

Breaking the Fourth Wall

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Introduction: Not Just a Role

I sat in one of the chairs of the corner Sunday school classroom, my eyes skimming the lines of the script in front of me. The other members of the kids' drama team sat around me as we prepared for the skit we would perform for this month's lesson in front of the entire Sunday school. As a sixth grader, I was one of the oldest there. I looked over every detail to see who I would get to play. I leaned forward in the plastic chair as Mr. Colson, our team leader, gave us the run-down of the latest story we would bring to life.

Mr. Colson looked at me and said that I was going to be the kid shooting spitballs at people in the pretend Sunday school class. I had never shot a spitball in my life, and truthfully, I didn't really know what it was, but I laughed. This was going to be fun.

But on Saturday night, the evening before we performed, I sat at the kitchen table, and I wasn't so sure anymore. My insides twisted. The girl who I was playing was a good kid. On the outside at least. She knew all the answers, she was the model student, and she seemed perfect in so many ways. I thought she and I had a lot in common.

But when the teacher left the room, this character shot spitballs at people, made fun of them, and was . . . mean. She even opened her eyes during prayer and made funny faces at the other kids. I thought back to one of my teachers lecturing us and threatening punishment if she caught us with our eyes open during prayer. I never clued into the fact that she would have to open her own eyes to catch us. But in this skit, I was supposed to pretend that I was this girl. I thought of the awards on my shelf and the smiles of teachers. The character and I had those things in common, but this girl had a darker side—one I never wanted others to think of when they saw me.

In past roles, I was a young girl with a crush, a little mouse helping Cinderella, and even

a girl getting used to the outdoor aspects of summer camp. After the shows, ladies in the church choir would come up to me and ask if math gave me a headache like it did for my character and chuckled as I grinned and shook my head. Others called me Esther the Jester after I wore the green joker hat for my role in King Nebuchadnezzar's court. What would they call me once I performed in this skit?

Mom came into the kitchen, and I took a shallow breath, "Mom, I don't want to do the skit tomorrow. You aren't supposed to open your eyes during prayer or shoot spitballs at other kids. And what if people think that I'm really like this?" I looked down. I couldn't let others' opinion of me change.

Mom's blue eyes stared at me intently, taking in my shaky voice. She paused then walked to our white and gray wall phone and picked up the receiver. A little later I heard, "I have a little girl in tears here who doesn't want to perform tomorrow."

The blurry wooden table sat in front of me. I would be letting Mr. Colson down. He was counting on me, and now he probably hated me. I didn't say anything when he gave me the part, and I seemed so excited at our first meeting. He probably wondered what happened.

Mom put the phone to her shoulder, "What do you want to do tomorrow, honey? The choice is yours."

I tried to slow my beating heart. I said I could do it and that I wouldn't let him down. But I didn't want to do the spitballs. That was too far. Mom and I talked, and she suggested that maybe blowing bubbles at people instead would work. What kid carries bubbles around anyway? But we weren't concerned with reality at that point.

The next morning, I pushed against the heavy doors to enter the Sunday School Fellowship Hall. I didn't want to see Mr. Colson, but I knew I would have to. I was sure I knew

what would happen. He would see me and would walk straight toward me.

“Esther, what happened? You told me that you were fine to do this skit.”

I bit my lip. “I know.”

“I was counting on you.” His mustache frowned with the rest of his mouth. He shook his head. “I can’t believe you would do this to me.”

I looked down.

“Do you know what you did?” He pointed his index finger at me. “You made it seem like I did something wrong, and now we have to rewrite this entire skit all because you aren’t comfortable with it.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s just a skit. It’s not a big deal!” His voice rose. “Do you understand what you put me through? How much stress you’ve caused me? Why didn’t you say anything before?” I looked around praying no one else could hear our conversation.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Colson.” I couldn’t look at him.

He would cut me off with a downward slash of his hand through the air. “Well, let’s just get this over with!” He would turn his back on me to find the other kids who had no issue with their roles.

But when I entered the Fellowship Hall, I didn’t see anyone right away. I started to walk to the carpeted area where the others were probably setting up. When I saw him, it was different than I had imagined. The eyes behind his glasses weren’t angry; instead, there was concern but also wariness. He didn’t yell. He simply accepted the changes I proposed and went along with the new ideas, bubbles and all. He said nothing about the previous night’s phone call.

Before each performance, my heart pounded inside my chest. What would the other kids say? What would the teachers say?

So that’s what you’re really like.

Esther, the hypocrite.

I can't believe you would do those things.

But no one said anything. It was just a skit.

Eventually, I realized that Mr. Colson disbanded the kids' drama team when it never started again after the summer break. I wondered if it was my fault. If I had lost the opportunity because I had failed to see the difference between a role and myself.

Chapter 1: The Way Things Are

“Mom, look what I got today!” I held out the yellow bracelet Mrs. Jones had circled around my four-year-old wrist. The words underneath the laminated paper read, “I was obedient today.” I would later get another one that said, “I was kind today.” I was just as proud when I brought home my certificate that said “I can count from 1-100+” and “I know my alphabet” during my first two weeks of preschool.

Some people don’t understand children like me, and looking back, I shake my own head at that chubby cheeked overachiever who asked what the maximum page count was on the assignment. I roll my eyes at the petite chatterbox who felt it was her duty to remind the teacher about the quiz the class was supposed to have in spite of the dirty looks the rest of her classmates shot her way. I didn’t care. I was prepared to give school my all, and I loved getting stickers at the top of my page that said, “Fantastic,” “Super!” or “Perfect.”

I basked in my teachers’ words when they complimented my writing or work ethic. I completed all of my math homework, memorized all my Bible verses, and read as many books as possible for the reading competition. I even secretly looked down on the “poor souls” who were in the polar bear reading group instead of the eagle reading group. I knew why the teachers divided us, but I didn’t say anything. Some of the polar bears were my best friends, and I knew it was wrong to point out their struggles when they were doing their best.

Once, when my second-grade teacher handed back our tests, I noticed that I didn’t receive a piece of paper. Mrs. Quinn always displayed the perfect tests and sure enough, I came in from recess one day and found my paper stapled to a cork board with “100%” written in red pen at the top of the page. She expected much from her students. I still say with some sincerity that I learned more in her class than any other class I took. She taught us the Lord’s prayer in

Latin, all the Prime Ministers of Canada, Portia's mercy speech from *The Merchant of Venice*, and how to diagram sentences. My little hand wrote down everything I needed to know, and I took advantage of each assignment and test to show her just how much I could do.

Mrs. Quinn played the piano during assembly and as a result, she needed one of her students to open the door to the classroom as she put away her music. I fingered that silver key in my hand with the word "Klassen" written on it as if it was a sacred treasure. I was the first student in my section to file out of the room, so it made sense to give me the key, but I held my head a little higher as I led the class to the upstairs classroom and inserted the key in the lock. No one else got to unlock the door except for me. Until one day the job nearly fell to someone else.

For some reason, I had to sit in a different seat that day, and I knew that I would not get the silver key. As soon as we finished singing the Canadian national anthem, I shoved my way between the seats and students to get to the front of the line probably muttering that I was supposed to have the key. There were complaints from some of the other kids, saying that they could open the door just as well as I could. I knew they were right, but I didn't like the idea of Mrs. Quinn entrusting the silver key into another's hands, leaving my own empty.

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I was the youngest of four siblings, and my parents had a well-enforced rule by the time I arrived: Never tear down your siblings. There are enough people in this world trying to tear you down. This home is a safe place where we will build each other up.

I don't remember ever seeing my parents fight when I was at home. The closest experience I remember involved my mom squirting my dad with a spritz bottle and my dad dumping a cup of water on her, which prompted me to tell them to "Stop fighting!" before I sprinted upstairs to my room and threw my body onto the pink comforter, burying my head in

my pillow. My poor, bewildered parents didn't know that I had just learned what divorce was from a friend at school. They both appeared in my bedroom doorway with eyebrows slightly knit together and wrapped their arms around my tiny frame as they explained their actions and assured me of their love.

I remember very few squabbles with my brother and sisters, and the ones I do remember were often my fault for being the annoying little sister who kept needling her siblings just to provoke some kind of reaction. It was a way to get attention from them. Yet, we didn't always get along. I slapped my sister on the arm once when she didn't want to listen to the tape I wanted to listen to as we went to bed. I pretended I was joking; she doesn't remember the incident at all.

I grew up learning how to present my best self to the world around me. I remember the word "inappropriate" used quite a bit in our family. It was a word to show that what you did was unacceptable—another popular word, and my parents had no tolerance for that type of behavior. Somehow I came to believe that certain emotions weren't deemed "appropriate" for the moment. I thought it was normal to suppress the "bad" emotions that could cause conflict to arise: anger, frustration, and sometimes sadness. I'm not sure how my siblings dealt with those feelings, but the fact that I rarely remember seeing them engaged in conflict is telling. In my elementary-aged mind, though, home was perfect.

~ ~ ~

This first date couldn't be more perfect.

I laughed as Michael spun me around, my flats sliding on the hardwood floor. "You lied through your teeth. You aren't rusty at all."

He held back a smile and simply spun me again then dipped me in time to the jazzy music. When my not-quite-yet boyfriend said he wanted to go swing dancing together, I

immediately agreed. He had said he was rusty, but all of these dips and turns told me otherwise. My heart fluttered, and my mind swam. Swing dancing on the first date? Gosh, this guy would be hard to beat. I didn't expect to meet someone two months shy of my college graduation, but here I was. And I had to admit, I wasn't upset about that.

