the edges of the city.

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Mom and Dad returned to Houston several weeks after dropping us off at the Turners' and closed on a home half the size of the Ligon house. They let Tony and me go back to Arkadelphia with them for the weekend to get Nanny and to load the rest of our belongings into a moving van.

That last afternoon, my best friend, Dodie, and our friend Mike swung by to pick me up so we could grab a bite at the Pig Pit Bar-B-Q before I left town. I ran across the front yard to remind my parents that we had discussed

this and I'd be back in an hour and a half. They both began to protest. "The movers are too close to being ready to go and we need to drive right behind the van. You need to stay here so we're not waiting on you."

Whatever on God's green earth a conniption fit is, according to Mom and Dad, I threw one right then and there in the front yard. They'd dragged Tony and me from the only town we'd ever known and torn us away from all our friends, and we'd spent weeks in gargantuan new schools without a single family member, save each other. I was in no mood to be told no. Al and Aletha Green had picked a fine time to suddenly agree.

"No," they said in unison. "You're not going."

"But you promised!"

"We didn't know how close we'd be to leaving. The answer's no."

Mad as a hornet and heartbroken, I hugged my bosom friend, Dodie—the Diana to my Anne—goodbye. I'd miss her more than anyone. We'd shared a locker and our clothes and a trunkful of secrets. We'd painted our toenails the same colors and swore to one another we'd never let them go naked. I'd spent the night over at her house innumerable times and protected her from spending the night at mine. We neither one were angels, so we felt like lesser demons in our religious little town when we were together.

About a half hour later, as the last few boxes went into the moving van, we heard several sirens screaming bloody murder. We almost never heard more than one siren at a time in our town. All of us stopped what we were doing, turned an ear in the direction of the wailing ambulances, and listened with our eyebrows drawn.

"We need to wait!" I yelled. "It's gonna be somebody we know!"

My parents were exhausted, and with all the furniture in the van, there was no place to sit in the house. Nanny was eighty-six by now, and had she sat down on the front steps, she'd still be sitting there today as a pile of ashes. Dad swung open the car door to the back seat and shot me a serious look. "Get in, Beth. We've got to get on our way." I was on his last nerve and he, on mine.

Cell phones were unheard of. We had a brand-new telephone number at the brand-new house we'd only owned for about a week, but none of our friends knew what it was. We hardly knew what it was. I went to school the next day and rode the bus home, still feeling immensely pouty at my unreasonable parents for not letting me go to the Pig Pit with my friends. When I walked through the front door, Mom and Nanny were sitting near one another on the couch. They both had tissues in their hands and the kind of pained looks on their faces that send every butterfly within ten square miles into an observer's stomach.

"Bethie, sit down with us a minute."

"No." I had no idea what they were about to say, but I was 100 percent positive I didn't want to hear it.

"Honey," Mom said, patting the space on the couch beside her, "come here."

I kept squeezing my eyes tight over and over like I could somehow make the surface of my brain so rigid and unyielding, the words wouldn't get in.

Dodie and Mike were dead. Just like that. He'd veered into the opposite lane, reaching for a pack of gum on the dashboard, just a mile or so from reaching the parking lot of the Pig Pit Bar-B-Q. Business as usual there. Customers stepping up to the counter. Cashier scribbling orders. "The two-meat special? Sliced beef, pork ribs, extra sauce. Side of baked beans and coleslaw. Got it. Pickles and sliced sweet onion are there by the silverware in the plastic containers. Fried blueberry pies will be out of the grease and on the counter in ten minutes, bubbling hot. Or you can have banana pudding if you've done lost your mind."

It was a head-on collision. Mike died instantly. Dodie's heart lived on for a few short hours. Of course it did. She was mostly heart. Her head injury, however, was catastrophic. From where I sat on the couch beside my mother, trying to process these two broken bodies of tender age, it seemed the whole world had lost its mind.

I still visit Dodie's grave when I'm in Arkadelphia and take daisies if I can find them. I round the small hill until I spy a certain memorial stone. It's the one with a built-in cameo picture of a fetching fifteen-year-old girl I knew as well as I knew myself, with a perfectly mischievous smile on her face. She gave her doting parents fits, and they didn't know the half of it. I pull off my shoes when I go to her grave and stand barefooted on the cold granite edge, the grass prickling my heels. "I'm still keeping my promise," I say. "Never a naked toe."

The death of a friend in childhood is so utterly unnatural that it leaves a fissure hard to mend. There was no going back now. The move was permanent. This strange, sprawling city, where the closest thing to an Arkansas hill was a concrete overpass, was our new home.

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Mom and Dad were still at excruciating odds, but Mom's state of mind had undeniably improved with proof of Dad's infidelity.

Gay had stumbled on the evidence shortly before we moved from Arkadelphia. She was always half a detective. She was at the Royal that fateful afternoon and in need of a pen to jot down a note. She sat down at Dad's desk, and when she pulled out the long, shallow center drawer where Dad kept his colored pens, sharpened pencils, staple remover, and paper clips, her fingertips swept across a foreign object Scotch-taped to the underside of the drawer. She slid out of the chair and crouched under the desk to investigate. The way she saw it, anything taped somewhere top secret needed untaping.

It was a postmarked letter from Dad's girlfriend, four front-and-back handwritten pages on cutesy stationery. This was no one-night fling here. The words smelled to high heaven with the heavy perfume of familiarity, dripping with recent memories and imminent plans. Gay brought it straight home to me because that was how we did things. Pulled me by the arm into the bathroom so we could lock ourselves in. Slapped that envelope onto my palm. The folded sleeve was at least five months pregnant with pages, so I

checked to see if the woman had used two stamps. That she had not cared a whit about robbing the post office of six cents told me all I needed to know. I combed through the innards, flipping the pages front to back.

"Holy moly," I said over and over.

"Oh, that's not all. Are you ready for this?" Gay asked.

"Yes!" And I was. God, help me, I was.

She held out two pictures, straight-armed like they were nailed to the blunt end of a two-by-four. Both were close-ups of the mistress and her pet, a white toy poodle. Her hair was short and frosted. By that I mean the mistress's, not the poodle's, though they did bear a remarkable resemblance. We'd struck gold, Gay and I.

"What do you think she thought Dad was going to do with those photos? Tack them to his bulletin board?"

"Don't ask me," I said, but she knew good and well I wanted her to.

Gay then gave me a stern and knowing look. It was the kind of look she got when she'd already made up her mind and a herd of buffaloes couldn't stop her. "We're calling her." She grabbed me by the wrist, unlocked the bathroom door, threw it open and swung me into the hall like a square-dance partner. "You get on this phone," she commanded, pointing to the black rotary on a shelf in the hall, "and I'll get on the one in the breakfast room."

"Wait, wait!" I pleaded. "Let's go over this first! What if Mom catches us?"

"She's *asleep*." Gay cocked her head and looked at me like *How dumb could you be?*

"But what about Nanny?"

"Nanny's gotten deaf as a stump. She won't know who we're talking to."

Oh, yes, she would. Nanny was a shameless snoop, and I was sure she only claimed to be hard of hearing so we'd drop our guard. But the fact was, she wouldn't have stopped us from making that call. Had there been a third phone, she'd have been on it. Still, I needed another minute to wrap my mind around what we two teenagers were about to do.

“How are we going to get ahold of her?” I asked.

Gay held up the envelope and pecked her index finger at the upper left-hand corner, where the return address was written in curly cursive with a bright-blue Bic: first name, last name, street address, and city. “We’re calling directory assistance for this name and address in Memphis, Tennessee!”

And we did. It was like taking candy from a baby. We scratched down the tawdry digits as fast as the operator could spit them out.

“Hellllllo.” Took that Tennessee woman ten seconds and four full syllables just to answer the phone, me writhing in the hall.

Gay started in right away. “You better never see our dad again as long as you live.”

“Who is this?” she asked, like she didn’t know.

“*Who is this?* You want to know who this is? I’ll tell you who this is! This is me, Gay Green, and this is my sister, Beth Green.”

A few seconds passed before I realized this was my cue. Then I piped up. “Yeah!”

Gay would make a statement punctuated with phone-splattering plosives, then say, “Right, Beth?”

“Yeah!”

“And I’ll tell you another thing.” And she would.

When she paused, I’d say, “Yeah!”

Gay told the woman what she thought of her disgusting poodle.

“Yeah!” And I meant every word of it.

That Jezebel had the gall to try to sweet-talk us and tell us what good friends we were going to be someday. She may as well have unleashed a rabid Rottweiler in her den. I couldn’t see my big sister, but I knew by now she must be foaming at the mouth. If Gay said *over our dead bodies* once to the woman, she said it a dozen times.

I don’t recollect exactly how the call ended, but no one need wonder if Gay got the last word. She came whirling around the corner of the breakfast room and into the hall like Superwoman, cape flapping. I never saw anyone fiercer. “Can you believe the nerve of that woman?”

“No,” I said, the hair on my arms standing straight up.

“She thinks she’s gonna marry Dad.”

I could not fathom for the life of me why either of those two women—the one with the toy poodle or the one sound asleep in the bed in broad daylight—wanted to be married to Dad. It was sheer mystery.

Gay and I stood in the hall and shook our heads for a moment. I feel sure Gay cussed, but I was still shy at cussing. I’d been a bit awkward on the call and something needed to be said, so I just went ahead and said it. “I felt like my yeahs got meaner and meaner.”

“They did,” Gay agreed, “they surely did. Meaner’n a snake.”

She knew better. She knew I was the biggest chicken in the Green farmyard. But that’s how she was with me. Every kid needs somebody like that. I’d remind Gay over and over years later when we were well into the throes of adulthood, “You were the brave one. Not me. It was always you. You can do anything you put your mind to.”

“We’re telling Mom.” That’s what Gay said next in the hall, gaining steam from making a long-distance call all the way to Memphis, Tennessee, not caring a hoot in Hogscald Holler that Dad was going to find out about it and, better yet, pay the phone bill for it. Sure enough, she told Mom, and I said yeah.

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Strange, how the most unwanted things can become gifts. Mom didn’t feel nearly as much like dying once we knew who’d been lying. She didn’t even feel as much like sleeping. In fact, she was feeling better altogether, at least for a while. Vindication can be a powerful elixir. Things were looking up now that she had something definitive on Dad. Now that she knew she wasn’t crazy. Now that her children believed her. Nothing feels better than knowing, even for just a clear minute, you aren’t crazy after all. I don’t doubt she got a permanent and some fresh hair color right after this.

I wish I'd heard it with my own ears. It would've been scrumptious tonic. I don't know for a fact Mom said it, but I can't picture that she didn't, given the opportunity. Here's how I imagine it:

"The kids know. They know I didn't make it up. They know what kind of man you've been." Lord-a-mercy, we knew what kind of man Dad had been better than Mom did. Still, I'd like to have heard her say "they believe me" and seen his face when he heard it.

Now, I don't know what Dad would've said to Mom's version of *I told you so*, but it wouldn't have mattered. Sometimes you just get to know you were right even if the other person denies it.

Mom was in a strange new place in no few ways. Dad couldn't just strut around like a peacock without knowing we spied with our little eyes one very serious player. Oh, he'd still strut around often enough, but without the applause of a certain conspicuous section of his audience.

Gay hadn't moved with us to Houston. Not yet, anyway. But the woman who'd birthed us both—Esther Aletha Rountree Green—made the move, not exactly wearing a cape, but no longer searching barefooted for the nearest river.

Mom didn't leave Dad then, nor would she leave him later when she learned of more grievous transgressions. She sentenced him instead to infernally long bouts of solitary confinement under the same roof with her. Don't imagine this to be a light sentence. I still daydream from time to time about what our lives might have been like if Mom had left Dad. I thought about it incessantly the week we seven celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

My mother didn't see leaving as a viable option. She never once brought it up, to my knowledge. In her reality—whether actual or perceived—where was she to go and what, exactly, was she to do to support herself? She had a high school education, checks bouncing like rubber balls, an elderly mother, one kid in college and two more kids to go, and all without a whit of confidence in herself. She also had a recent history of mental instability, though such considerations didn't likely factor into the equation. No, Mom did what many women of her era did. She stayed, despite a dozen

valid reasons to go. She considered dying, but never leaving. She was never under threat of Dad taking her to court for custody. Lawyers were for people with money, and Dad was by no means looking to spend money—we didn't have it, anyway—or raise kids. Among other dark things, he appeared, at least to me, to simply want Mom to slip out of the picture so he could enlist someone new to raise us.

He wouldn't get the chance, you can bet your toy poodle on that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WE DON'T ALWAYS WANT A NEW START, no matter how badly we need one. A new beginning can come for us like an intruder breaking into our house—into our very lives as we know them—and drag us kicking and screaming into a place inhospitable to our previous selves. A place where our skin doesn't even seem to fit the same way around our bones. A place where we stare both out the window and in the mirror, looking for comforts of familiarity. Whether we are going to change isn't an option here. The only option is what kind of change we're going to make.

Houston was that intruder to me, that killer captor come to take me somewhere I didn't think I wanted to go. I could not see it then, but I'd catch enough glimpses of God's providence in my peripheral vision to suspect, before long, that he'd moved us himself so that we could find a sustainable life. Our Arkansas town wasn't the problem. We loved Arkadelphia. I still love it and long for its hills and pines. The injuries our family incurred there were the problem. And when enough hardship happens within a small circumference, the roads to all the familiar places are little more than crisscrossing scars. By the time every direction you could take at a four-way stop—right, left, straight ahead, or reverse—carries the stomach-turning scent of carnage, moving can mean surviving.

I was about to get to start over. Mind you, for those who have lived past third grade, there's no real starting over from scratch. There's just starting over *scratched*—and if the hurts clawed deep enough, *scarred*. But for those who resist insisting on idyllic circumstances and faultless people, new beginnings can be had.

Our family had been reduced to so few in a community of so many, even once we settled into a house and a neighborhood, that we no longer had any notion of who we were. The oddity for me, at fifteen years of age,

was the fact that resigning myself to that nothingness, to that lostness and invisibleness, was an almost instant relief. For one thing, I could wash my face and leave it bare, and who was going to care? You don't have to hide anything when you're invisible. I began my sophomore year wearing no makeup at all. Having no friends at all. No small-town popularity, which meant, gloriously, that there was also no small-town, overnight *un*popularity.

I was accustomed to a miserable social order of perpetual musical chairs. All the "in" people couldn't be in at the same time, lest small town life be too boring, so every day the music played and when it stopped, somebody wasn't going to have a chair. You wouldn't even know what you'd done. You'd just go to school the next day and none of your crowd would be talking to you.

Those early days at Spring Woods High, no one was talking to me anyway. I was no longer cool or uncool. No longer in or out. The sheer mass of bodies maneuvering the corridors and classrooms meant no one even knew who was new. I didn't, however, stay anonymous in my classrooms for long. A month was about as long as I could keep from participating in class in the subjects I loved.

One late September day, our English teacher asked the class a question like she did every day. Only this particular day, my hand shot up in the air like it had a mind of its own. Since I'd been mute up to now, she called on me without hesitation. The second I opened my mouth and uttered the first sentence, laughter roared over my gravy-thick Arkansas accent. Why this did not shut me up is a mystery. Alas, I endured. My classmates finally got to the point that, when I raised my hand, they'd chant to the teacher, "Call on her! Call on her!" The ridicule never stopped, but somewhere along the way it lost its sharp teeth, and they mostly just gummed me half to death.

I did okay in my classes because knowing people wasn't imperative. But as it is for every outsider, lunch was brutal. The eight most spectacular words falling on the ear of a lonely kid clutching a tray: "You can sit with us if you want."

She scooted down the bench of the picnic-style table in the commons, where students ate lunch. The girls to her left followed her lead, crowding in together.

“What’s your name?”

“Beth Green.”

And they told me theirs. I ate with them the next day and the next.

My friendships and associations underwent complete reconstruction with the move to Houston, and largely for the better. I’d never again be pigeonholed into one group of people. The road to reconstruction wasn’t without a few bumps, however. After living in Houston several months, a couple of girls asked me to spend an upcoming Friday night at one of their homes.

“I don’t know what I should do,” I told my mom.

“Do you like them?”

“Yes, ma’am. I don’t know them very well, but they seem fun.”

“Then, honey, go! It’s new friends!”

Nanny chimed in. “Letha, you ain’t gone further than the grocer’s whole time we been here. Reckon how you gonna find some stranger’s house?”

“They’ll gimme directions, Nanny. We’ll find it,” I said. “We’re gonna have to find our way around sooner or later.”

“I guess I can call the police when your momma don’t come home ’fore mornin’.”

I guessed we got to be the kind of people who call the police now since nobody knew us here in the big city.

Come Friday evening, I read the directions while Mom navigated the intersections with a fair amount of anxiety and a thick fog of burning tobacco. It was nearly November, but still hot as blue blazes. We pictured how the hills around Arkadelphia would be a patchwork of autumn colors by now and moaned for home.

My two new friends came bopping out the front door in their low-rise bell-bottoms as soon as we drove up, probably because Mom squealed the tires overcorrecting the way she’d hit the curb and nearly taken out their

mailbox. People in Houston put their mailboxes too close to the street. The girls were freckle-faced and darling and mannerly enough that I knew Mom would be impressed with them. I met Kim's mom and small-talked for a moment, primarily answering questions.

"Yes, ma'am. Just a couple of months."

"Yes, ma'am, from Arkansas."

"No, ma'am, I don't have to call you ma'am if you don't want me to."

"Arkadelphia. It's a small college town outside Little Rock."

"Only five of us moved here but I'm from a family of eight. My grandmother lives with us."

"He manages movie theaters."

"Yes, ma'am, I do like movies."

"My favorite? *Love Story*? Well, yes, I did like it." I really didn't because I thought love ought to mean saying a million sorrys, but I suddenly felt odd about admitting I preferred *Count Dracula*, the 1970 release, for its honesty.

Soon we three fifteen-year-old girls were off to Kim's bedroom. I'd barely crossed the threshold when she shut the door behind us and locked it. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen an actual lock on a bedroom door. I thought how I could have used one of those. Kim made a beeline straight to her chest of drawers, dug around in the bottom, pulled out a plastic bag of what appeared to be catnip, raised her bedroom window, and lit up a joint.

I expected an armed raid any second and pictured how I was going to have to write letters to Nanny from prison. I did my best not to let on. I just acted like it was an everyday thing for your mother to be in the den ten feet down the hall watching *The Partridge Family* while you and your spend-the-night company are about to go to the pen. We stayed perfectly friendly at school after that, but I mostly spent nights at home until I could get a few things figured out.

Then there was my first date in Houston. A young man from one of my classes asked me out. He said we could hang out with a group of kids from Spring Woods and I'd have a chance to get to know a lot of people. Though I didn't have any romantic feelings for him, I also didn't have many friends

or any plans. He didn't seem like an axe murderer and, as far as I could tell, was too shy to be handsy, so I went, and he was right. We did meet up with his friends—but at a nightclub. A real live nightclub. Why on earth they let a group of high school sophomores through the door remains perplexing. We might as well have been in Las Vegas, if you asked me.

I was so nervous, I never got up from the table. The music blared, so I also didn't talk. I just nodded and sipped on something tall, red, and slushy my date called a hurricane. As I live and breathe, I couldn't taste a hint of alcohol in it. When it was time to go, I had no feet at all. Lord-a-mercy, I had no knees. I had to be carried to the car. All I remember on the drive home was hollering for him to stop. I flung the door open and threw up rivers of red right there in public on the pavement of the 7-Eleven. Possessing a strong aversion to public vomiting, I have this one incident to thank for keeping me stone-cold sober through the rest of high school and all through college, and for teetotaling my way into adulthood.

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With the move and the sudden luxury of big-city anonymity, my parents dropped out of church. The about-face was a whiplash, especially for Nanny. She pined for it something fierce, but she was simultaneously getting less and less mobile. Basics like getting in and out of the car had grown difficult.

I made a decision that seemed small at the time. I decided to go to church by myself. I had no idea where to go. The Turners attended First Baptist Church of Spring Branch, and they had taken Tony and me with them while we stayed at their house. That seemed the natural choice, but it wasn't nearly as close to our home as theirs. Still, I mustered the courage to call Mrs. Turner and ask her if they could give me a ride. They were dear enough to say yes without hesitation.

Mom found it understandably awkward and soon offered to start taking me and picking me up herself. I kept thinking, *Any week now she's going to say, "Well, I will just go in with you,"* but she never did. I think she knew

Dad would have jumped back in immediately and gotten involved up to his neck, and she'd lost her tolerance for hypocrisy.

Mom and Dad's relationship was still in shambles in the fresh wake of the exposed affair. Though Dad swore it was over, Mom had no way of knowing for certain. The phone would occasionally ring and, when we'd answer, the caller would sit in silence for several moments, then hang up. A saint couldn't have kept from wondering if it was her, and we were no saints. We were scarred enough that for months to come, nothing seemed black-and-white. Nothing was certain. Everything was colored with suspicion.

My parents would go back to church eventually but not until after I'd finished high school. In time I got my learner's permit and was in line at the Texas Department of Public Safety by 9 a.m. the morning of my sixteenth birthday to get my driver's license.

From then on, Mom let me borrow their black-and-yellow Dodge Dart to go to church and sometimes to school. It was like driving around a yellowjacket, but I didn't care. It was dependable enough if you kept a gallon milk jug full of water on the floorboard of the back seat on account of the radiator's deep commitment to overheating. I knew just how to pop the hood and cool it off if necessary, and if we drove it over thirty minutes in the heat with the AC on, it was rarely unnecessary.

I got involved in the church youth group and choir and the like, going to camp and on missions trips. Every now and then we'd have a special service where the students either spoke or sang, and my parents would come. Other than that, I was on my own, church-wise, those three high school years in Houston. It was a time of deciding rather than having everything decided for me. I now lived in a city where *not* going to church was far more common than going. You could say you believed in God without doing a single thing to show it.

I would decide over those three years who I wanted to be. Mind you, I would not become that person for years, if ever at all. There would be no arriving, just pursuing. It wasn't so much three steps forward and two steps back as it was ten thousand steps in circles and cycles. I would wonder if it

was still considered hypocrisy if the person I pretended to be was the person I deeply wanted to be. Of course I knew the answer. The guilt of duplicity would consume me at times. I'd repent, sorrowfully and earnestly, over what seemed inevitable patterns of stupid choices. I'd promise God to do better and I'd keep it up for a while. Then, sooner or later, I'd repeat the same old cycle of self-sabotage. In every sense of the saying, I could not keep my act together.

Somehow in the mess of it, Jesus stayed. He kept his commitment to me when I was at a loss to consistently keep what seemed a single commitment to him.

A teenager doesn't know she's still a child. A teenager feels like an adult, I suppose primarily because her outside, her flesh and her face, her body, her size, her width and height, look like—and can function like, get pregnant like, can party like, get arrested like, and die just like—an adult. She thinks she's making decisions as a grown-up with a fully developed brain and, in a case like mine, a fully developed faith. She's wrong about both of those beliefs. But chances are, she will not realize what a child she was until, as a full-grown adult, she knows and loves a teenager.

I kept going to church, bouts of hypocrisy and all. Kept going to those student activities. Kept singing in the choir. Kept taking my offering envelope with a couple of folded-up dollar bills in it. Kept volunteering to read the passage aloud in my high school Sunday school class.

What I could not see for the life of me was that one-half of the duplicitous person mocking me in the bathroom mirror and telling me what a fake I was had something on the other half. Something that continued to drive a black-and-yellow Dodge Dart with a faulty radiator back and forth to a community of faith. It was called hope.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NANNY DIED OF A STROKE on the furthest thing from a feather mattress in a hospital room in Houston, just as the azaleas were blooming our first early spring. We might have found a dogwood to drive her by, had she given us more notice. The only familiar sight before her soul fled her world-worn body was the face of her daughter. No face would have been lovelier to her and no fragrance homier than Mom's Estée Lauder Youth-Dew with a touch of smoke, but what I wouldn't give to rewrite Nanny's ending with us all in the room walking her home, singing. Perhaps what she needed more than people was peace. We Greens were a lot of things, but no one ever accused us of being a peaceful lot. I'd not only rewrite her story with a crowded room, I'd rewind the clock seven months and forfeit all that time just for her to have the comfort of dying in the town she—and we—still called home.

Minnie Ola Steed first blinked her eyes to the light of day on March 1, 1886, nestled in the arms of her mother, Aletha Jane, for whom she'd later name her daughter. No other scenario makes sense but that Nanny came fresh from the womb considerably contrary. Contrariness was her lifelong love language and, once you accepted it as such, oddly comforting. Her birthplace is on record simply as Pike County, since she was born and raised miles from a town with a post office. The tiny farming community did, however, have a name. The early settlers called it Pisgah after a location mentioned in the closing scene of Deuteronomy. I can't speak for the ancient Israelites, but the only acceptable pronunciation for Arkansans from our place that was called by the same name is *PIZZ-gy*. Here's how the Bible story goes:

> Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which faces Jericho, and the LORD showed him all the land. . . . The LORD then said to him, "This is the land I promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you will not cross into it."
>
> So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the LORD's word. He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab facing Beth-peor, and no one to this day knows where his grave is.
>
> DEUTERONOMY 34:1, 4-6

Now, God is God and can do what he pleases, and God knows he's always right and righteous and wise. But, having sinned considerably in my lifetime, I can only feel sorry for Moses for not getting to go to the Promised Land on account of how he'd smacked the rock twice, frustrated to no end with the confounding people demanding water, after God had told him to speak to it (Numbers 20:7-12). Moses isn't the only one who preferred smacking to speaking. But just about the time I'd think Moses had lost God's favor and breathed his last with God perturbed at him, there God is, burying him. God, who'd dug a garden in Eden with his own hands in Genesis 2:8, where he placed the man he'd formed from the dust of the ground, took those same hands and dug a hole overlooking the Promised Land and picked up the 120-year-old lifeless body of his servant, laid him in it, and covered it there with his hand. If that's not love, I don't know it.

The ink dries permanently on the thick scroll of Deuteronomy with this epitaph. "No prophet has arisen again in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10).

I have to think bodies matter to the Maker of heaven and earth only second to souls. He formed these human bodies of ours meticulously if curiously. Considering all we have going on inside of us at once, the wonder is not that we get sick but that we spend ten consecutive minutes *well*. To my people, not only did a body matter, where a body was laid to

rest mattered. They took the ancient practice of being buried with the fathers seriously (Genesis 49:29). No way was Nanny going to be at rest within earshot of honking 18-wheelers on Houston freeways, nor would she have cared to be in a hundred-degree oven every summer of her dead life. Mom didn't care what the price tag was, and Dad didn't likely either. Without question or discussion, Nanny's body was going back to Arkansas where it belonged.

Something about standing over the lifeless body of the person who braved the valley of the shadow of death—panting, wincing, sweating, yelping, pushing, and bleeding—to give you life is particularly poignant. I believe this to be true even where relationships have ruptured, weakened, or altogether severed.

Dad came home first to tell us Nanny was gone. He was not at all cold. He knew a major figure in all our lives, his included, had just vanished from our landscape. No one in our expansive family was less anonymous than Nanny. A few hours later Mom walked through the door, tears dripping from her jaw, moving slowly through the entryway and den toward the kitchen like the least bump against a piece of furniture would tear open her flesh and bleed her out. My mother was fifty when Nanny died and had lived with her precisely fifty years. Everywhere my family moved, Nanny moved with us. Though Mom had to have seen it coming and knew what a struggle daily tasks had become for Nanny, she was devastated by her death.

I cannot recall hugging my mother at that moment. If my memory is accurate, I stood back, staring, frozen in place like all ten of my fingertips were lead weights. I wish I could do it over again and hold her in my arms this time and comfort her and tell her how sorry I am and affirm what a loss she'd suffered even if I felt awkward. I wish I'd made it to the kettle before she did and told her to rest on the couch and let me serve her. I should have lit her cigarette for her. I don't know why I didn't. She had not raised uncompassionate children. All five of us were sentimental. I hugged her a thousand other times in the years that followed, swift with words of consolation, but that moment in a house in Houston that still felt like an ill-

fitting shoe, all I recall is paralysis. Perhaps I was terrified that a wave of grief this size and this soon after she'd emerged from the ocean floor would drown her. I went in my bedroom alone with the loss, closed the door, and sobbed.

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I have no recollection of our drive back to Arkansas for the funeral and burial, but Wayne, in Houston at the time, made the trip with us and remembers it distinctly. He tells me the only sound in the car was Mom sniffling. It goes without saying that Dad also snorted on account of his apparently untreatable postnasal drip, but beyond that, Mom got what she wanted. Quiet. No radio. No incessant chatter from her children. Just silence.

After four or five hours, the quiet had grown intolerable and Dad finally asked, "Couldn't we please just turn on a little radio?" She guessed so. Wayne reports that a few minutes later, the Four Tops came on singing their latest hit gleefully like they didn't care an iota what anybody listening was going through. If you wanted a dirge, you weren't going to get it from the Four Tops. Wayne says Mom lasted through it as long as she could then switched it off with significant fervor. With one sob per syllable, she blurted out, "My mother has died, and I don't wanna hear 'Ain't No Woman Like the One I Got'!"

This kind of thing—the way we Greens could dramatize—is what my family did best. Of all the things handed down through our family line, this may well be what I appreciate most. Before you go feeling sorry for my mother for having such disrespectful children that they had to bite their lips to keep from bursting out laughing, I'd slap a clean and crispy ten-dollar bill on the table to bet she had to stare out the front passenger window and pinch her own lips to keep from doing the same. It's how we did things, and not a one of us has ever been sorry enough to change.

There’s no real explaining what got into those early settlers’ minds when they named my grandmother’s homeland after the mountaintop where God gave Moses a panoramic view of the Promised Land. Arkansas has a generous share of mountain ranges, but not in those parts. Those parts are gentle hills with trees enough to make you strain to see the sunset; nevertheless, Pisgah it was and Pisgah it stayed, and I suppose everybody has a right to consider any plot of land hospitable enough to build their lives upon as being just a stone’s throw from God’s favorite. Pisgah was our favorite, anyway, and if it was good enough for Moses, it was good enough for Nanny.

We tucked Nanny’s body into a bed of earth two days later, exactly where she wanted to be buried. We returned her to the same Arkansas clay where her life had begun and to the cemetery adjoined to her old church. That’s how they did it back in that day, and who’s to say it wasn’t a good way? There was no distance at all between where they came to faith and where they came to rest, where they gathered for worship and where they gathered to wail, where they ate on the grounds after church and where they ate the food of tears. Sanctuary and cemetery, where they held flowers and married and where they laid flowers and buried.

She was finally at her husband’s side. Her fiddle-playing, foot-tapping man raised on the same hills, graduated from Mountain Home College and the University of Arkansas law school, a practicing lawyer who served as a small-town mayor, then in the Arkansas House of Representatives for three terms, the last of which he held until his death. When his occupation necessitated a move closer to the state capitol, he’d sent her and my mom, a tiny thing at the time, to Arkadelphia, while he walked their cow thirty-three winding, rising, dipping, daunting country miles. He died when my mom was fourteen. Nanny never remarried, pining for long, tall Micajah Rountree the rest of her life.

They were together now, their bodies in sweet repose under a thick blanket of earth right beside the graves of Esna Irene, their firstborn, who breathed her last at six weeks old; Prentis, their second born, who left their arms empty at two years of age; and Anthony Dalton, their sixth born, also

two, and whose death, Nanny claimed, nearly put his grief-racked parents and three big brothers in the grave with him. I don't know how a human heart keeps beating after such crushing. My mother was their seventh and last. When Minnie Ola Rountree and her brown-eyed daisy, Esther Aletha, climbed aboard that carriage for the big city of Arkadelphia, she must have had the fortitude of ten men for the reins tied to those three graves not to pull her clean off the seat.

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Words have a life of their own. When we no longer have the warm body of someone we loved, if they lived long enough to speak and spoke often enough in our hearing, they have a way of living on through language. Their words are right there, floating in the air, ready to wet the tongue as a moment arises when you know good and well what they'd say. My siblings and I speak fluent Nanny-ese. We can go whole conversations without speaking a single original word. This is the gift of having lived within the same walls. She never had no comment.

We had to stand ankle-deep in the stream of her legacy and pan the gold from the gravel for what was worth saving. Worth passing on. Some words and ways we each wanted to keep, but some needed condemning to the pit of hell. Racism ran through my grandmother's red blood like orange iron.

To her, desegregation was practically a death sentence. Her aversion was fed by raw, unfiltered fear. According to Nanny, Black people were going to multiply and slaughter white people and take over. Holding on to an ugly and erroneous historical narrative, in her mind we were the victims, not they. To her, we had not taken what was theirs; they were coming to take what was ours.

I knew, even as a young child back at the Royal Theater, that my Black classmates having to climb those narrow stairs to a separate space was immoral. The Black students at our high school in Arkadelphia had names. Parents. Churches. Many among them were personal friends. And yet every

morning my sister and I walked across Twelfth Street to the school, Nanny watched us from the picture window, certain one of the boys with deep-brown skin sitting on the steps up to the school door was going to grab us. The unavoidable irony was in the notion that our home—with all of its heinous secrets—was safe, but crossing the street would get us molested.

"Nanny, good grief, nobody's gonna get us!" we'd say repeatedly, only for it to fall on deaf ears. Jesus spoke of people who had ears but would not hear and eyes but would not see. To people in my grandmother's likeness, those boys were not image bearers. They were as feared as werewolves out for prey in broad daylight.

As ignorant as we five children were about matters of injustice and inequality, and as deeply steeped as we were in 1960s and 1970s white culture, we knew when she talked the way she did that she was wrong. *Hateful.* We were skewed enough to believe, to our shame, that a certain amount of racism was acceptable, "normal." But we were not blind enough—our young consciences not yet seared enough—to think Nanny hadn't crossed that line by a country mile. Unmistakably, our religious grandmother, who read the Bible on her bedside table every night, who loved Sunday school and church and wept through every hymn, had a deep and appalling gash of hypocrisy in the armor of her piety. You know some things in your gut. You don't have to take an ethics course. You don't have to know God well to know that, if he is righteous at all, some things are wrong. If he is good at all, some things are evil. If God is love, then nothing is more blasphemous than hate.

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There was nothing to love and everything repelling in the racist Nanny, a good bit to resist in the critical Nanny, but to a handful of kids clamoring for stability, the comically rural and ever-available Nanny was worth a heap.

Something was comforting about how Nanny never shed her hick vernacular. The continuous squabbles between her nouns and verbs were things a soul could count on. The way she pronounced *can't* as if it rhymed with *ain't* was classic. It felt good and fitting and rounded out. Her figures of speech weren't lifted from books. Their origins were stories. They were sensory and earthy, connected, like a spade in garden soil, like a baby at a breast.

She quilted, cracked pecans, shelled peas, fished for perch. She was so bent on cooking the trichinosis out of a pound of meat that every roast we ate was burned to a crisp and every piece of patty sausage curled up into a tiny bowl. The latter proved beneficial in that it would hold a tablespoon of gravy without spilling a drop so we could pick it up and eat it in one bite.

Burying Nanny had some mild advantages, although the house had too big a hole in it for us to appreciate them. Sticking her in a coffin meant the end of her incessant compulsion to consolidate. Once the breakfast cereal boxes were only a third full, she combined them all into one box. Being pleasant in the morning with one's elderly grandmother was a challenging prospect after pouring a bowlful of Cap'n Crunch that turned out to be equal parts Grape-Nuts and Special K. Same for chips. The Fritos, Lay's, and Cheetos were all destined for the same bag. Same for plastic bottles of soda pop in the refrigerator. It was one thing to order a suicide back at the Royal; it was another thing to happen on it. We'd come in from school and head to the kitchen for an afternoon snack and, seconds later, nine times out of ten, one word could be heard reverberating through the house. "Naaaaaaaaanny!"

Hers was the gift of presence. She was simply always there. Always there on Saturday nights with pin curls in her wispy gray hair upon which she was going to put a hat come Sunday morning for church. Always there, spit-washing a smudge off our faces, even when we were in high school. Always there in front of the oven with mitts on both hands waiting to pull out something hot, her wide hips eclipsing the oven door and with her dress caught at times where the sun don't shine. Always there on the other phone eavesdropping on our conversations. Always there with an "Ain'tcha

hungry?” and, when we said yes because we almost always were, spreading butter on a slice of light bread, folding it over and handing it to us like a feast. And it was.

“Want sugar on it?”

“No, ma’am.” Then again, sometimes, “Yes, ma’am.” It was mood dependent. Two different tastes entirely.