"You're doing so well! This can't be your first time dancing." He shuffled to the left with the music.

"I've only done choreography," I promised, mimicking his movements. "But I do love it."

He put our arms in a pretzel then spun me around and out. Then I lost his hand. I messed up and didn't realize I was supposed to let go then grab it again. I looked up, and he simply danced on his own then smiled and took my hand, bringing our arms back together again like it was the natural next step.

A few weeks later, he asked me to go hiking with him and his friend Dan at a place called Devil's Marble Yard. I hadn't been hiking in a while, but I wanted to spend the time with him. There was no rehearsal for this hike. I simply got out of the car in my barely used workout shorts and blue shirt and began walking along the trail. After about 45 minutes, I saw the rocks—boulders, actually—that covered the hillside.

"Why don't we take a break for a bit?" Dan said. God bless him. I didn't want Michael to think I was weak, but I needed to give my legs a rest. And I needed to find my courage.

We drank our water as Michael eagerly stood on the log and peered toward the rocks, craning his neck probably to get the best vantage point possible.

"Are you ready?" Michael looked at me and held out his hand.

I swallowed and smiled, forcing excitement and confidence in my tone as I took his hand.

“Yep!” I didn’t want him to see me sweat. Who was I kidding, though? We were about to climb a rocky mountain.

I pulled myself up onto one of the big white rocks. They weren’t moving like I had initially worried.

“Look out for the spiders!” Dan called.

I stopped. “What?” You’ve got to be kidding me.

“Dan, why did you tell her that?” Michael shouted up to him.

“Um.” I quickly glanced around. “It’s okay! At least now I’m prepared for them.” I hated spiders with a passion.

“Don’t worry. They run away from you.”

They’d better. I did not want any showdowns today, thank you very much.

The further I climbed, the more I could feel my muscles relax even though they were straining to reach the next bolder. It was a choose-your-own-adventure hike. I watched Michael climb a steep ledge that my 5’1” frame could never reach. I admired his courage.

“Esther, why don’t you come with me?”

I laughed. “I think I’m good but thank you.” I was glad he had unknowingly convinced me to do this scary thing. I looked at the view below me and saw the slope of rocks and the trees and mountains in the distance. I had conquered, and some of his adventurous spirit and courage had rubbed off on me in the process. We were a good fit for each other.

We got to the top, and it began to rain as we searched for the trail that was supposed to take us down the side of the mountain rather than trying to climb down the boulders, which was bound to end in disaster.

Michael called, “Come here for a minute.”

I walked over to find him grinning at me. He took my hands in his, his thumbs stroking my knuckles as he said, “So I would like to make this official and ask if you would be my girlfriend. I would love to write letters and Skype you over the summer and see where God takes this.”

“Yes,” I said, but even in the rain I could feel the warmth in my cheeks.

He gave me a big hug then suggested we try to find the hidden trail. I wandered off in one direction then turned and looked at his red hair through the branches of the trees. I was in awe. Love struck. A romantic who was finally watching her own romance play out in front of her. I mean being asked to be someone’s girlfriend in the rain? It seemed picture perfect.

“Guys, we should just head back the way we came,” Michael called.

I looked at him then at the steep slope we had just clambered up for the past hour. The rocks were covered in water and bound to be slippery.

“I think we should keep looking for the trail,” Dan said. Thank you, God, for Dan, I whispered again. I thought it was foolish to attempt to climb down the rocks, but I didn’t want to say so. I didn’t want Michael to think less of me.

“But we can’t find it.” Michael’s jaw was starting to tense.

“Well, it might be this way.” Dan started to search another part of the top.

“Esther, what do you think?” Michael looked at me.

I spoke carefully, “I think maybe we should keep looking for the trail. I think it would be better.”

“Fine,” he sighed.

I couldn’t understand how he didn’t see the danger of the rocks. Wasn’t it obvious? Probably just to me. I liked safe. But Michael wasn’t afraid of uncertainty. We balanced each

other out.

We found the trail and made it down the mountain but even on the side trail, I slipped and fell. After that, Michael went ahead of me to warn me where the slippery spots were. He later commented on the fact that he hadn't thought about the rocks being slick if we had climbed down his way.

The two of us parted ways for the summer as he prepared to move across the country to Seattle, and I went home to Canada. I had never been more grateful for the technology of video calls, and our once-a-week conversations lasted anywhere from 2-5 hours. Even with a screen, I found my cheeks warming when he told me I was beautiful, and I told him that I cared for him.

I didn't say "I love you." He told me those three words when he dropped me off at my dorm after our hike, and inwardly, I wondered if he really knew what love was because he had said it so soon. I shook my head. Who was I to say how much he knew of love, though? Maybe he really did love me already. I knew I liked him, but I couldn't say that I loved him. Not yet. I was still getting to know him.

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I walked into the college's empty rehearsal room I had just reserved before we did more choreography work for our show that night. It was 6pm, and the minion characters weren't called for rehearsal until seven. The room was mine for an hour. I pulled up the dance clip on YouTube that the assistant stage manager had recorded from our last choreography rehearsal. I zeroed in on my awkwardly moving limbs on the bottom right of the screen. I hadn't done choreography since high school two years earlier, and it showed. My movements were delayed. I was one of the last to jump, my arms were off, and my short legs never kicked high enough.

I replayed the video, trying to remind myself whether the left arm was up or down and

what the count was. I looked in the mirror at my body and started the stomp off at the beginning. Stomp, hit, clap, arm slap, elbow, firm fists. Again. Again and faster. Get it up to speed. Now the rest of the dance.

I went through each part. Pause. What was that move after the walk forward? I looked at the video again. Right, then the twist. I always forgot the twist.

I plugged my laptop into the sound system and the sound of a crow filled the speakers. This was it. I walked to the mirror and waited for the voice to yell, “Nightmare!”

I put the song on loop. I would practice until I got this right, and I *would* get this right. I could have asked the dance captain for help. That was her job, but that would mean admitting that I was struggling, and I couldn’t do that. Wouldn’t.

For the show, the minions were all given masks with elastics around the back to keep them in place. During one of the performances of the minion dance, my mask slipped from my face. I had to reposition it throughout that minute and twenty-five seconds. My execution of the dance was sloppy and unfinished as I tried to situate the blue and black plaster in its rightful spot. This was the same day the head of the department came to watch.

Many performers know their craft well enough to improvise when things go wrong and to make the moment work. The slip of the small string on my wig exposed my weakness, and though I tried to cover it up, I knew that I probably danced a couple of milliseconds behind all of the others. I had seen what I was capable of in rehearsals, but that day I couldn’t show it, nor could I explain to the audience what happened.

Chapter 2: Misperceptions

I sat in my Grade Nine music class with my flute laying across my lap. The yellow book in front of me was open to the song, “Loch Lomond.” Today was our playing test, and I had practiced this piece over and over again even though I had already played through almost all of songs in the book at that point.

I don’t remember how we figured out when each student would play, but I wasn’t first, and I didn’t like that. Sweat gathered on my palms. I picked up my flute to finger the keys as other students played. Ms. Shelley wrote on the rubrics sitting on the black music stand in front of her. My heart began to beat against my chest as the student beside me picked up her instrument to play.

Then it was my turn. Ms. Shelley smiled at me, and I lifted my flute to my mouth. My foot tapped out one, two, and I breathed from my stomach on three. I gently blew into the instrument and fingered the right notes but the song sounded wobblier than normal. My nerves were affecting my air flow. Stop shaking, Esther. Keep your breathing even.

My pep talk didn’t help. If only I had played first, the sound from my flute would’ve been clear and pure just as I had practiced. I crescendoed and decrescendoed the last line before holding the final note for its full value but no longer so I could silence the vibrato in my tone.

I placed my flute on my lap and kept my eyes trained on the silver metal. I didn’t want to make eye contact with Ms. Shelley’s hazel and surely disappointed eyes. I couldn’t believe I had played so poorly.

I received my rubric later, and a perfect score was written in pencil across the page along with the word, “Beautiful.” I thought she wrote it because she knew I was upset.

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I remember the stack of spiral workbooks Dad kept in the hall by the dresser for the course he taught. There was a time when every Sunday night Mom and Dad led small groups for TREC (Training and Equipping Christians) at church. In the beginning, both of them ran a young families group together, but later they split off into teaching two different classes. Dad taught a class on finances and managing resources while Mom taught a woman's Bible study. But these weren't the only things they were involved in over the years. Dad was the church treasurer, an elder, and eventually led the men's Bible study on Saturday mornings. Mom led the women's mentor group, had a Bible study Thursday afternoons and evenings, and also eventually led a church-wide women's Bible study on Monday nights.

My siblings got involved in the youth choir, senior high, and church productions, and I jumped right in behind them. Faith was important to my family, but sometimes I wonder if church was more important. Our lives became full of rushed dinners before rehearsal, afternoons waiting for Mom to pick us up from school because she got caught up in a conversation with one of her Bible study ladies, and Dad working all night in the basement and Mom's caution that he needed to start saying "no" more so he would sleep. These were common incidents, and even as kids we tasted the rush of this life.

When Youth Day rolled around, a day when the high schoolers took over the service and led the songs, performed skits, and danced, my brother felt the weight of responsibility. As a male guitarist with a good voice, he had been asked to lead the services. In the weeks leading up to that Sunday in June, his shoulders drooped, his eyes held bags, and chord charts spilled out of his overflowing worship binder.

I recall a discussion where Mom told us that she was going to put a note on the bulletin board to remind us to say "No." Sure enough, in the right corner she placed a little rectangular

paper with a flourish of blue ink: “I’m sorry. That just won’t work for me.” It was supposed to be a guaranteed way to say no without being further pressured. I don’t know if anyone in our family used it.

I grew up hearing the importance of giving your “yes” to God. I didn’t know that there was a difference between saying yes to God and saying yes to the expectations of other Christians.

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I sat in a room with other student leaders who would be tasked with sharing the Bible with the people in our dorms and helping our hallmates navigate this new semester. One of the leaders said that we could not be superman for the people on our hall, reminding us that we couldn’t save them. I nodded profusely, wishing that someone had told me those words before I had emptied and exhausted myself last year, trying to help a girl on my hall. I smiled like a good Christian as they shared their wisdom about boundaries and rest, but I remember words along these lines spilling out from others over the semester: “There will be days when you are exhausted, and someone comes into your room and needs to talk. You need to be willing to set aside what you are doing and be there for that person in the moment.” My mind clicked: Be there no matter what. No matter how tired, no matter how overwhelmed, they need you more. Your own stuff doesn’t matter; theirs does.

This conviction was tested multiple times over. It was tested when one girl came into my room and began to share her life story with me at midnight; it was tested when one girl sat in the hallway spilling her struggles while everyone else slept; it was tested when one girl asked to meet up on an incredible busy school week. I chose the hard yes. After all, I thought, that was what God wanted, wasn’t it?

Besides, I loved being the one known for carrying Kleenex. As one girl said, “I always end up crying when we meet!” I lived for the chance to encourage the girls. I loved being the listening ear as they talked about their pasts and presents. I loved walking out of a meeting, feeling like it mattered and would leave an impact. I wanted to be part of that.

But as one university semester blended into the next, my eyelids grew heavier and my head drooped. I began to think that God liked to ask me to do hard things, maybe even things that hurt me. But I would muscle through. I would show him that I would be the best Christian I could possibly be. I would do whatever he wanted and make him proud of me.

I was so sure that service was what God wanted most of all. I had watched my family continually serve, and what they did mattered. People noticed and were grateful. Service was their sign of true devotion to the Lord, and devotion was tested when you were exhausted. Was I exhausted? Yes. Did I think it mattered? No. In my mind, exhaustion was detrimental but good because if I wasn’t exhausted, I wasn’t serving enough. Success was measured by fatigue.

If anyone asked me why I continued to involve myself so fully in the campus ministry on top of everything else at school, I would have had two responses. I would have either said how much I loved it, or I would have shrugged, and said, “God called me to do it. So I need to. It doesn’t matter how tired I am.” I left no room for the fact that he may not have even asked me to do everything at once.

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After a late night theatre rehearsal, I found myself walking to the corner desk in my dorm and flipping on the light as I pulled out my textbooks. I had two mid-terms, a self-analysis, a review, and reading all due next week. I needed to work if I wanted to graduate on time. I mentally shoved out of my mind the girls on my hall who were in need of advice, the rehearsal

with contradicting instructions I had just experienced, and the sleep deprivation of the past week. When people asked how I was, I answered with “Fine.” Which changed to “Okay.” “Hanging in there.” to finally “I’m here.”

The hours ticked away, and my eyelids began to flutter as a stale feeling overtook the pupils. I looked at the black numbers in the upper right corner of my laptop. Close to 2am. I needed to call it a night. I closed my books and paused before closing my laptop. Maybe my English professor had posted my grade.

When asked in class how she graded, she said that she was fair, not easy. English had always been one of my strongest subjects, but I was still nervous to see what she thought of my writing. I pulled up Blackboard and clicked into my grades.

I blinked.

82/200 stared back at me. I quickly flipped to the calculator app on my laptop and typed in the numbers to reveal 42%.

My body shut down. The grade had unplugged the last line of strength to my brain, and all energy was draining from my limbs. I pulled up my email and wrote to my parents wishing them all the best as they flew to Europe the next morning for vacation. I couldn’t just dump my exhaustion on them. I needed them to know that I cared for them, that I was so glad they could go. But I also needed them to pray. Desperately.

I used words like “challenging,” “intimidated,” “defeated,” and “discouraged,” and apologized that the email was coming just before they left. Then I wished them a great trip and told them that I was praying for them. I wanted to be a good daughter and somehow felt that I shouldn’t be bothering them with my own problems. I hit send and shook my head.

I looked at my books. I imagined prying open my window and hurling them onto the field

below. I pictured grabbing the pages between my fingers and ripping them out. But I didn't have the energy for that. Besides, that wasn't an appropriate reaction.

I didn't want to wake my sleeping roommate and have her ask what was wrong. I wasn't ready to share my failure with the honor's student in the nearby bed. I thought of my suitcases tucked away in the closet. I wanted to go home. This grade confirmed that if I could fail one of my best subjects, then I would assuredly fail everything else.

I flipped off my desk light.

The next afternoon I sat on the swivel chair in front of the rigging station. The show was finished, and all the cast and the crew had left for dinner before striking the stage. Throughout the run of this show, I had taken advantage of the sad moments to allow me opportunities to cry without being questioned. Today was no exception.

But now there was no one onstage, and silence reigned in the backstage hallway. And silence escaped my mouth as my shoulders shook. I let the convulsion take over as tears filled my eyes. My hands formed a guard against my mouth and pressed against my nose so I didn't require tissues. I told the girls on my dorm hall that their tears mattered. That they should never apologize for their tears. I desperately wanted someone to tell me that my tears mattered. That it was okay to cry, to be angry, to not understand. But I hadn't heard that yet.

So I sat in the blue light of backstage, bent over in my all black tech clothes, releasing the emotion now so I could bury it later.

"Esther?"

I looked up.

"Oh honey!" My friend, Katy, immediately rushed to my rigging station and gave me a hug, her arms holding the crumbling pieces of my body together. "Are these happy tears or sad?"

She pulled away and her green eyes gently held out hope. Hope that maybe, just maybe, I could admit the truth. I could choose. For this moment I could change my typical lines.

“Sad,” I whispered. That word was never part of my script. I didn’t think it could be. I had avoided it for so long. I had stuffed it, beat it, and given it action only in isolation, but I never spoke it. Not until now.

She touched my hair like my mom and asked what was going on.

“I’m exhausted,” I said, but this time I didn’t stop. I told her about the pressure I felt in rehearsal, my struggle to mentor and encourage the girls on my hall, my late nights studying, my early morning classes, and the 42% on my paper. I sat with my head down barely feeling the energy to lift it.

She smiled and said that she knew she had all of the props, but she just had this feeling like she was missing one and needed to come onstage and check, and that’s when she saw me.

We both agreed that maybe it was a divine set-up.

“How are you doing?” I asked as I wiped my cheeks. I knew she had been struggling lately. I couldn’t describe how I knew, but there was something in her face that told me that everything wasn’t okay. And she had just given me so much by letting me cry. I didn’t want her to walk away empty-handed or drained by my struggles, so I listened and encouraged just as she had, then we prayed for each other. I don’t remember what we prayed for, but holding the hands of a living, breathing person made a difference. It was something that couldn’t be accomplished in isolation or on script.

Two weeks later, the circumstances around me turned in my direction. Instead of disappointment, the director of the show told me that I made her tear up and that she was proud of me. The girls on my hall came to support me in the show and their friend drama worked itself

out. And I met with my professor only to find that she had inputted my grade incorrectly. And while a B wasn't my ideal grade, I would gladly take it in place of an F. It was better than what I had believed to be true.

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I don't remember who was right or why my friend group began to argue outside of the playground. We had been friends for five years, since kindergarten, but the high voices still went back and forth, and I realized that I didn't want to listen to them anymore. I placed my small hands against the concrete curb, pushed myself up, and without a word, I ran. My feet pounded across the parking lot until I reached the safe haven of the three pines. We often acted out our games in the shade of those trees. It was sheltered, quiet, and peaceful. The other kids' voices still sounded in the distant playground, but I was convinced that nothing could touch me here.

A few minutes later, I saw my best friend's face emerge from the branched entrance of the pines followed by the other girls. Someone asked me why I ran away.

"I've told you before. I hate fights." I looked at them pointedly. Not all of them had been arguing, but I no longer wanted to hear the rushed, loud voices of the ones who had. I wanted everyone to get along. And they agreed to stop fighting.

I liked the power I had to run away, to opt out of the argument by carrying myself to the far corners of the school lot. I found myself slipping away more than once, believing that I was simply protecting myself from unnecessary drama. The fact that I would have friends jog up behind me and sit down and talk with me seemed to be inconsequential. It was their decision to sit with me. I didn't acknowledge that I had influenced that decision, though. I simply knew that my heart rate increased when voices were raised, and I darted my eyes, searching for an open space. When I saw that place, I struck out for it, and the conflict behind me faded away until it

disappeared altogether.

But then the conflict refused to fade in the form of one of my close friends. Rachel with her raven hair and petite stature was part of our group. But over time without warning, her dark eyes began to avoid mine. Here is how it often happened: I would notice her standing away from the circle of girls and ask her if she wanted to join us. Her response would either be negative or silence. I would go over to her, sure that no one really wanted to be alone, and she would put something between us: the mini apple tree with the rotting fruit on the ground, the pillars at the back of the school, or some random bushes.