A month before she died, my parents had to leave town for Dad’s job and I’d just had a stomach virus I couldn’t shake. On day three when I still had no appetite and was ghost-pale, she sat on the couch with me, scraped the inside of a ripe apple with a small spoon and hand-fed me until I was well.

Nanny was there. That’s all. And then she wasn’t. No more story to it than that.

CHAPTER NINE

I FOLLOWED THE TURNERS TO CHURCH, then after graduating from high school, I followed their younger daughter, Sandy, to college in San Marcos. She was a senior at what was then called Southwest Texas State University (now called Texas State) when I was an incoming freshman. Situated quaintly in the hill country with a clear, green river coursing through its center, San Marcos was a natural pick for a couple of Arkansans. Going back to Arkansas for college wasn't an option for me because out-of-state tuition was outside our budget, and at that time, SWTSU was as low-dollar as a state university could get. It also accepted practically anybody, and practicality was precisely what I needed.

My grades, which plummeted my freshman year of high school in the hub of the Green tornado, stayed wobbly through my transitional sophomore year but found some muscle during my junior and senior years. By that time I'd adapted, made friends, gotten involved in extracurricular activities, and fallen for a pretty wonderful guy who single-handedly packed my last two years of high school with great memories. I never told him anything about my family's history. He had a real live healthy family with solid, traditional values. These were the Cleavers. They didn't cuss, smoke, drink, or even fight. His dad was a bank president who came home every Monday through Friday for a sit-down lunch prepared by a stay-at-home mom who, as far as I know, didn't even take a nap. His family went to church every Sunday and lived their quiet faith Monday through Saturday.

The way I saw it, these people had everything on earth—except the ability to deal with my ugly truth. So I did what most troubled teenage girls do who are trying to be somebody new. I shoved the door shut on the past. And no matter how the wood bulged, the bones rattled, or the knob turned

from within, I pressed my back against that door, tried to talk over the noise, and dug in my heels with every ounce of determination I had. My high school boyfriend and I chose different universities and only lasted long-distance for a little less than a semester. We'd take another shot at it later, but the same shame still haunted me. We weren't a match. I figured if I married him, I'd spend my life pretending I'd been something I wasn't.

I jumped into college life like a cat on all fours, trying out for drill team before my clothes were unpacked and pledging a sorority shortly after. I majored in political science on a pre-law track in hopes of following in my grandfather Micajah's footsteps. Our university drill team performed at football games, so my parents would make the three-hour drive at least once a month to see our halftime show.

I started noticing almost immediately that the temperature between them wasn't quite as glacial. Lo and behold, they'd found a church ten minutes from our home. Dad started going first, and in what I can only attribute to an act of God, talked Mom and Tony into visiting with him. They fell equally in love with it, and just like that, the Greens were back to Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, Wednesday night potluck suppers and prayer meetings. On weekends home, I forsook the church I'd attended by myself in high school and, in solidarity, began to attend Spring Woods Baptist with my parents and little brother. They were right. It was a warm and happy, servant-hearted congregation.

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With our family's new start, I managed to create a new narrative so entirely self-convincing, it showed up with inexplicable sincerity in my prayers. Decades later, when my husband and I were packing up our city lives and moving to the country, I found my very first prayer journal at the bottom of a musty cardboard box Keith dropped from the attic. I flicked a dead spider off the small, bright-red three-ring binder and wiped a thick layer of dust off the vinyl surface with my fingertips. The words *Spiritual Daybook* emerged, typeset around the logo of a cross.

“Oh, wait a minute. I remember this.”

I opened the cover to several pages of basic journaling instructions fronting a thick stack of miniature notebook paper. My name and a start date were written in my neatest penmanship in a fill-in-the-blank on the first page. I did the math and smiled. I was eighteen. Since I didn’t write in it every day, it contained notes spanning several years of college.

I sat cross-legged on the floor, loosed the moorings of a thousand pressing tasks, and sailed back in time to my late adolescent life, recorded through reams of prayers. Some of the entries were so earnest and naive, so oblivious to what was ahead, they sent tears tumbling down my face. I snatched a roll of toilet tissue from the upstairs bathroom and laced my lap with crumpled wads, wet with tears. I half wished to hold that young Beth in my arms like a mother and tell her I loved her because I never, ever told her back then. Never gave her any slack. I’ve had mixed feelings about her at every stage. Other entries were so unwittingly absurd and hilarious, I fell over on my side and laughed until my stomach cramped. Some of the recordings weren’t far from the kinds of things I had prayed that morning, and I wasn’t sure if that was good news or bad. A cross section of entries:

“Help me keep up my enthusiasm so I’ll be a better Christian.”

“Forgive me for being too bossy.”

“Forgive me for talking about other people and for gossiping too much.” (Oh, that I’d recorded the gossip.)

“Help me not to be a ‘repeat offender.’” (The fact that *repeat offender* was in quotations indicates I’d heard it in a sermon, and whatever it was, I most assuredly did not want to be guilty of it.)

“Help me conquer these feelings I have.”

“Forgive me for talking so much.”

“Don’t let me hurt anyone else.”

“Help me to be a good Christian and not give in to temptation.”

“Forgive me for losing my temper.”

“Please help me have a better disposition.”

“Forgive me for not being the Christian I should be 100% of the time.” (Somebody needed to help the girl out.)

What I'd written didn't astound me nearly as much as what I hadn't. I'd bleached my family story of all blatant references to turmoil. I've faked a number of things in my life to get by, but I've always had a ripe fear of God, far too much to lie to him to his face, yet there it was, in my eighteen-, nineteen-, and twenty-year-old handwriting: a whole new family narrative.

On my birthday: "Thank you for a stable and happy home. I pray that I'll be a better and happier person this next year."

"Praise God for having me born into such a wonderful family."

"Help me get out of this state of uneasiness and always being about to cry. Thank you for the help my family has been to me."

"Thank you for the fun our family has together." (And on occasion and in certain groupings, nothing could have been truer.)

"Thanks for my mom. She's always here and I love her so much." (And she *was* there again.)

I thanked God repeatedly in the journal pages for "my wonderful parents" and told him how blessed I was to be born into such a good family. A godly family.

I love my family of origin. I loved it then. I had every reason to be grateful to God for the miracle that appeared to be underway in my home, and God knows I believed in the power of the gospel to transform lives. The oddity was that my words betrayed no hint that things had ever been different. Not a whiff of the acrid darkness from which we were being delivered. No before and after. The omissions were mystifying.

Maybe it was my idea of how a clean slate should look for a Jesus follower, completely homogenizing *forgiving* and *forgetting*. Maybe it was a way of keeping no record of wrongs. Whatever it was, I'd not just shut the trauma in. I'd shut it out. Poof. Gone. Almost overnight.

Any references made to conflicts, both within and without, were completely detached from the old narrative. It wasn't so much that I'd forgotten the trauma as that I refused to remember. My past and present had made a deal and shaken on it. "I won't bother you if you won't bother me." Our family had been reborn. Never mind how much we still looked like our old selves.

The irony was in the bold sincerity of my dissimulation. Since I couldn't deal with the disparities and was, by disposition, too sunny to move it all to the *Bad* column, I appear to have shifted the whole lot over to the *Good* column.

After all, there was genuine *Good* in the baffling mix. I loved college. I'd walk across the campus quad on the hilltop each year in late October with leaves every shade of red, gold, and brown flitting past my face in cool autumn gusts and, with tears stinging in my eyes, thank God for the privilege of going to college. I knew my parents were paying for it by the skin of their teeth alongside my sorority dues, my drill-team costumes, and my new polyester sweater, pleated wool skirt, and knee-high boots. Mom got a job outside the home for the first time in her life working in women's wear at Craig's, a department store, to help take the edge off the expenses. She told me that, every time she wrote a check for my tuition or Tony's, she prayed with all her might it wouldn't bounce. Ultimately both of us would graduate free of student loans, thanks to our mom and dad. I'm reminded again I should've bought them a car with my first royalty check and feel guilty that it's been a while since I felt guilty over it.

• • •

A life-altering moment occurred during my college years that is automatically underwhelming by the sheer telling of it, but everything afterward hinges on it. The summer between my freshman and sophomore years I returned home, got a temporary part-time job at Craig's in the baby department to be near Mom, and threw myself into church at Spring Woods Baptist. Within a few weeks, talk was circulating among the women.

"The sixth-grade girls don't have anyone to go with them to GA camp as a sponsor." GA stood for Girls' Auxiliary, a program in Southern Baptist churches that trained young girls to love missions and pray for missionaries. "All the moms either have jobs or other kids they can't leave."

There was also no air-conditioning, but this was incidental to mature women of God. This was an emergency. Imagine what our girls could become if they missed church camp.

“I don’t know if y’all need someone older,” I said with a drawl thick as corn-bread batter, “but if an eighteen-year-old can qualify as a sponsor and y’all would trust me with them, I’d—”

A van was packed to the gills with girls, pillows, bedrolls, and bags, gassed up and in drive practically before they knew my last name. We were on our way to Peach Creek Baptist Encampment for five days.

The facilities were simple and standard. Each cabin had about twelve bunk beds. My six girls and I shared the space with a couple of other small groups and their sponsors. I chose a bottom bunk, which gave the girls convenient access for the obligatory shenanigans like toothpaste between my toes and rice between my sheets. Mornings were for gatherings in the open-air pavilion where we’d hear from missionaries, then we’d break into small groups for guided discussions. Afternoons were for swimming (one-pieces only), games, and raiding the snack bar, or for returning to the cabin to rest or write letters to their moms. I wrote to mine, too. Evenings were set aside for a more formal service similar to Sunday morning church, hymn-singing included.

Each night before lights-out, I’d gather my girls around my bottom bunk and give them a bedtime devotional and discuss whatever was on their minds. They’d scoot in close in their pajamas, and a few of the other girls in the cabin would scrunch up with us. I fell in love with those sixth graders. I gave them everything I had, which was admittedly piddling. I shared what I knew about God and taught them during free time how to make use of every hot roller in a jumbo tray. They couldn’t get that from just anybody. It took considerable hair.

Come the fourth day of camp, I got up before dawn to jump into the shower before anyone else stirred. I was standing at the sink about to brush my teeth when it happened. Nothing was the least remarkable about the surroundings. They were, in fact, camp-level crude. The bathroom had a couple of commode stalls with typical industrial green metal doors, most of

which had relaxed from the hinges so that the sliding bar to lock the door was no longer parallel to the hole. Beside the stalls were several slender showers, each with a plastic cloudy-white curtain hanging from rings and mildewed at the bottom. The floor was painted concrete, cracked and peeling. The wet bathing suits draped over stall doors and hanging from hooks filled the room with the distinct scent of chlorine with a hint of mold.

It was right there at the sink I sensed the Lord's presence. I didn't see anything. I didn't hear anything. No thunder, no heat, no light, no still, small voice. No finger writing in the steam of the mirror facing me. My toothbrush didn't levitate. The hair on my head didn't stand on end. I did not see a vision. I didn't manifest a sudden spiritual gifting or, as I recall, say a word. So bereft was the moment of any tangible sign, I've wished over and over to go back to the time and place and experience it again so I could relive it as a grown-up and put it under a theological microscope. All I have to go on is the conviction of an eighteen-year-old to whom the sense of God's presence was intense enough to make her grip both sides of the sink until the moment passed.

I could have imagined it, but such things were not in my realm of thinking. I'd never heard of anyone having a remotely mystical experience. I feel like I'd have chosen a better venue to drum up a divine visitation than a bathroom where a toilet constantly ran and the showerheads dripped maddeningly. I've got no proof, of course, and really only one thing that testifies to the authenticity of it, and that's the permanence of the effects. In a lifetime of second-guesses, I've never doubted something holy and unique to my experience took place in that most unholy surrounding. Something big enough to become the *before* and *after* on my timeline. On a lifetime roller coaster of failures and successes, losses and gains, revivals, restructures, and reversals, whatever happened that early morning has never let me go or, in the same way, ever been repeated.

"You were filled with the Holy Spirit," a fellow women's ministry leader told me adamantly a couple of years ago, and I was not at all put off by her explanation or her confidence.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I hope I’ve been filled with the Holy Spirit lots of times. I pray for God to fill me with his Spirit every morning of my life, but the moment didn’t feel like *filled*. I felt something more like, well, *surrounded*.”

“Well, then, what did *you* feel was the point?”

“If I had to come up with a term for something I sensed in my spirit instead of actually hearing or seeing, I’d say it was ownership. Like God conveying in this weird sort of way, *You’re mine.* Thing is, I already was. I’m positive I was already in Christ and had been for at least half of my life.”

The funny thing about having what you think might have been an encounter with God is how you just go on doing all the earthy things, like getting acid indigestion. I brushed my teeth. I didn’t know what else to do. It’s why I’d come to the sink in the first place. I whisked up and down the incisors and the canines, back and forth on the molars, then I spit right there in the same sink I’d gripped on account of the holy presence. There’s got to be something better to do in the wake of the sacred than spit. The bathroom didn’t look or smell any better than it had. The locks on the bathroom stalls still didn’t work. I stared for a few seconds into the mirror, tilting my head this way and that. I didn’t look any different. I bent down and gathered up my damp towel and my toiletry bag and stepped out of the bathroom, not one whit wiser or better that I could tell. Nothing at all was different . . . yet everything had changed.

The early morning sun was just beginning to beam through the windows on a cabin full of deep-sleeping sixth-grade girls, some of their chins agape, their tonsils nearly showing, one with a strand of her brown hair adhered to the corner of her mouth, their unbathed and disproportionately large feet poking out of their bedrolls, and all of them utterly disheveled and breathtakingly beautiful. My heart melted on the concrete floor like a scoop of lard in my nanny’s skillet.

“Morning, sunshines!” I said it good and loud. “This is the day the Lord has made. Somebody better get up, rejoice, and be glad in it!” I’d end up practically dragging them by their long feet off those bunks.

I attended the morning session with my girls like usual, but once I got them settled into their small groups, I made a beeline to the woman overseeing the camp and asked if I could have a word with her. She was gracious and accommodating and listened carefully to what I had to say. "Something weird happened to me this morning."

"I'm all ears," she replied.

I've thought a thousand times how this scenario could have gone. These were days of sharp divides between the charismatic and noncharismatic traditions in Christianity. The woman sitting across from me didn't know me from Eve, and this was a Southern Baptist encampment. How easily she could have discounted my story or feared I was under charismatic influence and discouraged me from ever giving credence to anything vaguely experiential. I'm amazed that, even if she believed what had happened to me was real, she didn't feel duty-bound to discourage me from making too much out of it.

She leaned forward attentively and looked me straight in the eye as I spoke, her legs crossed, her left elbow on her knee, and her chin rested on her palm. The story didn't take me long. The absurdity was how little there was to tell.

When I finished, she dropped her hand from her chin and smoothed the fold in her skirt over her knee and said slowly and directly, "I believe, Beth, that you have received what we Baptists would term *a call to vocational Christian service*."

I listened pensively, neither nodding nor shaking my head.

"Now, here is what you need to do next."

I've told this part of the story a number of times, hoping that, somewhere along the way, it would reach the woman who sat across from me with her hair slightly teased and pinned up loosely in a French twist, and she'd contact me and I could tell her what fitting counsel she offered me for that moment in time. Of all names for me to leave unrecorded, this key person in my life remains anonymous.

"I want you to go right back to church this coming Sunday . . ."

"Yes, ma'am." I nodded. "I'll be there."

“And, at the end of the service, when your pastor—now, who is your pastor, Beth?”

“Dr. Dean Burke of Spring Woods Baptist in Houston. We call him Brother Burke.”

“Okay, when Brother Burke gives the invitation—”

“For people to come forward who want to receive Jesus as Savior or join the church?” I already knew this was what she meant, but this was my vexatious way of letting her know I was following her. That she appeared unvexed was a grace.

“Yes, when Brother Burke gives the invitation for people who are making a decision regarding Jesus, I want you to step out into the aisle—”

“Like I did when I was nine?”

“Is that when you made your profession of faith?” she inquired.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, then. Just like when you were nine, I want you to step out into the aisle and walk straight to your pastor and tell him you believe you have received a call to vocational Christian service. In our denomination, we make this public to our church family just like we made our profession of faith. He will help steer you from there.”

• • •

That’s exactly what I did and, thanks be to God, what my pastor did. Brother Burke warmly received me, invited me to stand alongside several others who’d come forward to join the church, and after introducing them, he shared with the congregation my decision to follow Jesus into vocational service. There I was again, nine years old times two, at the front of a church receiving the right hand of fellowship from a line of people an aisle long.

I know now how awry this could have gone at any point. I could have told my experience, whatever it may have been, to a ministry leader or pastor and, instead of falling into trustworthy hands, been discredited, shut down, misled, exploited, used or misused. I was a prime candidate to be groomed for abuse.

I couldn’t articulate it then, but in retrospect, I know that I’d surrendered to full-time ministry. I had no idea what the ministry was. Not sure what it would yet be. I envied the boys who could confidently say, “God called me to preach!” What on earth was less credible in my world than a girl obsessed with mascara, lip gloss, and hot rollers saying she’d received a vocational calling from God and no clue what to? I hadn’t the least notion what a woman in my denomination could do. I supposed I would become a missionary, but even that seemed so far-fetched at the time, I couldn’t picture it.

I served at my church all that summer and returned to college in late August. I’d had no further encounter with God in those months nor, strangely, the expectation of one. My spiritual disciplines were nascent and my sanctification woefully underdeveloped, but I kept whittling away at the little I knew to do. I assumed if I were supposed to change my course for college, I’d get some kind of signal, and I never did. I continued pursuing a political science major and a minor in English and threw in a teacher’s certificate for good measure.

What happened that morning wouldn’t be the last time I’d perceive an unusual move of the Spirit but, to date, never in the same way. Who knows why I’ve had a smattering of mystical experiences in my walk with God in a tradition rather resistant to them? An individual can go an entire lifetime without feeling anything out of the ordinary and have no less Spirit, no less calling, no less purpose, faith, or gifting, and certainly no less fruitfulness.

He or she will also be considerably less controversial. The less common experiences I’ve shared along the way have caused more skepticism than credibility, and understandably so. They would be easy to contrive and just as easy to misunderstand, blow out of proportion, or exploit. My experience is not meant to be a standard of any kind. God is sovereign and reserves the right to both order and creativity.

When I let the wind catch the pages of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, I find nowhere to land on one precise pattern for what it looks like to be summoned by God to walk with him or called by Jesus to follow him. God told Abram, “Go.” On the other hand, the voice of the Lord said

within the hearing of Isaiah, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” and Isaiah volunteered. “Here am I! Send me!” Jesus said directly to some of his disciples, “Follow me.” Others were brought to him by those he’d summoned. All come to Jesus by faith. No one comes by formula.

From where I sit, where I stand, where I walk, where I run, where I rest, where I pray, play, and weep, my story looks like a shirt too long left in the bottom of a clothes hamper. Were I to bleach and launder it, starch and iron it to stand up properly, crisp and straight, it would look a whole lot better, but I am certain of this—it would no longer fit.

CHAPTER TEN

I'D NOTICED HIM BEFORE. He was the kind of handsome hard not to notice. The first time I recall seeing him was across the college cafeteria. I was seated at a long table with friends from drill team, finishing up a fast meal before an all-evening practice. We were so accustomed to the roar of trays clattering, plates clanging, and students chattering, we thought nothing of having to yell to be heard at the table.

"Miracle Whip."

"What'd you say, Beth?"

"Miracle Whip!" I said a second time, employing the full use of my lungs.

"What about it?"

"I don't understand it!"

"What don't you understand about Miracle Whip?"

Meaningless conversations can be the truest test of good friendships. Anyone can talk about the heavy stuff.

"I don't understand why even a college cafeteria wouldn't know you can't put anything but real mayonnaise in blue cheese dressing," I railed. "Why even bother? Why not just accept your mediocrity and serve Thousand Island?"

The few listening studied the triangles of milky iceberg lettuce dripping on the ends of their forks. Salad was the safest thing to eat before practice if we wanted to keep our supper down for two hours of high kicks. No one could tell us the football players practiced harder than we did. We knew they'd have cried like babies after the first hour of Mrs. Tidwell hollering, "Again!" with two long *a*'s. Any one of us on the squad could have kicked a superior field goal. At least the football players got to really eat.

"I don't even like blue cheese dressing," one of them chirped.

“That’s because you’ve only eaten it with Miracle Whip!”

This was about the time I saw him walk into the cafeteria wearing a Western shirt, Wrangler jeans, and cowboy boots, looking a lot like a young George Strait, and I momentarily lost my train of thought.

“Mean Green, we gotta go!”

These were the peak years of fame for Mean Joe Greene, a Texas boy who first sparked a twinkle in the eye of sports fans as a defensive player for the University of North Texas Mean Green football team, then shot off like a rocket to Pittsburgh to play for the Steelers. A friend had an enamel pin bearing the words *Mean Green* and latched it on the lapel of my drill team cape one day and it stuck. It was a natural nickname for anyone with my last name, and I liked it because I’d been told I could be irritatingly cheerful. They’d never seen me get worked up over Miracle Whip.

I was still wondering if the guy who’d made it to the meat and potato line by now was new to campus and, if not, how I’d managed to miss those boots, when I realized my friends were halfway out the cafeteria door, capes whipping in the wind. I jumped up, pitched my tray on the conveyor belt, and darted to catch up with them.

The next time I saw the guy from the cafeteria was about a month into the semester. My little brother, Tony, had joined me at Southwest Texas State that year, when I was a junior and he was a freshman. We planned to meet in a parking lot on campus one afternoon to run an errand together. Tony was in the middle of a conversation with someone whose back was to me when I walked up. When Tony saw me, he said, “Hey, Keith, this is my big sister, Beth.” He turned to me. “Beth, I met Keith at a fraternity rush party. He’s president of the Pikes. Keith, Beth’s president of Chi Omega. Maybe y’all have met.” We shook our heads *no* and said the proper *nice-to-meet-you*s. We were both in relationships with other people at this point and neither one of us gave away any signs of interest. We simply took note.

Five days later, I walked into the two-bedroom apartment I shared with three of my friends and there he was, standing in our den, this time in a polo shirt and Wrangler jeans. Two of my apartment mates were “little sisters” to his fraternity, meaning they knew one another well, and he’d stopped by to

say hi. Fact was, though I was in and out of the room for the next fifteen minutes, he said hi to everybody *but* me, which was precisely how I began to suspect he'd come to see me. There is a way between a man and a woman who keep one another in the corner of their eye.

When Keith left, I gave him time to descend one flight of stairs, then opened the door, leaned over the rail, and said, "Hey!"

He looked up sheepishly then glanced right and left. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes! Just wanted to say, next time you're in our apartment seeing your friends, you can actually talk to me, too."

He flashed a smile and his face flushed red. "Okay, then. *I will.*"

I grinned, then stepped back through my apartment door and shut it. We continued turning up, unplanned, in the same places, like a puppeteer was holding two sets of strings.

The next date on our sorority's fall schedule, and one long-since set, was a mixer at the Pike house with his fraternity. Rest assured, I have exactly zero interest in writing about Greek life on a college campus unless it is New Testament Greek, but alas, it has an unavoidable place in my story. About an hour into the party, Keith walked across the spacious room toward me and shouted over Fleetwood Mac crooning "Go Your Own Way." "May I grab you a beer?"

"No, thank you!"

He appeared a tad thrown by my response. Thinking maybe I was too highbrow for a beer, he tried a different beverage. "How about a margarita?"

I shook my head. "Thank you, though!"

"A piña colada?" This being a keg party with paper cups, I felt this was a reach.

I shouted back, "Thanks anyway. The thing is—" Oblivious to the last note of "Go Your Own Way," I picked that one silent moment to yell at the top of my lungs, "I don't drink!"

I didn’t have to worry about whether the fraternity president standing five feet in front of me heard what I said. From the look on his face, cute as he was, he clearly had no place in his twenty-one-year-old brain to file this piece of data. Flummoxed, he turned around and started walking off as the next record blasted over the sound system.

“But I dance,” I yelled.

In what, to this day, is perhaps the single most romantic gesture I’ve ever been privy to receive, the young man with the mysterious redwood eyes and hair the shade of a moonless midnight spun around, stretched out his arm, opened his palm, and said, “Well, then. May I have this dance?”

• • •

By the time we each knew how deeply troubled the other was, it was too late. We were a guy and a girl with next to nothing but chronic brokenness in common, too lovestruck to take our differences seriously. Our variances spanned the spectrum: theological, ideological, political, financial, familial. Keith was a deer hunter. I thought hunting was barbaric. I loved poetry. He’d burst out laughing by the third rhyme. His family had new money and fine cars. My family was deep in debt, and the left taillight on my dad’s overwrought Cadillac was duct-taped to the bumper. Keith cussed like he was born for it, and I spoke fluent Christian cheese. I thought he’d grow out of it. He thought I would.

Both our families unapologetically preferred our previous love interests. We had all the support of a house of cards. Like most wounded people, Keith and I brought out the worst in one another. Any relationship counselor worth ten dollars in compensation would have declared us humanly incompatible and been exactly right.

Isn’t that the way it is? We think we can break all the rules and still be the exceptions who make it. We think love will always be enough, but when we’re early in it and the chemistry is acute, we don’t know that love isn’t always a feeling. We haven’t yet learned it is as often an action when we’re momentarily bankrupt of affection.

I've reflected no few times, as Keith surely has, on how much easier our lives could have been if we'd made sure we were genuine friends with common interests and not just two matchsticks living in unfettered friction, about to burn one another to the ground. Then again, I always end up wondering if, for us, it had to be this way. I wonder if God has had his way in this untamable whirlwind and storm. I wonder if the extraordinary difficulty was essential to the shaping of our clay, and not solely the consequence of our compromised hearts.

At least we lived in the same city. Keith was a fourth-generation Houstonian. His bloodline reaches back to the hallowed days when Texas was a Republic. Anyone who finds little meaning in this was brought into this world, as I was, in one of the lesser forty-nine. Real Texans are born here. Real Texans stay here—or if some cruel twist of fate downgrades them elsewhere, they are compelled by some immutable pledge sewn deep in their lone-starred hearts to testify to their Texasness in under ninety seconds per encounter. They may be mannerly enough to do it subtly ("Thank you for helping me since I don't know my way around here because, well, you see, I'm from Texas"), but they will do it. They cannot help themselves. Texas is a hot oven where certain ingredients are baked in. I do not write these words without appreciation. I simply speak verifiable facts that may be tested and tried.

Keith came from hardworking blue-collar stock. One grandfather and several uncles managed to strike gold unstopping Houston's toilets, but it's fair to say his dad outdid them all. His name was doubly painted on the sides of white plumbing vans all over the metroplex. The slogan read, "Call John and get Moore!" Beneath it, the company name: John Moore Plumbing. Handsome, rugged, and magnetic, the man gave the whole industry dignity, managing to pull up the collective pants of Houston's plumbers.

One of the earliest times I went to the Moores' house, Keith said he was starving and did I want a sandwich. No, I said, but followed him into the kitchen lest I be left alone with his family members glaring at me with the side-eye. He grabbed a loaf of bread, unwound the twist tie, and drew

out two pieces of thick-sliced and slapped them on the kitchen island, all the while talking about the time he accidentally nailed himself to the back fence. He opened the double-wide refrigerator, pulling a package of sliced ham out of the meat compartment and a beefsteak tomato from the veggie drawer. He reached back in the refrigerator one last time, and that's when it happened. He withdrew his rugged tan fist from the deluxe Frigidaire with a fifteen-ounce jar of Miracle Whip in it. I commenced to having never seen one human being so generous of hand with a condiment in my life.

"Keith, you like Thousand Island, don't you?"

"Yeah, why?"

We fought over Miracle Whip versus real mayonnaise all the way back to my house, neither one of us giving an inch.

• • •

We fought about everything. Everything but one thing. We were already getting along poorly enough that I figured we'd marry. He knew I was serious about my faith, but we hadn't had "the talk," and I was getting nervous. We were back in San Marcos for our spring semester. There was this big rock not far from my apartment, and he'd picked me up and set me on top of it and we were flirting the way a young man and woman in love will do.

"Keith, I need to tell you something."

"What?" he said and kissed me on the hand.

"I'm serious. I need you to know something."

"Tell me," he said, now kissing my fingertips.

"Keith! Look me in the eye!" And he did. "Keith, I need you to know I'm gonna work for God."

He looked a bit stupefied. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," I said intensely, "I'm going to work for God. Like, all my life."

I wouldn't say he dropped my hand like a hot potato, exactly, but close. "How do you know?"

“He told me I was going to.”

“God told you that you were going to work for him.”

“Yes, Keith. But not with words. With a knowing. Do you know what I mean by *a knowing*?” Good grief, I hardly knew what I meant by *a knowing*. Most people I knew didn’t even believe in *a knowing*.

His dark brows drew down nearly to his thick eyelashes. “What are you going to do?”

“I have no idea.” My stomach flipped. This had gone better with Brother Burke.

“So, let me see if I have this straight. God told you that you were going to work for him.”

“Yes.”

“But he did not tell you what you were going to do.”

“Yes. Well, I mean, no, he didn’t tell me what I was going to do.”

Keith put his hands on his hips and stared so hard into my eyes, I thought he’d bore a hole through my pupils to the back side of my skull. “Let me ask you something.”

“Okay,” I replied, starting to feel a little nauseous.

“You gonna be a nun?” With his Catholic background, it was the only thing he could imagine an overly zealous religious girl doing.

“No!” I shouted, incredulous on account of the way we’d been kissing for the last half hour.

“Well, in that case, I can live with it.”

And he did. And he has. And God knows neither of us could have imagined what was coming.

We tied the knot on the thirtieth of the next December in a low-budget ceremony that was fine by me. I wore an appropriately off-white wedding dress we’d rented for sixty dollars. Most of them were fifty, but Mom and I went for broke.

“You’re the only person I’d marry at the peak of deer season,” Keith told me emphatically.

Well over forty years ago we said our vows in front of our guests and two families, the latter of whom looked like they'd mistaken a wedding for a funeral. Over time, we each grew on the other's family. We just didn't get in a hurry about it. Mom never took down the family picture my previous boyfriend was in, she loved him so, but she did finally cut Keith's face out of a snapshot and glue it over Scott's. Since Keith looked all right in Scott's suit, I accepted it. Marriage has everything to do with acceptance, I think.

Keith's only been home for a half dozen or so of our wedding anniversaries due to deer season. We celebrate it. We just celebrate it late. I never really mind. Making it another year for Keith and me has mostly been about God and each of us individually, anyway.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A FEW NIGHTS AFTER WE GOT BACK from a weeklong honeymoon cruise in the Caribbean, I awakened out of a dead sleep to Keith standing straight up on our bed, shouting at the top of his lungs. I bolted off the mattress and scanned the room for an intruder. We were the only ones there. I pulled the short chain on the bedside table lamp and looked at my young husband, who was wild-eyed and terrified and clearly seeing something I couldn't.

"Baby, it's me," I said, reaching toward him gingerly, unsure he was safe to touch. "I think you've had a bad dream."

Keith glanced my way with a measure of recognition. I was sure once he realized it was me, I wouldn't be in danger. He was a mysterious guy. A brooder to be sure, but if I knew anything about him at all, I knew he loved me. Nearly worshiped me. I knew in my gut he wouldn't physically harm me on purpose. His arms were still stiff, the veins bulging, and his fists clenched, but his gaze was now flashing back and forth between me and whatever he saw in front of him.

I touched his hand. "Ivan, baby." His first name and what, nearly from the start, I've always called him. "It's me. I'm right here. Let's sit down on the bed. Are you with me here? Can you hear me?"

He nodded. I tugged on his hand to urge him downward. He complied but sat as stiff as he'd stood.

I rubbed his back gently. "You've had a bad dream is all." *Dear Jesus, let that be all.* "We're safe, honey, we're safe," I whispered. "Want me to get you some water?"

He nodded.

I headed to the kitchen, weak-kneed and wobbly, my mind whirling, and filled a plastic glass with tap water. We both held the glass steady while he took a few sips. He made some sounds, groans mostly, but never said a

word.

"Lie back down, honey. It's over now. All is well." *Dear Jesus, let it be over now. Let all be well.*

He lay back, his head on one edge of the pillow, then turned away from me on his side and fell back to sleep, if indeed he'd ever been awake. My heart banged in my chest like a boot trying to kick down a door. Such was my jarring introduction to what would become commonly known as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Boy, had Keith earned it.

> Funeral services for Marcel John Moore III, 3, son of Mr. and Mrs. M. J. Moore, Jr., . . . will be held at 9:30 a.m. Monday at St. Theresa's Catholic Church. Burial will be in the Garden of Gethsemane. The boy died Friday night of injuries received in an explosion at his home last Sunday.
>
> *The Houston Post*

They were little more than toddlers, Keith and his big brother, "Duke," the elder as towheaded as the younger was dark. They were playing in the attached garage of their small home, happy as could be, and thought to gas up their tiny plastic lawn mower with the orange can their daddy used for the big one. The fuel gurgled and splashed from the can to the toy, and it then rolled mercilessly underneath the water heater bearing a slender blue flame. Duke got the worst of it since his clothes were doused. Keith's physical body bore fewer burns, but his tender two-year-old mind sustained blisters too broad and deep to soothe and bandage. Both boys were rushed by ambulances to the nearest hospital and placed in the same room. Duke was in and out; Keith never lost consciousness. I am told he never stopped screaming. He'd recall one particular image. *Brother . . . wrapped in cotton balls.*

"Burial will be in the Garden of Gethsemane."

The place of pleading and pores bleeding. That place where you enter in with Jesus and crawl on your hands and knees and fall on your face before God, begging for the cup of suffering to pass by you, but the chalice is so close to you now and the moon so full, you can see your reflection in the gold. Your face is contorted with dread, the whites of your eyes luminous with horror. Not everyone comes out.

"Burial will be in the Garden of Gethsemane."

Burial in the dirt you dug up bruising your knees, begging. It is the place where those who believe come at their rawest, skinless and vulnerable, powerless, helplessly dependent, thrown at the mercy of a God they hope is listening. It is there a petitioner sobs, "I won't live through this if this cup doesn't pass. Do what you're going to do, God, do your will, do it above my own because you alone are God. But know that I cannot, will not, come out of this alive." Keith and his mom got buried there with Duke in the Garden of Gethsemane, the one in cotton swaddling clothes, freed from his pain and made whole in the presence of God, cuddled and unafraid and set down, his blond hair tousled by the hand of God, and loosed to play. The other two of them were buried alive. There would be no play. Others in the family grieved, but these two would never recover.

Gethsemane is all the things we fear most except one. We fear we are unheard. We're sure of it, but it is not true. It was in that original Gethsemane that Jesus, in the words of Hebrews 5:7, "offered prayers and appeals with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard . . ."

And we are heard.

• • •

Keith's instability had nothing on mine. We entered marriage equally troubled. Equally proficient at hiding our harms until we were exposed to the fluorescent floodlight of life under a shared roof. Two years after we

married, he'd lose his younger sister in a day's time to a catastrophic brain aneurysm. I asked my mother-in-law once how she ever survived such losses.

"I didn't mean to," she replied, and I knew she meant it. "I just kept waking up."

Sometimes you wake up when you don't even want to. But maybe God keeps you waking up till one day, many days later, you grow a little gladder that you did.

Over the slow crawl of some long and challenging years, the sharp edges of the fractures I'd sustained in childhood dulled just enough to allow me to generally flourish. Keith's fractures came at the hand of such savage instruments that he steps on shards nearly every step he takes. He told me once, "Lizabeth, life is harder for some people than others."

I wanted to argue with him. I wanted to say how everyone had the same opportunity to be happy in Jesus. I wanted to ask him why the blessings of the present couldn't make up for the curses of the past. I wanted to ask him why I wasn't enough to make him too glad to be sad, but I knew I'd be talking like a fool. Life *is* harder for some people than others. Shadows follow me often enough, but not incessantly. Not everywhere I go. I've not spent a single night's sleep in a burning garage. I deal with bouts of anxiety and depression, but they don't chase me down constantly like ravenous wolves after a bleating sheep. I wondered sometimes, as most kids do, if my parents really loved me, but never once was I faced with circumstances wooing me to wonder if my parents wished their other child had been the one to survive.

Solomon said a long time ago in Proverbs 14:10 that "each heart knows its own bitterness" (NIV), and I think he was on to something. No other human can climb down our throats like a spelunker and hack through our trachea and try on our hearts and see how they feel. One mortal cannot fully comprehend how another operates from within. Jesus is the only outsider who truly knows the insider our skin keeps veiled. Look the world over for two people with identical afflictions, injuries, infirmities, regrets, losses,

tragedies, and missed opportunities, and if by some anomaly you find them, they still won't have the same DNA, background, living conditions, physical conditions, and support systems to navigate them with.