I would almost always wonder what I had done to cause one of my friends to stop talking to me, which made me chase after her when she began to physically run away. I thought something was terribly wrong, and what kind of friend would I be if I left her to face it alone? I wanted to help, but she refused to speak to me with the exception of telling me to leave her alone.

Looking back now, I want to tell my worried face, “Just give the girl some space, Esther. She’ll be fine tomorrow.” I want to tell myself, “Life isn’t just about you.” I meant well; I wanted to help my friend, but I tried to help too much. It’s something I still wrestle with in different ways, and I have to remind myself to back off trying to help and simply give people the space they need. I didn’t know this back then, so I often found myself trying to help Rachel when she didn’t want it.

Some days everything was fine, but for reasons I can’t explain, I would find myself facing her turned back, begging her to tell me if she was okay or if I had done something wrong, if that’s why she refused to talk to me. I apologized several times over without knowing what the apology was for, but she accepted it on occasion, and everything would go back to normal for a

little while at least.

Mom's wise words told me that Rachel was a manipulator, a word she had to explain to me, and that Rachel simply wanted attention. Mom would take me on her lap and talk it through with me as I sat with slumped shoulders. But in my mind, Rachel was still my friend, and I refused to let that title go. After all, she probably wasn't trying to hurt me. She was just upset. I wanted her to be okay again. But most of all, I just wanted my friend back; I wanted her love back.

One day, after another recess of turned backs, pitiful pleas, and avoiding eyes, I finally got her attention outside of the big glass windows of our third-grade classroom.

She turned around. She was going to talk to me. And these are the words I remember:

“You know, I never wanted to be your friend. You just wouldn't stop bothering me in JK, so I only pretended to be your friend.”

Her words were a slap in the face, and the pain slowly spread as I watched her whip around and stalk away. I was sure she had loved me once. And I loved her. What was wrong with me that she took her love away?

The sting slowly reached my eyes when the long ring of the bell sounded, the end of recess. I walked into the classroom and looked at no one. A classmate suggested I tell the teacher, but I refused. If Miss James got involved, Rachel would get in trouble, and I couldn't do that to her. After all, she was still my friend.

As usual, everything went back to normal again. I smiled, pretending I was fine. I acted like I didn't remember the words she spoke, and even if I did, they didn't affect me at all. I worried that if I told her that she had hurt me, she would shut me out again. I didn't mind apologizing; it made the conflict go away, and that meant I had my friend back.

Chapter 3: Shattered Reality

Mom's guttural growl echoed in the kitchen as one of the drawers closed with a bang.

I got up off the couch where I was reading, knowing that Mom was not okay. She needed help but wouldn't say it. I rounded the corner to see her in front of the oven with the pans scattered on different burners. This was a common event, and I know that I've probably cobbled together many different moments to create this scene, but the truth is that they all run together.

"Mom? Are you okay?"

Sometimes her answer was that she had burned the food or her hand. Other times she was out of an ingredient and wasn't sure she could substitute it.

"What can I do for you?" I asked. I wanted to protect her from the heavy crease between her eyebrows and from the steaming chaos of pots in front of her.

"You can go ahead and set the table and pour the water," came her brisk reply. She only briefly looked up, and I heard the edge in her tone. Not unkind, but sharper than normal.

I quickly walked to the silverware drawer and pulled out the forks and knives and set the dining room table, pulling out the glasses and filling them with water as efficiently as I could. I mentally counted the number of people who were coming and brought in chairs from the kitchen, arranging them as best as I could. If I got things done faster, she would breathe a little easier, and she wouldn't snap so easily at herself. Or at me.

"What else can I do for you, Mom?" I asked.

"I still need to change," she declared in dismay as she looked at her apron.

"I can take care of the rest while you get ready, Mom."

"You can make the salad."

That wasn't the answer I was looking for. She hadn't gone upstairs to change, so I knew

that my offer of help wasn't what she really needed. But I grabbed the romaine from the fridge and began to wash the leaves and tear them into the glass bowl with the flowers etched into the sides.

A Casting Crowns song played in the background.

I didn't say anything.

"Can you ask Dad to come upstairs and cut the meat, please?"

"Absolutely!" I quickly bounded down the stairs to the basement and poked my head in Dad's office. His dark brown eyes were trained on the monitor's screen as he held the black corded phone in one hand and his other hand navigated the mouse on his desk. I hesitated. I didn't want to disturb him, but Mom needed help.

His eyes didn't look up, so I decided that it was best to leave without saying anything. I would try again in a few minutes. I quietly closed his door then sprinted up the steps, skipping every other one.

Mom was still working away by the stove. "He's on the phone." I needed to explain his absence.

She huffed a deep sigh and tossed her oven mitts on the counter. "Well, this probably won't turn out, but you know what? It's what we have," she said.

Mom's cooking was good. I couldn't understand her biting tone at the time. I came to realize that the anger that spilled out was the residual overflow of the anger she poured on herself first. In her mind, she had failed to meet some impossible expectation. The same kind of expectation I can now see that I placed on myself.

"Mom, I'm sure it'll be great. It always is." I could tell my words weren't changing the air, so I thought maybe my actions could. I walked up and wrapped my arms around her waist,

squeezing tightly, but she didn't fully hug me back. Her one arm came around me for a second in acknowledgement then I felt the pat. The one that said, "Yes, I got your hug, but I need to go now."

I let go as she turned away from me toward the counter. The air was still filled with the heat from the stove.

"Can you put the veggies on for me please? Bring the water to a boil then add half the bag and turn it down to 5," she stated as she rushed upstairs to change.

"Absolutely."

She would be better when the company came and then once the night was over. Tonight, we would laugh, make small talk, and never mention the harried kitchen moments.

~ ~ ~

I sat on the linoleum floor with my back against the wooden cupboard as Dad spoke. My preteen mind tried to wrap around what was happening, but it just didn't make sense. His firm, solemn voice said something about church division, late night meetings, family confrontations, and now the decision was final until something changed: we would no longer have contact with my uncle.

I thought of the time my uncle and I talked in the church hallway, and he told me all about the different ways a person could respond to the question, "How are you?" and the meanings behind each response. He loved words and was a wordsmith in many ways, yet it was the wordsmithing that had started the trouble from what I gathered.

My siblings either stood or sat at the kitchen table; I was the one who sat closest to the hall exit, but I couldn't leave. I don't remember anything out of the ordinary in their reactions, and I wonder why. This wasn't normal. I didn't understand how this could be happening to my

family. I vaguely remember trying to look only at Dad, though, so the others wouldn't chance a look at me. I blinked and took a handful of my hair and brought it to my face, brushing the strands against my cheek and holding it there like a mop. Peter, my cousin, got up from the kitchen table and walked over to where I sat. He folded his almost twenty-year-old frame next to mine. He was the one who got up that day to comfort me, and I never forgot that. But I don't remember leaning into his embrace and relaxing against him. Giving into the emotions would distract the others from Dad's words; I didn't think tears would be appropriate.

I didn't understand everything that followed in the coming months or even the coming years, but I trusted my parents and the rest of my extended family's position. I avoided the topic around Mom and Dad; I felt like it was on a "do-not-mention" list, but I would whisper with my sister every once in a while behind closed doors. Every time Christmas or weddings rolled around, my uncle's place was empty. I hated the eggshells I walked on and the feeling in my stomach whenever his name came up at family functions. This wasn't because of him but because I associated his name with conflict, and I didn't know what would happen when he was mentioned. I know I was not the only one who felt his absence. In fact, in some ways, I probably felt it least as the youngest of my generation in the family, but it was a live, glowing coal that I so desperately wanted someone to snuff out.

I would see him twice in the next ten years, both times for funerals. I missed having a whole family. I still do. I entertained writing a letter to him once, thinking that maybe his youngest niece could somehow convince him to apologize, falsely believing that I could wordsmith my way into his heart and make him understand. Because words had started this mess, I had thought that maybe new words could end it. That in spite of all the words that had been said, mine could be the key. It was a sliver of hope that I held onto, but I came to think that

the hope was vain and foolish, and I never put pen to paper.

~ ~ ~

I kept Michael's letters close beside my bed and reread them multiple times. The day before he came to visit me in October, I received a beautiful bouquet of orange, red, and yellow flowers with a note that said, "To a lovely girl, with a warm heart and eyes that shine like pearls. I'll see you soon." I sat on the floor, staring at the box they arrived in, and a giggle escaped my lips.

He surprised me at school the next day, and I squealed with delight as his arms wrapped around me. His blue collared shirt brought out his deep eyes, and when he took my hand in the car, I stopped speaking for a moment because the butterflies clouded my brain. It was so good to have him with me.

Later that night, I told him about our upstairs neighbor, the rude college student who had the audacity to stay up all night and scream profanities at his video game then scream at my roommate through the floor when she banged on the ceiling. It was a nightmare, and I didn't know what to do.

"I'll go talk to him," he volunteered.

"Michael, you don't have to."

"No, it'll be good for him to see a guy."

I hesitated. "Well, we can go. I guess that's fine. I do have one request, though. Let me do the talking." This was my apartment and my problem. I didn't want him to take the responsibility.

"No."

"What?" I blinked. "Why?"

“You’ll be too nice.” His tone left no room for discussion of that point.

So, when we went up to the apartment, Michael talked to the shirtless male who opened the door as the smell of weed wafted from the apartment. I confess, I didn’t know what the smell was until Michael confirmed it later. Michael spoke, my roommate spoke, but I didn’t know what to contribute. The shirtless student agreed to keep it down, and we walked back to the apartment. I didn’t say a word. Part of me loved Michael for taking the lead. But the other part wanted to say, “I *am* strong you know. I’m capable. Don’t take that away from me.” We never talked about the incident.

A few nights later, I knew something was wrong. I could see it in Michael’s tense jawline as he drove onto the highway to find somewhere for us to talk. The rain forced us to remain in the car, so he eventually pulled into an empty parking lot and turned off the engine. The area appeared to belong to a school I thought, noting the basketball hoop close by. A harsh yellow light glared down on us, and rain ran in rivulets along the windshield.

He spoke quietly and said that he needed to tell me some things.

He wouldn’t look at me. I assumed it had something to do with his past—some more details he felt he should share with me. I told him before and I would tell him again, his past did not define him. Not to me and not to God. I sat ready to let him know that I did not hold any of it against him.

Then he said that it was about something that happened this past summer.

This summer? But we were dating this summer.

I became conscious of my hand that had been holding his to support him and give him courage to speak, and I wondered how long I could maintain that connection. How long I should. I didn’t want him to think I was angry. Anger wasn’t appropriate. I steeled my heart. If I

prepared for the worst, I would be fine. Preparation was key.

~ ~ ~

In theatre, we have a term for what happens when you laugh onstage instead of staying in the moment. It's called breaking character. When I played my first role in college, my friend Ethan acted opposite me and would always whisper these hilarious, completely left-field comments that still fit with his character's cluelessness during rehearsal, and I would often stifle a grin instead of accepting them as the normal part of a performance. He told me later it was his mission to teach me not to break. Finally, one night he looked at me in one of the moments of pandemonium in the scene and said only so I could hear something like "Do we kill everyone?" It was with complete innocence, just like his character.

I matched his sincerity and responded honestly as my character would. I never broke. He later told me that it was then that he knew that I had learned.

~ ~ ~

As Michael spoke, I stared at his face. I don't remember him looking at me. I don't think I moved—as if movement would frighten him away, like he was an easily spooked deer. I don't remember all of the words, but I remember certain moments. Certain details that I could imagine for myself: Like his meeting with another's soft lips. I had tried to prepare for it in the minutes before he started speaking, but it hadn't helped ease the pain. I kept thinking this was someone else's story, not mine.

Then he shared about a second girl, a girl from Tinder, who tried to go further as they sat in his car even though he had told her he was dating someone else. As he told the story, I saw her place her hand on his thigh and watched her draw him further. I wanted to throw up. I realized that my hand had come to my mouth. He couldn't think I was horrified. I didn't want him to

think I was angry. I pretended to scratch my face instead.

“Esther, you have every right to walk away, to have me drop you off at your apartment and never speak to me again.”

I looked out the windshield at the empty parking lot and said the first words that came to my mind: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” It was a verse I had learned long ago that said that when God forgave, he did so completely with no residual stain. Other verses I had memorized began to flow from my mouth, one after another about God’s forgiveness and mercy. They were second nature, and as I spoke them the garish light traced the tear that streamed down his cheek. He needed forgiveness, but I couldn’t say it yet. It was too soon. I couldn’t process all that he had said; I was numb. I wonder if that is why the Scripture came out first. It was the one thing that I could speak when everything else had shut down.

“Thank you,” he whispered and reached across the seat to give me a hug. My mind flashed to the other girls, and as much as I leaned into his embrace, my joints felt stiff.

I spoke words that night that I fully believed, and truthfully, I’m not sure how else I would have responded. I know Michael needed to hear those words; he was desperate for them. Yet there was a distinction I should have made. The distinction that God had completely forgiven him, but his actions had caused damaged that his confession wouldn’t simply erase.

“I am so sorry,” he whispered as he held me. It was the first time he said those words that night.

I wanted to cry, but I couldn’t.

“None of this is your fault,” he said. “You need to know that. I was incredibly foolish. It had nothing to do with you.”

In the months to come, I wondered if it *was* somehow my fault. Maybe if I had done more for him then he wouldn't have reached out to other girls when he was lonely. Maybe if I had talked with him more or encouraged him more, things could have been different. I would later realize that while his decisions had affected me, I was not responsible for the actions he chose.

But he was leaving in 24 hours, and I had to decide what I was going to do before then. I knew that if any girl came to me with this situation, I would immediately tell her to walk away, that she was worth more than a man who cheated on her. I didn't say those things to myself. I didn't want to hear them. I had convinced myself that I could never find anyone better than Michael—that he had simply made a mistake, and he shouldn't be branded by it. After all, didn't we all make mistakes?

I walked to my apartment door, feeling as if I was walking through water. I began to get out my keys as he retreated downstairs when I stopped and walked to the railing.

“Michael.”

He looked up from the bottom of the concrete steps.

“Thank you,” I said. He was honest. I would never have known if he hadn't told me.

He held up his fingers in an “I love you” sign, then walked away as if pulled by a sigh.

I prayed to God that night with Michael's words clear in my ears, “I know this sounds empty now, but Esther . . . never again. Never again will I ever do anything like that to you. I promise.”

How could I reconcile this man who took me swing dancing, sent me flowers, prayed over me, and wrote me letters, with someone who cheated on me? That night I grew convinced little by little that I was to be a picture of grace to Michael. That if I stayed in the relationship

after everything he had done, he would see what true grace was. I thought it was my divine mission. I learned months later that I was wrong; I simply had chosen my own mission.

But the next day, I tucked my hand into his and said, “The answer is yes. Yes, I still want this.” And that day I also told him that I loved him for the first time. He asked me not to tell anyone about him cheating, and I agreed, asking for one exception: a friend who I knew would not dissuade me from my chosen winding path. I wanted my friends and family to like him.

The day after he left, I lay face down on my bedroom floor and wept the tears I had not cried in the car. I asked the Lord to “get him,” to punish him for what he had done, and I poured out the frustration I never voiced when Michael had asked me how I was feeling. I was angry that he had hurt me. Angry that he had betrayed me. Yet I still did not want to leave the relationship. Because I loved him. I would later ask myself if maybe I loved the safety of his arms or the tenderness in his glances instead of him. It occurs to me that one of the reasons I loved him was because he saw me as worthy of love, a truth that I had struggled to accept but kept hidden from those around me.

I never told him about my moment on the bedroom floor. I never admitted that he had hurt me. He had fallen in love with the gracious, ever-kind Esther. I had built a character who exuded every virtuous trait I could imagine. My cousin had once jokingly said that I had the smallest sprinkling of sin possible in mankind, and I refused to break from that smooth porcelain exterior.

Months later, Michael came for another visit, which would turn out to be his last. That visit gave me my first kiss. I had dreamt that the moment would happen in the foliage of the Christmas tree decorated with its bright lights and red bows, but instead, we lay on a tan couch surrounded by my apartment’s drab olive walls. He brushed my hair back and asked if he could

kiss me, and I nodded and waited for his lips to meet my virgin ones. It was not what I had expected. Neither pleasurable nor completely repulsive. It simply was. But I wanted to like it. It was important that I like it.

I reminded myself that it wasn't his first kiss. That's why it was important to him. He had grown frustrated when he had asked me a month earlier over video call why we hadn't kissed even though we had been dating for almost eight months. I had always been told that kisses were powerful. They could get out of control. I liked control, so it was easier not to kiss. Besides, I didn't know what I was missing.

But he did. A kiss held meaning for him that I could not comprehend. Romance was a new concept to me, foreign, invigorating, and dizzying.

"I want to kiss you," I assured him, but I also wanted to be careful. He said I was wrong to be afraid. Maybe he was right. But he was wrong to inform me that girls in Seattle would have kissed him on the first or second date. I thought, "You already proved that to me," but I said nothing.

Two days later, he apologized for urging me to kiss him when I wasn't ready. His message declared that he would respect my wishes if I didn't want to kiss him yet, but he also mentioned in passing that of course kissing would make him fall deeper in love with me.

I didn't want to lose him. And I did want to kiss him.

A few days after our first kiss, he kissed me again under a blanket of stars in the cold air and told me that I could open my mouth more. He said it like a little kid awkwardly asking a kindergarten crush to hold his hand. I blushed and laughed. "I don't know what I'm doing!" I said and covered my face with my hands.

"That's okay," he laughed. "Let's learn together." He was kind.

We sat, and I stared at the light on his back porch.

“Esther, if this relationship is going to continue, I’m going to need to see some things from you,” he said.

This was new. He told me earlier that month that there were certain ways that he wanted me to love him better. Things like telling him what I was doing for the Lord and writing shorter heartfelt messages instead of longer ones. To be fair, he asked how he could love me better too. I don’t think I came up with anything. This incoming criticism was a chance to grow. A way to get better. A step toward perfect. But even though I reminded myself of that, I shifted on the picnic table’s wood waiting to hear what he had to say. The conversation went something like this:

“I want you to be less sensitive.”

I tilted my head to the side. I had told him that I was sensitive to violence and people’s pain, but that wasn’t something that I really could change nor did I want to.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I said. “I think God’s given me a gift of showing mercy, and I’m not about to change that.”

“No, what I mean is that I want you to care less about what other people think of you.”

“Okay. Yeah.” I slowly nodded. “I want to get better at that.”

“I also want you to be less afraid,” he continued.