"Each heart knows its own bitterness."

Two wounds could require the same number of stitches, yet cause varied levels of pain. Not all stage 4 cancers are alike, nor are the hearts, minds, and bodies dealing with them. No two head-on collisions have identical ramifications. We are distinct whether we want to be or not. Even of marriage, the Lord said the two shall become one flesh. He did not say we'd become one heart. He did not say we'd become one mind.

• • •

Keith would ultimately be diagnosed not only with severe PTSD but also with bipolar disorder. I stare at those last two words because this is the first I've written them for public consumption. I asked my man while I was writing this memoir, "Shall we tell our real story or not? It's up to you. I won't tell anything you're not comfortable with. But we're in our sixties now, honey. Some couple, some family, some reader we'd never otherwise reach might need to hear our story."

Keith stood in front of me with his hands on his hips, head tilted, eyes locked with mine. "You thinking details?"

"Nope," I said, and I wasn't.

"Will you leave out—?"

I didn't let him finish. "I'll leave out anything you want. This is your call. You draw the line." I've come to believe that, far beyond the more romantic things, love means finding some measure of safety with one another in a world that couldn't be less safe. Silence.

"Let's do it, then," he finally replied.

What every author hopes but has no right nor power to demand is that the reader will deal gently with records of sacred things. Vulnerability, in and of itself, is sacred because it mirrors, if even in a glass darkly, the

image of Christ. Pulling the bandage back and giving someone a glimpse of a wound that, in this life, will likely never fully heal but only hope to be treated, is *expensive*.

The conundrum is that we cannot know what it will cost until it's too late and already shown. What we do want and hope and pray—Keith and I—is to offer somebody lonely a little company. We have been lonely. We have felt unknown. We've felt like people in our social stratospheres could not understand why we cannot always do the things they do, go the places they go, count on the things they count on. We can't always plan. We can no more fix another individual's similar challenges than we can fix our own, but we can help another feel less alone. We can stand with another family in spirit and nod. "Yes, we get it. Yes, we've felt that. Yes, we feared that."

We've had a hard go, my guy and I. Life can be mean. Mental illness is mean. It can be heartless to the one it needles and harasses, and hateful to the ones nearby. Mental illness may be a lot of things, but there is at least one thing it is not. It is not someone's fault. Keith and I have gone through agonizing situations of our own making, our own foolishness, selfishness, and sinfulness. The most relentless winds that have battered our four walls for decades on end, beaten our windowpanes with frozen rain, whistled through the cracks in our doors, and threatened to blow our house down, however, are outside our doing. Outside our causing. Outside our fixing.

For us and for so many others like us, what works beautifully—nearly magically—more often than not works only for a while. More ups, more downs. More tears. More conflicts. More appointments. More blood tests. *Let's raise this, lower this, discontinue this, start this.* More exhaustion. More pulling our hair out. More holding hands. More trying again. More fighting the urge to not try again . . .

We've had a hard go, yes, but we've also had, by the grace of God, divine consolations and—at each of our bests—mutual compassion. Commitment, sometimes just one of us at a time till it's both of us again. What we have had, by the grace of God, is courage to seek help again, and again, and again, and again. What we have had, by the grace of God, are some good friends we finally trusted enough to tell. What *I* have had, by the

grace of God, is a man willing to submit to doctors' orders, willing to do what it takes to live under a continuous medical protocol that is constantly, maddeningly changing. These are not small things. These are to the tremendous credit of Keith Moore.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"MARRIAGE HAS MADE ME SICK."

I say these words to my mother while sitting in her small breakfast room in Houston two months after my wedding day. We're sipping percolated Folgers out of china teacups. She's thawed out a Sara Lee cheesecake and cut us each a tiny sliver. She has a knack for assuming nobody's very hungry. She sets them on the saucers meant for the china teacups. She opens a can of cherry pie filling and puts a teaspoonful on each of our pieces. Mine is still a little frozen in the middle, but can the chronically ill even care?

"What kind of sick?"

She pushes her saucer back and reaches for a cigarette and her ashtray to prepare herself for my response. I'd like to have a smoke myself, but I don't. Too dizzy, and anyway, I need a divorce because marriage has made me sick.

"I'm so tired I can hardly lift my little finger."

"Honey, you should have told me this sooner. What else?" Mom wasn't much of a toucher, but she could really love a person with her eyes. She loves me deeply. I can see it on her face. I can smell it in her coffee. I can taste it in her cheesecake.

"I'm constantly sick to my stomach."

"I see," she says, eyes narrowing.

"It's gotten so bad, I've started throwing up every day. I shouldn't have married him."

"Tell me what else, honey," she says. I've got her full attention.

I hear the clock on the mantel strike 5 p.m. I'll have to go home soon. I don't make a habit of talking to my mother about intimate matters, but I clearly have a cancer of some kind and this is no time for timidity. "Mom

—” I look away on this part out of embarrassment—“my breasts are so sore that I can hardly stand it.”

“Both of them?”

“Yes! Sore all the way under my arms.” I choke up. It sounds even worse now that I’ve spoken the bad news into the atmosphere. Here I am, just twenty-one. I’m wondering if I’m underage enough to get an annulment.

She puts out her cigarette, halfway smoked, so I sit straight up.

“Bethie,” she says in such a way that I look right at her, “you’re not sick.” Denial is rife in my family.

“Yes, Mom! I am!”

“No, honey, you’re not. You’re pregnant.” And she grins a grin as marvelous and mischievous as any I’d ever see stretch across her face.

Let the reader who wonders how I could possibly have been so ignorant understand that I’d been recently diagnosed with a badly tilted uterus and such severe endometriosis that I’d been assured of the need for surgery to conceive. Let the reader also understand that such assurances can be faulty.

• • •

The nurse peeked her head through my hospital room door around four in the morning. “Mrs. Moore, you awake?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I’d shut my eyes for an hour or so, exhausted and weak in a way I’d never known, but I hadn’t managed to fall asleep. My mind kept trying to catch up with what my body had been through.

The nurse’s name was Marianne. I know because I journaled it. No one warns you how bonded you’re going to feel to the nurses who walked with you, as my nanny and mom would say, through the valley of the shadow. You think the nurses feel the same bond, and that they’ll quit their job and

go home with you from the hospital, crowded in the back seat with the flower vases and the baby, and take care of you both for weeks—or maybe even till kindergarten—because you're both so special.

They won't mind doing this free of charge either. You can see the future plain as day: your OB-GYN nurse right next to you at the baby's high school graduation.

Marianne didn't hit the light switch, but from the interminable level of fluorescent wattage in the hallway spilling into my room, I could see the front of a bassinet cart in the doorway. "I bet I have something you want," she chirped.

"You do! You surely do!" I replied, scooting up the bed and into a sitting position, wincing. The nurse rolled the bassinet to the left side of my bed, scooped up its passenger, and placed her in my arms.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"You're welcome, honey. How ya feelin'?"

"Good right this second."

"Hit the call button when you need some help. I'm about to go off the clock, but you'll be in good hands." She shut the door behind her.

This was the first chance the baby and I had gotten to be alone. She had been born at exactly 5:18 p.m. the evening before, weighing in at seven pounds and three ounces. A half hour later, according to my journal, Keith announced her arrival to twenty-five people to be precise. All of them exuberantly endured until I was moved to my own room, at which point they all crowded into the small space for an impromptu celebration and prayer meeting. I cased the room, studying the faces of some of the dearest people in the world to us, and knew we were so lucky to be so loved. Come 9 p.m., however, some of us were ready to be less lucky and a smidge less loved, including a newborn passed around like a football and a new mom who couldn't say no.

After all, the day had started before dawn.

Early Sunday morning, I wrote to my firstborn in her baby book, *I felt that it might be getting close to time for your precious birth.*

What I meant by this was that I awakened around five in the morning to the sensation of a small buffalo in my belly, trying to find a way out of my body with its hooves.

I awoke your father at 8:15 and he was ecstatic! I was too afraid to be sure I was in labor, so your father and I prayed about it and the Lord sent us on to church.

I need not trouble my memory. I'm 100 percent certain only one person was doing that particular praying: the same one doing the sending. Keith complied because he knew even less about childbearing than I did. I could end this memoir after the next line inscribed in the baby book because it's really all you need to know.

I taught Sunday school that morning and was in the hospital by 12:35!

I hadn't studied my Sunday school quarterly for nothing. I had sixth graders to teach—and look at the street corners if you want to know what happens to sixth graders who hadn't been in their quarterlies. Not on my watch. I can't say it was pleasant. I taught for forty-five minutes while rocking back and forth on a backless stool like I was meek and humble and riding on a donkey. I brought the lesson to a close without inviting the girls to share prayer requests, which normally was my favorite part. Based on this practice alone, I was confident I knew more about the personal lives of our congregants than the pastor, and what could be more rewarding besides giving birth right there on the linoleum in a Sunday school room?

I found Keith posthaste and suggested we might consider on this occasion forgoing the worship service and, instead, run by our house, grab my bags and head on over to the hospital. Nothing is close in Houston, Texas. By the time we'd driven the first twenty minutes, I was clocking my contractions at two minutes apart. I grew increasingly anxious.

"Honey, I think you better speed up."

A few minutes passed. "What I mean by speeding up is *step on it*."

Several more minutes. "For the love of God, if you stop at one more light, I'm going to smack you in the face with this diaper bag."

Don't push. Don't push. Stay in control. I pressed my hand on the dashboard and regulated my breathing like they taught us in Lamaze class. *Definitely in transition,* I told myself. It goes without saying that I'd chosen the self-sacrificing path of natural childbirth. I was strong and well-prepared, and why start your child's life on drugs? (This is as good a time as any to interject that my second child would indeed start her life on drugs.)

Keith wheeled the car up to the hospital emergency room entrance, ran inside to let them know I was advancing quickly, and came back to get me. They hurried me to labor and delivery and had me change into a gown. After performing the exam, Nurse Jean looked at me with her mean, steely eyes.

"Mrs. Moore, you are at two centimeters."

I discerned a judgmental spirit. What Nurse Jean discerned was that I had the longest day of my life ahead of me. Who knew a human could endure that kind of sheer agony and live to tell it?

"Mrs. Moore, are you sure you don't want something to take the edge off?" It should go without saying this was not Nurse Jean.

"I'm sure."

I lied. The only thing I was sure about at this point was that nothing was vaguely natural about childbirth. I'd clutch one of Keith's hands until it was numb and bloodless, then he'd offer me the other. Apart from answering questions, I never made a peep. I'd like to go on record having almost made it. I was down the stretch, trying my best to bear down, when my doctor announced a change of plans.

"Mrs. Moore, we're going to have to give you a saddle block. The little fellow is stuck and we're going to need to help him out, okay?"

He and both nurses were glancing toward the monitor. He was tapping a number with the tip of an index finger inside an indigo glove.

Early that afternoon the nurses had predicted from the heartbeat that the baby was a boy. I already knew it on account of Mom swinging my wedding ring on a chain over my belly a few weeks earlier. "It's a boy,"

she'd declared with an enthusiasm I could've sworn was a bit forced. Keith and I assumed it all along. Nothing about Keith engendered my confidence in his ability to produce a girl. We'd name him Matthew Keith.

"Mrs. Moore, we need you to sit up a little more. Focus with us."

I nodded my head, swallowing to dampen a blaze of panic scorching my throat. "Will he be all right?" To be sure, they murmured yeses, but the sound was lost in the speed of movement. Nurses were in and out. The lamp was rearranged. Instruments were brought in on a tray. Keith backed up against the wall, looking fifteen years old and lost.

"Beth," the doctor was calling me by my first name now, "on your next contraction, I'm going to insert a needle into your lower back." What he meant was *spine*. "Jean and Marianne are going to lean you forward and hold you really still, but you do your best not to move, too, okay?"

"Yessir." I willed my shaking body as still as possible. I felt the chill of the air conditioner against my bare back. The contraction came in seconds and, with it, the needle. I don't know if I heard the gurgle or simply felt it.

"Good job," he said. "Let's get this baby out."

By the time they repositioned me for delivery, I could no longer feel my legs. A drape was placed over me. Then I heard what sounded like scissors cutting through thick fabric, just once, and watched Keith's face drain to white.

"Beth." The doctor again. "You're going to feel like I'm nearly pulling you off the table, but we've got you. You ready?"

It happened just like he said. I was sure he'd not only gone for the baby but for my liver, my kidneys, and both lungs. After no small commotion, the tone in the room lightened, and Nurse Jean flashed a smile.

"Well, look what we have here. Mr. and Mrs. Moore, you have a daughter."

"A *girl*?" we said, almost in unison, stunned but by no means disappointed.

The drape was removed like a curtain coming up, and a little human fetched from my own body was placed on my chest. The doctor would take the next fifteen minutes to sew me back together again.

The hour that followed was a blur. What I remember most was how deliriously happy my mom was that we'd had a girl. Mind you, she loved boys. She just hadn't had her fill of females yet.

"I'm saying, honey, she's far more alert than the other babies in the nursery. Looking around like she knows exactly what's happening. Like she's wise."

I smiled to see Mom smile and did my best to answer and enter into the wonder, but what I wanted to say to somebody in charge was, "What just happened?" I'd heard of women having babies under shade trees like it was just another day. *Oh, I'll be right back. I'm just gonna go over there and birth a human. Somebody boil water for tea.* The exact word my Lamaze coach had used for pain in childbearing was *manageable*. I was thinking how she better pray she never runs into me at the Walmart.

As an attendant wheeled me out of recovery, I asked for my cosmetics bag and touched up my makeup and instantly assumed the role of cheerful host to that horde of wonderful people in my hospital room. After they filed out, a few at a time, until no one remained but us, my young weary husband took off his boots, lowered the rail on the hospital bed, and crawled in beside me.

"Babe, babe, careful with my IV!"

I could see the surgical tape tugging and the inserted needle lifting the skin on the top of my hand. Keith has a host of marvelous qualities, like loving and affectionate and romantic, but I've yet to hear a single tongue list *gentle* among them. Once I unwound the IV tube from his neck, I folded into his side, glad and grateful to have him next to me. We got to have our newborn for a while, then talked until we were no longer coherent.

When he began to wheeze the way a man falling into deep sleep will do, I nudged him. "Honey, go on home and get in bed and have a night's rest. If you stay any later, I'll be scared to death you'll fall asleep at the wheel."

He kissed me good night and told me what a good job I'd done. He'd see me tomorrow.

I'd been alone a couple of hours when Nurse Marianne rolled the infant carrier in, placed the newborn in my arms, and left the two of us to it. I gave the chain on the overhead lamp one short tug so the room would stay dim. My daughter was wrapped round and round in a thin white blanket, a baby-faced chrysalis. I kissed her tiny cheek, then placed her on my lap and began to unwind the thick dressing. Mom was right. She was surprisingly alert, studious almost, her eyes fixed on my face.

Beneath the layers was Baby Girl Moore in a tiny white diaper, a crisscross undershirt, and a pale-pink boggin cap.

I took the cap off carefully and grimaced at the specks of blood on the inside of it. The baby had a bright-red welt on the back of her head that would turn a deep, mushy purple and a couple of tiny cuts not yet scabbed over. These were signatures of the forceps used to fetch her. She, too, had been through the valley of the shadow, entering this arctic world feeling like someone was trying to behead her.

The thing about life is that, for most folks, it hurts from the start.

She was the most magnificent little creature I'd ever held. I'd held a lot of babies. I loved baby dolls and babies from the time I could toddle. I started babysitting at twelve and, at fourteen, cared for a three- to five-month-old most every weekday of an Arkansas summer in a mobile home while the baby's mom went back to work to support them. I'd helped in the church nursery innumerable times. Nanny used to say of her side of the family tree, "We folk are drunk on babies." I inherited that intoxication in a line of bar shots.

Still, this was different. This baby birthed something in my heart. Something involuntary. Something that had gestated for twenty-two years. I had to have felt that hidden life kick inside my heart at times, but it was now delivered abruptly and reciprocally and irreversibly into the open air. This baby had come for my heart. Welted it front and back. Tore it wide open and brought it out—vulnerable, naked, nicked bloody and blue—into the wind, sunshine, and fury of this world. I'd only feel this frighteningly overtaken with one other infant.

What a pure thing. What an inexplicably pure thing. I'd never felt pure in my life that I could remember, but this little thing squinting her gray-blue eyes back at me, this precious little creature, was the embodiment of innocence. How two such impure people could come up with something like this was unfathomable.

"Hi there, little one. My name is Mom." One tear dropped from my jaw to her tummy, then another. "Your name is Amanda. Aren't you the sweetest little thing?"

It's shocking what a stranger a newborn can be to the very woman who grew and birthed it. You thought he or she would be completely recognizable, utterly familiar and known by you. A piece of you. The same as you. But you know when you see them—or at least I knew when I saw her—that a much bigger marvel has taken place. The child that grew inside of you and was nourished, protected, and hidden by you is an individual, cut apart from you now, unique from you, moving free of you, seeing the world in a different way from you.

They say newborns can't yet focus, and I'll not suggest this one could. Maybe I was all shades and shadows and all that held her gaze were the sounds. I'm not sure how long I sat with her on my lap, studying her and asking her to tell me about herself. Finally, she stretched, crinkling her forehead, bowing up her whole body and straightening her arms over her head, her hands in fists the size of ten-cent gumballs. I delighted in the way she threw her entire self into it. I had never been so happy in my life. As she finished off the yawn, her chin quivered.

I whispered, "Oh, I'm so sorry. Let's warm you back up." I gathered the blanket back around her and slipped her boggin cap back on her head and held her close, just under my chin.

You were my lifelong dream come true, I'd write a few days later in her baby book. And she was.

• • •

A little less than three years later, I'd sit in another hospital bed with a second child. Though the anesthesia didn't work nearly as well as promised, both of us made it through labor and delivery with decidedly less trauma and no big scissors. Keith and I mention from time to time how badly we'd wanted a son the second time around, shuddering to imagine what we'd have missed had God not ignored our prayers. It's not that we're partial to girls. It's that we are partial to these girls. These exact two. We named our second Melissa, so she'd go perfectly with Amanda. Three syllables with an accent on the second. Strong *m*'s. Both ending in *a*'s.

They favored one another, except for hair color. Amanda was sunshine blonde. Melissa's hair would lighten for a few years, but she came into this world the same way she ended up: dark-headed. Aside from being equally affectionate and loving throughout, they began and remain as different from one another as two humans from the same couple could be. Most parents of two would say the same, but we emphasize it like a rarity because the distinctions never cease to be astonishing. Amanda was agreeable and eager to please. The way Melissa saw it, nothing could clear the air like a good argument. Amanda's favorite question was "How?" Melissa's, "Why?" Amanda loved books. Peace and stillness. Melissa loved motion. Action. Adventure. Amanda talked at nine and a half months. Melissa walked. Amanda loved long bedtime stories. Melissa, exhausted by each day's end, was asleep before her face landed on the pillowcase. Amanda loved to go on walks. Melissa wanted wheels. Amanda loved horses. Melissa loved Camaros. Amanda was a mama's girl. Melissa was a daddy's girl.

They were both *our* girls.

If Keith had the patience and inclination for an ink pen, he could tell you how he's felt about these two girls. He could count to you how many times he's said he wouldn't trade them for ten sons. He'd boast about how smart and lovely they are, and he'd tell you that nothing makes the four of us collectively happier than making a Moore sandwich. It's nothing original. Just a group hug—Keith and I, two slices of bread; the girls, the peanut butter and jelly. The ham and cheese. Pastrami and Swiss on two slices of rye. Lots of squeezing. Kisses on the cheeks.

Regular stuff, but Keith and I are such irregular people that regular things are remarkable to us. Keith would tell you, if he had you at our table for fried speckled trout he'd caught that morning and macaroni and cheese he made from scratch, what being Dad to little girls has meant to him. Our lives together have never for ten minutes been drama-free. Amanda and Melissa could have had—deserved to have—far better parents. They deserved stability. We didn't have it to give. But we gave them what we had. When we had more, we did not withhold it. When we had less, they were not unscathed. You can't have a father and mother with the kinds of issues Keith and I had and not ride a relentless roller coaster. When we had on seat belts, it was good. It was fun. When we didn't, it was scary. It was sad.

We made some good decisions. We made some god-awful decisions. That we're in one piece, that we're still together, that we love one another beyond the confines of human language is the indelible mark of divine grace. We know it every day of our lives. I have a lot of doubts in this life. Whether or not Jesus tarried with us in our four walls, dispensing mercy like a pharmacist dispenses drugs, is not among them.

We have laughed hard. We have cried hard. We have fought hard.

Some of us have prayed hard. And wondered why on earth everything always had to *be* hard.

Yet there is nothing in the universe I'd trade for having ridden this ride with those two girls.

My daughters. Amanda, Melissa. My sun and my moon. Sunshine, Moonshine.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IF IT'S TRUE GOD OFTEN USES THE BODY OF CHRIST—by that I mean a community of fellow believers—to tell us what he wants from us, what he wanted from me in my early twenties was leg warmers. I was a new mom when the aerobics craze took America by sweat and storm. A handful of women at my church decided we needed a class and I was just the person to lead it. *Why*, you ask?

"Didn't you do drill team, Beth?"

"Well, yes, but that's not the same thing as—"

"Fabulous! When's the kickoff?"

In my day, we didn't just *start* things at church. We kicked them off.

"I'm going to have to give this some thought," I explained, "because I promised God that, whatever I did, I'd do as ministry."

Unimpressed, they retorted, "So, do it as ministry."

"How?"

"How are we supposed to know? You figure it out."

I turned the idea over and over in my head, then, when I saw them next, said, "Maybe I could figure a way to use Christian music."

To their credit, they affirmed the idea, though I could plainly see from their expressions that they pictured us stretching in our tights and leotards to "Rock of Ages."

"I need to actually learn how to do aerobics."

Exasperated, they asked, "Well, how long is that gonna take?"

It didn't take long. I enrolled in an aerobics class not far from my home to get the hang of it and, lo and behold, loved it. This was 1980, when Christian contemporary music was just beginning to get airplay on local Christian radio stations. Songs were coming out weekly by artists like Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, Steven Curtis Chapman, and Leon Patillo, and

groups like the Imperials, Petra, Harvest, Farrell and Farrell, and White Heart that were clearly begging for choreography. The music was there if I had enough imagination.

For better and for worse, imagination happens to be one of my strong suits. With a baby on a blanket beside me, kicking her little legs to the beat, I started choreographing aerobic exercises to Christian contemporary music. We announced a kickoff in the church bulletin and on posters in the halls and women's restrooms a month later. The church let us use a small room if we'd remove the chairs ourselves and put them back afterward, and by the first night, we were already short on space.

Eight people was one thing. What's a few lunges between friends? But when the class kept growing, I got antsy. I needed to know what I was doing. I contacted Houston's renowned First Baptist Church because, according to hearsay, they'd spent a small fortune building, of all scandalous things, what they called a Christian Life Center. It was complete with an indoor track, basketball and racquetball courts, a weight room, a café, a bowling alley, and locker rooms with showers. This was a fancy outfit. A friend of mine had seen the women's locker room with her own eyes and claimed they even furnished handheld hair dryers.

"Wattage?" I asked. This was the true test.

"Twelve hundred."

If any church was going to have personnel who could train me to teach a dance-exercise class as ministry, First Baptist would.

"Now, what is it you're asking again?" The young man on the phone worked the front desk of the CLC, where members could check out a basketball, a pair of bowling shoes, a towel, or the like.

"Could you tell me who is in charge of your women's aerobics program?" My accent was still thick as patty sausage, so I had to repeat the question several times.

"Let me put you through to my boss."

His boss, one of many ministers at FBC, asked me three questions in turn for every one of mine. What kind of class did I teach? How much experience did I have? Had women come back a second and third time? I

answered the questions but circled back to my own.

"Sir, what I'm wondering is if you have someone who oversees an aerobics program there?"

"No."

I'd just spent twenty minutes on a phone propped between my ear and my shoulder while I fed the baby a bottle.

"But," he was quick to say, "I'd like to hire one. Would you be interested in applying?"

I'd end up overseeing the program and teaching multiple classes a week—advanced and intermediate—in that "Christian Life Center" for twelve years and cry like there was no tomorrow when the time came to give it up. I've never in my ministry life done anything that was a bigger riot. If pure fun qualified as fruit of the Spirit, we were as Spirit-filled as women in tights get. We laughed and carried on, tripped over our own feet, crunched our stomach muscles, worked our thighs until we felt the burn, danced our hearts out, sang loud to every song, and dripped with enough sweat to swim to the parking lot. Childcare was in a gym, just outside the door in plain sight, where anyone who had kids could drop them off happy as clams. They could run themselves into exhaustion, play games, throw basketballs into miniature hoops and, best of all, learn to roller-skate from Miss Debbie. Those kids became the best roller skaters in the Southern Baptist Convention, bar none. Could Jane Fonda offer that? Could Richard Simmons? Nay, I say.

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Ironically, the most important element of my new part-time job was the part I didn't want.

"I'd like you to pray about moving your letter here to First Baptist."

The request came from my new boss moments after he told me I was hired. *Moving your letter* was something Southern Baptists did when we transferred our membership from one church to another. Originally it referred to an actual letter exchanged by the two churches, but over time,

the phrase became a bit more figurative. (I ought not have to explain at this point that moving one's letter was activated by walking the aisle at the end of a worship service. After the pastor gave you the right hand of fellowship, you filled out a membership form.)

In our world, it went without saying that moving one's letter was something that occurred laterally between two Southern Baptist churches. If you were moving from a Baptist church to, say, a Methodist church, you were indeed moving somewhere, but it was down. This I write without a whit of meanness. I can't even work up any cynicism. This was our culture, and I was contentedly at home in it. I find comfort in the blessed assurance that other denominations surely had their own forms of exclusivity.

"We prayed about it and feel led to just stay in our neighborhood church," I said to my new boss a week later by phone. I loved our smaller church and had not one inclination to budge, hair dryers or no hair dryers. The other line went silent for about fifteen seconds, then he said, "Well, then, I may not have made the offer as clear as I should have. I apologize for that. It's part of the offer. I hope that's not too inconvenient."

I was aghast and went to Keith immediately and intoned to him the audacity.

"Fine with me," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I'd ten times rather be somewhere we can get lost in the crowd."

That I can't recall the speech I gave Keith in response is a shame. No way it didn't include a fusion of biblical threats like "Well, if you want to hide your light under a bushel and forfeit your salt, then stand before the judgment seat, go right ahead."

I took this crisis with great haste to the Lord in prayer, to which the Lord responded with equal haste by moving our letter to First Baptist Church. I've found that walking by faith is 50 percent hanging in there until you're far enough down the road to develop hindsight. I cannot think of one thing God appears to have done more strategically than move Keith and me to First Baptist. The opportunities that would start coming my way as a result were by no means based on my credibility. I hadn't had time to build

any. I also wasn't unique in any way nor, that I could tell, particularly talented. The opportunities came to me based on the credibility of my church and its pastor, John Bisagno.

If there is any such thing as a life-pastor—one you'd say marked your life the longest and deepest and for good, mind you, and not for evil—unquestionably, John Bisagno would be mine. I'd remain under his leadership until he retired just short of twenty years later. He was a concoction of strengths and weaknesses just like the rest of us, but I've never met anyone who found more unquenchable joy in helping men *and women* do what God had called them to do. Brother John's ego bowed low to his eagerness to see people thrive in Jesus. He sought out the most gifted young preachers on the landscape to speak from his pulpit, knowing good and well he'd be compared to them. Didn't care. If he had to divest himself of power in order to invest in the next generation, fine with him.

My first official opportunity to stand in front of a group and speak occurred at First Baptist's annual women's retreat when I was still in my early twenties. I'd been asked to do a breakout session on, you guessed it, aerobics. All my earliest speaking invitations were tied to this topic. I entitled the fifty-minute message "Making Fitness Count for Christ." I spoke for the first thirty, then slapped a cassette tape in my boom box and got them on their feet the last twenty. Granted, the choreography had to be carefully crafted to accommodate attire since, in those days, most women came to church retreats at fancy hotels in dresses and navy-blue hosiery.

I'd like to interject at this moment that writing this memoir has been, at certain points, like being skinned alive by vile demons with a potato peeler. I've endured for moments like this one. The gift our young selves give to our old selves, if we're lucky, is pure absurdity. I have hated the young woman I used to be many times for many reasons, but I can only love a woman who takes herself seriously reading from a Bible while wearing a sweatband. Give me this.

At the end of the first of a jillion breakout sessions I'd do in my young speaking life, a woman named Marge Caldwell approached me. I knew who she was. Everybody at the women's retreat knew who she was. Among the

sages of Houston's First Baptist Church, warm and charming and funny, she was probably the most popular Christian motivational speaker in our denomination even at almost seventy. Women speakers in the conservative church world were only slightly scarcer than unicorns. Marge had served all over the United States and in multiple foreign countries. She was the keynote speaker at the retreat.

The embodiment of grace and poise, Marge reached out her hand and introduced herself to me.

"Yes, yes, ma'am, I know who you are, Mrs. Caldwell."

"Call me Marge," she said. I nodded but didn't. We'd soon become as thick as blood and still I'd struggle to call her by her first name.

"Beth," she said, her blue eyes narrowing, "I think you're called to do this."

I assumed she meant teaching aerobics. I felt a bead of sweat run from under my thick hair down my spine.

"No, no, I don't mean *this* so much," she quickly followed up, shooting a glance toward my three-pound hand weights. "I mean, I think you're called to speak."

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Every now and then God sends a prophetic word to one servant through another that has no immediate effect or manifestation. It's meant to be pondered humbly, not broadcasted publicly. It's intended to be planted like seed in the fertile soil of the heart, deeply enough where the birds of prey can't peck it away. Those words can't be forced to fruition, though we will inevitably try, even when we're warned of the futility. I gave the Lord a little time then decided he must be waiting for me to take initiative. I talked Keith into springing the money for printing a tricolor flyer with my picture on it. The blurb below it read, "Elizabeth Moore, professional Christian Speaker and Teacher, is a welcomed addition to the world of Christian motivators and communicators."

I wrote the blurb. Indeed, I welcomed myself. I sent them to every church I could find in the yellow pages within a ten-mile radius, and for the life of me, I cannot recall a solitary result. It is possible the Lord hid them. A stack of expensive tricolor flyers is in a box somewhere in my attic, the supply having severely exceeded the demand. That I'd capitalized *Speaker* and *Teacher* might have some bearing on the humbling that would come in my thirties.

A seed needs planting in order to grow. It needs patience. If the seed was cast from the hand of God, he will surely sprout it, in his time, in his way. If it came from good human intentions, consider it no waste. It was a mortal's vocalized belief that you have something to offer, and while that person may prove mistaken about the precise form, that faith can act as fertilizer to the soil.

Marge Caldwell had her own journey in a world of podiums, in a day when our honorarium might amount to a corsage we wore while speaking, wondering if the pin was going to pop a breast like a balloon. Men don't have to worry about these things. Fitness wasn't the gateway topic that first brought Marge to a podium. Her intro was poise and manners, the former of which entailed how to stand and sit properly and how to find the right dress style for your God-given shape. She somehow managed to do this without a whiff of body shaming. Her manners classes, on the other hand, ranged all the way from making proper introductions when hosting a dinner party to knowing a salad fork from a dessert fork. You weren't well acquainted with Marge Caldwell if you didn't know which plate to put your dinner roll on. Let the bread basket pass you by.

In those days and in that world, invitations to speak only about Jesus were rare. Think of it this way. Most of what we did was speak at teas. You couldn't speak at a tea and serve it up straight. The first cups had to be mostly milk and sugar, and you'd better serve good cookies.

Several years after my introduction to Marge, I seized the first opportunity to serve my tea straight. I was still teaching aerobics and would continue to for seven more years. Don't imagine I'd spoken for the last time

on “Making Fitness Count for Christ.” Christian women were heavily invested in leotards by this time. The taste of Jesus was on my tongue now, however, and there would be no washing it down.

I was twenty-seven years old, Amanda and Melissa five and two, when the phone rang, and Marge’s voice sounded on the other end. Her voice had become as familiar to me by now as honey and butter on a warm biscuit.

“First Baptist needs a substitute Sunday school teacher for married women in the young adult department. It would just be for a year while the regular teacher takes a maternity break. I told them I thought I knew exactly who should do it.”

The thing about active mentors who have poured untold energy into you is how famously difficult it is to say no to them. I stammered around. I was no stranger to teaching Sunday school, but only to children. I was speaking by now at women’s events on a fairly frequent basis, and with five messages in my repertoire, I could recycle indefinitely and save myself hours of preparation time. Why would I also want to teach Sunday school?

In my most deferential voice, I responded, “Well, you know, with the speaking and all, I’m not sure how it would work.”

“Now, you may speak more than I do, Beth,” she said as sweet as molasses, both of us knowing full well I didn’t speak a tenth as often as she did, “but doing them both has worked for me for twenty years. In fact, they work well together.”

I needn’t waste ink expounding on how few days passed before I was teaching Sunday school to a group of married women twenty-eight to thirty-one years of age. I was the youngest person in the class. I dreaded every Sunday like a tooth extraction. I’d have been better off reading aloud the Sunday school quarterly which, at that time, held all the excitement of an obituary. Instead, I had the bright idea to freestyle and think up what I wanted to talk about and, come Saturday, have a near panic attack scrambling to find a Bible verse to go with it. I was terrible. That’s not to say I wasn’t fun. We had fun all right. We just didn’t learn anything about the Bible. You can’t deliver Sunday school lessons as motivational speeches and manage to disciple people.

The end of the year couldn't come quickly enough. I resolved never to darken the door of another Sunday school class in a teaching capacity.

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One Sunday morning about ten miserable months into my teaching commitment, I was sitting in the worship center beside Keith, waiting for the service to begin and miserable yet again over the inspirational talk I'd just substituted for a Bible lesson. As the organist played and our spectacular two-hundred-voice choir filed into the loft, I sighed with self-contempt and distracted myself with the bulletin. Announcements of upcoming events were on the back.

A new class on Bible doctrine begins in two weeks during the Training Union hour in room 235, taught by Buddy Walters.

The Lord bid me *GO. For the love of all things holy, go.*

I didn't know the teacher from Adam. What I knew was that I'd be bored to tears, but at least I'd learn something. I prepared for the sacrifice by motivating myself with a clean new spiral notebook—college ruled—and a package of colored pens and the obligatory yellow highlighter. Around fifteen of us showed up, and as well as I'm able to recall, the class didn't grow significantly larger. Training Union, after all, was on Sunday evenings for an hour before another church service. This was discipleship for diehards.

Buddy Walters had a quiet presence. A former college-football player, he was as thick as he was wide—one contiguous muscle—but surprisingly unassuming, like he had no idea what a presence he was. There was no fanfare in his class, not even for the kickoff. No *let's go around the room and introduce ourselves*. When the clock struck 6:00 p.m., he plainly walked to the podium in the small Sunday school room, flopped open a king-size KJV and told us to turn to Genesis. I'd never seen a Bible in worse condition.

The man bowed his head and asked the Lord to use him, then launched into a lesson without bell or whistle. He didn't have a booming voice. He didn't even use a lot of inflection. His deep voice and long drawl stayed steady and authoritative even at times when tears mystifyingly pooled in his eyes. He'd not told a sad story or anything. He just taught, shifting back and forth between the podium and the chalkboard. Each time he added an item to the Bible chart he'd drawn, he clapped a plume of chalk dust off his hands and flipped another page of his Bible. I don't recall turning pages that first night or taking down notes. All I remember is sitting, mesmerized.

I'd never seen a person like Buddy. I'd never met anyone who seemed to study the Bible for the sheer delight of it and not simply the discipline. I appreciated the Bible. Respected it. Embraced a way of living and talking that developed from it. But I didn't *love* it. Not like that guy loved it.

The second he closed in prayer, I stood up from my chair, grabbed my purse, and walked straight out the door without a word. Instead of staying for the service, I walked quickly down the stairs and through the hall and out the door to the massive parking lot as fast as I could. I ran to my car, threw my purse in the passenger seat, got in, shut the door, and burst into tears. "I don't know what that was," I cried to God, leaning forward toward the windshield in case he couldn't see me through the roof, "but I want it."

There are not many parts of my life story that make me cry nearly every time I tell them, but this one does. We can't always define what we yearn for in Christ. We don't even know such sacred affections are possible for regular run-of-the-mill humans like us until we see it in someone else.