I sighed and looked away. I had told him in the summer that I struggled with fear, and he had told me that he would challenge me on it. I regretted sharing that with him now. He brought it up too much. How does one become less afraid? I had been trying my whole life to be courageous, yet I still felt like a cowering little girl afraid of dark shadows.

“And I want you to be doing more for the kingdom of God.”

Michael had told me earlier that I should get to know my neighbors in the hopes of

forming a relationship with them to share my faith. As a petite female, I didn't feel comfortable knocking on random doors by myself or at all for that matter. He told me consistently that I should be involved in a small group at my church or at school. The phone calls he made to me at 3am my time as he begged me to get some sleep should have told him that I didn't have time. But that wasn't an excuse to him. I wanted to explain that my ministry maybe didn't have an official title, but I was involved in God's work through encouraging notes, smiles, and hugs for the people around me, but he really didn't need to know the specifics. I don't know if I tried to tell him that. I do know that I was discouraged that semester because it was the first time I wasn't officially mentoring other girls and helping them grow in their Christian faith.

Then he challenged me to try shooting a gun (something foreign to this Canadian girl) and to try alcohol (something dangerous to this Baptist mind). I balked on both counts although truthfully, he had a greater chance of getting me to shoot a gun rather than drink. It wasn't that I saw drinking as a sin exactly, but I didn't like the fact that I could get addicted to it. Besides, I had no desire to try it. Michael pushed back. I don't think he expected such a stubbornness in me on this issue, but I wasn't budging. My dry family never went near alcohol; it was an unspoken rule. Growing up, Dad's disapproval of the drink was very clear, and I had no desire to cause tension there.

We agreed to disagree, yet this gnawing sense in the pit of my stomach told me that he wasn't happy with my decision and was going to tear down my defenses somehow like he did with his debate opponents in high school.

He leaned in for another kiss, and I found that I began to enjoy it, but I didn't like that it became his expectation. I worried that his focus had shifted from me to the kissing, from who I was to what I gave him. From then on when he said goodnight, he leaned in for a kiss. But since

I had said yes already, I thought I couldn't say no.

One day, his mouth swiftly bent down in mid-conversation. My head may have jerked back in surprise at first before my mouth began to work. I reminded it to work for him.

"Sorry," he hastily responded after he pulled back. I assured him it was fine. I was growing to like it. He smiled and swept me up excitedly, my feet no longer touching the ground and carried me to the nearby bed.

"No, no, no." I quickly squirmed from his arms as soon as the soft comforter touched my frame, and I scrambled off its blue and white fabric.

"I'm not going to do anything," he pouted. The lines on his face seemed more twisted and his jaw looked firmer.

I put my arms around his neck to appease him. "I know. I just don't feel comfortable with that." I probably tried to kiss the frustration from his face then.

I came to enjoy and understand the creation of a kiss. Wanting another. And another. He told me one kiss I gave him was the best yet. He meant to encourage me, and I was encouraged.

A few weeks before he ended the relationship, he told me that he chose me, that Lord-willing he wanted to marry me. He told me he wanted to protect me and to care for me. He told me that I mattered. The night we said goodbye for Christmas, I cried, and he cradled me in his arms, saying that he would never let anything happen to me.

Exactly one week later he told me over video call that he shouldn't have placed the expectations he did on me. Then he said that he couldn't do long distance anymore. We were too different. And he felt like God wanted him to end the relationship. My back pressed against the wall as words continued to flow from his mouth. My mind was semi-conscious of the melted puddle of ice cream from my favorite dessert on the plate beside me.

“I’m not going to keep you if you don’t want to stay,” I said.

“I just want to make sure you’ll be okay.”

“My God has taken care of me long before you came along, and he will continue to care for me,” I told him. He would never know how I would turn my anger toward God in the coming months and accuse him of unfaithfulness and malice for bringing this man into my life only to have him break my heart.

“Wow.” He said. “This went better than I expected.”

Glad to know I’m easy to break up with, I thought but never said.

We prayed over each other, and when he finished, he said, “Is it wrong to say I love you?”

I let out a single laugh. “I love you, too, but here we are.” I looked at him, hoping he would change his mind, that he would realize he really did want me.

“Goodbye, Esther.”

“Goodbye, Michael.”

I closed the laptop.

I had been everything I thought I was supposed to be. I was kind and loving, forgiving and gentle to a fault. And yet here I was.

I didn’t acknowledge the pain the next few days. It was easier to remain numb. My sister eventually took me aside on our pink couch and whispered that it was okay to hurt. I didn’t want to hurt, but I didn’t have much choice.

Months later, I would realize that the greatest gift Michael could have given me was ending the relationship. The pain was awful, but it would wrench open gaping wounds that I didn’t realize needed healing, and for that, I am grateful to him.

~ ~ ~

I sat on my dorm bedspread and stared into the darkness with only the bed lamp creating shadows on the wall. I thought of all the moments I had raised my hands in the morning begging God to give me strength, of the times I wrapped my fingers around the metal bars on the bunk bed and pulled to do something with the pent-up emotions. I opened up the journal I hadn't used in almost two weeks. I needed to write. I gripped the black pen and brought it to the white page, letting the words etch out in disjointed letters. "Why did you ask me to do so many things, Lord? Leadership, school, thesis, this missions trip, serve..." The ink got darker and the letters bigger. "It's too much! Why?" I pressed harder. "If you see your children, why don't you intervene. I am trying to do the best I can for you, but I can't do this. Not anymore. Help! Please! Jesus, HEAR ME!!!"

I was supposed to be this strong Christian with no doubts about God. I was supposed to believe that he was good.

I prayed in my desperation: "Father, I know you created me for your glory and that's what I've been trying to do. But I feel so beat down that I don't think I can get up. Father, I understand that serving you is always worthwhile, but I am dying inside." A small knock at the door sounded at some point in my writing. I swiped under my eyes and climbed off the bottom bunk. Creeping to the door, I slowly turned the metal handle, trying not to wake my sleeping roommate.

"Hi, I'm just doing room checks," Nina said. She was my RA, but in the past few months her big blue eyes, filled with empathy whenever I spoke, had gained my trust and my friendship.

"Are you okay?" Her brows knit together as her gaze steadied on my wet cheeks and red eyes.

I shook my head. “No,” I whispered. She hugged me close. With eyes squeezed tight and her arms wrapped around me, I wept. She said nothing. And that’s what I needed.

~ ~ ~

The professors all stared at me, notepads and pens laying before them on the white table. My heartbeat was steady as I waited for their next question. This sophomore hearing was a rite of passage for the theatre students at my university. To pass the hearing, I needed to perform a two-minute monologue for the professors, and they would ultimately decide if I belonged in the program.

Mr. Welsh, the dean of the department, asked, “What is your objective?”

One of the key questions that we had to communicate was our objective. It’s the core that drives the scene and propels a certain character to do what she does. I raised my chin slightly and said that as Rita, my character, I wanted the man in the room during the scene to talk to me.

“That’s not strong enough.”

I blinked. My heartbeat increased. It was the only answer I had prepared and another professor had told me it was strong enough, although I remember his own hesitation now. Besides, that professor wasn’t Mr. Welsh.

“He could tell your character to shut up. But that’s not what she wants.” He looked at me.

He was right. It was more than that. But what?

I pulled the character back into my thoughts. A nun who had finally found someone who treated her as an equal: the parish priest. Yet, he cut her off and refused to speak to her. She didn’t know why.

“I want him to notice me, to see me, to validate me.” Disjointed words like these collided into each other, but I hoped the professors wouldn’t catch on to my scrambling mind.

They moved on to the next question.

It makes sense looking back now. Rita wanted to know that she had value, and the priest was the one who gave it to her through connection. As I tried to inhabit her character, I knew that she hated feeling shut out and was desperate to overcome this sudden loss of connection, but I don't think she knew how to overcome it. That's why she stumbled over the words in the monologue, talking about the orphans and the other nuns who refused to talk to her. She couldn't bring herself to simply say what she wanted from the priest. Maybe she didn't know what she wanted, herself.

Chapter 4: Failing Expectations

I looked at the television screen and pressed my lips together. This was supposed to be a chance to bond with Dad over musicals while I was home from college.

“But honey, think about it,” Dad insisted.

“Dad.” I dug my left shoulder into the couch as I turned to him. “I’m not saying I would kiss anyone onstage, but I know people who can, and it doesn’t mean anything to them.” My mind flashed back to the Broadway couple who happened to share my beliefs on God and how they had separated work and reality so clearly that kissing onstage meant absolutely nothing to them. I was amazed when I read that article. Dad was not amazed hearing the story.

The television screen cast its color across the dimmed family room where we had just watched a live musical where a married actress who was playing the role of a single woman kissed the leading man, and he wasn’t her husband in real life. That’s what began this discussion—again. Dad and I had already talked about this issue, and the last conversation had left me with tense limbs and a contorted mind.

“Esther, how would you feel if you saw me kissing another woman?” he asked.

Air escaped my nostrils. “Dad, that’s different. It isn’t real life. I’m not saying all actors can or should do it, but if they can, it’s not wrong.”

“But you didn’t answer my question.” When he was hooked onto an idea, I couldn’t dissuade him from it, just like I couldn’t dissuade a bloodhound from the scent it was tracking. He knew I was avoiding the question and was insistent on bringing his point home.

“No.” I rolled my eyes. “I wouldn’t want you kissing anyone other than Mom.”

“Exactly!” He pointed to the screen.