That night in the car, I suppose before I even turned the ignition, God, in effect, struck a match against a stone and lit a torch in my heart for the Scriptures that has never been quenched. The intensity of the flames rises and recedes from day to day, but in thirty-five years, the fire God set within me that evening has never gone out. I didn't deserve it or earn it. I don't really even understand it, but I've yet to get my fill of Bible study. I'll come to a sudden realization how two scenes in Scripture connect and still slap my desk over it.

I'd spend several years under Buddy's teaching. I was ravenous. I became such a pest, interrupting class with questions, that he began assigning me homework.

"You can't already be finished with that," he'd say.

"Yes, I am! See?" and I'd show him the completed assignments.

He made appointments to come to our house to teach me how to use Bible commentaries and dictionaries. A stickler for propriety, Buddy made my husband sit at the table with us. Keith would flip through *Field and Stream* while Buddy and I flipped through Bible resources, and the more Keith learned about fishing, the more I learned about teaching. I'd teach Sunday school nonstop for the next twenty-three years, and Marge would be proven right, of course. Studying for roughly forty-five to fifty Sunday school lessons a year for adults, one book of the Bible after another, would break the Bible wide open into endless topics, themes, and messages that would feed decades of events on the road.

Other mentors would come into my life for a season or a particular purpose, but these three—Brother John, Marge, and Buddy—remain unrivaled in influence. Each made a deep indentation, a bold point with a permanent marker. Draw lines connecting them, and they form a triangle that shaped my entire ministry life. Brother John's insatiable desire to see individuals come to Jesus and discover what he'd called them to do was infectious. Marge's love for being a woman and for serving and defending women multiplies like blood cells in my bone marrow. Buddy's passion for the Scriptures ruined me for anything but a life of study.

Within the sturdy triangle they built around me, I would slowly find my own way of being and walking and living and talking with Jesus. I'd find my own way of teaching. As God would often have it, I believe, the thumbprints of multiple mentors pressed into the clay of a life shapes a certain distinctiveness. You're too much a mix of all of them to turn out just like any one of them. To these three, all of whom now stand in God's presence, I owe a debt impossible to repay.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE TEACHING MINISTRY to which I'd give the name Living Proof grew up with my daughters, not only in time but in form, with all the tumbles and falls that go with toddlerhood and the scrapes, near misses, speeding tickets, fender benders, and driving through stop signs accompanying life on wheels. I can't say the ministry has grown up nearly as well as Amanda and Melissa have, nor that its growing was always *up*, but similarities abound.

By the time my girls were climbing aboard Big Wheels, I was climbing aboard airplanes, adapting to a world of seat belts, tray tables, and overhead compartments. Keith and I figured out a travel schedule we could manage without pulling one another's hair out, and I started traveling two Friday nights a month, rarely back-to-back, while Keith held down the fort.

No two parents parent identically. Keith's way of holding down the fort was not my way since I was substantially more weak-kneed to the girls' whims. They could talk me into just about anything. Keith, on the other hand, was bound and determined not to be a pushover. Though he is one of the most generous individuals I've ever known, Keith is infamous in our family for choosing unique places to draw the line. I'd call home to see how things were going.

"Mom, come home! Dad won't even let us get cheese on a hamburger at the drive-through when you are out of town!"

"Put your father on the phone." I'd hear grumbling and grousing.

"Hello?" Keith would say in his John Moore Plumbing Company voice, like I was a customer with a clogged toilet.

"Babe, for crying out loud, why won't you let the girls get cheese on their hamburgers?"

"Because it's ten cents extra, and they can slap a slice of American cheese on it when we get home."

We never could sort out this conflict. “It’s a matter of principle,” he’d say.

“What principle?” I’d say.

“You can’t just give them everything they want! That’s not how life is!”

“Keith, it’s *cheese*.”

And it was. But it also wasn’t. He was right about me. I did want them to have most everything they wanted, and my idea of him holding down the fort was doing whatever they asked. Mind you, Keith could be great fun, but when I was out of town, the good times were going to roll down his lane. He’d often treat them to a movie or laze around with them all Saturday morning in front of cartoons. But sometimes he felt the best way he and the girls could bond on a Saturday with Mom away was by cleaning out the garage he’d been needing to cull for eighteen months, and boy, was I going to hear about it.

We four made it work, not perfectly by any stretch of the imagination, but well enough to stay in one piece, and we kept that same schedule for years. I wanted to work. Keith wanted me to work. We needed the money, and by now, I was beginning to get honorariums for women’s retreats that exceeded the cost of a tank of gas.

There’s no having it all. That’s an undeniable fact. But I wanted two things desperately. I wanted my family, and I wanted ministry. I wanted to raise my own children. I also wanted women to catch a fever for the Scriptures. I loved being home, and I loved being on the road. I adored my two little girls, and I also adored cracking open a Bible with a room full of females. To their credit—Keith, Amanda, and Melissa’s—alongside ocean tides of grace, I’ve had those two things. How well they balanced from day to day was up for grabs, but both were constants.

What fell entirely through the cracks was my social life. Friendships that weren’t built into the family construct through church, neighborhood, or the kids’ schools or sports circled the drain. They were not small losses

but necessary. Something had to go. Nothing about balancing family and ministry worked perfectly. I can't even say it consistently worked smoothly, but it worked well enough for us to make it.

Ministry is tough on a family. Imagine feeling like you're competing with God for your primary person's affections. The opportunity for people in vocational ministry to spiritually manipulate those around them is lake-wide. Slender is the bridge above it. I attempted to keep my feet affixed, but the path could get slippery, and goodness knows no deception is slyer than self-deception. To whatever degree I didn't use God against my family, Keith deserves substantial credit, cheese or no cheese. A plumber by trade, his nose for sniffing out manure and his mouth for calling it were effective deterrents. Who knows how much difficulty ministry added to the family mix? It's all we ever knew.

Notoriety is a different matter. We four know precisely how much stress that added to the mix, but I'll get to that later.

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Our family dynamics extended beyond the four humans under our roof. Our lives were tightly braided pigtails with each set of our children's grandparents. Except for the earliest years of our marriage, Keith worked with his dad at the plumbing company. We were in and out of his parents' home continually and met them at restaurants every chance we got. Keith's dad was no fool. He knew the best way to maintain a close relationship with his married children was to offer a meal out and foot the bill. We and Keith's siblings and their young families would show up at the drop of a hat.

As for the Green side of our family, no amount of difficulty or distraction could pry my siblings or me from my mom. Gay and I always lived within short driving distance of our parents, but even our other siblings who moved away never stayed away long. None of us were ever out of touch with her, or for that matter, with Dad, since they were a package deal. These were not uncomplicated dynamics for some of us, but a

family can go a long way on denial. The maddening complexity is, denial could, on occasion, offer a little relief. It makes for a poor lifestyle but a pleasant lunch.

By this time, another grenade, bigger than ever, had dropped in our family over my father's past transgressions, so the joys my parents found during my college years had been cut short. They would never recover from this one, though they'd stay married and in church and make all the obligatory appearances, and each stayed present in our family. The ice thawed somewhat through the years, but the sun never really came out between them again. Their domains were separate enough anyway. Dad still worked movie theater hours and, even when he was around, tended to live in a bit of a bubble. Mom had the run of the house and the television. She had her soap operas, her flower beds, her letter-writing, her afternoon naps, and, most precious to her of all, a revolving door for her children and grandchildren.

When I think back, I marvel at how much life took place under those overcast skies at my parents' house. Some of my favorite memories of Mom are woven into the years my girls were young. Aletha hit and missed a bit as a mother. Hit, I want to say, more than missed. But she was the finest grandmother I ever knew. My mother was at her best in the company of her grandchildren. This was true from the firstborn among them to the last. She was a Rountree, after all, drunk on babies. She played with them on the floor even when she got so frail, we'd have to help her up. She rocked them a thousand miles. Gay and I had young families at the same time, and our idea of bliss was being together with Mom. She read to our children, talked incessantly to them, and drew vocabulary out of them that constantly entertained us. She wooed them into a world of stories and scenes, of dress-ups, masquerades, and families made of clay.

The movie *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* was booming at the box office when Amanda was three and four years old, and she became obsessed with the hairless, bug-eyed fictional creature at its center. We were at Mom's one day when I came in from the backyard and couldn't find either one of them. After calling for them multiple times, I heard a familiar little girl's giggle

coming from inside the hall closet. I opened the door to find Mom's and Amanda's faces surrounded by stuffed animals like a scene from the movie. This was my mom. She made every ordinary thing magic to my children. She bought them frocks from Kmart that, to them, may as well have come from Neiman Marcus. She created a space on a low budget where a Salisbury-steak frozen dinner was eating high on the hog. She sang more in hoarse chords than melodies on account of all the Marlboros, but the definition of glee to Amanda and Melissa was singing songs with their nanny. That's what they called her.

Nanny.

"I love you, Nanny!" Arms so tight around her neck, the vein on her forehead bulged.

She'd smooch them big on the cheek with every bit of lip she could roll out and say effortlessly to them what she felt with all her heart but struggled to articulate to my siblings and me. "I love you, too." Just like that. Just like it was how we all talked in our family.

I love you, a bushel and a peck
A bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck

I never resented how her grandparenting exceeded her parenting. I beamed, feeling like most mothers do. You want to know how to love me? Love my children. You want to be good to me? Be good to my children.

She was their best friend. Any of my siblings who lived close enough for her to be continually involved in their children's lives would say the same. We would also say she was ours. I can't think of a single slice of our existence characterized by ease, but many of these days were especially good days.

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Our four-Moore, four-pet, tight-budget family was making it somewhat stably amid our steady stream of conflicts and challenges when, soon after I turned thirty, we made one of the most monumental decisions of our lives. Keith's younger cousin had a four-year-old son she was unable to parent due to the relentless battering of a drug addiction. Her dad, Keith's paternal uncle, and his new wife had taken the child in and done the best they could, but the situation was unsustainable. The genetics on Keith's side of the family are bold and unapologetic, especially among the males. This little guy, who I'd never seen, was rumored to be my husband's spitting image. To Keith, seeing the boy was like seeing himself at four years old. And seeing himself at four years old, the embers of the house fire still burning and skin still blistering, was nearly unbearable.

"We could take him in," he said. "What's one more?"

The thing was, our youngest had just found her feet in elementary school. I loved my girls' infancies, toddlerhoods, and preschool years, and I cried like a baby their first days of kindergarten, but having given those years my all and from the get-go of marriage, school-bus yellow had become my new favorite color. I was wet-faced with a sudsy, fresh wave of freedom. I could accomplish all kinds of work during school hours and still be standing on the front lawn, smiling ear to ear, when the bus driver ground the brakes at my curb every weekday afternoon.

"I just don't know, honey. That's a lot. Three children are substantially more than two."

My mom had always claimed it was so. She said she never regretted having five, but that a parent was outnumbered the moment she had more children than hands.

Keith kept bringing him up. I kept needing more time to think.

A few months later, we spent all day Saturday at an extended Moore family picnic at a park in Houston, and my gaze fell on the loveliest little boy. Dark hair, big brown eyes.

"Whose child is that?" I whispered in Keith's ear while he gnawed a pork rib clean. He dropped it on his paper plate, cleared the baked beans from his throat, and said his cousin's name, motioning toward his uncle

trailing a dozen or so feet behind the boy.

"That's *him*?"

"Yep," Keith replied.

"That's the little boy you've been talking about?"

"Yep."

"Can't be. That child couldn't possibly be four years old."

"Yeah, he is. He's just small. He needs a lot."

That beautiful little boy would move into our home shortly after. All four of us had stars in our eyes. A little brother sounded marvelous to Amanda and Melissa. A son sounded marvelous to Keith, especially one who favored him so. And then there was me with the loftiest thoughts of all. I recall saying the words out loud, "Let's love him to wholeness."

It's hard to love someone to a place you've never been.

We nicknamed him Spud. Thinking he was ours forever, we tried right away to adopt him, but his mom's whereabouts remained unknown and his father wouldn't sign the papers. He sought no role in the boy's life, but he seemed strangely empowered by controlling the legalities. It wasn't a grudge against us. We'd never met. Perhaps it was just a grudge against life in general.

Legal guardianship transferred from Spud's grandparents to us, and we embraced him as our own. I've given this a torturous amount of thought in hindsight. Should we have ever taken on the names Mom and Dad and called the girls his sisters, or should we have insisted on Uncle Keith, Aunt Beth, and cousins Amanda and Melissa? There never seems to be a crystal ball when you need one. Spud wanted a family. He didn't want cousins. He asked within a week of being in our home if he could call me Mom. I stuttered around, trying to think of the right answer and ultimately didn't have the heart to say no. The way I saw it, plenty of stepmothers, mothers-in-law, and mother figures went by *Mom*. And I was willing. I was more than willing. I was *determined*. As determined as I have ever been about anything in my life.

Spud's needs differed greatly from our girls'. They were doing fine in public school. We knew early on he'd require private education. We knew he needed medical help and sought it. We knew his heart was fractured, and we set out to be used by God to mend it. Through no fault of his, we would ultimately prove unable to do so. He was worth much more than we had to offer.

Created in the image of God, we humans, by and large, have an inherent desire to save. We want so badly to rescue. Understandably, our little guy's needs were great. By sheer necessity, the girls had to take a back seat to our new family member. They still loved him. We all did. We desperately wanted ours to be the perfect home for him. He had been through so much in his short life. Abandonment by both parents is a heck of a thing. The child's ability to attach can be woefully compromised. The bonding Keith pictured would not materialize as he hoped, a reality he'd find devastating.

Despite the challenges, we bought in, withholding nothing we had to give. We did all the regular things with our fifth family member that we'd done with four—school, sports, church, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, trips, summers at the neighborhood pool, bikes, vacations, Moore and Green Christmases and holidays. Like hosts of other families, whatever successes we enjoyed were three steps forward and two steps back. I'm no math wizard, but as far as I could count, one step was still forward. I'd joke that I was a mom of six: Amanda was the equivalent of one child, Melissa, two, and Spud, at the very least, three.

Spud and I spent weekdays together, just the two of us, while his sisters were in school and Keith was at work. He went with me to the Christian Life Center three times a week, where I taught aerobics and he learned to roller-skate just like the girls had. Eighteen months later, my brown-eyed potato went to a carefully selected private kindergarten thirty minutes from our home.

He was a challenge to his teachers from the start, so I did what I had to do. I set out to make sure he was the cutest one in his class. I'd like to go on record saying that, having failed at a thousand other things, I am confident

of having succeeded in this. The boy never went to school a single day under my care without hair product. He was adorable—and don't tell me adorable doesn't matter when it comes to a difficult child. The principal, a capable and godly woman if I'd ever met one, called me nearly every week. The range of Spud's misdeeds widely varied. Some of them were serious and mystifying. We were doing everything we knew to do, seeking multiple avenues of professional help, while also trying to parent two other children. The tears and frustrations were innumerable. Baffled, I'd sometimes say to him, "Son, why on earth did you do that?"

He didn't know. He really didn't.

When he was in the second grade, I was asked to come early for afternoon car pool because the principal needed a few minutes. My heart sank. I knew this drill. I also knew how hard the school was trying. From start to finish, they were never anything but fair with us. This time Spud had needed to go to the bathroom in the middle of a class period. What is the teacher to do but believe a child, even one she cannot trust as far as she can toss him, who looks terribly pained of bladder? To Spud's great fortune, he entered the boys' room at the precise time the kindergartners were taking their bathroom break. Four little boys were lined up at the urinals when Spud was inspired to turn the light off, leaving the room pitch-black, causing them to lose concentration and panic, thereby hosing one another down.

I listened and nodded. It was a terrible thing he'd done. The boys didn't have a change of clothes. Some of them cried. Spud and I walked straight to the car without exchanging a single word. And this once—just this once—I set my head down on the steering wheel and burst out laughing. The two of us laughed until our sides screamed. I knew then that boy was bright. I'd not know what to do with him. I wouldn't be a great success with him. I wouldn't be able to love him to wholeness. But I knew he was bright. And, my, that boy was beautiful.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WITH SPUD IN SCHOOL, my study life ramped up. I could study from school bell to school bell if I wanted, and much of the time, I wanted. The more I studied, the more I wanted to teach what I learned. I'd added on a Thursday morning class at a Baptist church closer to my home in hopes of taking a group deeper in the Scriptures than Sunday school accommodated. Bible Study Fellowship and Kay Arthur's Precept Upon Precept Bible studies were stirring up ravenous appetites in Christian women for homework in addition to weekly Bible study lectures. My class began harassing me—in the holiest way—to write segments of homework for them to complete between Thursdays. I taught a series on a collection of Psalms the next semester and threw together some very basic assignments. They weren't great, but they invited the women into the experience as full participants rather than passive recipients. The difference would prove life changing for all of us.

Shortly before the next semester, I stumbled onto something in a daily Bible reading plan that, seemed to me, appeared on the pages out of nowhere. After the Lord rescued his people from their slavery in Egypt, he led them into the wilderness—that much I knew—and told them through his servant Moses to build a mobile structure for him according to his exact instructions, and there he would meet with them. The detail alone was astounding. Chapter after chapter followed, documenting precise measurements, colors, textures, furnishings, embroidery, and lighting. Who knew God had such a flair for architecture and interior design? One golden calf, two broken tablets, a plague, a cleft of the rock, and two new tablets later, the people of God followed the pattern of God. And sure enough, when the structure was accomplished to the minutest detail, God kept his promise. A cloud settled over the Tabernacle, and his glory filled the house.

As long as the cloud was directly over it, the Israelites knew to stay put. When the cloud lifted, they knew to pick up and move with it. I'd never seen anything more fascinating.

With the kind of naiveté only a first-timer could possess, I got a bright idea. *My class wants homework. I'll do a series and write them homework on this!* Mind you, I had exactly zero training in writing curriculum. My attempt was to take them on the same journey in Exodus—*turn here, now turn to the book of Hebrews and watch this come together*—that had, at times, moved me facedown to the floor. I got in so far over my head, I was buried alive. I wrote a ten-week Bible study in real time for several hundred women *as we went*. Through most of the course, the class was only one week behind me. I finished it not because I ever figured out what I was doing, but because I'd made a commitment to my class members.

While the clock counted down every second of my children's school hours, I studied and wrote maniacally. Every Tuesday afternoon, I turned in five new days of extensive homework to my dear friend Johnnie, who oversaw women's ministry at the church where we met. All day each Wednesday, she ran off copies by hand on an old-school mimeograph machine for our class members. On Wednesday nights, she collated and three-hole-punched them, and on Thursdays at the beginning of each class, she handed them out. Johnnie and I kept up this pace for two and a half months, fifty days of homework in all, a minimum of four pages for each day. She could have strangled me. I could have strangled myself.

Except for one thing.

Jesus met me there in the small dining room of our home where I'd set up my first word processor. I'd either bought, borrowed, or checked out so many books and commentaries from the First Baptist Church library that my rectangular table looked like a model of a city skyline. Papers were everywhere in the form of stapled articles, rough drafts, or wads of lessons I'd printed out, proofread, and trashed. It was a mash-up. A disaster area. But it was the most intense time I'd ever spent with God.

I moved into that Tabernacle in the wilderness for weeks on end and fed on the Bread of the Presence. I bathed in the bronze basin. I was as high as a kite from sniffing incense from the altar in the Holy Place. I'd awakened to a startling awareness that Jesus was more real, more vivid and alive, more utterly conscious, engaged, and energized right here among mortals in the briars and thorns than anyone we could see.

I worked so hard during those months of research and writing, I didn't know what to do with myself when the course was over. The crash was violent. Breakers of fear began to hit me at the first stoplight on my way home that final Thursday. I drove headlong into an emptiness, a void, that was instantaneous and unexpected, entering me whole and hollowing me out. I still find the haste with which it hit me to be curious. I was no weakling. I was a survivor. Headstrong, self-disciplined. I'd learned to run my race of faith weighted down and against heavy winds. But I'd never run into this wall of nothingness, and now I'd run into it going ninety-nine miles per hour.

Writing a second study of equal volume hadn't seriously occurred to me and, had it, I would have known instinctively the first experience couldn't be replicated. Some things can't be mimeographed. Five years earlier in my Bible doctrine class, I'd shaken awake to a world of study I knew I never wanted to leave. I'd been climbing that mountain ever since, and the last several months, I'd made it to the top, to the tip of my mortal experience with the divine. I'd get to stick a flag in the treeless, sun-scorched ground, but I would not get to stay.

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Thirty years have blown off the calendar since that season of my life, and while I've climbed many a mountain and beheld vistas that took my breath away, that was my Everest. My thin air, my once-in-a-lifetime climb. I would not hike back down to sea level. I'd jump from the cliff.

I received a phone call from my beloved pastor within twenty-four hours. "Beth, I need you to do me a favor."

“Of course! What is it?”

“A missionary couple we love very much are back in the States staying at our house for a couple of days and in need of some help and healing. The wife is struggling with abuse in her childhood, and I’d like for you to spend some time with her.”

I was taken aback. I’d only recently referenced my own background of abuse and done so in very general terms. I’d made no big boasts of healing, nor had I received a moment’s counseling. Quite appropriately, my pastor wanted to make sure she was in the safe company of a woman and one who understood and could empathize and encourage, but I wasn’t sure I was the one. I was young. Ill-equipped and early-in.

“I just don’t know, Pastor. I just—”

“Would you pray about it and let me know tomorrow? They are only in Houston for a few days. I told her I was almost sure you’d be willing to minister to her.”

“Oh, I’m so willing to minister to her, but I just . . . well, yes, I will pray about it.”

And I did. And the next day I told him I didn’t have peace about it.

My pastor was a very persuasive man, but by no stretch of the imagination was he forcefully authoritarian. For him to come across as a bully would be a severe misrepresentation. The fact was, he believed in me and believed with all his heart I could help her. These were days when women rarely came forward to say they’d been abused. He knew I wasn’t a counselor. He just wanted me to hear this woman out, and he assumed the only thing holding me back was a lack of confidence in myself.

Driving to his house, I knew I was making a mistake. A terrible foreboding flipped my stomach. As promised, they left the two of us alone. We sat at a table and she, a woman beautiful and incalculably dear to God and worthy to be heard, began to tell me her story. Best I can recollect, she’d talked about fifteen minutes when I could see her lips moving but no longer make out what she was saying. My ears started ringing. Perspiration

beaded on my upper lip and the blood seemed to rush to my head as if I were swinging upside down again from the monkey bars on the school ground across from my childhood home.

I tried to shake out of it. *Listen to her. This is important to her. Pay attention!* I couldn't focus to save my life. I could barely make out the features on her face. I was engulfed in the blurry edges of a dream scene, the table where we were sitting, now some thirty feet long, the two of us on opposite ends. Mouths moving but no sounds. I shivered. *It's too hot in here. No, it's too cold. Pull yourself together. What is wrong with you?*

I can't recall a single word I said to her. I have no idea if I acted as bizarre as I felt. I don't have a notion whether I prayed with her as I normally would pray with any woman in turmoil. I'd give anything if this dear woman had been in better hands than mine that day. Two drowning people cannot save each other. I was too vulnerable, caught in midair, free-falling from a mountaintop into a dark abyss. I don't know if I behaved normally when my pastor and his wife returned or if I muttered unintelligibly. I don't know how I got to the car or drove home.

What I do know is that scenes from my childhood and adolescence began playing in front of me, like on a silver screen, one right after another. I viewed them like a one-person audience. Like an outside party, a voyeur in the back of the theater. The scenes, situations, and players varied. Some were scenes of sins against me. Others, scenes of my own sins. Others, no one's sins but Adam's. Just the scathing, scorching-hot, flailing reality of being alive on this fearsome, fallen soil. I'd known most of those experiences occurred. I hadn't forgotten them. But I'd shut myself off from them.

The Lord alone knows why this missionary's story swung the door so wide open on my youth. She certainly bore no responsibility for my baffling reaction. She was brave, and what she did was good and right and vital. Her story was known and heard and esteemed by heaven. She mattered. Her experiences mattered. God help me, I don't even know what happened to

her after that. I've been on the receiving end of innumerable accounts from the mouths of women and girls since then, no few of them graphic, and yet never been triggered to such a degree.

The door that swung wide on my past was bound to open at some point. It was begging to be opened, the knob throbbing. I would not be able to seek any measure of authentic wholeness until everything behind it spilled out into the light.

What happened at the table during the missionary's account kept happening almost every time I shut my eyes for several months. My mind turned into a circus, clever clowns with melting faces playing tricks on me. I couldn't tell reality from fantasy. Worst of all, I couldn't tell what was God and what was the devil.

I did my best to function as normally as possible for my children, but they knew I was out of character. If my instability was as obvious to them as it was to me, I'd say I can't imagine how frightening it must have been. But unfortunately, I can. I knew well what it was like to think your mother is losing her mind. I didn't crawl into bed because, unlike my mother, I was terrified of closing my eyes. I managed to live by rote, doing mechanical things like straightening up the house, cooking supper, checking to see if homework was done, taking them here and there. We went to church throughout. Foolish woman that I was, I kept teaching Sunday school. God knows what I taught. Then night would fall, and I'd whirl into a black hole.

Keith was having problems of his own and had withdrawn into his own world, but not far enough removed to miss my compromised condition. He recounts times he awakened during the night and found me curled up behind a chair, disoriented and talking in half-realities. These days we'd know to go to a hospital. Those days were not these days. *What hospital? And where? And with what money?* The person in the mirror became unrecognizable and loathe-worthy to me. I couldn't trust my judgment or my perceptions. My brain felt like it had jarred loose from the skull, floating now in a laboratory jar. "Dissect this one. She was crazy, you know. Disturbed. This will be interesting."

Three hours of sleep. Get up, Beth. Read your Bible. Pray. Confess your sins. Your awful sins. Get the kids up. Do the things. Iron, iron, iron. Play the music. Don't let them see the wreckage behind your eyes. Don't let them figure it out. Get them off to school. Wash the dishes, Beth. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, what has become of me? What will become of us? Do you still love me? Do you still love me? Do you still love me?

Tormenting thoughts engulfed me, and guilt for what I interpreted solely as a grotesque and ruinous estate slid me shoulder-deep into the mud of despair. I reached a point where I believed my mind would snap and I'd lose my children.

Don't let go. Don't let go. Whatever you do, don't let go.

I was thirty-four, a mother of three with a fulfilling ministry, getting to do what I loved to do, on the verge of total self-destruction. In my life story, this was my perfect storm. The best I can calculate, this season was the violent collision of three forces, unequal in strength but all stronger than I and each nearly impossible to distinguish from the other. Dividing them was sorting the wind.

One force was my troubled past. I'd kept that broken person crouched down as long as she was willing, and the moment I became too vulnerable to cover for her, she stretched her folded legs and stood to her feet, the size of Goliath. Some of the guilt and self-hatred that plagued me in the midst and aftermath of this season came from the absolute certainty that others had suffered far worse and handled it far better. How pathetic could I be?

Another force in this perfect storm came from the domain of darkness above and below, from the haunts of demons tormenting bearers of the divine image, where unseeable wolves are unleashed to steal, kill, and destroy. A darkness descended on me during those months that wasn't simply the absence of light. It was the presence of evil. Intelligent, cogent evil with a frighteningly uncanny knack for timing and the wherewithal to cause complete havoc. It surrounded my home and closed in on it and, had God not given it a boundary it could not pass, would have consumed us to dust. It came for my mind, my heart, my body, my husband, my marriage, my children, my home, my relationships, my fruitfulness, my hope, my joy,

my ministry, my faith, and my future. The old flashbacks from my youth have faded now, dissipating into the light. Any flashbacks that make me shudder these days are of this season.

The third force, preeminent over all persons, principalities, and powers, was God himself. He was at hand in the fury, hidden and unhidden, revealing—not himself so much, but the pact I'd make with self-destruction. It was a time of divine testing, of tearing down and clearing out. The first months of my perfect storm, the worst part, when my mind was the least coherent, lasted the better part of a year. I'd spend the rest of my thirties in the wake of it, sorting through the rubble, trying to understand and recover from the trauma and navigate how to go forward.

Part of me would not survive this season. I'd experienced a killing. God had come with sword and shield to kill what was killing me. Destructive patterns I'd fallen into all my life would ultimately be broken. I'd stared into the surfaced face of the victim lurking within who kept falling for lies, falling prey to poisonous relationships. I'd ultimately get the help I needed to keep from self-destructing, and my victim mentality would gradually be starved of oxygen.

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In the fresh wake of this awful season—timing I see as no coincidence—the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention came calling for the Tabernacle study I'd written. They'd pick it up, clean it up, and publish it. It would be their first official women's Bible study. Their edited version would still be hefty, but I smile thinking of the enduring, hardworking women who humored me, working through every line of the voluminous original version. They and I joined those Israelites in the wilderness, and though we could not see the cloud nor the fire, we felt the heat. We moved with Jesus that semester, and for many of us, there was no going back.

I would write four more Bible studies in my thirties in happy partnership with Lifeway Christian Resources, with numerous others to follow in the decades to come. Though every cover bore the same author's

name, I was not the same woman. Despite the title of the Bible study closest to my life message, I didn't break free from the bondage built into my past. I was *broken* free. Over and over I'd plead to the Lord the words of the psalmist David: "Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice" (Psalm 51:8, KJV).

Once you've broken to pieces, the luxury of imagining yourself unbreakable evaporates. Your outlook changes, not for the better in every way but in most ways, I think. Does compassion ever come easy? Where are those with no need of mercy to find it within themselves when someone desperately needs it? I still bear scars sustained in the casting-about of a perfect storm, but the hit to my pride, having believed myself whole and above certain lows, has never scarred over or scabbed. I figure it never will. I hope it never will. It's not a bad idea for wounded pride to bleed for a lifetime. Let that self-righteous fool in me hemorrhage.

Much of my mid-to-late thirties was spent in my parental happy place: on the bleachers at legions of volleyball games and basketball games, hollering and carrying on, consuming fistfuls of popcorn, containers of concession-stand nachos, cokes, and Snickers bars. The parents of our children's teammates comprised the near entirety of our social circle. We knew little to nothing about one another's personal lives. We loved each other's kids. We knew when they were having off days on the court and on days. We cheered them on and, when they'd let us, cheered them up.

I was still wet behind the ears and under the arms from my perfect storm in those days. I can't recall a time I sat flat-bottomed on a set of bleachers that I did not have thoughts like this go through my head: *I'm here. I'm sane. Shaken but sane. And there—right there before my eyes—there are my beautiful children. God, thank you, God, thank you.*

I was as good as done, sinking to the ocean floor, and he who walked on water plunged his hand beneath the churning brine and brought me forth from the belly of the sea.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"BETHIE?"

The hour was unusually early for my brother Wayne to call. He worked live-theater hours, getting home past midnight, rarely to glimpse the sunrise. His soft-spoken voice carried an intensity even in the one-word endearment, instantly causing my throat to clench.

"I think you better come on out here. I think she probably won't make it through today."

"You calling the rest of them, Bro?"

"Yeah, I just called Sandra. I'll call Gay and Tony next."

"I'll change clothes and be in the car in ten minutes. I love you, Wayne." Oh, mercy, I did. Mercy, I do.

Our mother was dying. I was forty-one. It was early August, and in two short weeks, I'd move Amanda into the freshman dorm at Texas A&M. Melissa was entering her junior year of high school.

We were already waist-deep in a season of loss. Spud had been back with his biological mother, Keith's cousin, for many months. She'd met a decent guy, she said, and had given birth to a second son and wanted her firstborn back. She was clean and holding down a job. Spud was eleven years old by then, and wounds of parental abandonment gaped wider with age and grew increasingly infected and angry. We could have refused to let Keith's cousin have her son and perhaps taken her to court, but right or wrong, we didn't resist.

Spud had been with us seven years by then, and we, a family gulping and treading water to stay afloat, had given him what we had. In our eyes, we'd failed abysmally. Keith had mostly withdrawn from him. Their challenges were similar enough that every flame near our home lit both fuses. I'd seen all the specialists, exhausted all the resources, and tried all

the methods and come up ridiculously short—not just on answers for Spud, but also in successfully mothering the boy, the one gift I had been most confident and enthusiastic I could offer him. You haven't drunk deep from the cup of unfiltered failure until you've failed at what you were best at. No chaser on earth rids the tongue entirely of such an acrid taste.

My marriage needed attention. My daughters needed attention. I was determined for them to get it. It was time. It was also devastating and guilt-inducing. The second-guessing still haunts me. I didn't know if Spud would do well with his biological mom, but I'd grown certain by this point that he wouldn't do well without her.

I didn't know what I was going to do without mine. I had been filling the dishwasher with supper plates two years earlier when she phoned to tell me about an upcoming biopsy. I wiped off my hands, pitched the dishrag, and backed up against the refrigerator. Butterflies migrated into my stomach.

"Hopefully, it's just benign tissue. You know, fibrocystic disease. They've told you before you had that. Was it a little mushy and indistinct?"

"No."

"Sore like before a cycle?"

"No."

"Still, Mom, it could be anything. I mean, has the breast dimpled or anything like that?"

"Yes," she said weakly, almost defeatedly, like she already knew exactly how all of it would go. My back slid against the stainless-steel door as I sank to the floor. I sat cross-legged on the tile for the rest of our conversation and tried to control the shakiness of my voice.

One breast was removed, then a similar lump developed in the other, metastasizing rapidly. We really never did get ahead of it. Dad took her for radiation treatments, and Gay and I tagged along to rounds of chemo and doctors' appointments. Cancer is vicious. Ravenous. Hers was not satisfied to merely eat her alive on the inside, consuming muscle and fat like schools

of microscopic piranhas, leaving nothing but flesh on her bones. It also externalized in large, gruesome sores on the skin surrounding the two horizontal scars where breasts had once been.

We'd have given her anything she wanted just to soothe her pain and fears. Mom wanted then what she'd wanted all along: her children and Campho-Phenique. We'd been slathered down with the latter our entire lives for every conceivable malady: chiggers, mosquito bites, fleabites, tick bites, cat scratches, warts, blisters, hives, wasp stings, fever blisters, burns. In our family, it was the cure-all, the one dependable remedy in a spitefully uncooperative world. Who could think the Lord unkind to Mom when countless tubes of prescription cream failed to do for her chest sores what one bottle of Campho-Phenique accomplished? I took it as a sign—of what, I cannot clearly say. A sign, I suppose, that God knew his patient. To be a stranger to God in sickness and death is an incurable blow.

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Wayne called my other siblings and me from the cordless phone in Mom and Dad's kitchen that morning. Soon after her doctor indicated her cancer had advanced to a terminal stage, Wayne had wrapped up a contract on the latest show he'd conducted in Vegas, arranged for temporary work at Theatre Under the Stars in Houston, and driven his wife, Lisa, and their toddler, Ben, all the way from the Nevada desert to our parents' home in Sugar Land, Texas.

They'd lived with my parents for the past nine months, Lisa caring for Mom around the clock like a combination nurse-cook-housekeeper-cleaner and Wayne tending to her as best he could while still earning a necessary paycheck. Weakened beyond the rallying point, Mom spent most of her days on the couch, catnapping and watching her youngest grandbaby, curly-headed and beautiful, play with blocks and toys teethed and well-seasoned with the sweet slobber of a passel of older cousins. Having watched her progress for months on end, Wayne and Lisa perceived from her condition that morning that she'd not likely make it till sundown. They'd prove right.

All of us, children and grandchildren alike, made it to Mom's side with long, hard hours to spare. The whole lot of us crowded around her twin bed for much of the time, then we'd take turns, a few in, a few out, never leaving her alone. She tried to talk to us and with urgency, but her words were hieroglyphic. I'm only a little ashamed to say this was lucky for her five adult children because it afforded ample license to exercise our own creative interpretations. Conveniently, she said to each of us in her unknown tongues all the things we most wanted to hear from her. Among those things were how much she loved us, how proud she was of us, how she probably shouldn't have said this or that and how each of us were her favorite. We knew she felt all these things and, hallelujah, we'd finally deciphered them.

My daughters, much like their cousins, were devastated. The downside of human closeness is that, to the degree you have loved their presence, you grieve their loss. Amanda, the tenderest of empaths, couldn't bear to see her nanny dying. Melissa couldn't bear to leave the room. They loved their grandmother equally and processed her suffering distinctly. As shadows from the afternoon sun crept across the carpet, dimming the light to mark the inevitability of night, Melissa came into the den and held her hand out to her big sister and said, "Come in with me."

"I can't," Amanda insisted, shaking her head, the rims of her eyelids bright red.

"Yes, you can."

"No, I can't!"

"Why?" Melissa asked.

"Because I'll cry!"

"So, cry! She knows we're sad. She's sad, too."

Amanda hesitated a moment, then took Melissa's hand, and the two girls disappeared into the small bedroom and had their nanny all to themselves for a little while. They knelt right by her side, held her limp hand and talked to her through their tears. She talked back to them, too.

"Nanny," Melissa said, "guess what. I just got my driver's license. I drove all the way over here on the freeway and everything."

Mom dramatically gasped.

“Like she was hollering, ‘Somebody call the police!’” Melissa interpreted.

This was how I knew Mom was still in there. Still coherent. Aware we were near. Still witty and mischievous, even there on the brink of death. There with her organs giving out. There with her cheeks caving in. Nothing delighted her more than making those kids laugh. She’d dreaded Melissa getting her driver’s license from the first moment she saw her haul like a wild goat with its tail afire down the driveway on a Big Wheel.

Mom talked to those two girls with all the oxygen and feeling she had left in her lungs. She told them she loved them like there was no tomorrow.

It didn’t matter that they couldn’t make out the words. They knew what she was saying. *“You are my best friends. You all are.”*

Sensing the swelling weariness and angst in a small house full of grieving people, the hospice nurse asked to see us in the den.

“You’ve each asked me how much longer I think it will be, and I can’t answer that. But what I can tell you, if you’re longing for your mother’s suffering to end, is that if I were her, looking into the faces of all the people I loved most, I wouldn’t want to let go either. I’m not telling you what to do, but if I were you, I’d give her a little space.”

We’d given her everything *but* space. She’d wanted us to entertain her in her dying months just like her living months, and that’s what we’d done. Nothing was sacred. A month earlier, we’d dragged out all her turbans and worn them tight like we were bald as onions, too, and she’d laughed and coughed and laughed and coughed. And smoked. Doctor told her not to. Way she saw it, she’d given up enough. Hers wasn’t going to be death by cigarette anyway. But she hadn’t smoked today. She was never going to smoke again unless the Lord saw fit to have a pack in one hand and a lighter in the other when he met her at the pearlies.

Now it was just the waiting. We did what hospice said. We let the house get quiet and the floors creak. We were still near but not making a big racket, breathing right in her face and trying to get a response from her. We knew by the slowing rise and fall of her chest when the time was drawing

near. We stepped back and let Dad move up close to her head. One of us said to Dad, “Tell her we release her.” I think it was me. The hospice nurse had said it might help, but I regretted it the moment I said it. He cradled her face in his hands and whispered something in her ear.

Our mom, Esther Aletha Rountree Green, opened her mouth wide to catch one last breath from the thinning air but it would not come. There would be no waking her. No more Gay, Tony, and me, tiptoeing into her bedroom in our tiny three-person train, whispering, “Mom?” No more scaring us half to death with a sudden loud awakening of, “What? What? What is it?”

Our own nanny, Minnie Ola, spent torturous moments hovering outside Mom’s bedroom door in the days on Twelfth Street in Arkadelphia when Mom would sink into the mattress, swallowed up in a shroud of sheets, and go someplace we could not reach. So, maybe Jesus let Nanny stand with him at the door on this day, when her daughter shook awake to bliss, and flash an eternal smile with no false teeth and the glistening tears on her face evaporated. Maybe right then Esna Irene, Prentis, and Anthony Dalton, her three tiny siblings tucked in the ground before she was born, ran out from under their mother’s apron laughing and playing. Maybe Mom tumbled to the ground, to the greenest and cleanest of grass, tackled by gleeful, childlike affections of the Kingdom of Heaven. Maybe that’s when she heard a fiddle playing and she knew without looking that her daddy, Micajah, was the one playing it. She’d know the sound of his bow sliding across those strings anywhere. Maybe it was foot-tapping Saturday night on the Rountree porch in the sweet by-and-by.

Maybe.

But what I know for certain—as certain as a mortal mind can be—is that my mother finally knew she was loved by Jesus. Loved completely. Loved all along. She’d believed to her bones Jesus was partial and certainly not to her. I’d talked my face blue trying to reason with her. But now she knew. Now she knew that, if Jesus was partial, he was partial to all his own,

just like she'd been to all her own. Jesus had never lost interest in her. Never replaced her with another. He'd never lied to her. Never cheated on her. He never even thought she was crazy.

The floor came out from under our Green family. We knew it would. Dad remarried in six months. We knew he would. And it was just as well. He'd done his time. God knows, she'd done hers. But we would never not miss her. Never stop aching for her. Never stop wondering if she was happy and laughing. Never stop hoping she'd forgotten the hard parts. We five, who never agree on much of anything else, agreed unanimously on what we'd have chiseled into the granite beneath her name: "Queen of Everything."

She was safe near the water now, eternal Sunday mornings now, her momma in her pillbox hat, singing, "Shall We Gather at the River?"

Yes, we'll gather at the river, she'll croon. *The beautiful, the beautiful river. Gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IT'S A PECULIAR THING, this living long enough to take a good look back. We reflect on moments that seemed ordinary enough at the time, when an idea germinated that turned out to be enormously consequential. Then there's the opposite experience: the stumbling and fumbling into something that sticks. You're a barely passable farmer on your way to a particular field with a carton of seed, and you accidentally trip and spill it onto soil you'd never choose, and a few seasons later, you're staring at acres of cornstalks, scratching your head, wondering where they came from. My nanny would say, "Some things don't make a lick'a sense."

If we're people of faith, we chalk it up to God's sovereignty, and if we do perchance have a lick of sense, we refrain from making a formula of it. God appears to be robustly committed to disproving human formulas. I believe in vision casting. But I believe in it only to the degree we accept that mortals, by and large, have distorted vision. We have a nearly immutable tendency to see things either bigger or smaller than they really are. And truth be told, we're poor prophets, squinting to see what's only a few inches in front of us.

The same year my mom's soul vacated her sick body for heaven and my firstborn vacated her bedroom at home for a dorm room at college, I was asked to lunch by a couple of colleagues from Lifeway Christian Resources in Nashville. They said I could choose the place. I loved these people by now. I also feel sorry for folks who live outside our state line and have to deal with wretched attempts at Tex-Mex, so I took them to Pappasito's Cantina as a mercy.

We chitchatted through the first wicker basket of tortilla chips, hot from the fryer. Novices don't know that every Mexican restaurant can be judged by its salsa. If it's poor, don't order. Simply leave a tip for the

waiter's trouble and proceed directly to your car and put on your sunglasses so no one will see you crying.

Pappasito's can make salsa like wizards stirring up magic potions, and their confidence in their enchantments is displayed in liberality. Each person at the table gets his or her own little bowl. This is as it should be. Stay out of my salsa and I'll stay out of yours. This is key to long-lasting relationships in Texas. I was on my second bowl when my guests said, "We'll get right on to why we're here. We were wondering, since God has been so gracious to bless our partnership in Bible studies, if we might think about putting on some events together."

I'd gotten a bit of a heads-up this question was coming, so I'd been thinking about it for a couple of days. I was already doing all the events I could handle, so these couldn't be additions. They would have to be substitutes, trade-ins of a wide variety of events and conferences for something more uniform, and I'm resistant to an overabundance of sameness. These were creative people at my table, though, and not the type who wasted your time, and anyway, I'd not gotten my enchiladas yet.

"What would that look like?" I fear overcontrol in the same way a sane person fears stepping barefooted into a nest of rattlesnakes. I'm not proud of it. It's just a fact. So, the first thing I needed to know was this. "Would I have to speak on something we're publishing—like the latest Bible studies—or would I have the freedom to develop the material from scratch?"

"No, no, we wouldn't expect you to speak on the Bible studies, unless you thought that was what the Lord wanted you to do. We'd have in mind for you to teach however he led."

"Could it be intentionally interdenominational?" Mind you, I couldn't have been more denominational in my own church attendance if my life depended on it, but from the earliest days of my calling, I'd wanted to serve beyond Southern Baptist walls. That vision was already in drive—not exactly speeding, but not meandering either—and my heart would sink to put it in reverse.

"We'd work extremely hard at it." I knew they meant it. These were not showmen. These were some of the best people I knew.

Right about now, the server approached our table with a giant tray of plates balanced on his left palm. Once my colleagues were appropriately impressed with their fare, I beheld my own. The enchiladas were just the way I like them: two corn tortillas rolled into perfect cylinders, melted yellow cheese oozing from the ends, tucked under a generous blanket of chili gravy—not too thick, not too thin—topped with shredded cheddar cheese and bordered by flaky Spanish rice and soupy refried beans. Lord, hear my plea: let my final meal be this.

We asked God to bless the food, the conversation, our friendship, and our families. These were my people. I understood how they talked and prayed and thought and ate. Southern Baptists don't pick at their food. What we don't drink, we eat. About the time I was thinking how to bluntly ask the benefit of doing joint events, they got right to it.

"We'd choose the number of events you'd be interested in doing a year, then we'd take care of everything but the teaching and the music. We'd do all the scheduling, setup, preparation, and managing. We'd book your flights and hotel. Your part would be to show up and do what you love most. *Teach.*"

The thought of another office taking care of all the logistics was rapturous. I had exactly two employees, one full-time, the other part-time, and we were way over our heads. "How many teaching sessions?"

"We're thinking, what, *three*?"

I nodded my head. Flying in here and there to give a twenty-minute message was fine, but what I loved most was to actually get somewhere with a group: to move from A to B, then from B to C. So far we were on the same page. "Just one night away from home?"

"Yes. We figure we'd go Friday evening and Saturday till noon. The schedule would leave sufficient time to fly home that evening and still be able to go to our churches on Sunday."

Lifeway's first priority was the local church. It was mine, too. Coming home on Saturday nights would be a must because of my Sunday school class. I could miss a handful of Sundays a year but no more than that. "What would we call it?"

“What would you *want* to call it?”

“Well, you know, the name of my ministry is Living Proof. Could we call it that?”

“Sure! We could call it Living Proof Seminar.”

I carry an offense against certain words for no reason at all except the sound of them, and *seminar* is one of them. But since I loved everything else my guests from Lifeway put on the table, I figured I could live with it.

I had one last question, and it wasn’t small. This aspect of the event would be as crucial as the teaching. “Who’d lead worship?”

“We’re praying that through. We’re trusting God knows exactly who it needs to be. Beth, honestly, we don’t even know if churches will respond to an outside event coming in, but we’re willing to give it our best shot if you are.”

I was every bit willing. A few weeks later, they let me know they’d found a great pick for worship leader. I couldn’t wait to hear.

“It’s a young guy in his twenties. Married, brand-new daddy. Name is Travis Cottrell. Seems to be a really good leader in the making, and we feel like he’ll put together a solid team.” I rubbed my head, wishing I had an ice pack. A man? Seriously? For a women’s event?

Travis turned out to be one of the most astonishingly gifted individuals I’ve ever encountered. And he was uncannily humble, hilarious, and just plain likable. I tend to be a fan of likable. After my first Living Proof Seminar with Travis, I fed a piece of paper through the fax machine to Lifeway with three words on it: *It’s a match.*

Travis would become like a son to me; his wife, Angela, like a daughter-in-law. They’d add two more children to their brood, and I’d get to watch all three of them grow up.

The caliber of singers and musicians God sent our way was an embarrassment of riches. Each of them, true worshipers. We’d have new ones come and others go, and yet the generous and humorous culture never changed. No big conflicts. No big dramas. No split-ups. No sketchy relationships between members. Jealousies and rivalries never raised their heads either, unless we were playing Fishbowl during flight delays.

Not many things in my life have neared ideal. I knew life was hard by the time I was six years old. But the idea borne over bowls of salsa, over chips, queso, and jalapeños, over enchiladas and chili gravy, over handmade tortillas and garlic butter that ordinary day in Houston, Texas, by God's kindness, came mighty close.

That said, no amount of training could have prepared us for what was ahead, and had it been prophesied with any accuracy, I'd have been the first one to tuck tail and run. I handed Lifeway about half of my travel schedule, partnering in a dozen events a year. The Bible studies were picking up momentum, and we'd just published *Breaking Free*, the series I'd written after emerging from the abyss where I'd faced down my past.

Let me rephrase that: where my past had faced me down. I'd been sure at times that I'd either die in the process of healing up or lose my marriage, family, or mental faculties. Instead I came out of those months and years with a liberation in Christ that changed my insides—the ways I thought and felt and the ways I viewed life—dramatically enough that, for a while, it seemed to me like I was wearing someone else's body and thinking with someone else's brain. I wasn't fixed—I'm still not fixed—but I was free in a way that striving alone could not possibly have won me. I'd been on the receiving end of a miracle Jesus can do with a handful of fragments offered to him by individuals at the end of themselves.

All the studies were better received than we could have predicted on our best day, but *Breaking Free* hit a nerve. Our part of the evangelical world didn't talk much about topics like strongholds, spiritual warfare, freedom from bondage, and breaking yokes of addiction or oppression. I probably wouldn't have talked about them either had the harrowing ride I'd taken in my thirties not wrecked me to the point where I knew that if God wasn't bigger and abler than I'd been raised to believe, I was ruined. It turned out that he was indeed bigger.

What happened next indicated I might not have been the only one who needed hope that, if you trusted Jesus and really sought to know him, you didn't have to stay the way you'd been. Didn't have to live your life beaten

down or up, or with a victim mentality, or as a lifelong addict. Didn't have to stay in a maddening spiral. You didn't have to turn out like your parents or their parents, not if you didn't want to.

Breaking Free skyrocketed, and instead of leaving the other studies in a cloud of dust, it caught them up in the vortex. The more women took the video-driven Bible studies, the more they sought out a similar experience live. In order to make the distinction clear, the name of our events transitioned, thank God, from Living Proof Seminar to Living Proof Live.

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By my midforties our Living Proof Live events had outgrown church sanctuaries, and we were heading into arenas. Then the arenas started selling out. Our first ten-thousand-person event was in Pensacola, Florida. Despite every butterfly in Escambia County fluttering in my stomach, I tried to keep my head down and stay focused on preparation for the three messages. But when I stood up from the desk to get dressed for the Friday night session, I made the mistake of glancing out the hotel room window. The tenth floor captured a panoramic view of the grounds surrounding the arena. Throngs of women were lined up outside, waiting for the doors to open. We wouldn't begin for two hours.

My stomach lurched into my throat. I went facedown on the brown tweed carpet. *Dear God, dear God, dear God, dear God. Help me, help me, help me.*

I'm not opposed to well-placed hyperbole to make a point, but I'd have a hard time overdramatizing the effect this season in large arenas had on my insides. There were times I wondered if that feeling in my stomach, all that churning and burning, was the lining peeling off. I pictured an autopsy being performed on my body someday and the medical examiner saying to Keith, "Did you know your wife did not have a single inch of intestines?"

How in the world does anyone live up to arena-size expectations? What even makes it worth trying to find your car in the parking lot when it's over? This would be the cue for a smug saint to say, "It wasn't about you,

Beth." I knew that. All of us on the team knew why we were there. We never once lost sight of it. We wanted to exalt Christ and please him more than anything in the world. But the sheer task of preparing and posturing ourselves before God, trying to be crucified to our own flesh and filled with the Spirit, enduring the relentless spiritual warfare, and praying feverishly for his presence to be among us to save, rescue, deliver, and satisfy was monumental. There's a reverence for the enormity of divine trust and the recognition you won't prove worthy of it.

Those arena events marked the wildest, most surreal experiences of our ministry. We saw God move—*felt* God move—in ways we lacked the vocabulary to describe. We saw marvels of God, beautiful and mystifying. Yet no matter how celebratory an environment, there is no such thing as a crowd lightly populated by affliction. We saw people in gut-wrenching pain, soaked in what seemed unrelievable suffering, some who'd been suffering so long they could no longer weep. We heard endless stories, held people in our arms who'd gone through catastrophic losses, and prayed for people in circumstances we had no idea if we ourselves could withstand.

And we endured a thousand mishaps in a world where the quirks exceeded the perks. The bowels of an arena serve as backstage, and since they're windowless by design, they're usually poorly lit. They also tend to be a bit dank and sometimes a little spooky. Once, when observing a moment's privacy in a toilet stall, a mouse ran out from behind the bowl and scurried right between my feet. Birds, on the other hand, loose and flying around in the arena, were not nearly as startling, but they could be distracting during a teaching session. Once we had a bat. Sometimes I'd have a bee buzzing around my head while I was trying to read a Bible passage. I blame hair spray. Another time I swallowed a fly. The wardrobe mishaps were innumerable, and after a while, it was hard not to think God was causing them for his own amusement.

During the segment when people could come forward for prayer, anything at all could happen. Once when I was praying over a woman, she fell completely out in the Spirit. Now, we were interdenominational and we dearly loved and cherished our many Pentecostal attendees, but this was

early on, and I already knew the fastest way to get shut down by the Baptists was for people to start falling out. I bent over, grabbed sister by the waist on her way down, slung her deadweight up like a sack of flour, hooked her chin onto my shoulder, and whispered with no small measure of authority, “With everything in me, I ask God to bless you and grant your petitions, but I’m gonna need you to wake up in Jesus’ name or I’m gonna get fired.” She came to a few seconds later. I never did figure out what happened to make her drop the way she did, but it was months before I got guts enough to lay hands on someone again.

Another time we had an accidental exorcism. Having no clue under God’s blue heaven what we were dealing with, the way the woman was writhing on the floor, we called the paramedics. But before they could get to her, she’d slithered up like a snake, hissed, and tried to bite my coworker. Because the Lord is merciful, a woman standing nearby recognized the signs and leapt into action, calling forth every unseemly thing a soul could possibly possess from that devil-beleaguered woman in Jesus’ name, and in a minute flat, she was calm as a lamb. It was a bit too much for us. We hadn’t signed up for demons.

On occasion, we’d have individuals attend, inexplicably, in full costume. The most memorable one was a clown, dead center on the fourth row. Between the enormous orange wig, the red-ball nose, the thick, full-face makeup, gloves, and long, cartoonish shoes, it was hard to tell if it was a man or a woman. My guess was that it was a woman, only because the clown raised its hands during the praise portion and I’ve found women to be, by and large, more demonstrative in worship.

There were also the glorious parts, sacred and holy. Going to sound check midafternoon on Friday and prayer-walking an enormous room of empty seats moved me nearly to tears every time, thinking how Jesus knew precisely who’d occupy each one and how he wanted to reveal himself to her. Then, come 7:00 p.m., the sounds of ten to twenty thousand voices under one roof ascending to the throne of heaven in worship and the palpable sense of God’s delight in it were otherworldly. We tried to take in every minute, knowing it was exceedingly temporary and rare. And we

knew it was extraordinary grace. Not one person on our team believed he or she deserved to be there. I knew my being there was the scandalous work of the Cross of Christ.

The vast majority of individuals in the arenas for Living Proof Live events were women who'd come to worship Jesus and study Scripture together in an atmosphere wholly given to those two things. They wanted to be faithful to God through successes and sicknesses, sorrows, disappointments and discouragements. They were single women wanting to follow hard after Jesus. They were wives trying to hang on to their marriages. They were teenage girls who'd already sensed a calling to ministry or to the missions field. They were moms parenting alone, trying to make ends meet and raise their kids to love Jesus, as well as widows longing to find purpose in unsolicited solo journeys. They were women who'd met Jesus but wanted to get to know him and to come to love him and find that ever-elusive satisfaction in someone safe. Altogether, they were sisters in Jesus, many to whom I felt a deep connection from hours and hours we'd spent together on the pages of Bible studies. I loved them so. I love them still. And there were seekers in those audiences, those who'd come along with a friend or chanced a ticket and had no idea what they'd gotten themselves into.

Some people, of course, came with different agendas, different expectations, and ones we couldn't have met had our lives depended on it. Among those were individuals who reportedly had been sent by God to deliver me a message and intended to get to me if they had to long-jump over twenty rows of people to do it.

Or lie.

One evening I was in my hotel room preparing for an event. My assistant had given me a folder with letters and emails from women who'd written our ministry, saying they'd be attending, and I came across one of the worst stories I'd ever heard. A woman who'd be in attendance that evening had been shunned for standing up for what she believed by every person in her life: her husband, family members, friends, and fellow church

members. She'd managed to scrape together the money for the event and was hoping to gain courage to keep going. Well, I called her immediately on my cell phone and told her that she could sit with me.

When I told Ron, my colleague in charge of security, to make room for her, he sighed. "I wish you'd run that by me first."

I loved and respected Ron tremendously and was normally compliant. But as I said, I don't tend to thrive with overcontrol, and I sometimes kick against restraints for the pure freedom of it. I shrugged my shoulders dismissively and said it would be fine.

When he picked me up several hours later for the event, he said matter-of-factly, "Well, at least this one turned out better than a few others. This one has only been arrested three times, and you should know that's not her real name or her real story." Obviously, the arrests were not the objection. It was our privilege to serve former or current inmates, either one. All under the roof of a Living Proof Live event had fallen short of the glory of God. Offenses weren't the issue. Deception was.

All told, we served in all fifty states, some of them many times over, and at any given time, in a room of two generations of women from at least fifteen denominations. We had the ride of a lifetime—seats toward the front of a mighty move of God in discipleship.

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But with visibility comes scrutiny.

Once upon a time, we Christians in the world's West mostly kept to our separate compartments. The scholars and academics stayed over there in their universities, seminaries, and graduate schools. Pastors and their staff members were primarily preoccupied with their churches and, if required or desired, their denominations. Lay leaders—by that I mean volunteer servants of influence within a church body—focused largely on the individuals entrusted to them, the fellow lay leaders within their departments and staff members overseeing their departments. Christian speakers knew other Christian speakers. Sunday school teachers looked to

other Sunday school teachers. Writers were concerned with readers and knew by heart the names and styles of other authors within their fields. The lives of singers and songwriters were composed by the daily rhythms of a world of music. We all knew our places.

It was within these compartments that most of our camaraderie, encouragement, enjoyment, competition, critique, ranking, bashing, making, breaking, rivalry, gossip, appropriateness, inappropriateness, inspiration, restoration, despair, and repair took place. We were a mansion of many rooms but, generally speaking, on separate floors.

Then out of practically nowhere came the World Wide Web, and birthed from its dystopian womb, social media marched on the scene like so many Joshuas, its armies circling, shouting, and blasting horns around our compartmentalized Jerichos, and the walls came tumbling down. And outside our compartments, some of us were exceedingly, abundantly weirder than you could ask or imagine. Namely me.

My path, for instance, would hardly have crossed with a whole host of seminary presidents and professors and, God help me, seminary students. Let it be nailed on some sacred door that there is no scrutiny on earth like that which proceedeth from the mouth of a first-year seminary student. What, after all, did we who were Sunday school–taught have to do with we who were seminary taught? We were neither one pretending to be the other. We'd have simply minded our own business, judged and made fun of one another behind each other's backs, and been foils for one another's narratives. Suddenly, we were all in the same big yard—where nobody wanted to be—with the rest of the world watching.

I'd seen many a purebred theologian—by this I mean formally educated and holding fast to a well-established system by which they organize, exegete, and interpret Scripture—have their tails set on fire for this heresy or that on social media platforms, and by their own camps. The competition was fierce, and for some, the only way to get on top was to discredit those above them. All to say, if the purebreds couldn't pass the tests of public scrutiny, mongrels like me were stuck at the barbecue.

I knew early on I was over my head and in serious need of education. In my twenties, I applied to and was accepted at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, but the distance of the Houston branch from my home made it impossible to go a second semester because the schedule didn't coincide with my children's school hours. I continued being tutored by my Bible doctrine teacher until he moved out of state, and then I sought out tutoring in Greek. To supplement the few formal classes I could take, I began building a library of Bible resources so I could study on my own. Every extra dime I got from speaking or writing, I spent on Bible commentaries. Their writers became my professors. I saw no problem with this approach. The way I looked at it, I was learning from the purebreds. What could possibly go wrong?

I ordered every set of commentaries I could get my hands on, tore through them voraciously, and flourished with them. With a little more money and a little more training in technical terms and Hebrew and Greek words, I moved up to bigger leagues: multiple-volume sets that had a separate volume for virtually every book of the Bible. I had two basic standards for the resources I studied: shared belief that the Scriptures were God-breathed, complete, true, and authoritative for life and godliness, and that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and very God who came in the flesh and, though he knew no sin, was crucified for our sins, raised from the dead, ascended to God's right hand, and will one day return. I believed to my bones those two guideposts would keep me between the ditches and on orthodox ground. I didn't realize until years into my study life that my thinking was being shaped by schools of Christian thought as wide on the denominational spectrum as they could be deep.

I cycled through countless phases of religious readings. I went through a phase of reading works of renowned rabbis, one right after another. I read every book the late Abraham Joshua Heschel ever wrote and shook my head over his sheer mastery with words. I went through a phase of reading works of monks, mystics, and early church fathers and desert mothers. Then there were the reformers, of course. Oh, and the English Bible translators. I came just short of developing a crush on William Tyndale.

At least every five or six years I'd go through a Pentecostal phase. I'm not talking about the prosperity gospel variety. That's never made a speck of New Testament sense to me nor to any Pentecostal I know who takes the Gospels seriously. But I'd still check to see what their theologians and writers were saying when I was running low on faith that God still moved in miraculous ways because I knew good and well that he did. And, of course, everybody I knew either went through multiple phases with Anglican writers like C. S. Lewis, John Stott, and J. I. Packer—or they entered one once and never came out.

Perhaps some of these phases were little more than a search for my own identity, but it was the hunt for Christ himself that consciously fueled them. I'd spend my entire adult life looking for someone I'd already found. Looking for something else about him. For what his face looked like in this light or that. For what his profile looked like in this relationship or that. Spent decades looking up and down the lives of those who'd also searched for him and found him to see if they'd stumbled onto something I'd missed.

Every phase was in pursuit of some little something I might glean about walking with Jesus. Yes, even from the rabbis. Jesus was a rabbi, for starters. Further, Jesus said to know him was to know the Father. So it was no waste of time to learn from those who wrote on the Father that I might gain some riches of understanding about the Son in whom "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3). While my shelves would have undoubtedly furrowed the brows of a committed denominationalist, I was nonetheless underwhelmed by any library filled with ink drawn from one slender stream. But these curiosities produced a mongrel, and a mongrel is a mess waiting to happen.

Now, God cannot be blamed for all the twists and turns my path has taken, but I do believe he charted my hike through hills and dales that had me wading in multiple streams of Christianity. To be sure, I got in too far and lost my balance at times and had to grab on to a branch to pull myself out, but mostly I was the happier for having splashed and sloshed around in them.

I praise-danced myself dizzy in front of the sanctuary with children in charismatic churches and spoke at more of them than I can remember. I served in Methodist churches, Lutheran churches, Nazarene churches, Assembly of God churches, Bible churches, Friends churches, Presbyterian churches, and all kinds of nondenominational churches. I walked through the doors of marvelous Black churches, not only to serve, but also on occasion to simply attend, taking full part, often thinking to myself, *This is the way I was born to do church.* God allowed me to serve more Catholic women in my Tuesday night interdenominational Bible study than I could possibly count. They tended to be among the most insatiable students in our classes.

I loved this part of ministry, finding something of value to take home with me nearly everywhere I went. I wanted to be spared nothing God was willing to give. I should qualify that by saying nothing *wonderful*. I wanted, after all, to be spared skin diseases, boils, and the like, and the kinds of instructions Isaiah received. Prophesying naked does not appeal to me. I'm not even all that comfortable reading the Bible in my swimsuit. And if I hide my underwear under a rock like Jeremiah did, I'm hoping my daughters will sweetly but swiftly catch me in the act and confiscate my phone before I post a picture of it on social media.

Now, I can't say I ever asked God to speak to me from a burning bush, but one time I thought I was on the cusp of a visitation from within the holly bush by my front door. I'd ended my devotions that morning before dawn by going out on the front porch, thrusting out my arms and praying over our property and that of our neighbors. We were in a terrible drought and at high risk of fire, the nearest one a mere county over. All of a sudden, the bush three feet from where I was standing started shaking wildly and making an awful racket. Wide-eyed, I dropped my arms and steadied myself to behold what manner of greeting this was, and before I could say, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening," out from under the holly bush came the biggest armadillo I've ever seen in my life. Nothing more ubiquitously Texan had ever happened to me in prayer.

The thing is, I've had a good time with the Lord, and I hope he's had a good time with me. I've also had terribly hard times. My friend Bill reminds me that critics are the guardians of our souls. In this case, I'm as blessed as anyone I know. Critics, too, have been my teachers. I needed to know where I'd spoken out of turn, taught wrongly, or been misunderstood. As humiliating as it could be, I also needed to see at times how others saw me or hear at times how they heard me. Those in the public eye will never be relieved of criticism. It's baked in and probably should be. The trick to dealing with criticism is letting it do its good work but forbidding it to demoralize and destroy or to embitter.

What was so complex to me was how I could be so bold as to live, read, serve, speak, pray, and interact with God well beyond the norms of my lifelong and dearly loved denomination and yet be, at the same time, so thoroughly contained within it. So deeply indoctrinated by it. I suppose I felt venturing out was fine as long as I knew where I belonged. As long as I knew which way was home. As long as I knew how I identified as a follower of Jesus.

And, make no mistake, I knew. At the end of the day, at the end of *every* day, mongrel or not, I was a Southern Baptist, and I was certain it would, in all ways, keep me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MY COMING OF AGE COINCIDED with two simultaneous movements within the evangelical world that marked my life indelibly: Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and the Southern Baptist Convention's Conservative Resurgence. Falwell, a Baptist minister, founded the Moral Majority in 1979, the year after Keith and I married, in order to mobilize Christian conservatives to take political action on issues they deemed of chief concern. Though the organization would remain intact for only a decade, it normalized a way of talking, thinking, and politicizing in my part of the evangelical world that became almost synonymous with godliness. The message could not have been clearer in the white evangelical church world: if you're a good Christian, you think this way. If you're a bad Christian—or more likely no Christian at all—you think another way.

I wanted to be a good Christian. I wanted to think all the right ways. I wanted to be on all the right sides. The issues weren't the problem. I shared similar enough convictions. I was pro-life, though I lacked the guts to be overtly pious about it because it was a wonder I hadn't ended up with an unwanted pregnancy. I certainly believed in religious liberty. To the extent I understood the concepts in early adulthood, I believed in fair capitalism and preferred smaller government. I should have qualified for the Moral Majority in every way.

Most of my friends who were serious about their faith were all in. They listened regularly to radio programs espousing the same basic idea: Christians should rally and use what power God has given us to see to it that America—a Christian nation, after all—is led by Christian principles and morals. But I couldn't listen to *Focus on the Family* without feeling guilty. The pitch in the voices of spokespeople for the Christian Right triggered my shame and shut me down. I didn't want it to. I wanted to be

one of them. But I qualified for the Moral Majority about as much as I qualified for head of brain surgery at the medical center. My kind belonged to the immoral minority and, boy, was it lonely.

My parents were Democrats. As far as I know, neither of them ever voted for a Republican presidential candidate. I couldn't imagine being anything different. I helped distribute yard signs during Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign. Then came Bill Clinton. For the life of me, I could not pull that lever in the voting booth. I was an Arkansan, for crying out loud. Where was my Razorback spirit? But something about him seemed smarmy to me. I watched television until every vote was in and the winner of the election was announced. Tears streamed down my cheeks. *Dear Lord, here we go.*

Clinton was my induction to the world of Republicanism. I was a reluctant Republican all along. But I'd have been a reluctant Democrat, too. Understand, I could not possibly have believed more strongly in democracy. The right to cast a vote according to personal conviction is, to me, the pulsating heart of American liberty, but I always thought diehard party loyalties and predetermined straight tickets were a bit fraught for Jesus followers. Hand-shaking and back-scratching could be hard to tell apart.

The Conservative Resurgence, underway at the same time, hit much closer to home. It didn't involve the larger landscape of conservative evangelicals. These were Southern Baptist concerns. Anyone paying attention to SBC matters by the mid-eighties clearly got the message that the entire denomination was in danger from godless liberals who did not believe the Bible was the Word of God. Glory to God, we'd been saved from the catastrophic demise of the entire Southern Baptist Convention. I had not even known to be worried, but what a relief others had.

I do not say this mockingly. We'd dodged a bullet, but more bullets were coming. This was war. We'd have to be continually proactive against Southern Baptist liberals and drive them out or they'd take us over.

Of course, my idea of Baptist conservatism was that of my own home church. Jesus was preeminent in all things, the Bible was unmistakably revered as God-breathed and authoritative, and sanctification was taught

without apology. Our church was welcoming, generous, and warm, and its sheer size offered ample opportunity for both men and women to serve and reasonable space for leaders to see a few things differently, at least on secondary matters.

Generally speaking, I concurred with our church's climate in regard to men's and women's roles. Ours was a patriarchal world. To be anything different wouldn't have been Southern Baptist. The dual concepts of wives respecting and submitting to their husbands and husbands loving and caring for their wives as Christ loved the church were as familiar to me as my own hands. I taught some version of the same concepts in my classes and in my materials any time the subjects were relevant to the message.

My pastor and his wife, a brilliant force in her own right, modeled a healthy dynamic of mutual esteem and tremendous affection. I was around them too often for too long and under too many circumstances for it to have all been a show. During any given sermon series on the family, my pastor taught that wives were to be submissive to their husbands, but he didn't pound on it.

In our church, submission would not have included accepting physical abuse. I don't say this as rationalization but as a fact as far as I knew it. I was neck-deep in women's ministry and occasionally called into meetings between my pastor and a woman in a bad marriage. I never heard him counsel a wife to stay in an environment where she was unsafe. If she wasn't in danger of getting hurt, I'd heard him say several times, "Leave him and force a crisis. If he's willing to get help, your marriage has a chance. If he's not, it likely doesn't." Today I'd know a recommendation like this was woefully insufficient for the woman's well-being, but back then he was ahead of his time.

In the larger denominational landscape, generally speaking, women's well-being wasn't the priority. Our husband's was. We catered to them. This was part of submission. This notion did not only come from the men. I was taught in so many words by women mentors that if I treated my husband as if he already were everything I wanted him to be, he would become that. Also, if we women would do our part, God would see to it that the men

would be won over and do their part. We took these to be guarantees. I would not recognize for years that my devotion was, in part, dealmaking with God.

I was never blind to varying degrees of sexism in our church culture, but I accepted it. It was affirmed and reaffirmed and, in case anyone missed it, reaffirmed again as scriptural. Here were the verses. Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap. Right here. Over and over and over again. If we didn't like it, we could take it up with God. "He wrote it."

That was that.

Never mind all the Scriptures in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John where Jesus pushed back hard against cultural norms, affirmed the dignity of women, and gave them revolutionary places in the gospel story. Never mind that Luke reported women followers of Jesus in the eighth chapter of his Gospel. Never mind that, according to Peter's sermon on Pentecost in Acts 2, what was happening before the very eyes of the crowd was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy: God pouring out his Spirit on his sons and daughters and promising they'd prophesy. Never mind how many women Paul named among his co-laborers.

Women like me played by the rules or we were off the court.

I couldn't afford to think in any other way, even if I was tempted to. I'd be finished as a teacher in my denomination.

As long as I stayed under the radar, serving at my own church and traveling here and there to speak and teach at small-scale women's events, I got minimal pushback. It was not until the invitations and opportunities grew and the first Bible studies were embraced by growing numbers of women in Southern Baptist churches that I was exposed to disdain and palpable disapproval.

I have this crystallized memory of a moment in time when it first hit me that I was unaccepted—and *unacceptable*, no matter how I'd try—to some of the main movers and shakers in our denomination. I was attending my first Southern Baptist convention, having been asked to speak to a small gathering of women. My room was on the ninth floor of the Marriott. I'd been looking out the window at all the moving bodies on the sidewalk,

marveling at how many of them had the exact same hairstyle. This was almost as true of the women. I checked the time, grabbed my Bible and purse, and headed to the elevators to catch a ride to the lobby. After a minute or two of waiting, the red down-arrow lit up with a ding.

I stepped toward the door, and it opened like the stage curtain of a musical theater on some of the most familiar players in my denominational world. I couldn't believe my good fortune. My eyes bounced from lanyard to lanyard while the elevator door bounced against my palm. It was them all right and, next to them, their wives, as lovely as I'd pictured them. Elated, I commenced greeting them by their first names and hugging them like we were kinfolk at a family reunion. I could build a compelling case that nothing says awkward like being fully committed to a hug—gravity forcefully, unstoppably throwing your body forward—and realizing the sentiment is unrequited. They didn't want to hug.