“But I’m saying that some couples can do it, and it’s not an issue for them.” I refused to

let him think he had simply won with that kind of logic. I didn't want him to say I was right. I just wanted him to acknowledge even the possibility that there may be exceptions to his rule.

“Honestly, Esther, if your mother had been doing theatre, and I saw her onstage in a show kissing another man, I wouldn't have looked at her twice.”

The commercial on the screen came to an end. I shifted on the brown couch he had bought just a few years prior that I wasn't quite used to yet. I waved my hand. “I don't want to talk about this anymore.”

“Why not?” He looked at me. I didn't meet his brown eyes.

“Because I know you'll never agree with me, and I don't fully agree with you, and this conversation just makes me upset.” I laughed, but it came out as more of a sputter.

“But Esther, you understand my point—”

“Dad, what you basically just said is that if I kissed someone onstage, I would never be worthy of a second glance from any man as wonderful as you.” I still saw Dad as an ideal man. Not perfect but I saw his kindness, his humor, his strength, and his dedication. I wanted to think I was worthy of the affection of someone like him one day.

I still didn't make eye contact.

I don't remember what Dad said next. I remember starts at attempting sentences, but he didn't take back his words. He didn't try to pull me out of the hole I had fallen into, the hole his words had dug. He stood by his convictions. Still passionate. I've never engaged in that topic of conversation with him again.

~ ~ ~

“OK girls, let's go to it.” I stopped. I couldn't remember the next part of my monologue. “Line?”

“That was the signal...” the assistant stage manager prompted.

“That was the signal for good times and laughin’.” Pause. It was gone. “Line?”

“We’d pull up our chairs...”

“We’d pull up our chairs around the frame and anyone that dropped in would do the same.” I had to ask for another line.

My heart beat harder even though the seats were empty. I knew Mrs. Camden, my director, was watching. She was also the head of the college’s theater department, the one who had given me the lead character for my senior role. The one who expected me to be an example to the rest of the cast.

“Line?” I said again as I swallowed and tried to avoid looking for her among the theater seats.

I focused on the back wall of the mezzanine, the brown and cream colors coming together, willing my mind to picture the scene I was supposed to be describing on my character’s back porch. It wouldn’t come. The screen door had slammed in my face and a steel one was behind it. The assistant stage manager gave me the ending line of the monologue.

I turned upon the painted stage and walked with purposeful steps to the upstage left corner by the back curtain.

I wasn’t on in the next scene. A good thing. I had time to berate myself.

I probably curled my fingers into my fists as I normally did and felt the nails dig into my skin. How could I forget? How could I be so stupid?

During several nights the last couple of weeks, I had paced on the tile floor of my dorm hallway past each of the twenty-five rooms, came to the stairwell, then turned and walked again.

“What are you doing up, Esther?” One of the girls asked on her way back from the

bathroom. The hall lights had already been dimmed with every other lighting fixture on. It was past midnight.

“Memorizing.” I held up my blue script.

“You walk while you memorize?”

“Yeah, it helps keep me awake,” I said. “Otherwise, I’d fall asleep.” I had to learn these lines.

I had always been good at memorizing. My sister and I use to recite entire movies together word for word complete with soundtrack, and I even recall one instance where Mom asked us to “put on a movie” meaning for us to quote it, as we traveled back home on a long car ride.

As I hid behind the curtain, heat filled my face. I knew what I would be doing over my Fall Break. Hours upon hours of studying these lines. You mess up then you make up, my inner voice lectured me. I couldn’t believe I had blanked not on just one line but a full monologue.

But then a word slid into my mind: *grace*. I paused and pressed my lips together. I didn’t want to hear that word right now. I wanted to be angry. I wanted punishment. It felt just. Yet, I knew I shouldn’t.

I released my breath and uncurled my fists in the blue lighting of the backstage area and brought my hands clasped together. I still chewed on my bottom lip, but I calmed my nerves. We needed to finish the rest of the rehearsal tonight.

That night, the same assistant stage manager drove me back to my dorm. “I have so many line notes to type up.”

“Yeah, I’m sure I didn’t help with that.” It was better to admit your weakness and try to make light of it, yet I didn’t look at her in the car as I said it.

She glanced at me. “Yeah, what was up with that? I finally just said to look at the whole monologue.”

My throat got thick. It was unlike me. I was always so on top of things. What had I done wrong?

~ ~ ~

“Okay, I want to see ‘The Sin Chair’ drama. You have five minutes to set up,” Mr. Peters said.

As the leader of this drama, my eyes widened, and my mind scrambled to figure out what we needed as my actors got their props. I wasn’t used to directing dramas in college, just performing in them.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and glanced to my left.

“Jesus, I pray for Esther right now,” came a friend’s calm voice in prayer. But I had to set up! This process had felt anything but peaceful. Our theatre class was leaving in less than a week to fly across the world to Belgium and France, where we would be using these skits and songs as mission opportunities. The goal was to tell people about the Gospel of Jesus, about the abundant and eternal life He gave. My life felt less than abundant.

“Amen.” I looked up. “Thank you.”

The firm voice of Mr. Peters broke into the moment and informed me that I now had two minutes to set up.

My eyes bulged at his words. Was he serious?

I pushed my tongue against the back of my teeth and forced myself not to shake my head. We were praying!

But it didn’t matter.

Those words had become refrains I repeated to myself over and over again. I was up until 3am last night. It didn't matter. Stress was emanating from my body. It didn't matter. Doubt about God's character created cracks in my belief.

That mattered—but I didn't have time to deal with that now.

I counted roles quickly in my head as I gathered everyone stage right of the chair and made sure people were ready when David asked where the music was. It was a wordless drama, so the Five Iron Frenzy song was key.

I had completely forgotten. I huffed. Where was it? Did I use my laptop, my mp3 player?

My professor informed me that we should've already started the skit by now.

I bit my tongue and plugged the aux cord into the device. I rushed past Mr. Peters with my head down and stood behind the crowd of waiting actors.

He reminded us that we were on a tight schedule.

Just start the music.

He asked if we were ready.

I refused to make eye contact with him. Eye contact would give me away. Besides, I could already see the pitying looks of the rest of my team. I nodded and turned my back to the scene as the upbeat music started. Why did I think I could do this? Pull it together. You can't break down here. Just shut down whatever you're feeling. It doesn't matter.

I took a deep breath. Then again. The last group before me walked on the stage. I got ready for my entrance where I would take on the role of a Christian who knew exactly what to do in a difficult situation.

~ ~ ~

“This week I want you to pay attention to how mean you are to yourself.” Brittany circled

her pointer finger in the air as if to capture all of the voices she was referring to. She had been counseling me for a few months—this was after Michael and I broke up and the anxiety had increased with my job and graduate school.

“Okay.” I nodded. It would probably be more than she expected, but that was okay. That was my normal. At least I had finally stopped looking in the mirror, silently screaming, “What is wrong with you?” a week or two earlier.

That weekend I knew I needed to get out of my apartment. I couldn’t just sit. It was too still, and there was an emptiness I didn’t want to think about. I didn’t know what to do with it. I walked down to the paved trail and crossed the wooden bridge. The small stream whispered in my ears, and I watched the wind nudge the branches beside me.

I shouldn’t be feeling this way. I have no reason to feel like this. I just need to pull myself together.

Maybe this is what Brittany was talking about. I pulled out my phone and wrote down in a drafts folder the words that had just fluttered through my mind. Then added a second one to the list. I walked further and pulled out my phone again, typing, *You don’t actually believe these things, you’re just thinking of awful things to say. They’re not even true.*

I pushed my phone back into my pocket and kept walking. She wanted me to keep a record. Maybe it would be more than she bargained for. I felt a queasy feeling in my stomach as I wrote the words down. This didn’t seem right, yet when I prayed, I felt like God said he wanted this. I won’t try to explain how I knew this, but it was as if he wanted to show me how far my view of myself was from his view. Truthfully, I don’t know if I cared about that too much.

Chapter 5: Unable to Perform

“Pray for Dad when you think of him. He didn’t come to bed last night.” Mom turned back to the counter and busied herself with the food there.

It was tax season. Dad was a self-employed accountant and only twenty-two stair steps separated his office from my parents’ bedroom. We didn’t hear the steps squeak under his weight as much between March and June. He either didn’t use them or everyone else was already in bed when he did.

I remember asking Mom if we could go downstairs and see Dad after school. We normally didn’t ask, but when he had a deadline at midnight, we didn’t feel right about simply opening the basement door. She said to go ahead, but we shouldn’t stay long. We peeped in with just enough time to give him a quick hug and kiss, and every once in a while we told him that we were praying for him.

I closed his basement door and studied the sign there. The black words on the white board simply read, “God put me on this earth to accomplish a certain number of things...Right now, I am so far behind, I’ll never die!”

Mom asked us to pray for Dad to get an extension on taxes, to pray for Dad as he traveled 45 minutes to Bowmanville after very little sleep, to keep him from careless errors due to his allnighters. At school, my teachers asked for prayer requests, and I slipped up my hand and asked them to pray for my dad. He wasn’t sleeping and was very tired.

He provided for us. His work schedule was necessary, and there was no way to change that fact. I made sure each Christmas, birthday, and Father’s Day to thank him for the way he provided for our family.

~ ~ ~

I got my first taste of his tax season schedule during my first semester of graduate school. I sat, looking at the blinking cursor on my Word document, trying to write about a book of essays regarding violence and Flannery O'Connor. The graduate class was different than I had expected since we focused more on the author's life than the text itself, and I wasn't sure how I felt about O'Connor, but I had mandated that I *would* finish reading the book, especially after running into my professor that Monday.