A sick feeling went through me that I wouldn't shake for decades. They didn't like me. Not together they didn't. They might have liked me two on one, but all huddled up, it was clear they didn't think we were one big happy family like I did.

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In the years that followed, I frequently spoke at a variety of conferences for men and women where I was the only woman on the program. I'd meet with the same elevator air of disapproval on virtually every occasion. The host, having issued the invitation, was gracious and, at times, so was this man or that. A little hostility, however, can go a long way in a hospitality room. It wasn't always blatant. The social temperature in the room might just be a little frosty, or I might be invisible even in close proximity, like the car ride from the hotel over to the venue.

At some point in the conference, disapproval would almost inevitably take the form of ridicule. I've lost count of the times a fellow plenary speaker would ignore me in the hospitality room but bring me up in the introduction of his message. It might go something like this:

“We’re just glad we get to be on the same platform as Beth Moore. Sure hope we get some of that anointing.”

Uproarious laughter would follow. Sometimes the guy would do a little imitation of me speaking, going heavy on the drawl and big with the mannerisms, prancing on the platform just short of airborne, waving his arms gratuitously and hollering as thick and countrified as possible, “GLO-REE TO GAWD!”

The face of my real self would burn red with embarrassment at the dramatization of my easy caricature. I was supposed to take these things like a good sport, and I tried to. I recognized good-spirited humor. But if the guy hadn’t said a word to me when we were three feet apart for half an hour backstage, I had a hard time thinking these things were meant well. The biggest offense I brought into these environments was my gender, but my personality and lack of academic training were also factors.

The challenge became doing what I felt God was calling me to do without making trouble or posing any threat. For example, if I knew I’d be serving or standing alongside a man on the platform who was short of stature, I’d wear flats. Once I was in Sydney for a conference with a couple of hours to kill between sessions, so I dressed down to a T-shirt and yoga pants and took a walk with my dear friend Christine Caine. I had a terrible craving for a chocolate malt, so we stopped at a popular burger joint to partake. As we wove our way through the restaurant to leave, a small group of people entered the establishment. Christine motioned toward an elderly gentleman at its hub and whispered to me, “That is *So-and-So*. He is one of the most highly esteemed men of God in this city. I would love for you to meet him.”

He was also one of the shortest men of God in the city. A full head shorter than me. This was not my fault, but it was my responsibility. Christine introduced us, and the man’s graciousness and soft-spokenness disarmed me. I don’t know if it was his age, humility, or custom, but the longer he talked, the further over he bowed.

This presented no small challenge for me. I felt the need to bend over even further so I could somehow show deference, placing my head beneath his while also tugging at my T-shirt to keep it over my hind end. Before our conversation was over, I was nearly twisted into a pretzel.

When we walked out the door, Christine looked at me aghast and said, "What was that?"

"I don't know!" I said. "I couldn't help myself. It was involuntary!"

"I don't ever want to see that again."

We laughed until we nearly collapsed on the sidewalk.

Meanwhile, back in the States, I'd address men even in casual conversation by their titles when we were part of the same gatherings or meetings. If they had a doctorate, I called them *Dr. So-and-So* even if they were fifteen years my junior. I was more than happy to show respect, but this wasn't about respect. This was about rank. I responded according to the cues, showing inordinate deference.

"I could learn so much from you, and goodness knows I need to."

"You're so much better at message delivery. I mostly blurt stuff out."

"You know better than I that [insert anything at all about theology, the Bible, the church, or Christian spirituality in general]."

"I'm anxious to study under you."

And over and over, "I'm just a layperson."

I didn't do this to flatter. I did it because I believed it to be true.

When I got up to speak, if there were even a dozen men in eyeshot in a room full of women, somewhere in my introduction or opening prayer, I made clear I was "coming under authority" and did not "wish to lord authority" over anyone. And I meant it. I found some way to apologize for being there. These kinds of practices were not actions I took here and there. They constituted an attitude I carried continually. *Men are the boss. Make sure they know you know that.*

Once I nearly gave myself an ulcer over a large Sunday school class I taught that had both women and men in it. We'd intended for it to be women only. My classes had always been women only. But the men kept coming and kept coming.

“They’re going to need to sit in the back,” I said early on.

“How are we going to facilitate that?” my greeters asked.

“We’re just going to have to say it to them like this: ‘Could you kindly sit in the back?’”

The guys sat in back at first, and then they didn’t. They plainly sat where they wanted, and no one in the class seemed particularly bothered but me.

“If this keeps up,” I said to one of the leaders at my church, “I’m going to need a male Sunday school director. That’s the only way we can do this. I’ll have to have a male covering.”

“As long as you have a male covering,” were words I’d heard over and over again, and I believed them to my bones. A male covering was the key to a woman being blessed by God in ministry.

I rationalized that God brought a male worship leader to Living Proof Live not only because he was tremendously gifted and well suited for the environment but also to provide the event with—you guessed it—a male covering.

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Every time something hard or bad happened in ministry, I automatically assumed that either I was failing to remain under Keith’s covering or Keith was failing to provide good covering. I’d say stuff like, “I think there’s a tear in my covering” or “I must be out from under my covering.”

And the more visible I became, the more those who objected to a woman at that level of leadership brought my marriage into question. One of the key concerns was that Keith didn’t attend church regularly and was clearly not the spiritual leader of our home. I heard it over and over: God was not pleased with my marriage. I got it in my head that, though my calling was sure, God’s blessing and approval on it hinged directly on what kind of wife I was. I grew increasingly terrified of losing the favor of God, and I had gotten the message loud and clear that the fastest, surest way to lose it was by turning into Jezebel and taking over the throne of my home.

I'd frequently read or hear of men saying, "Can you imagine what it would be like to be her husband?" as if Keith were meek and I were hairy-chested. A man's boldness with the gospel was seen as godly passion. A woman's boldness with the very same gospel was ungodly impertinence. It was *masculine*. And what you knew in my world without a shred of doubt was that nothing was more off-putting to the men at the helm than a masculine woman.

I was deeply disturbed by the entire legitimacy of my ministry being conflated with my marriage. I was around my pastor and my mentor often enough to mention here and there some of the insults I received.

"They don't know what they're talking about. Ignore it."

But I couldn't, so I'd overcompensate. I'd pray harder and try harder to be a godly wife. I'd make our roles clearer in the illustrations I used in my teaching.

"You just keep being a sweet wife," my pastor and my mentor would say.

It wasn't their fault I'd then compulsively overthink what qualified as *sweet*.

A lot of men in my world loved referring to their spouse as "my sweet wife." What was sweet exactly? If sweet was unopinionated, I was a lemon. If sweet was being cheerful about Keith going hunting and fishing any time he pleased, I was honey on the comb. If sweet was passive, I was a chili pepper, but if sweet was affectionate, well then, I was Keith Moore's sweet wife.

My man may not have felt particularly obligated to be at church every Sunday—"Lizabeth," he would say to me, after all, "Jesus loves a fisherman"—but he always prayed for me before I spoke. If I was out of town, he did this by phone. He was so committed to making sure I knew he had my blessing, he'd take his phone into the deer blind in order to stay reachable. If you're not properly impressed with this self-sacrificing act, you're not a hunter. I can't count the times he prayed for me in a whisper so as not to compromise his hunt.

But amid all the bowing, deferring, objections, and accusations, Keith and I were dealing with issues far exceeding one-size-fits-all formulas.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

OUR NIGHTMARE BEGAN without much fanfare in 2014, ironically in Keith's happiest place. Of a myriad of ways to describe my husband, nothing sums him up more aptly than a saltwater fisherman, salty as the sea. When I close my eyes and imagine him most content and at peace with his life, it is always there in the water, by himself, waist-deep, fishing rod in hand. There where the only sounds are croons of seagulls and the whirring of a fishing line whipping a lure toward yonder top water. I am bound and determined to have the words "Beth's Man of the Sea" etched in the granite on Keith's half of our double marker.

He was fishing one of his favorite spots: Sabine Pass at the border between Texas and Louisiana, where a river by the same name spills into the gulf. Knows the area like the back of his hand. He'd taken his boat out to shallow water and looked for slicks. After anchoring, he jumped overboard, grabbed his rod and reel, and, holding it over his head, trudged the current to what looked like a sweet spot. Said he was catching reds right and left, standing amid a school. He hooked a ten-pound thirty-incher, and instead of letting it fight long enough to expend some energy as he normally would, he drew it in at its full vigor and went to grab it around the gills.

"I was greedy, wanting to get it on the stringer fast so I could catch the next one."

As he cupped his right hand around its gills, the red shot straight up with a splash, piercing the inside of his middle finger with the spine of its dorsal.

"Felt like a sharp nail. Hurt like a son of a gun. I felt it hit bone."

Now, you'd have to know Keith or an equally devout saltwater fisherman to understand that a minor wound in no way impairs or abbreviates a trip. The lone exception for Keith was the time a barb of a

lure sunk into the soft center of his palm, making it most inconvenient to keep casting. He has small hair-thin scars like geometric shapes all over his sunbrowned hands, signatures of a lifelong fisherman. His kind of casters don't quit. He shook the blood off and kept fishing. When he got home, what he showed me was the stringer in the cooler, not the wound on the finger.

Some days later, "Look at this, Lizabeth."

"Is that where that redfish nicked you last weekend?"

"Yep. Blasted thing."

"Huh." I held his open hand in mine, studied the wound, and kissed it gently. "Looks to me like it's getting infected. Better get some antibiotic cream on it."

This seemed nothing but a nuisance to us at the time. Over the coming weeks, the wound—no bigger than a pinhead—got angrier and angrier, and the skin on the inside of his finger darkened to a fiery red, like he'd clutched a flat iron. When his finger nearly doubled in size, he headed to the doctor and got a prescription-strength antibiotic. Still no alarm. More of an inconvenience really.

At the end of fourteen days of antibiotics, it still hadn't improved, annoying Keith considerably since fishing season had passed and deer season was beginning. The last thing he wanted was to waste the winter in a doctor's office whining over a sore finger. While he was hunting, the wounded finger all of a sudden stiffened straight as a board, and within hours, the surrounding fingers froze, too.

Keith headed with haste back to the doctor who, thinking the tip of the fish's spine must have lodged in the bone, referred him to a hand surgeon. Soon Keith was in day surgery and I, in the waiting room, pecking away at my laptop, praying all would be well and believing fully that it would. We were alert and anxious for the issue to be over but not worried. The surgeon failed to find a foreign object, a fact we found disappointing, but he assured Keith he'd cleaned the wound and the bone and it should be fine. "Here's a prescription for a better antibiotic."

It wasn't better. Weeks passed and Keith's hand worsened.

“Mom, what on earth?” our girls protested.

“No clue, but I’m going to tell you right now that your Dad’s hand looks like it belongs to a bloated dead body that washed up on the seashore. It’s like this sick combination of yellow and gray.”

“Mom, gross! Somebody’s got to do something!”

“We’ve been referred to an infectious disease doctor downtown at the medical center, and we’ll make a beeline that direction as soon as they’ll give us an appointment.”

Heading an hour downtown to Houston’s renowned medical center would be the beginning of finally getting some answers. It would also be the beginning of the end of life as we knew it. After extensive testing, Keith learned that his condition was caused by *Mycobacterium marinum*. It was a rare, serious, and enthusiastic bacterial infection transferred from marine life of some kind into the human body through a wound.

“I can tell you what it is, and that’s a win,” the physician said. “But I’m not familiar enough with it to treat it. I’m referring you to the only one I know who is.”

Off Keith and I went to a second infectious disease doctor, reputed to be the best of the best. We will both say to our dying breaths we’ve never met a more peculiar individual than the physician who’d oversee Keith’s care for the next several months. We’d look around the examining room sometimes, wondering if we were being recorded for a spoof. I suppose an echelon of brilliance exists, an Everest-high IQ, that gives a person a certain singularity. If so, this was as smart a man as either of us had ever met. There was no beating around the bush or lagging confidence. Scratching a pen across a pad of paper, his eyes disappearing beneath haphazardly forested brows, the doctor said without looking up, “I can get you over this.”

“You can?” This was the best news we’d heard in months.

“Yes. Settle in. It’ll take about six months and require a cocktail of antibiotics that aren’t easy on the body. But this is the way to the other side.”

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We left the office with prescriptions in hand—and, prescriptions soon in body, Keith left us.

The specialist was right. The bacteria in Keith's finger, which had spread to his hand and threatened his arm, was not going to heal without the treatment. We had no choice but to take this route, but it wreaked havoc on Keith's system at every level, leaving nothing unscathed. His blood pressure shot up and stayed nearly stroke-high. His pulse raced. His body could not slow down. He could not sleep. He could hardly eat. He paced like a lion.

The drugs were so strong, they nullified every other medication he took, including the protocol for bipolar disorder and severe PTSD that had been a heaven-sent reprieve and joyously successful. The antibiotics would indeed eventually heal him from *Mycobacterium marinum* and keep him from losing his arm, hand, or finger. But the treatment set in motion an unforeseen and—who knows—perhaps unavoidable domino effect that would last several long years, escalate to a breaking point that nearly killed Keith literally, nearly destroyed us, and threatened to wipe out our family closeness.

I don't know much about physiology, but I know a little about computer technology. To make sense of what happened to Keith, I think in terms of my laptop contracting a virus. The virus caused the computer to start overheating. It grew increasingly hot until the software collapsed. It continued to intensify until the computer was revving and roaring inside and out. Picture me running to every IT tech I could find because this laptop no longer seemed to be mine. My fingerprints on it were unidentifiable. I couldn't recover documents. I couldn't update it. I couldn't restart it. I couldn't even turn it off. I sounded alarm after alarm, and specialists tried to help, but nothing worked. And finally, one night, the hard drive crashed.

We sent Keith by ambulance to a hospital, and before dawn, he was admitted to the ICU, his kidneys failing. Over the next several years he'd spend over thirty-two days in hospitals. I brought a man home from the

final hospital stay who was nearly catatonic. He talked very little and mostly wanted to sleep. When he was awake, his frame of mind was dark and his disposition toward me was uncharacteristically heartless. His contempt toward me wasn't personal, though I'd not believe that for many months or ever successfully sift the emotions out of it. For a while, he couldn't have told me the date if his life depended on it. He couldn't concentrate to read. He couldn't stay awake through a half-hour sitcom. He didn't want me to talk to him. He didn't want to talk to me. He just wanted to be left alone. Left to sleep.

It was a gradual thing, both coming and going. There wasn't a day I could mark on the calendar when Keith left me, nor a day I could mark when he returned. But there was a day I remember in shivering, Technicolor detail when my daughters and I wept openly on a three-way call and finally admitted to one another what we'd each been afraid to say.

I remember the precise time of day, the pattern of the clouds in the sky, the white dashes between lanes on the dark-gray pavement of the freeway, the temperature in the car, the pitch of my voice, the pitch of theirs.

I'm the mom. It was up to me to say it. "He's gone. And the infernal thing is, we never even knew the day he died so we could grieve."

I regularly pass the exit where I spoke the words we'd each been thinking and still have to remind myself to breathe. Oh, we cried until our ribs felt bruised. We believed to our inmost beings he'd never be back. We hadn't jumped to that conclusion. We'd been sloth-slow to say it out loud. We'd done everything we knew to do to bring him back.

We're faulty for a thousand reasons, but we aren't people of low tolerance. We're hardy in this family, hard to run off and not hard to please. We're too flawed and too challenged by history, circumstance, and chemistry to hoard grace for long. So when I say we came to a place where we believed my husband and their father was gone forever, I'm not writing for dramatic effect.

I slept in the house with a stranger. A stranger slept in the house with me. A man I didn't like. A man who didn't like me. My life, his life, our girls' lives, became unrecognizable, and as is often the case, especially for

people in ministry, we were trapped in a secret, unsure who we could trust with the truth.

I did my best to advocate, keeping daily records of his condition, administering and overseeing all his prescriptions, writing down the precise times and milligrams. He was under the constant care of a whole handful of physicians. And they cared. They did. I'm satisfied that most of them did everything they knew to do. They just couldn't fix it. Not at that point, anyway. I couldn't fix it. Keith couldn't fix it. Though I believe costly mistakes and miscalculations were made along the way, the heart-scorching days of overheating followed by our long dark months of cold, contemptuous silence were no one's fault and least of all Keith's. He doesn't remember most of it. A whole handful of years are a blur to him, and it's no wonder. His nervous system had nearly fried. Amanda, Melissa, and I had to process much of our trauma together because no one else, including Keith, knows what life was like inside our home in those brutal days. We'll get tempted to think maybe we overdramatized the situation, then we'll stumble on pictures from those years. Keith looked like a completely different man, not just twenty years older, but, as I live and breathe, a different face.

• • •

I've rarely been mad at God. He's baptized me in such sparkling brooks of mercy that, even when I couldn't for the life of me understand his decisions, I was continually aware of how good and kind he'd been to me. But one day about three years ago I stormed through the woods around my home, mad, miserable, and screaming, "How long, O Lord? How long?? What do you want from us? How long will you punish us?"

That may be one of the worst parts of being a religious person with a dark past. The temptation to view persistent hardship as punishment is almost too much to resist.

Regardless of what the naysayers said, I needed to work. My income and insurance were essential. I'd also been told by one of Keith's specialists, who could see the heavy toll it was taking on me, that I'd be unwise to remove all my distractions. I did my best to operate normally and diligently at work, but one day in the thick of it, I couldn't hold back the tears at lunch. My beloved coworker, Susan, with compassion coursing in streams down her own face, said, "Beth, God loves you so much."

I looked at my dear friend and finally voiced the horror that had started stalking my soul day and night.

"I know he does, Susan. But does he love Keith? Does he care that he has never had a day of rest from his pain? Does he care at all? Does he just like some of us and to heck with the rest of us?"

My insides broke wide open. I'd said it. Said in the light of day what dogged me in the dark. And somehow it was good to have it out in the air. Out in the atmosphere. Out where angels could hear it. Out where demons could hear it. Out where my workmates could hear it. My heart was so battered by that time, I couldn't discern a flicker of marital affection in my chest. I would have told you commitment was all I had left. And then I heard myself. Heard myself clearly enough to get wind of the emotion pumping the words with air and sound.

"GOD, WHY DON'T YOU LOVE MY HUSBAND?"

Fact is, you don't carry a fury, a deep offense, over a person being unloved that you don't love. I loved Keith Moore. I wanted him back. God, forgive me, right then, I felt like I loved him more than God did. And I wanted God to answer for what he'd put that man through all his life. And what he'd put us both through for decades.

God didn't answer. Not out in the open, he didn't. But he also didn't stop talking to me through the Scriptures. Didn't stop meeting with me in my prayer time. Didn't stop filling me to teach and write. I can't even say he really pushed me to repent. He just endured with me. Endured with us. Endured with Keith.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DURING THESE YEARS when Keith and I were dealing with mental health dynamics that made our home life particularly complex, a fear of ruling over my husband and the guilt of having to go around him at times made my life ten times harder than it had to be. There were countless occasions when I had to take charge because Keith needed me to. My daughters needed me to. This I'd finally sort out with the help of medical professionals, but it would be a long, arduous journey and would include profuse tears in prayer.

Eventually I'd grasp how tender were the mercies of God toward Keith's and my humble estate. The voice of Christ on the God-breathed page would become distinct enough to hear over the others. "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

We were so weary and burdened. The last thing we needed was the pressure to conform. Couples dealing with complex mental illnesses rarely have the luxury of conforming. We'd give anything to.

The fears and fixations I developed in an effort to be pleasing to both man and God also seem incongruent with my personality, which is neither weak by nature, nor meek. I'm determined to a fault, have an independent streak a mile deep, and in situations and against obstacles many people would find terrifying, I don't have an ounce of fear. I can kill a water moccasin wrapped around the paw of my dog in sixty seconds flat and sling it limp and dangling on the branch of a tree. This incongruence, to me, is part of what makes the story particularly worth telling.

I've done significant soul-searching and self-examination about how much of this bondage to male approval and acceptance I brought on myself and how much of it was imposed on me. I've heard from no few women

who ran into similar dynamics and also performed all sorts of mental gymnastics to be able to use their God-given gifts in a man's world, even to teach other women. We knew instinctively that we could either find someplace else to go or turn into pretzels. So I turned into the Auntie Anne's of pretzels.

Then came the autumn of 2016.

• • •

The date was October 8, 2016. I'd just boarded a plane to begin my trek back to Houston after a four-day stay in Chinle, Arizona. We'd held a Living Proof Live event that weekend in response to an invitation from a small group of women who'd done several of the Bible studies and prayed for a couple of years that God would make a way for us to come. Their invitation came to me by way of a deeply touching video in which they shared their vision for an event not only for Navajo women but for Native American women from any tribe, any reservation, any state.

I didn't want to go in like an idiot, presumptuous and insulting, like I knew their world and how to speak to challenges I'd never faced. I flew in several days early to meet as many women as I could ahead of time. I was invited to several different homes in and around the city, toured canyons where ancient drawings were visible from a distance, got some history lessons from a Navajo guide, and spent hours in the car with a couple of local women, hanging on every word they said. I mostly listened those first several days, mesmerized by the land, spellbound by the strength and pure tenacity of the women, and won over by their pursuit of Jesus.

By the time Travis and the worship team hit the first chord at our event, the women had already marked me permanently. Several had shared with me their stories of sexual abuse because, through the Bible studies, I'd shared mine with them. There is often a sacred trust between women who have been sexually abused. A certain amount of understanding. A certain

acceptance that we feel few other places. No one on earth is glad to have been victimized, but I count it a privilege to stand alongside those who have.

Now that the event was over, I grabbed a newspaper before my flight in order to catch up on whatever had set social media on fire. I'd gotten online the day before just long enough to see a barrage of references to some random *Access Hollywood* tape. I'd jumped off quickly because, whatever it was, I could tell it was big enough to steal my focus. I hadn't come to Chinle three days early to lose my focus.

By the time I got home and crawled into bed that night, I'd not only read the full transcript of Donald Trump's off-the-air comments, I'd also read the rationalizations of multiple evangelical leaders who'd been fawning over him like he was God's gift to American Christianity. *It was just locker room talk. He's a baby Christian. He's not the same man. He made mistakes. He was just big talking like men do sometimes. Boys will be boys.*

In my admittedly limited understanding, boys being boys who grab girls by their genitals are boys being boys committing acts that are criminal. Sexual immorality is one thing. I'm not naive about such things. This kind of thing was different. This kind of thing moved into the realm of sexual criminality.

You think this kind of talk is okay? That's what I wanted to ask. *Do you happen to know women who have had hands forced on them? Because I do. I know more of them than you can count. I can say many of their first names to you. And I can tell you this is no small matter. What he said, at the very least, calls for public shock and deep dismay among evangelicals across the board.*

A few voiced disgust, and I was grateful for those, but most either remained silent or actually offered excuses. Their support for Trump's candidacy didn't appear to waver. My own brothers in the faith, who'd been easily scandalized by others, had developed a sudden and protracted case of uncharacteristic tolerance.

I thought back over all the years of dealing with the grabbing. I thought about my story and hundreds of others I'd heard, some as recently as the previous three days. I thought about how maddeningly difficult it is to get people who haven't been victimized to care. To comprehend the reverberating repercussions of the actions of those who think they have the right to force themselves on another. The audacity it takes to joke about it like it's nothing. Like we're nothing.

I was no longer that terrified child who'd been pulled by her own father into the middle of the car seat, then, in the wake of the attack, clung to the door handle on the passenger side, shaking uncontrollably, forehead bouncing against the window with every bump on Highway 67.

I was no longer that adolescent girl who, for the life of her, could not draw a boundary and simply say no. I was even a long, long way from the young woman who couldn't listen to a missionary's story of abuse without dropping into a dark and deep downward spiral, reliving her own.

And, as much as any of those things, I'd lived too long now to buy the lie that keeping your mouth shut protects the family's interests. No, it doesn't. A family that provides a safe space for abusive people to remain unrepentant and unchanged and unaccountable is already shattered.

The next morning, I awakened dead calm, had prayer time, opened up Twitter, and posted a series of tweets:

> Wake up, Sleepers, to what women have dealt with all along in environments of gross entitlement & power. Are we sickened? Yes. Surprised? NO.
>
> Try to absorb how acceptable the disesteem and objectifying of women has been when some Christian leaders don't think it's that big a deal.
>
> I'm one among many women sexually abused, misused, stared down, heckled, talked naughty to. Like we liked it. We didn't. We're tired of it.

> “Keep your mouth shut or something worse will happen.”
> Yes. I’m familiar with the concept. Sometimes it’s terrifyingly true. Still, we speak.

Something happened, all right. The punishment was swift and severe. A friend tried to save me from some of it by calling me a day later. Said it was circulating on some pretty legit websites that I’d “joined Hillary’s campaign.” Said he knew it wasn’t true, but others didn’t know me as well and they’d believe it. Said several leaders, knowing we were friends, asked him to call me. He suggested ways I could—in my words, not his—walk back the cat.

No.

He put his wife, whom I loved dearly, on the phone.

“I know, Beth. But all the babies.”

All the babies. She, like so many of my evangelical friends, believed that reversing Roe v. Wade was the most important thing to God, perhaps the only thing that mattered, and they believed in all sincerity that Donald Trump in the White House could make that happen.

I am pro-life as well. Not just antiabortion, but pro-life, across the board from conception to coffin or cremation and for people of every kind and creed and every shade of skin. I believe that is the only Christian response. But when pro-Christian starts to look less and less like Christ, something’s gone off the rails. It was, to me, like they were under a spell. Like someone spiked their iced tea. I knew many of these people and no longer recognized them nor them me.

What happened immediately following those tweets was the psychological equivalent of standing in front of a firing squad bereft of the benefit of dying. The trolling on social media was scathing and unrelenting. Over and over: “Baby killer!” Hundreds and hundreds of emails.

It brought a firestorm unlike anything we’d ever experienced to my coworkers, women I dearly love, at Living Proof. The phones never stopped. They’d put the receiver down only to pick it back up. The switchboard blinked bright red for days. My coworkers, some of them

staunch Republicans and some of them Trump supporters, were left answering for something none of them would have said. Let me rephrase that. They were left answering when they actually got the chance to speak. Many callers screamed and cursed, demanding answers but not taking breath enough to get one. My coworkers would say to the railers, "I'm going to have to hang up now," and they'd call right back for rounds two, three, four, five, and six.

There was no avoiding the bonfire at the ministry. There was no putting the matter on the back burner. We'd meet around our table—fifteen people no demon in hell had been able to divide—and I could see the demoralization on their faces. Living Proof had been a place teeming with joy, and literally overnight, it turned into a house of dread. We did our best. These were women of character who deeply loved God and were committed to loving one another. They tried to reassure me. I tried to reassure them. But the hate and malevolence invading our space pounded every aphorism into powder. At the end of each day, we dragged ourselves to our cars weary, sometimes in tears, and only for the war to follow us all home, where families and friends wanted answers.

These were brutal days at Living Proof and, as hard as we all tried to work together, fracturing days. That we survived it and found our way to the other side is a testimony to my coworkers' character and the grace of God.

Daily, I received word that my Bible studies were being pulled out of more churches. Some were boxed up and sent back to us. I was told some of them were burned. I expected reactions from men to the thread I'd published on social media, but I didn't see the women coming. Some of them posted pictures on social media of stacks of studies they'd thrown in the garbage, the wavy, weathered edges of the workbooks testifying to the weeks they'd spent in those pages.

Why would you throw them away?

The men mostly called me names. The women went for the jugular. These words played on a continual loop: "I am so disappointed in you. I trusted you!"

I'd known my comments would cause a backlash, but I couldn't wrap my mind around the enormity, the pure thoroughness, of it. For a stunning number of people, that one set of comments rendered years of ministry null and void. I couldn't make sense of it.

I'd spent untold energy trying to be obedient to what I felt God had called me to do and not cross the line by getting into the men's lane. I'd done everything I could think of to make clear I had no feminist agenda. I'd gone out of my way to make sure they knew I was neither trying to seduce them nor reduce them.

Oh, let there be no mistaking, I esteemed the men. Out from under their authority, I could hardly be trusted, let alone be blessed and used as an instrument for the gospel. The system wasn't the men's fault. They were just serving according to the Bible. I believed this wholeheartedly. I'd chalked up some of the most bizarre, socially awkward situations imaginable with male leaders to their rendition of obedience to Scripture.

All this time, I'd accepted the rampant sexism because I thought it was about Scripture. What I was watching in the wake of the *Access Hollywood* report, however, did not appear to be a whit about Scripture, nor did it evidence fruit of the Holy Spirit, as far as I could discern. In my estimation, this thing playing out in front of the world was about power. This was about control. This was about the boys' club.

You lied.

I bit those two words on my tongue until it nearly bled.

I believed you and you lied. I thought this was all about Scripture. All about pleasing God. This does not look God-pleasing to me.

I couldn't get these thoughts out of my head. I became increasingly vocal about it, until the words I'd bitten down were finally blatantly spoken. I also began to voice my alarm about the racism and white nationalism (not love of country, mind you, but idolatry of country) that seemed to me were intensifying under Trump's influence. It has been my observation that racism and sexism have an uncanny way of showing up together, like two fists on one body. The common denominator was clear as a bell from where I sat. It was superiority.

I spoke out specifically to my own Southern Baptist world because I believed we'd been party to things that were wrong, and I wanted to use what God-given influence I had to come alongside others in making them right. Part of a shift—not toward liberalism, for crying out loud. Toward Christlikeness.

I wanted us to be Jesus-loving, Jesus-like people of the great commission, following him wherever he led, serving people, meeting needs, sharing the gospel, laying down our lives for his name's sake. This is what I wanted for myself. This is what I wanted for my children and grandchildren, and it's what I wanted for our denomination.

The Baptist church had been my safe place. My sanctuary. These were my people. I loved them. But something was happening to us. Something bad. Maybe it had been happening all along and I was too blind to see it. Too busy in my own world. Too privileged. Too partial. Too immersed.

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In April 2018, the *Houston Chronicle* reported on two separate court affidavits accusing one of the primary architects of the Conservative Resurgence of sexual misconduct. Additional lawsuits would be filed. One month later, the other primary architect of the Conservative Resurgence was removed from his position for grossly mishandling an allegation of sexual abuse that occurred at his previous post at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In February 2019, the news broke in the *Houston Chronicle* and the *San Antonio Express-News* of sexual abuse of scandalous proportions in SBC churches. Journalists had been doing their homework for six months, poring over records, documents, and court cases from the previous two decades. By the time they went to press, they'd tallied over seven hundred victims.

The article was the first of numerous installments shining a flashlight not only on abuse cases, but also on multiple cover-ups. The most prominent commonality was that the predatory wolves were sheltered, and

the victimized sheep were left wounded and wandering. The news was devastating, sending shock waves all over the Christian world. Many Southern Baptist leaders were deeply grieved and determined to do everything possible to hold churches accountable. Their efforts met with tremendous opposition. Ultimately, those fighting on behalf of abuse victims would win some key battles and start a long journey forward, but it would take several years and bitter disputes.

Three months after the news broke on the biggest sexual abuse crisis in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention, there was a new crisis. After my ill-advised tweet about speaking in my church on Mother's Day, suddenly the biggest threat to the denomination was publicly portrayed as women trying to get to the pulpit and supplant their pastors. I did not know one. Permit me to say that again, I did not know a single one. But whether or not a woman could stand at the pulpit of a Southern Baptist church and give a message somehow became all we could talk about.

I knew what gaslighting looked like long before I knew what it was called. It thrived under our roof on Twelfth Street. It buttered our bread and paid our light bill. It deflected blame and shifted responsibility. My mother was the cause of my dad's problems. She'd drummed up those accusations in her own unstable mind. It was Mom's own sick suspicions tearing the family apart. It couldn't have been further from the truth, but it also could not have been more effective.

I can't imagine that a solitary pastor, seminary president, or leader in the SBC really believed I had an inkling of interest in taking over a pulpit, nor leading the charge for female takeover of the denomination. They had four decades of history as proof to the contrary. All that time I'd obsessed over having a male covering, a mind-boggling number of male leaders were providing a covering, all right. They were covering up sexual abuse. But because I'd been so outspoken and had already annoyed them, a horde of Southern Baptist brethren came for me like I'd burned down churches.

This one got me. I'd survived the 2016 firestorm, but I wouldn't survive this one. These dogs got through the fence. These dogs hit home and knocked me down in my own yard. These dogs bit.

I might have survived it, had it not been so personal. This mob wasn't from the broader social-media spectrum I'd worked up three years earlier. Not this time. These were Southern Baptists, many of them pastors, and not only from the fringes. I could not imagine my life outside my denomination. I didn't want to imagine it. Didn't even know who I was aside from them. I'd been disgusted with them, disappointed with them, frustrated with them, and baffled by them any number of times in six decades, but that's how it goes with family, isn't it? And make no mistake, this was my family. I didn't want to leave the house. I wanted the Holy Spirit to come in the house.

Don't let go. Don't let go. I'd said it to myself over and over. *Don't let those people push you out. Stay and watch what God will do. Hold on, old girl. Hold on.*

So much life lived there . . .

Butter cookies and baby bear chairs.

Tiny white choir robes with big red bows.

Running up and down the halls with my childhood friends.

Walking the aisle and extending endless right hands of fellowship.

The waters of baptism.

Ten thousand hymns.

My grandmother, her hats, and all her friends.

Handbell choir.

Regular choir.

Wadded-up dollar bills in gold offering plates.

A lifetime of Sunday school classes.

Too many Wednesday night suppers to count.

Missions classes.

Vacation Bible School.

Moving to Texas.

All the First Baptists.

Summer camps.

Sixth graders.

Young women.

Middle-aged women.

Older women.

Bible studies: one, two, three, four . . . fifteen, sixteen, seventeen . . .

All my friends at Lifeway, the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention.

My event team at Lifeway.

My curriculum team at Lifeway.

All my friends at Lifeway.

Don't let go. Don't let go.

I loved these Lifeway people like flesh and blood. I loved so many Southern Baptist women. So many Southern Baptist men, many of them pastors. To leave the SBC would mean leaving them.

No. Don't let go. Don't let go.

That undertow pulled hard, but I held on harder, fingers laced, swinging around with the tide, saltwater rushing through my head.

And then it was simply, horribly, plainly, unmistakably, *Let go.*

And the current sucked me under and into the dark water and out to the middle of the sea.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MY DAD DIED.

Albert lived just shy of nine years longer than Aletha. To the closest of observers, these appeared to be the happiest years of his life, and despite my cynicism, I don't believe they were his best years simply because my mother had vanished from the scene. I believe they were his best years because he got a fresh start. He married a good friend of Mom's from church, a widow about the same age. She was marvelous, warm and lovely with five grown kids of her own and a litter of grandkids. Dad had a brand-new family with no history. This is not to say he dispensed of the old family. He would've relished us all being one big happy family. These were gracious and likable people, and the few times we occupied the same space, we had ease and enjoyment in one another's company as far as I could tell. It's just that we were all too far along in life and, as for the Greens, too bogged down by decades of mire—and still missing the one who'd made it bearable.

Only eight weeks had passed when Dad announced to my sister and me that they were going to "throw their lot together."

"Come again?" we asked.

"Throw our lot together!"

"What does that mean?" Gay asked. She was always the one to ask on behalf of both of us. She absorbed what Dad was saying faster than I did. "You're getting married?"

Affirmative. Could somebody drop a thermometer six feet under and check Mom's temperature? Is she even cold yet?

"There are worse things," my brother Wayne said to me on the phone a few hours later. "He's an old man and he's lonely, Bethie. Mom's gone. She's not coming back. Do you want him to live with you?"

Point taken.

The happy couple asked Gay and me, the only two who lived in the Houston area, to meet them for lunch at Joe's Crab Shack soon after they made the announcement, and we complied. Right there in the booth with brown vinyl benches, they flirted with one another like fourteen-year-olds. I have nothing against old love. I'm, in fact, in favor of it. I just don't want to see it get handsy.

Finding the scene somewhat surreal, Gay and I turned to two extra orders of hush puppies. They were gumball small and decidedly overcooked—more on the blackened side than golden brown—and could have used more onion, but they were not entirely inedible and were easy to pitch in our mouths. God knows we needed something to keep our mouths full. We wouldn't have said anything awful. We could clearly see how happy they were. But I think we'd have each liked to say stuff like, "Stop that. Keep your hands to yourself right now."

Gay and I carried each other to our cars the way sisters do, ping-ponging between shock and hysteria.

"What just happened?"

The wedding came with considerable haste, but then again, these weren't spring chickens. By the big day, all of Dad's children but one had adapted to the idea as much as we were able and could be found among the attendees. Now, I've never once been at a Baptist wedding reception with spiked punch, but I feel it might've been a mercy in this case. The way Jesus loves weddings, I'm making the lone observation he missed a fine opportunity to show up and mess with the ginger ale.

Off the smiling couple went on their honeymoon, a thought which kept me from getting a wink of sleep all night. After they returned, the two of them bought a house together, traveled all over creation together, bought a time-share on a lake together, played card games together, gardened together, went to church together, and lived happily ever after together for nearly nine years. They'd found the love of their lives. I was in their company multiple times through those years, and they were always as giddy

and glad-spirited with one another as they'd been at Joe's Crab Shack. Less handsy, thank God, but giddy. Every day of their married life, Dad clipped a flower from their yard if one was in bloom and presented it to her.

I never knew what to do with any of this. I still don't know what to do with it. I was happy for them. I really was. I was happy to the fullest possible extent I was ever going to be happy with anything wonderful happening to Dad, without him ever fully owning the scars he'd left on us.

I believe in the grace of God. I breathe by the grace of God. I have needed the floodgates of forgiveness opened wide all my life. I believe in nothing more passionately than I believe in the power of repentance and the completeness of forgiveness in Christ. But I believe the wheel of repentance cranks by our coming nose to nose with the wrong and owning responsibility and confessing and coming into agreement with God's opinion on it.

I could never tell that Dad ever understood what pain, insecurity, and instability he'd brought to us. To me. I do not speak for my siblings here or for our late mother. I speak for myself alone. I never knew if my father comprehended the catastrophic consequences of the inability to draw relational boundaries and attract emotionally healthy people that dogged me throughout my adolescence and young adulthood. He said he was sorry, but in what seemed to me a rush to move on and forget it. But that's just it. I'd never have the luxury of forgetting it. It would take years to, in some biblical way, forgive it.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Dad claimed to have changed. And here's where it gets, by far, the most convoluted: I never saw a shred of evidence to the contrary. He served his neighbors. He served his church. He served his wife. He served the poor every week at a local soup kitchen. No one ever surfaced with allegations against him or, really, a bad thing to say about him. The whole lot of it was maddening because I wanted to believe and yet struggled laboriously to do so. I struggled with guilt, but the moment I'd try to accept the change to drain the guilt, I'd struggle with disbelief.

I've spent an entire lifetime trying to figure out whether I could trust my gut. I'm convinced, this late in the game, that I should have trusted it exceedingly more than I did. But the question remains, was my gut so scarred where my dad was concerned that it couldn't be trusted? So scarred where he was concerned that I'd just have to go with the facts? If so, the facts were in his favor. He seemed to grow old in peace.

Would I? That was the question.

• • •

My cell phone rang around eight o'clock that morning. My stepmother's voice was trembling and weak.

"Beth?"

"Yes, ma'am?" I responded right away. She was a love. I never labored to show her kindness and affection.

"Beth, something's wrong with your father!"

"What happened?" My pulse quickened and the blood thickened in my veins.

"He got out of the bed just a few moments ago and started for the bathroom and fell to the floor. He's breathing but not responding to me at all!"

I met her urgency with my own. "Have you called 911?"

"An ambulance is on the way. I don't know if he will be okay!" She was crying now, devastated.

"Is he trying to communicate at all?" I asked. She'd already told me he was unresponsive, but my mind couldn't absorb the information.

"He was at first. Not now. Oh, no. Oh no, no, no."

I cried with her and tried to keep from asking her all the same questions. There was nothing else to be done.

"Beth, I think I hear the ambulance!"

Relief. "Call me the second they tell you where they're headed with him, okay?"

"Yes, yes, okay!"

Twenty long minutes later she called me back and told me where the EMT driver was taking Dad.

"I'm getting in the car this instant and heading that way," I assured her. "I'll meet you there!"

I called a couple of my siblings on the way. "It doesn't sound good."

"No, it doesn't," they agreed.

My stepmother looked so frail, so small and pale, when I reached her in the waiting area outside the emergency room. Dad had suffered a massive stroke. Gay knew by this time and was on her way across town. I held my stepmother in my arms while she wept, my hard heart cracking like a windshield in a collision, caving in, shards cascading to the floor.

In a few minutes an emergency room nurse summoned my dad's wife to fill out paperwork. Glancing my way, she said, "You an immediate family member?"

"Yes, that's my father."

"You want to go in with him while I borrow your mother?"

"My stepmother," a correction I made with affection, nodding my head toward the gracious woman in her mid-eighties, the love of my father's life. "Yes, I would very much like to go in."

God has given me grace for the dead and dying. I've had it as long as I can remember. I'm not scared or put off by the atmosphere. It feels holy to me. I go in as a woman anointing a body for burial but with the anointing oil of prayer, the spice and fragrance of soft touch and quiet worship. I guess God knew I'd need this grace for all the years of teaching Sunday school and doing ministry. I've sat beside many a still body, a cooling body, and often by myself. Sometimes I didn't know the person. I'd simply be there for someone who couldn't. This wasn't one of those times. This was my father. And there he was, motionless, and there we were, alone.

"Hey, Dad," I whispered. "It's Beth. I'm right here. Gay is on her way. We've called the others. Everyone sends so much love and concern."

I looked at his hand, my insides wrenched and wrestling with wanting and not wanting to hold it. I'd held the dying hands of perfect strangers. But only strangers are perfect. It's the known ones that muddle.

I pulled up a chair, sat down beside him, and wrapped my fingers around his palm. His hand was limp. I pictured a scene from a movie: he squeezes my hand ever so slightly to let me know he hears me. He knows me. No, not so much as a twitch. Flaccid nothingness. A void. It's just me alone holding on.

I feel awkward but awake. Determined. I know that I love him. To the capacity my maimed heart is able, I know in that moment that I love him. I lean over and whisper in his left ear. "I forgive you, Dad. I forgive you. All is well. Be at peace."

Nothing. Nothing at all. But *nothing* is better than "Forgive me for what?"

Maybe somewhere deep in the cavern of his consciousness, he was saying, "Thank you, honey. Thank you. I'm so sorry." Maybe he just couldn't get his body to register a response. I don't know. I never did know. That's just it. I never will know.

All I could do was hope. Hope he was truly sorry. Hope he'd completely changed. I'd lied for him, after all. Lied for my mother, really.

When I was in my early thirties, I ached to get some of my story off my chest, so I wrote and self-published a poetry book. It was my first publication and embarrassingly poorly done, but an earnest attempt to even out my story with the broken side.

I left no doubt in those pages that dark things had happened in my childhood. I originally wrote that my perpetrator had "betrayed my parent's trust," intending, in a slightly veiled way, to absolve my mother. Then just before it went to print, panic set in, and knowing what was at stake, I moved the apostrophe one tiny space. It became "my parents' trust." The shame I'd have brought my mother in implicating my father would have upended our relationship. As it was, she hardly spoke to me for the better part of two weeks. I'd dedicated the book to her to soften the blow. It didn't.

It's a peculiar thing, isn't it, how we feel at times we have to lie to tell the truth? Victims of childhood sexual abuse who tell their stories often tell the first version with a mixture of honesty and dishonesty. It's our job, we

feel, to protect people from the truth. Our job to protect people from the burden or disappointment of knowing the real us.

As I held Dad's motionless hand, I said to him silently, where God alone could eavesdrop, *I don't know you. I wish I did, but I don't. Who are you, really? Which one of these men was the real you? I bet you were interesting. I bet you had such stories to tell. True stories to tell.* And he did. He'd typed out an informal autobiography to all five of us kids and presented it to us several years earlier. Pages and pages that few of us could read for years.

The terrific, inescapable irony was that I felt no less connection with him in that emergency room, him in a coma, than I'd felt every time he'd answered the phone all those years of my young adulthood. After a lightning-quick, happy-go-lucky, disengaged "How are you?" that slid straight into "So glad you called!" like a pro baseball player stealing home plate, he'd say, "Let me put your mother on!"

Dad's chirpiness on the phone got on every last nerve I had. If he'd ever once taken a breath between "How are you?" and "So glad you called," I'd have experimented with something like, "Well, I've been arrested for robbing the 7-Eleven at gunpoint for three Salisbury-steak frozen dinners. I shaved my head to get rid of the lice I caught my first night in jail, and would you believe my cellmate is a tattoo artist whose common-law wife smuggled his ink jets through security in a birthday cake and now I have a bright-red heart on the back of my head with a banner that says 'I Love Thugs'?"

For once I had the glaring chance, but there he was, an old man. Helpless. Defenseless. Small somehow, like someone was deflating an Army-green air mattress.

I called my Uncle Roy, Dad's only sibling, from my cell phone. He was tender and sweet like always. Listened to every word. How two people from the same parentage can be so different is a mystery as old as Cain and Abel. Uncle Roy believes it was the war. Dad had too much trauma. Too much death. He was in it too long. It was all too dark. He feels Dad learned to dissociate to survive. I've come to believe he's likely right. Such a truth

would neither excuse nor absolve the man. It's just a wooden spoon in a shaky hand to stir up bits and pieces of compassion stuck to the bottom of a pan of thick stew.

"Honey, can you put the phone up to his ear for me?" Uncle Roy requested.

"Yes." And I did so. I have no idea what my dad's younger brother said to him, but tears dripped from my jaw to my lap.

Gay arrived soon after that, and I have never been gladder to see her. Orderlies moved Dad to a hospital room, but we were told he'd never wake up. His skull was a wading pool.

"How long?"

"Who can say? Could be hours. Could be days."

My stepmother, my sister, and I knelt around his bed, joined hands at his feet and across his legs, committed his spirit to his Maker and asked the Lord to take him gently and let him not linger long.

Soon the waiting room nearest Dad's room was humming with people. Melissa was neck-deep in grad school exams at Wheaton College in Illinois, scrambling toward the first opportunity to fly home. Amanda and her husband, Curtis, were living in the Dallas area and packed their Jeep Cherokee and headed four hours south to Houston soon after they received the news. My grandson, fifteen months old at the time, lunged for me the moment he saw me and wrapped his arms tightly around my neck, hiding his face under my hair. He was a long way from reading a book but even a toddler can read a room. He was the happiest little fellow in the world, but he knew something bad had happened and he loved his grandmother, who conveniently had the heaviest hair in the room to hide under. When his parents needed to leave and head to my house to settle in for an inevitable funeral, he did not want to let go. Amanda had to unwind his arms from my neck with him screaming bloody murder until all three of us—Amanda, my grandson, and me—were sobbing.

When Dad's condition remained unchanged for several hours and I couldn't get my little guy off my mind, I asked Gay and our stepmother if it would be all right for me to go home for a little while and rock him. Of

course, it was.

I had that plump and beautiful blue-eyed toddler with the world's longest lashes in my arms, rocking him and singing to him and smooching his sweet head, when Gay called.

"Dad's gone, Beth."

She'd been the only one with him when he breathed his last. Our stepmother had slipped out of the room for the merest moment. But it felt right. My sister was the one to get to walk him home. I believe God calendars those kinds of appointments, and I'm as certain as I know to be that the man went to Jesus.

• • •

From where I sit, my father was loads of trouble in his living, but he was the least trouble in his dying of anyone I ever knew. He lived actively, healthily until he fell to the floor that morning in his eighty-seventh year. Volunteered. Served. Socialized. Like overstuffing a suitcase, he packed the last eight years of his life to broken zippers with good memories and lighthearted fun and games with his second wife. You know the one. The love of his life. Who can understand these things?

The Scrabble board was still set up on their kitchen table from a hot competition the night before; some *Q*s and *Z*s and other abominably difficult letters to play were perched on their wooden stands. They'd decided to finish the game the next day. A yellow ledger was close by with their scores, in my father's penmanship, from recent rounds of Scrabble and dominoes. A travel atlas was wide open right beside it with a green highlighter in the crease, plotting the next road trip.

We steadied ourselves and prepared to meet with the funeral director to see to Dad's final needs. But in iconic Albert B. Green fashion, he'd already planned his going-out to the minutest detail, and to his substantial credit, his casket and funeral and burial expenses were paid in full. We had his handwritten instructions of his wishes, numbered one through fourteen.

Thirteen of them were easily implemented. We'd have given up on the fourteenth except for Keith. He was adamant the old man had earned the twenty-one-gun salute and had half a dozen medals to prove it. He'd fought in two wars, done four tours, taken a bullet in the face and shrapnel in the back. His hands helped shove the gates of Dachau open in April of 1945, and his eyes saw sights of living ghosts in clattering bones stumbling toward the realization of their liberation, black eyes widening in the deep hollows of skeletal faces. His ears heard their weak wails of relief and gratitude. His skin felt their desperate pawing.

Keith was bound and determined to see to his father-in-law's wishes of a full military burial if it was the last thing he did. He contacted the VA and chased down every possible lead, refusing to take no for an answer. All this left me with a sizable crush on Keith because I knew like I knew my own name why he was doing it. He liked Dad well enough, but this wasn't about Dad. This was about Keith Moore's wife. He wanted to help me see a different side of my dad, an honorable side of my dad, here at the end. Though I'd still have to sort out all the complexities for years to come, my husband's good intentions were not wasted.

Keith didn't get to meet the veterans beforehand. He was simply assured they'd show up at the burial site and would he have a cash donation in hand.

All this was over the phone. Keith would have preferred names and a printout of concretized plans, but none were forthcoming, and he had no choice but to take them at their word. "Just tell us the time and place."

And they were good for it. We were already sitting under the awning, Dad right there in the open casket, awkward as usual but, also as usual, oblivious to it, when several cars pulled up to the nearest curb with bumps and screeches. There were seven of them, all right around Dad's age, so it understandably took them a while to get out of their vehicles, tuck their shirts back in, get their rifles out of the trunk, and make their way over to us. They'd not taken quite the care of themselves that Dad had, and though

this did nothing to diminish their due honor for service to their country, it appeared to me that several of them had not tried on their uniforms in roughly twenty pounds.

I looked at Wayne and he at me with no uncertain expression. “I hope,” I whispered to my big brother, “one of them doesn’t trip over a grave marker getting over here and the gun go off.”

We would all live through this event and find it varying degrees of meaningful, as Keith had hoped, even if he was let down somewhat by the disheveled condition of a couple of the veterans. Anyway, only a fool could remain unmoved by taps. The twenty-one-gun salute—which on this occasion was seven guns, three shots each—was also effective. And loud. I knew Dad really was dead when he didn’t wake up. The man deserved to be honored by his country for his service. He was a good soldier, whether or not he’d always been a particularly good dad.

I’m ashamed to say the whole affair was also a bit theatrically comedic. Skit-like, if I may. We are terrible people, my siblings and me. I blame Wayne for our inappropriate laughter. He blames me. And there we were in folding chairs, the right legs of mine digging into soft ground beneath the fake grass rug, and me wondering if we were about to topple on our mother.

• • •

I saw Mom and Dad about a year later. Well, not really. What I mean is, I imagined them. I was minding my own business, thinking about a dozen other things, when a live picture like we can take nowadays with our cell phones sprang into my mind’s eye out of seemingly nowhere. They looked to be in their late twenties or early thirties. Dad was dapper in a perfectly ironed and creased gray-green uniform and a garrison cap, and Mom was in a white short-sleeved dress with a fitted bodice cinched at the waist by a crisp white belt. Her flared skirt just below the knee was whipping in the breeze like a freshly bleached sheet on a clothesline. They were both smiling wide, maybe laughing, and the beams of an unseen sun were picking up the gold strands of Mom’s pecan-brown hair. The sky in the

backdrop was as blue as my grandson's eyes. Mom and Dad weren't holding hands or gazing at one another. Nothing like that. Just there in the scene together, happy as larks.

I know it wasn't real. I don't claim a vision of any kind. But it was a most unexpected picture to pop into my head and one that brought me considerable comfort. I so hoped, somewhere beyond the veil, my parents were each exactly that gleeful and were at complete peace with one another, fully liberated, the gates of pain pushed open by the hand of God.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE HAPPIEST YEAR OF MY MARRIED LIFE converged with the saddest year of my church life. As much as I hate to admit it, the two might not be entirely unrelated.

Keith had been too sick to feel the earth shake beneath me in October 2016 or to fully register the unabating aftershocks in 2017–2019. But he'd started coming awake to the broader world in late 2020 and was wide-eyed and fully cognizant in March 2021, when I made public my departure from the SBC, the denomination I'd loved all my life and served since I was twelve.

His return from the abyss was slow, two steps forward and one step back, but once he was back, I had the happiest year of my married life, bar none. Easy? No. Flawless? Heavens, no. That's not our vibe. *Happiest.* Lest you be thinking God gave me a brand-new man and that's why I was happy, nope, I mostly just got back the same ornery one I married and with the same mouth that needed washing.

And I needed Keith like a calla needs rain. He knew better than anyone but my Maker how much this decision meant to me. Knew I wouldn't know what to do with myself. Knew I wouldn't even know myself. He knew letting go of my long and happy partnership with Lifeway was a dagger to my heart. Many of my dearest relationships were tied to the SBC, and though most of them would survive the shift at least to some degree, we no longer shared the same bond. The leaving had come with a dying. Keith showed up for it and mourned with me. Mourned for me. Wept for me. Cussed for me.

For the first time in my life, I didn't have a home church. Didn't have a clue where to go. To Keith, this meant we were footloose, and what could be better than footloose? To me, this meant we were legless. Harborless.

Detached. No place nor people of faith we could call our own. The yearning to belong is woven into the human fabric. We had nowhere we belonged.

We'd been watching online services for a year, but I was starving half to death for corporate worship and the corporate reading of Scripture. As multiple churches reopened their doors following the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic, we visited several denominations closest to our tradition—and some great congregations—but each time we were faced with an undeniable reality: our presence was loaded. That's not to say we weren't welcome. It's to say we came with baggage and triggered reactions and opinions. Sometimes we humans are simply too known in a particular environment to have the luxury of starting over. And make no mistake, we were starting over.

During this season, Saturday evenings meant one thing for me: anxiety about where we would go to church the next morning. Keith would've been content to keep watching online where he could stay in his blue-checkered pajama pants, eat scrambled eggs and toast, and steer clear of an offering plate. But we don't sing that well. I found online praise and worship to be unbearably awkward, us sitting there smelling like Jimmy Dean sausage, with unbrushed teeth, uncombed hair, one dog sprawled over us and another dropping a slimy ball in our laps. Sometimes Keith would bust out laughing at the way we sounded, and by that time, false piety beaten to smithereens, I'd have to bust out with him. It wasn't working. Neither, so far, was finding a church.

One Saturday evening, me sitting on the couch, down in the mouth again, Keith said out of a concoction of compassion and frustration, "Elizabeth Moore, pick up your cell phone right now."

"Why?"

"God, help me, woman, you'd exasperate the pope. Would you just pick the thing up?"

So I did—but in a huff.

"Google *Anglican churches in Houston*," he said, bossy-like.

"What?"

"You heard me."

Our daughter, son-in-law, and their three children had moved to Missouri the previous summer, and in need of a breather from our tradition, they'd attended an Anglican church for a while and found considerable consolation in it. By this time, Keith was at his wit's end with me and my church drama and knew we were going to have to get off the beaten path to find a place we were less controversial.

So I did what he said. I sat right there on the couch and dictated into the tiny microphone of my phone, "Anglican churches in Houston, Texas."

Keith looked over my shoulder while my phone proceeded to search. When a half dozen red locator pins popped up on the screen, he circled around the couch and sat down next to me.

"Let's see," he said, leaning in close.

"None of them are anywhere near us," I quipped.

"Well, which is the closest?" His tone was a tad put out, but his posture was love through and through, sitting thigh to thigh with me, his arm tight around my shoulders.

He'd left this decision up to me for the previous forty-two years because, frankly, he didn't care. I don't mean he didn't want to go to church. I mean he didn't care where we went. The way he saw it, he wasn't going to get involved anyway. If I was happy at a church, he was fine with it. Right now, however, I was anything but happy in a church, having grown increasingly self-conscious and imagining we were too radioactive to be welcome anywhere. We'd just be tolerated, the way I saw it, and a headache to whatever poor pastor ended up with us. Keith faced the fact on his own that he was going to have to step up.

"This one right here." I tapped the screen with my fingernail. "About a half hour away."

"Good," Keith said. "That's where we're going tomorrow."

I was mostly quiet on the drive except to parrot every direction the voice assistant on my iPhone gave us. Siri would say, *Take a left at the stoplight in nine hundred feet.*

And I'd say, "Take a left at the stoplight in nine hundred feet, babe."

"I heard it."

“Okay. Just making sure.” *At the four-way stop, continue straight ahead.* “Babe, at the four-way stop, continue—”

“I heard it.”

“Okay.”

This for thirty minutes. We pulled into the parking lot at five minutes till. I reached for my purse and Bible on the floorboard, crunching butterfly wings in my stomach. Keith walked around the car and held his hand out to me. I grabbed it and we started for the entryway. As I replay the scene in my imagination, I’m all but wearing a white stick-on name tag with red letters: *Hello, I’m a Southern Baptist.*

A man wearing a real clip-on name tag with his picture and the church logo on it—the kind that says you really, really belong—greeted us at the door.

“Mornin’, folks!”

“Morning,” I said, avoiding eye contact, my volume trailing off with a mumble. “We’re vis’tors.”

“They know,” Keith said under his breath, reading the room, and perhaps reveling a bit in my rare onset of social awkwardness.

To a couple who’d come of age during the peak years of evangelicalism’s megachurch, the building seemed small. I’d loved the loudness of three-thousand-seat worship centers. The energy of it. I’d long appreciated the ministry of the man or woman sitting at the control center of a large sanctuary with enough sensitivity to know when to dim or brighten the lights. *Take them down during praise and worship so people aren’t distracted. Take them up for the sermon so people can read their Bibles.* I loved it. I still love it. But we knew this time around, the last thing we were looking for was big.

When we entered the foyer, the double doors to the sanctuary were twenty feet ahead of us and wide open. A few dudes were standing at the doors handing out bulletins. Hardly a sound was coming from inside. We were looking to slip subtly into a pew, but a whole handful of people were huddled at the door, each in some kind of robe. Now, I’d worn a choir robe at church no telling how many times, but this did not appear to be the choir.

For one thing, a couple of kids were in the huddle. Most everybody was holding something. Keith assumed the gentlemanly role, motioning me to go first, then pressed my back between my shoulder blades like a cattle prod for me to get going.

"Right through them?" I whispered.

"Yes, Lizabeth, *go*."

Okay, I was thinking, *but this is awkward*. Seemed obvious to me they were about to have a ceremony. We must have inadvertently visited on a special Sunday. I stepped through the huddle, weaving my head around the candlesticks and trying to avoid hitting my forehead on a cross a man was holding on the end of a wooden cane. I smiled at a small girl, maybe seven years old, holding another cross. Several men in various robes and stoles were standing nearby. Instead of being annoyed by us, each of them smiled at us warmly, motioning us forward and whispering various renditions of "Come right in," and "Welcome" and, to my profuse repetitions of "I'm so sorry, excuse us please," saying, "No, no, no, we're glad you're here."

A man around our age with a gentle face and warm, genuine smile was among them. He had on a white robe overlaid with a green stole bearing a grapevine pattern. He reached out his hand to me and, in a louder whisper, introduced himself as the rector. "Welcome to our church. And you are?"

"Beth—" I hesitated for half a second—"Moore."

"Oh!" he said, tilting his head back with surprise and an infectious, harmless chuckle. "Like *Beth Moore*."

"Unfortunately, yes." The verger who'd worked with him for decades would inform me later with a wide grin that the rector was simply amused I had the same name as the infamous Beth Moore. Nothing further occurred to him.

"Come right on in," he said in the dearest way. "We're glad to have you."

Somewhere around 120 people were seated in the pews of the sanctuary, and a small worship band with two singers at standing mics was poised to the left of an otherwise empty stage. We'd hardly sat down when a bell rang.

The band commenced immediately, the congregation stood and Keith with them, and I scrambled to my feet. Lo and behold, here they came, right down the center aisle, that huddle of people, smiling and singing.

Keith leaned his head toward me and whispered, “Get your bulletin.”

Now, I didn’t know when Keith thought he’d become such an expert, but I could see he was already holding his. I perused the room and saw that most of the other attendees were holding theirs. I grabbed mine just in time for the main guy, the man who had welcomed us at the door, to start saying phrases and the congregation hearkening back.

This included Keith, who’d never darkened the doors of this church. He acted just like he’d come into a sudden storehouse of knowledge. He pointed to the top of the right-hand column of my bulletin. “We’re right here.”

Anybody paying attention in the sanctuary could hear the sound of inexperience in the rattling of my bulletin. My hands were shaking uncontrollably with nerves.

And Keith? Well, let me ask you a few questions. Did your family ever have an aquarium when you were growing up? Did your mom or dad or aunt or older sibling ever take you to the pet store and buy you a goldfish of your very own to add to it? Remember how the employee submerged a dipper into the large fish tank and drew out a cup or so of water into a clear plastic bag, then grabbed a small net with a handle on it, scooped up a goldfish, dropped it in, and secured the bag with a twist tie? Remember how that fish would get all wild-eyed and anxious in that small bag on the way home in the car? Then, how you’d get it home to an aquarium your new goldfish had never seen, filled with fish it had never met, and you’d untwist the tie and pour the water and the new goldfish into the tank and it would just swim right in, smooth as warm butter, like it was home? Like it knew just what to do?

That was Keith. He took to it literally like a fish to water. He knew just where we were at all times in the order of service on the bulletin. When he read responsively, nothing about his voice was thin or throaty. He called it forth from his gut, bold-like. A few minutes in, he reached down and

lowered the kneeling bench like he'd built it. He dropped to his knees on that fixture like he knew precisely what to anticipate . . . and began to weep. And he wept and he wept. Wept for most of the service. Unhidden, unashamed. He'd wipe his face with both his hands, stare up at the ceiling a few seconds, then drop his face to his forearms, balanced on the back of the pew in front of us.

When we stood to say the Nicene Creed, he hardly glanced at the paper. I was trying to catch up with the words, wishing they'd slow down. The phrases were so beautiful. Rhythmic. Potent. True. Transforming. I'd heard them before, of course, and said them here and there in various services, but not like this. Not the way people say them who've built their entire faith lives upon them. I was still on "He ascended into heaven" when Keith and the rest of the congregation were declaring, "And we believe in the Holy Spirit."

One reason I couldn't keep up with the reading is that I couldn't keep my eyes off Keith.

Who even are you? I asked silently.

I was lost through much of the service, with one exception. I could tell we were proceeding toward the Lord's Supper, and I intended to receive it. And I intended to receive it, not just with hand and mouth, but with my whole soul. I'd have thrown my body on the table if they'd let me. In fact, the closer we got to the Eucharist section of the bulletin, the more I felt like I couldn't live without it another second.

I was so worn out, beaten down, and lost, that by the time the usher reached our row and motioned for us to proceed to the center aisle, I lunged toward it, Keith right on my heels. We stood in line behind other congregants moving forward and dividing right and left at the altar. Keith's hands were on my shoulders, my heart pounding in my chest. It was everything we could do not to break out of line and run to the altar. We dove for those kneeling cushions with our whole weight, set our elbows on the wooden rail, and cupped our hands for the wafer like starving people

begging for bread. I dipped the wafer into the wine, set it on my tongue, and just held it there. Held it there until it softened and blanketed my tongue. I felt it fit. Felt it fold over me.

I finally swallowed and opened my eyes to see Keith in my peripheral vision, already on his feet, extending his right hand to help me up. We returned to our row. He went right back to the kneeling bench, so I followed suit until the Eucharist was complete and Keith climbed back in his seat.

I loved the things we said toward the end. I didn't know how badly I needed to say them.

All our problems,
We send to the cross of Christ!

On that second line, the whole congregation, old and young, thrust their hands up and out vigorously. Now, I love nothing better than hand motions. I caught right on to this one.

All our difficulties,
We send to the cross of Christ!

Oh, heck, yeah, this was right up my alley.

All the devil's works,
We send to the cross of Christ!

I came just short of throwing my back out with enthusiasm on that part.

All our hopes,
We set on the risen Christ!

Yes. We do. You're all we've got, Jesus. Yes, we do.

That same wad of robed people who were at the back of the sanctuary when we came in gathered up their sacred paraphernalia and processed out, just like they'd processed in, but with double joy. "Celebrate, one and all!

By the power of the cross, Jesus welcomed us to his table!" Little girls in white robes snuffed the candles on the tables of the platform and filed out.

A loud voice came from the back. "Let us go forth into the world, knowing Christ and making him known!"

The congregants, who'd been quiet as church mice at the beginning of the service, shouted, "Thanks be to God!"

And it was over. I wasn't sure what just happened, but I wasn't opposed to it. A man got Keith's attention immediately, and I gathered up my Bible, purse, and bulletin. When I stood up and turned to leave the pew, several women were gathered there. In just seconds, a few more joined them.

I'll replay this scene in my head for the rest of my days, and Keith declares he will, too, but my words will fail to do it justice. It was something felt more than seen. About five women circled around me, the closest ones setting their hands on my forearms. It couldn't have been planned. No one knew we were coming. And we had no thought whatsoever that anyone there would know who we were.

"Beth," one of them voiced with palpable tenderness, "we don't know what brought you and your husband here today, but we want you to know __"

All of them nodded their heads like they knew exactly what she was about to say.

"We're so glad you came. You are welcome here, Beth."

God smote the rock, and water gushed forth from my eyes like waterfalls. I can't think of a time I've ever cried with less restraint in a public place. I couldn't stop. Couldn't get ahold of myself. Couldn't say a syllable. I just sobbed.

One of the women touching my arm said, "Can I simply ask you if you're okay?"

I nodded.

"Those are just tears of tenderness, right?" she followed up.

Nodded again.

“Okay, then. Those are allowed.” And they gently laughed, and I smiled, and, one by one, they embraced me. Keith and I drove home mostly in silence, his arm across the console and his hand stretched over mine.

Drained, I took a nap when we got home. Several hours later I sat down next to him in our den. “How’d you know to do all that?”

“What do you mean?”

“At church today.”

“You mean the liturgy?” He seemed surprised I was asking.

“Yes.”

“Lizabeth, we did those things at my Catholic church and Catholic school throughout my whole childhood.”

“Babe, why didn’t you ever tell me you wanted to go back?”

“I didn’t want to go back. Don’t want to now.”

“But, Keith, I’ve never once seen you enjoy a service like that. Never ever seen you participate like that. What on earth?”

“Those were the parts I loved back then. I didn’t love all of it. But I loved those parts. I loved saying and praying those words. I was such a hyperactive kid that all the sitting and the kneeling and the standing and walking—constantly changing positions—worked for me. I hadn’t expected that today. I hadn’t expected it all to hit me that way. I had no idea I’d missed it. It was surreal having you with me. Surreal to have you not object to it.”

“They read a lot of Scripture,” I said. “Nearly three full chapters.”

“Yeah, they did.” He grinned, knowing full well I’d calculated how much Bible was used.

I continued on. “I thought the sermon was good. It wasn’t loud and flashy, but it was good. It was solid.”

“Agree with that.”

“A lot was said about the gospel in the service, and I guess you heard at the end how we were supposed to go out and make Jesus known. I mean, Keith, that was tonic for this old evangelist’s bones.”

“Yep,” he laughed, “I guess it was.”

We sat silently awhile.

“I want to go back next Sunday,” I said.

“Okay. We’ll take it a week at a time. Deal?”

“Deal.”

We stumbled accidentally, woundedly, wearily onto the Via Media. A middle road. It would take us a while to recognize the scenery.

• • •

I was nearly as terrible the second time as I was the first. I stayed a phrase behind the congregation with every sentence, and half the time, I was too face-planted in the bulletin to make it to my feet before it was time to sit down. I tried to keep an eye on Keith and do what he did.

I wasn’t quite as out of sync the third week. It felt good to begin to anticipate a thing or two rather than constantly chase the liturgy. I could settle in for a couple of minutes while the offering plate was passed and review my bulletin and see what we were doing next. I was going to be ready for it this time.

What I wasn’t ready for, however, was the offertory music that day. It was instrumental, keyboard only, in the hands of a silver-haired, sweet-smiling gentleman about my age, wearing a suit and tie. I recognized the song four notes in. *Middle C, F, A, treble C.*

My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.

I closed my eyes and mouthed the words. The wind of the Spirit picked up in my imagination and blew year after year from old wall calendars, ink-smeared pages tearing, whipping, and tumbling from the scene, the breeze dying down right around June 1966.

There we were again in my imagination, all of us on our feet in the sanctuary of First Baptist Church, Arkadelphia, Arkansas: Nanny and her friends in their pillbox hats, Mom and Dad, my brothers and sisters and me, nine years old. My Sunday school teacher yonder to the right, my choir teacher, front-center in the loft, Brother Reeves standing in front of his fancy tall chair with the red velvet cushioned inserts, Elwyn Raymer, our minister of music, holding a hymnal in his right hand and keeping the tempo with his left. We were all singing with our hymnals wide open, but who needed them anyway?

When darkness veils his lovely face,
I rest on his unchanging grace;
in every high and stormy gale,
my anchor holds within the veil.

Swept back vividly in my memories to First Baptist Church, sitting squarely and consciously on the pew of this Anglican church, it occurred to me how firmly I'd been held and how fittingly maneuvered. Through a chain of endless storms, pocked by furious tornadoes, my sanity mocked in the darkest of nights, Jesus had held. I knew no truer truth in all of life than the profession of faith I'd made public at nine years old. I kept mouthing the words while the organist played on.

His oath, his covenant, his blood,
support me in the whelming flood;
when all around my soul gives way,
he then is all my hope and stay.

I hadn't drowned. Even when I let go and gave myself wholly to the undertow and was swept into the heart of the sea, his hand was wrapped round me. Though the waves roared and tempest raged, at no time was I adrift from his presence.

When he shall come with trumpet sound,

O may I then in him be found:
dressed in his righteousness alone,
faultless to stand before the throne.

All that shame I'd felt. All that time I was so sure everyone could see all that had been done to me and all that I had done, the God Who Sees, who really sees, saw a beloved child, not an outcast laid bare in condemnation, but a daughter draped sublimely, safely in Christ's righteousness.

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand:
all other ground is sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand.

I'd track down the organist after the service and thank him for such an act of service, playing that Baptist hymn for this old Baptist girl, and he said how glad he was that I enjoyed it. Said he keeps the hymnals of other denominations and chooses from one every week in case a wanderer is in the house pining for home.

I walked to the car nearly stumbling with wonder. With every step I took, it occurred to me with more startling clarity, that somewhere beyond the clouds all was calendared. Neither my pain nor my path could be reduced to mere consequences. Even the detours on this road were marked by Providence. The travel atlas was out on my Father's table up north; a route I could not see was highlighted in green. In the words of the great apostle, God was, all along, *finishing what was lacking in my faith*. Such will be the course for the rest of my days, come what may.

My heritage, so precious to me, could not be stripped from me any more than my future could be stolen. God would see to his good pleasure. No trading in. No trading out. No such scarcity can be found in the Spirit. I could hold on to all of it. Every last bit of it. For he who called me was holding on to me.

EPILOGUE

TEN YEARS AGO my man built me a house in the woods where, God willing, we intend to live out the rest of our days. By *built*, I don't mean he took hand to brick or hung the doors, but as surely as our metal roof is spring-grass green, he took a pen to paper and drew it right before my eyes.

"What would you think about living in something like that?"

Keith is a bit of an anomaly. He's a grimy outdoorsman with a fine eye for design, but he's never claimed to possess a fleck of drawing prowess. It didn't matter. I got the picture.

"Yes," I replied.

"Really?"

"Baby, absolutely, yes. That's the house I want to grow old in."

His face lit up with delight. "You mean it?"

"Honey, *yes*." And I did. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"I've pictured it for years."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I thought I'd sooner bury you than blow you out of this house where we raised the kids."

I'd sworn and declared I'd never leave it. Sworn and declared when I breathed my last, he could hurl my cold, stiff body into one of a dozen holes the dogs had dug in the backyard.

We'd bought the blue Victorian in a greater Houston neighborhood at a foreclosure rate when our girls were five and two. I loved every square inch of it. Amanda had learned to ride a two-wheeler and Melissa, a Big Wheel, in that driveway. They'd learned to shoot hoops in it. I'd waited at the curb of that house for the bus to come get each of them for their first days of school. I'd taken pictures of my girls in their prom dresses in that house.

My first grandchildren crawled and toddled and ate off the floor in that house. Eight pets—dogs and cats both—had been raised and spoiled rotten within those walls. For the love of God, I'd gotten "yard of the month" once at that house.

I'd risen up before dawn more mornings than I have math skills to count over the course of twenty-seven years to meet with Jesus in its small dining room. I'd prepared a jillion Sunday school lessons and conference messages and written fourteen Bible studies there. I'd rolled out butcher paper on the den floor and drawn a timeline of the seventy weeks of Daniel for Bible study in permanent marker. And when I rolled it back up, the black ink had bled through to the hardwood. Now, who's going to buy that house? Nobody, and not just because I'd ruined the floor. I wasn't budging.

A couple of developments weakened my firm resolve. We'd made the ghastly mistake of getting two puppies at the same time. I needn't explain to anyone with similar regrets what that decision did to my "yard of the month." Between the landscaping, furniture, rugs, book spines, stair rails, cabinet knobs, and every pair of shoes we owned, those two gremlins managed to do thousands of dollars' worth of damage in two years' time. The fields nearby where we'd run these dogs and their predecessors, letting them chase rabbits till their paws were nubs, were now covered with storage-unit eyesores. I ask you, how many storage units does one neighborhood need? If it sounds like I decided to leave the home in which I'd sworn to live out my days and uproot to the country over a pair of dogs, then you've got the picture.

I'd just said it once. And I said it no louder than a whisper—and with a disclaimer. "Don't even think of reminding me that I said this. Don't even pay attention to it. But I might one day consider moving."

Keith called a Realtor the next day. She and Keith searched for a piece of land first. After several weeks of exploration, they discovered acres down a one-way dirt road behind a few farms on the outskirts of Houston. The land was so dense with trees, brush, vines, and thorns, they had to hack their way in to see if adequate space for two houses was above the floodplain. We weren't moving without Keith's parents. They lived one

minute from us in town, and we weren't giving that up even for dogs. We'd build their house first since, in their late seventies, bar a tragedy, they had less time left to enjoy it.

Keith drove me out to see the property and walked me down the spider-webbed path he'd hacked, and it was love at first sight. I'd ached for a fresh-air, moving mural over my head, painted with long, leafy arms of pines, oaks, and sycamores, ever since my family moved away from the hill in Arkadelphia.

We dove into our savings and made an offer nearly overnight. Keith and his dad began the monumental task of clearing enough land for our houses, digging a well, and putting in electrical lines and butane and septic tanks. My in-laws settled on a house plan quickly, but no matter what Keith put in front of me, nothing made my eyes sparkle.

"Babe, I'm telling you," I said over and over, "any one of them is fine. I don't care. You know I'm not a house snob. I'm in it for the trees. I don't care what house you put in the middle of that little forest, I'll be blissful."

"But I want you to care."

"Well, honey," I said, "I'm sorry. I don't care. You pick. I'll be so happy."

And all that was true until the day at our breakfast table when Keith sketched an image on a piece of 8½-by-11-inch printer paper and asked, "What would you think about living in something like that?"

"It's a church!" I exclaimed, taken aback.

"Well, yeah, but we'd design it into a home."

"Keith, where did you even come up with this idea?"

"You know I'll take a country road over a freeway any day, and driving between here and San Antonio or Dallas, either one, I've seen some rendition of this style church several times and had to stop and stare. They're almost always a basic, no-frills chapel, the roof a twelve/twelve pitch like this, and a couple of Sunday school rooms on each side in the back. I've dreamed of it for years. Seems like, as much as your faith has shaped our lives up to now, it would make a fitting shape for the rest of

them. The way I'm picturing it, a combination den, dining area, and kitchen would go in the chapel part of it, then bedrooms to each side of the rear. It wouldn't be ornate, but that's not us anyway. I think it could work."

He had me, hook, line, and sinker. Keith started poring over online catalogs of local architects and driving by examples of their handiwork. He found an architect whose drawings showed imagination and asked him if he'd meet us for dinner. After we'd small-talked a few minutes, Keith took a folded piece of paper out of his shirt pocket with the same drawing, unfolded it, pressed out the creases with his fingertips, turned it 180 degrees, and slid it across the table. "Have you ever designed a house like this?"

The tall, slender, gray-haired gentleman looked like a character from a movie. He was perfectly put together from head to toe with a mesmerizing South African accent, a trimmed goatee with a meticulously spun handlebar mustache, and a crimson bow tie at the neck of a shirt sufficiently starched to stand alone. He picked up the paper, lifted his chin, squinted through his bifocal lenses, then raised his brows and grinned. "Like an old church?"

"Yessir," Keith said. "My wife has a calling, and all these years she's __"

"No," he interrupted, "I can't say I've ever created a blueprint for a home like this. But I also can't say I haven't wished to."

He just didn't seem like the lying type. We hired him on the spot. Pleased to euphoria with the resulting blueprints, Keith met with a custom builder right away and oversaw every square inch of construction. He found five pieces of unmatched stained glass and had windows cut to fit them.

Bereft of a gifting for interiors, I left everything entirely to Keith. He chose all the flooring, countertops, cabinets, and appliances with the easy agreement that the insides would be homey, not fancy. We were moving to the woods so two gnarly dogs would have space to romp. We're the opposite of the sort of people who don't let their pets on their couch. One sleeps with us, for pity's sake.

We'd move into that brand-new old-country church a year later. I'd once again swear and declare I'd never move.

• • •

We're all we have out in these woods. We can either find a way to be happy out here together or be miserable out here together, but the unchanging fact is, we're out here alone together. Our kids grew up. Keith's daddy died. His mother moved into assisted living. A pandemic hit and pinned us in these acres alone for months. Our daughters—Sunshine and Moonshine—and our darling, hilarious, and endlessly energetic grandchildren all live many miles away.

We're still thick as thieves, those girls and I. Not a day goes by without us talking, stalking, commiserating, laughing, deliberating, planning, scheming, or crying. We text, we call, we video and Zoom. We're together in person as often as possible, and when we're not, we pine for one another. They're the best friends and confidantes I have. My closest advisers. My favorite humans. My funniest comediennes. They're beautiful and brilliant, witty and deep, bold and full of grace, and I miss them every dang day. Those gorgeous creatures are doing exactly what they should be doing. Doing exactly what I want them to be doing. They're living their grown-up lives. They love Jesus. They love their parents. They're never out of touch nor out of reach. But here's the God's honest truth of our everyday lives: their dad's all I've got left of them in these woods.

Not too long ago, Keith came in the house looking like he'd seen a ghost.

"Lizabeth," he said, "I'm gonna need you to get in the truck and right now and I don't want to hear any arguing. I've got somewhere I've gotta take you."

"Where on earth?" I asked.

"You'll see."

We drove for half an hour, Keith winding this way and that, and finally pulled into the gravel parking lot of a church near Waller, Texas.

"This was my grandparents' church, Lizabeth. This was the place I went with them when I was a kid and spent all those weekends in the country. Hadn't been back in all these years."

He'd gotten a serious case of nostalgia earlier in the day. The kind that gets in your lungs and makes you pant for something—*anything*—meaningful, purposeful from your past. He'd driven out to those country roads in Waller, aching for his grandparents who had given themselves to a little lost boy with scars on his legs and scars on his heart, remembering how they'd saved his life. Their ninety acres had long since been halved and sold and locked behind gates. He sat on the shoulder of the road, reliving memories. He remembered how he felt when he'd sit between them in the pickup truck. He hadn't even minded going to church with them every Sunday, as long as he was snug and secure between that old woman and that old man.

Where was that church, anyway? he'd asked himself on the earlier drive. *It couldn't be too far from here.*

He knew it wasn't in town back then. It had been somewhere out in the country, nothing but pastures around it. He drove all over those country roads, and just about the time he was ready to give up, he finally spied it. He read the sign on it over and over to make sure he wasn't imagining things. A new building had gone up since the last time he'd been there, but they'd seen fit to keep the old one and mark its history with a placard just for remembrance's sake. It was the one, all right. The one where he'd squirmed in the pew between his grandpa and grandma, them saying what seemed a thousand Our Fathers.

I got out of the truck and stared, my hand slowly rising to cover my gaping mouth.

It was my house. Size, shape, the roof pitch, the white paint.

The very house Keith had drawn on a scratch sheet of paper and built for me was the spitting image of his grandparents' church. The memory of its appearance had been buried alive beneath the charred wood and gray ash of his childhood, a pulse of faith too faint for Keith to perceive and too loud for God to forget.

All this time, Keith thought the chapel he'd built as a home for us was a matter of his taste in design and, in his words, a monument of sorts to my faith. The connection between the two places had never occurred to Keith.

But it had never stopped occurring to Christ.

As I stood in front of the old church, seeing in my mind's eye the squirrels skittering up and over that same roofline on my house in the pines, I knew I'd been wrong about God, thinking that day I stormed through the woods, wet-faced with boiling, angry tears that Keith never got a break and, therefore, neither did we. Copious questions remained unanswered. But one answer alone caught the clear glimmer of the setting sun on the stained glass of Keith's grandparents' old church. God loved my husband. He'd loved him all along. Of course, I knew it inside, but I'd needed in the worst way for God to show it. And he'd chosen a way I could not possibly miss. Could not possibly forget. I'd awaken to it every morning and drive up to it every evening after work.

God was the unseen architect of our chapel in the woods. Keith had built it for me, but God had built it for us.

• • •

I saw this life of mine going differently than it has. I saw myself turning out better than I have. Surer about how things go. I expected to have more riddles solved. More people sorted out. More grays dissolved to black-and-white.

I never was able to divide up the room into the good and the bad the way I'd wanted. I couldn't even unmix my own feelings, let alone those of others. I needed neatness from God. What I got was a tangled-up knot.

Funny thing is, not once had it occurred to me how little difference exists between a tight knot and a firm tie. Somewhere inside the balled-up, walled-up mass of tangled strands in the life of faith, the inscrutable God of heaven and earth has the loose ends tied. The ones that mean anything, anyway. Tied securely. Tied sturdily. Tied in such a way that all the human tugging, doubting, and fretting in the world can't loose them. Tied in such a way no mortal mind could calculate. What God is this who can keep a

secret so long? What God is this, so unhurried to prove himself? So confident of his own spotless character that he is unpressured by all the second-guessing of his own children?

I'm growing old now, quickly, the clock ticking, the days flying. I'm not very sure of myself anymore, if I ever truly was. But I am utterly sure of one thing about my turn on this whirling earth. A thing I've never seen. A thing I cannot prove. A thing I cannot always sense. Every inch of this harrowing journey, in all the bruising and bleeding and sobbing and pleading, my hand has been tightly knotted, safe and warm, with the hand of Jesus. In all the letting go, he has held me fast. He will hold me still. And he will lead me home. Blest be the tie that binds.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Lord-a-mercy, this would go a heap faster if I could just mention the people I *don't* need to thank. Alas, I'm having trouble coming up with enough of their names to fill a page, so I'll attempt to do this the customary way, but I will inevitably overlook people to whom I owe so much gratitude.

I'm deeply grateful to Ron Beers, senior vice president at Tyndale House, for entrusting me with another project. I don't take it lightly. I always fear being more of a liability to my publishers than a blessing. Karen Watson has been my closest compadre at Tyndale for as many as ten years, one of my most powerful draws to Tyndale and the one with whom I feel safest to try new things and speak my mind. She is more valuable to me than gold. I'm so grateful for the care and excellence of editor Kathryn Olson and copy editor Danika Kelly. You are both fabulous. I'm wild about the whole Tyndale crew, among them Maria Eriksen, Kristen Magnesen, and publicist Katie Dodillet. I can't wait to be on the road with you again. Huge thanks to Jackie Nuñez and Dean Renninger for your work on the cover. It delighted me to no end. I knew what I was getting into with these individuals on my Tyndale team when I partnered with them on this work. Knew I wouldn't regret it.

The gift I didn't know to anticipate was Carol Traver. I'm going to need a minute here. Carol's niche at Tyndale is memoir, so our paths hadn't crossed. Once I settled in my mind that this was the direction God meant for me to go with the next Tyndale book, Karen Watson quipped, "Oh, I know exactly who we need to assign to you. You will love her." Oh, man, was she right. Let me say with tears in my eyes and a wide grin across my face, no therapist on earth knows as much about my personal life as Carol Traver. God bless her. A memoir is uniquely difficult to write because a life is immensely hard to honestly face. Mine has been anyway. Every draft hit her desk first, raw and unfiltered.

Carol helped me navigate what was too much to tell and what was too little. I came to one part that messed with me so much, she checked on me every day for a week. I had such difficulty with another chunk of my story, one far more recent, that I finally said, "I'm just going to write it all to you, exactly how I perceived it, exactly how I felt it, saw it, and get it all off my chest, and let you decide what to keep, what is of actual benefit to the reader, and what needs to go." She did exactly what I asked, and a three-chapter segment of the book turned into a two-chapter segment. Those deleted portions will rightly never see the light of day. By the time all was said and done, Carol walked with me through every chapter, every page and paragraph of this book. She's read this manuscript more times than any human ought to have to and far more times than I. I can't imagine this would be the same book with a different editor. Carol, I'm so glad I took this ride with you, and I forgive you for cutting my marvelous Pony Bee story. The reader has no idea what you put out to pasture.

I'll never live long enough nor have vocabulary enough to adequately thank my coworkers at Living Proof Ministries for their constant support, camaraderie, prayers, laughter, grace, patience, hilarity, and affection. They are my closest fellow sojourners in the faith, and they continually

increase my love for Jesus. No margin exists for me to write a trade book without them picking up the slack. Kimberly McMahon (K-Mac to me) deserves a double portion of gratitude as she serves alongside this Enneagram 7 as my personal assistant while I bounce like a Ping-Pong ball all over the place. When I can't remember my last name, she can.

I loved every second of reliving with Helen Maerz that momentous week of missions camp when I was eighteen and she was one of my sixth graders.

I'm so thankful for close and unreplaceable friends in the faith like Travis and Angela Cottrell, whom I love like my own flesh and blood, my whole Living Proof worship team, Keith's and my double-dating friends Danny and Charmaine Mitcham, our beloved Steven, Amy, and Ainsley Purcell, Johnnie Haines, Priscilla Shirer, Lisa Weir, Steve Bezner, Derwin and Vicki Gray, Russell and Maria Moore, and Christine Caine, one of my favorite people on earth and a ridiculously generous cheerleader. So many other names deserve to be in this paragraph. These are just a few who have been nearby during these many months of writing. I owe you such debts of love. You have no small part in this memoir. After all, without friends, how good can memories possibly be?

Inexpressibly grateful to my church family. I wouldn't have wanted to miss you for anything in the world. I'll never forget that Sunday.

I began this book with gratitude to each of my siblings, but I cannot draw to a close without echoing it. They didn't volunteer to have a very wordy writer and controversial religious figure in the family. Children who grow up in the same family don't have identical experiences, nor do they witness all the others' most life-shaping scenes. And even when they do, they don't necessarily see those events from the same corner of the room. My siblings' willingness to let me tell any overlapping parts of the Green story from my individual perspective is a mercy and a gift beyond price. I offered to change their names, for what little it was worth, but they declined the offer. So, Sandra, Wayne, Gay, and Tony, I thank you with all of my heart. Lisa, my Wayne's other half, you are one of the dearest people in the world to me and no less my sister than Sandra and Gay. I love all of you.

Uncle Roy, you are our Green family patriarch. Please live long enough to read this book. You are the youngest person in his nineties that I know. We are all so proud to be yours.

Amanda and Melissa, my Sunshine and my Moonshine, you are the only two daughters for me. Your grace toward me after all my mistakes and regrets and love for me in all my weakness and over-the-topness leaves me in tearful gratitude. You are my favorite company. I esteem no one higher. Love no one more. Enjoy no one more. Thank you for being able to deal with this memoir. Curtis, my son-in-law, I don't know how you've dealt with all of us Moores but we're so glad you have. I love you dearly. To my grandchildren: because I adore you, earnestly love you more than my own life and certainly more than my own story, I have very intentionally left your names out of these pages. My hope is that you will grow up free of my public baggage and find your way with Jesus.

Ivan Keith, I come finally to you and find myself at a loss for words. You could not possibly have more skin in this memoir. Your willingness to let me be this transparent about our story is nothing less than heroic to me. We have lived a wild journey together. I reckon, darling, we've been everything but bored. Thank you for enduring. I love you so.

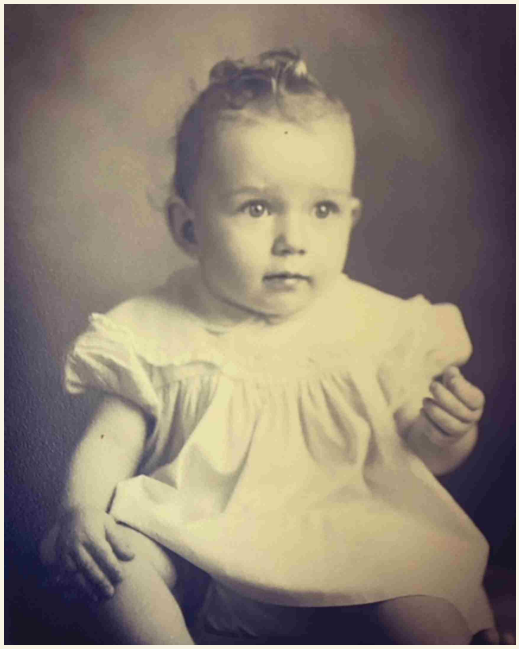
I am grateful beyond any possible measure for Jesus, who saved my soul and who daily saves me from myself. If anything in these pages is of value, if any good dwells in me at all, my blessed Savior, it is you. You have my heart. You are my home. You are my joy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AUTHOR AND SPEAKER BETH MOORE is a dynamic teacher whose conferences take her across the globe. Beth founded Living Proof Ministries in 1994 with the purpose of encouraging women to know and love Jesus through the study of Scripture. She has written numerous bestselling books, including *Get Out of That Pit*; *So Long, Insecurity*; and *Chasing Vines*; and Bible studies, including *Breaking Free*, *Mercy Triumphs*, *Entrusted*, *The Quest*, and *Now That Faith Has Come*, which have been read by women of all ages, races, and denominations. Another recent addition includes her first work of fiction, *The Undoing of Saint Silvanus*.

Beth recently celebrated twenty-four years of Living Proof Live conferences. She can be seen teaching Bible studies on the television program *Living Proof with Beth Moore*, aired on the Trinity Broadcasting Network.

She and her husband of forty-four years reside in Houston, Texas. She is a dedicated wife, the mother of two adult daughters, the grandmother of three delightful grandchildren, an active church member, and a dog-lover-to-the-death.



Me at 9 months old

My darling mom (center) in 1960

My dad and me

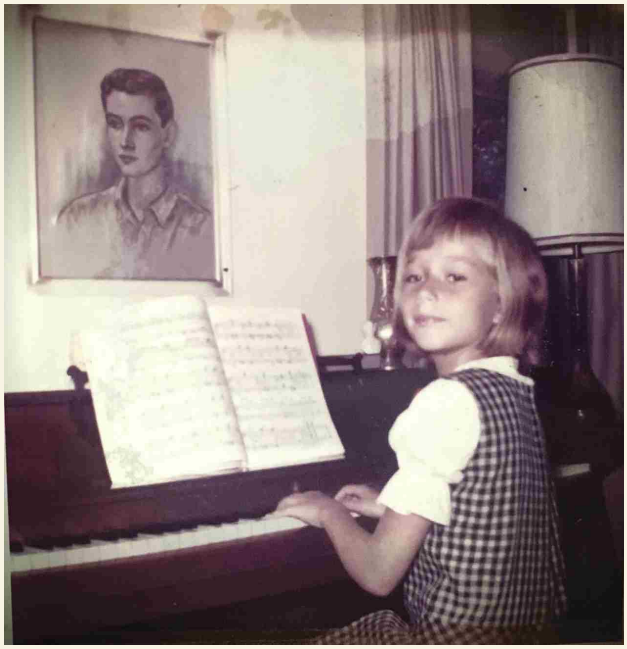
Nanny, Mom, my siblings, and me

The five of us (from left): me, Gay, Wayne, Tony, and Sandra

The three little ones: Gay, Tony, and me

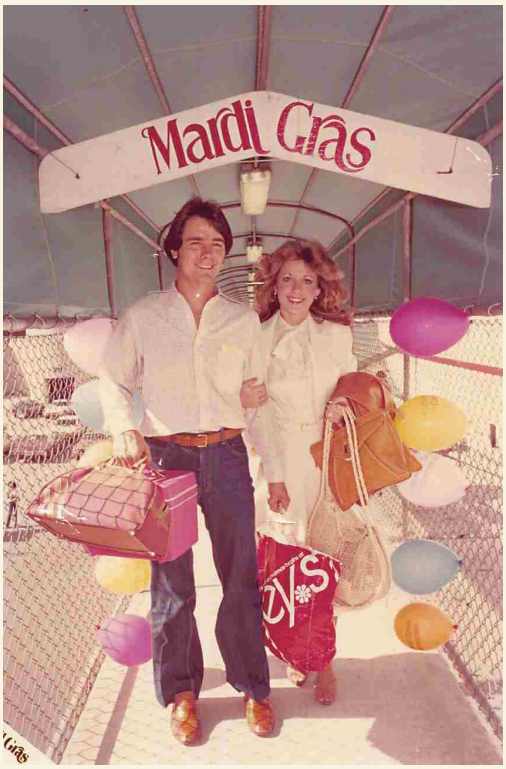
Christmas 1961

Senior Prom. My mom made my dress and I loved it!

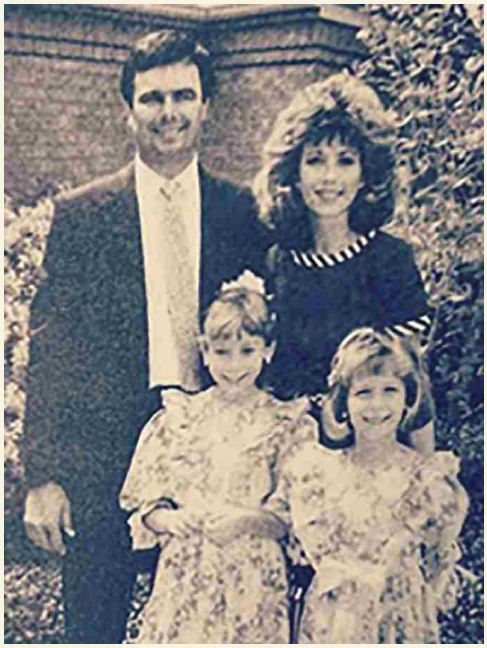


Practicing piano with the maestro (Wayne) over my head in 1962

Keith duck hunting, 1980



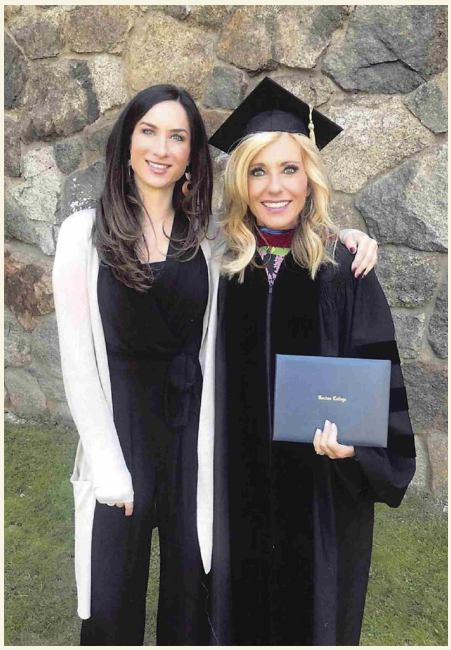
Our honeymoon, 1978



The five of us on Easter 1987: Keith, Amanda, Melissa, me and my hair

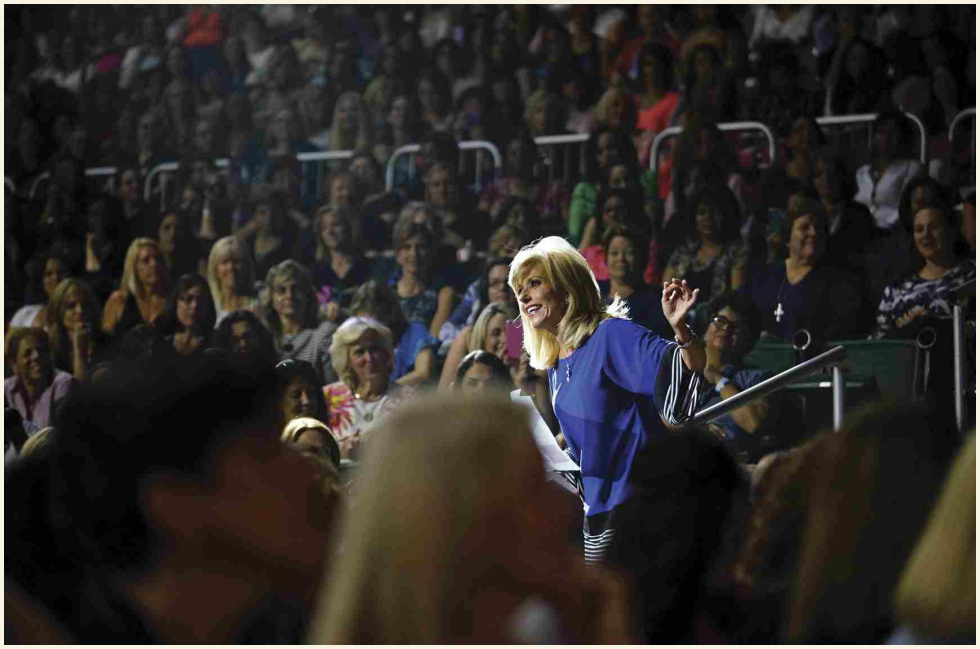
My baby girls: Sunshine (right) and Moonshine (left)

Amanda’s wedding

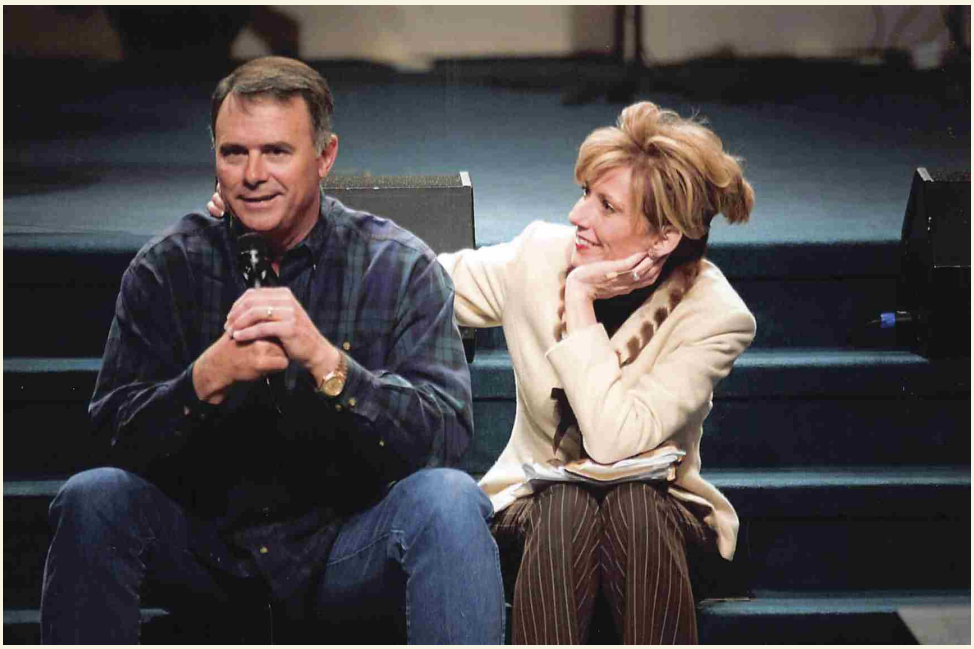


Melissa and me, May 2019

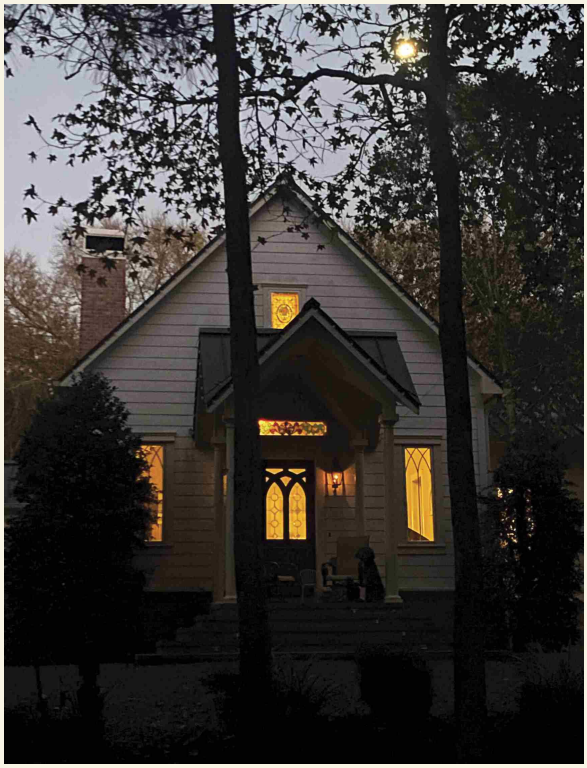
Living Proof Live



Receiving an honorary doctorate from Gordon College in 2019



An impromptu Q&A with Keith at a Living Proof Live event in 2006

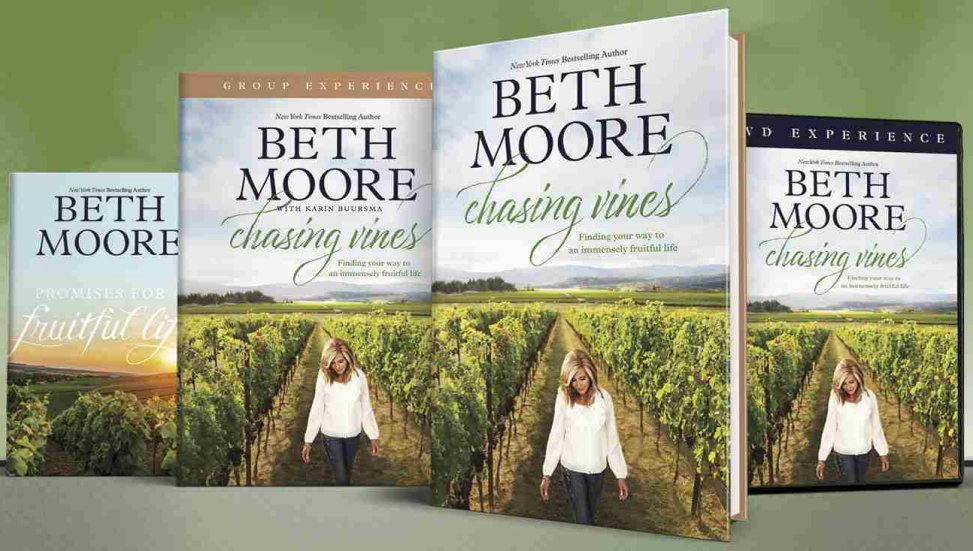


Our home in the woods

Keith, our bird dog Creek, and me, 2021

Join Beth on her journey of discovering what it means to chase vines—

and learn how to fully embrace God's amazing design for a fruitful, abundant, and meaningful life.



Chasing Vines: Popular teacher and speaker Beth Moore helps us understand how our life—and our relationship with God—could be different if we better understood and fully embraced His amazing design for making fruitful lives that matter.

Chasing Vines DVD Experience: Designed for use with the *Chasing Vines Group Experience*, this six-session DVD curriculum based on Beth Moore's book explores the ways God delights in watching things grow—and how the land of the vineyard holds the secret for how we can have a fruitful life.

Chasing Vines Group Experience: This is a six-session workbook designed for use with the *Chasing Vines DVD Experience*, based on the book by Beth Moore. A great resource for church groups, Bible studies, and anyone who's ever wondered how God makes everything in life matter!

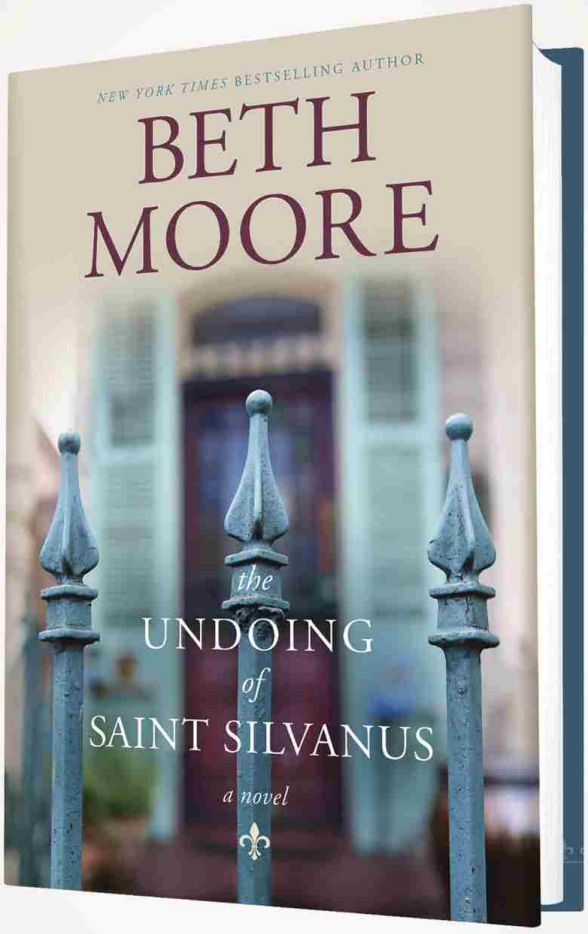
Promises for a Fruitful Life: Drawn from Scripture and passages from Beth Moore's book *Chasing Vines*, this booklet will help you find new hope for Kingdom building. With each page, you'll be reminded that your life matters—and nothing you've experienced will be wasted by the One who created you.

To learn more from Beth and access additional resources, visit her online at Bethmoore.org.

CP1547

"From its gritty start to its redemptive finish, Moore's ambitious first novel spotlights her gifts for humanizing the biblical experience and the search for faith."

BOOKLIST



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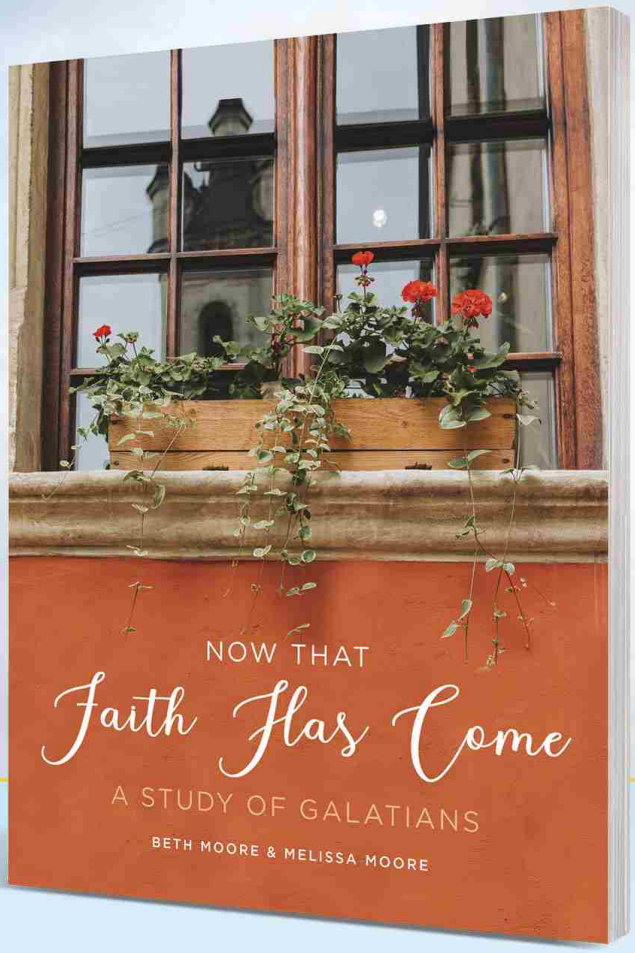
CP1303

Join bestselling authors Beth Moore and Melissa Moore for a six-week deep dive into Paul's captivating letter to the Galatians!



Come to know the letter's original recipients. Study its original context and embrace its timeless relevance. Discover—or perhaps rediscover—what makes the gospel of Jesus Christ revolutionary to those who choose to believe. Find out how everything has changed, now that faith has come.

CP1830