He had waved nonchalantly at me as I walked and read.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

"Flannery O'Connor. For my book review," I admitted, trying to act like I wasn't still stuck at the beginning.

He looked at the book in my hands. "Is your review next week?"

"Thursday." Three days later.

He paused, pushed his lips together, and nodded. "Okay," he said. "Enjoy."

"Thank you."

I walked in the opposite direction, and my speed increased. He probably thought I was a terrible student. What if he asked me directly if I'd finished the book? I had to make sure I could honestly say yes. I had to show him that I was better than this. There was just so much to do with grading and my other papers. But I could have started reading sooner. It was my own fault.

I had napped throughout the night the past few days to try to finish everything in time. I thought of each person who chided me that I needed to sleep. They were right, but I couldn't. Not yet. Even though I wanted to so desperately. Three hours was just going to have to do. I didn't have any other options.

I submitted the paper at 11:59pm that Thursday night and pulled out the stack of essays I

was supposed to hand back graded the next day. I picked up one student's essay and began to look at the article he had analyzed then began writing with my red pen.

I had told one of the lead graduate student assistants (GSA) a few days earlier, "You know, I wouldn't be surprised if I passed out at the end of this week."

"Well as one of your leads, I'm concerned. Why?" Her hair lapped against her shoulders as she rested her arms on the cubicle intersections.

I listed off my work and told her how I was barely sleeping so I could get everything done on time. I half hoped that she would somehow be able to ease the burden, lighten the load, at least affirm me and tell me that she cared about me.

She said that she had experienced a week like that once last year and told me everyone went through it. It was hard, but I needed to just do it.

And whether she meant it this way or not, I heard the phrase my brother often told me and my sisters when we were younger: "Suck it up, princess."

I looked at the time on my phone. It was 2:30 am, and I stared at the comment I had just written: "More than one piercing it is coming back tomorrow."

What in the world? What was I even trying to say? I uncapped my whiteout and painted over my error, rewriting, "More than one sentence in outline."

I shook my head. I had to stay awake.

My stiff knees cracked when I stood up because I had been sitting on them for so long, but it was their discomfort that kept me awake. I had learned that trick last week, but it was starting to fade as the hours wore on, and I discovered that I wrote the word, "Exhaustion" in one of my end comments.

I stared at the paper. I looked up quickly. My head was starting to nod. I got up and

grabbed some water from the tap. I had to stay awake.

I looked at the clock. It was just after 5 am. I looked at the stack of essays beside me and counted seven. Even if I did all of them without stopping, I wouldn't finish in time for my noon class, and that was without including the time needed to get ready for school and actually take the bus there.

I wouldn't meet the deadline.

I sat back in my chair. My body felt stiff. I was going to have to send an email to my boss and beg for mercy. I looked at the time on my phone again, then walked over to my blue laptop case and slid the computer out of the zippered pocket.

I waited for the Internet to connect then pulled up the mail icon, watching it bounce as it opened. I clicked on the envelope tab and typed in Wells as the auto-finish pulled up her email. What to call it? I thought. I typed the letters: M-e-r-c-y.

I explained my busy schedule, but I knew not to blame my schedule for my failure. No excuses. A teacher had pounded those words into my class years ago, and it had become my mantra. I took full responsibility for my failure and would she please grant me an extension until midnight tonight?

I read and reread the email. Changing a word here and there. Adding a comma. My mouse hovered over the send key. There was no going back. I tapped once and watched the email disappear.

I promised her that I would continue to grade until I heard from her. I didn't know what her answer would be, and I refused to assume she would be gracious. Would she be angry? Disappointed?

What if I got an email that said if I didn't finish in time, I could kiss my scholarship

goodbye? “I already gave ya’ll an extension,” her email might read, “and if you can’t keep up with this program, then maybe it’s not for you.”

I stood at my ironing board waiting for her response as I worked on finishing up the paper I was currently grading. My body leaned too far to one side, and I took an extra step to steady myself. Part of me was slightly impressed that I was falling asleep while standing up. Another part told me to focus and get back to work. The other part didn’t care anymore.

I refreshed my browser almost a half hour later and saw her email containing a one-word reply:

“Yes.”

My breath caught. I could go to bed—finally.

I sent back my reply: “Mrs. Wells, I can’t thank you enough...I write this with tears. Thank you so much.” I stacked the remaining essays on top of each other, organized my things for class the next day, and climbed into bed, setting my alarm for two and a half hours later.

I got to school that morning and dropped my bags down in my gray cubicle. I pulled out the essays from earlier that morning and placed the stack on my desk.

What would Mrs. Wells do when she saw me? I stared at the pile.

She would walk in, and the blue eyes behind her glasses would glare around the room. She would make eye contact with me and march over.

I would stand up. “Mrs. Wells, I am so sorry.”

She held up her banged hand. “So you’ve been screwing off your time and not doing anything?” She glanced at my papers. Her eyes sparked. “Or were you flat out refusing to do what I asked?” Her lip curled back.

My heart ricocheted in my chest.

“I—” my voice shook.

“I never,” she emphasized the word, “want to see this happen again. Do you understand me?”

I bit my lip as the image disappeared. I took an essay and sat at my desk to see if I could grade another student’s work before my noon class.

The side door clicked open, and I stood up an inch to see who had walked in. It was Mrs. Wells. She began talking with another GSA, and I busied myself with my backpack. I glanced over the wall of the cubicle again and saw her walk straight toward me. Her cardigan flowed behind her, and her bracelets jangled to her steps.

“Mrs. Wells, I’m so sorry.” My eyes immediately filled with tears, and I looked down.

“Are you okay?” Her brows knit together and her blue eyes searched my face. “Did you sleep?” She asked.

I nodded. “I went to bed after I got your email. I just have 6 left, and I’m trying to finish the ones I can before noon.”

“Just leave them and don’t worry about them.”

“Are you sure?” I bit my lip.

“Yes,” she stated firmly. “You have until Saturday to finish them. In fact, I don’t want you to touch any essays for the rest of today, okay?” She stared at me.

“Thank you.” My shoulders relaxed.

She gave me a hug. “Why didn’t you say anything earlier?” she asked, shaking her head in bewilderment as she pulled away.

“I thought I could handle it.” My voice sounded small to my own ears.

~ ~ ~

My alarm blared, and I groped for the snooze button until the beeping stopped. I flung my covers aside and knelt beside my bed. It was my way to pray before actually getting up, but I also was able to lean my head against the comforter without going back to sleep. This time nausea hit my stomach.

I stumbled to my feet, limbs shaking as dark spots leapt before my eyes. I took the few steps into my bathroom and lay on the cool tile as sweat drenched my body. This was it; I must have finally gotten the flu.

I lay shaking with thick breath. My stomach calmed. I slowly sat up and held out my hand to see if it was still trembling. I saw a slight quiver but nothing major. I pulled out my thermometer: no fever.

I looked at the clock, I needed to get to the GSA meeting. I put on clothes, ate some oatmeal, and got on the bus for school. I arrived at my cubicle, yet something still seemed off.

I couldn't place it.

"How are you, dude?" A friend asked with her cheerful smile and brown eyes winking out from behind her glasses.

"Good." It probably was best to tell someone. "I feel a little off," I admitted. I told her that I had almost passed out that morning, but it happened on the rare occasion. I should be fine. Really. It was good to let others know, but they needed to understand that I was okay.

"GSAs! Gather round!" Mrs. Wells's Texan accent dragged us to the chairs, and I sat at the front. She drawled on about the rebuttal essay, her voice becoming less and less important. I set my notebook aside and noticed my increased heartbeat. I wouldn't take off my cardigan unless I had to. My body was sometimes trigger happy when I did anything that made it think it was unwell.

The heat began to gather in rebellious layers between the cotton material and my arms. I slowly slid the soft red fabric off. My stomach was okay for the time being. My head filled with something foreign, something I did not know, and I knew it would take me down. Should I stand up and leave? Go to the bathroom? My eyes twitched shut on their own.

A water bottle straw touched my lips. General whispers circled around me, and arms wrapped around my shoulders. “I’m okay,” the words barely escaped.

“No, you’re not,” The accent responded. I hadn’t opened my eyes yet. That took energy I didn’t have at the moment.

“What do you need?” the voice asked.

I slowly pried my eyelids open and saw the blessing of carpet four feet below. “I need to lie down.”

“Do you want to go to your cubicle—”

“Right here.” I didn’t want to black out again.

“Well, okay! Right here then,” she laughed.

People offered to grab pillows or blankets, but I said I was fine. They brought them anyway; I didn’t feel right using them.

I lay on the ground and stared up while Mrs. Wells continued the meeting.

Chime in from the ground about one of the points so they know you aren’t useless, I told myself. I spoke up.

Mrs. Wells laughed. I felt tired. I tried to smile.

Several minutes later, the meeting dismissed. Everyone was leaving, and I didn’t feel ready, but I needed to leave with them, to be like them. I put my arms at my side and began to

push.

“You stay there.” Mrs. Wells’s blue eyes pinned me to the ground. I didn’t move.

She asked what happened, if I ate breakfast, and I explained that yes, I had eaten, and yes, I had seen the doctor about these strange episodes, and no, no one knew what was wrong with my body, but I was fine. Really. I just needed to rest a bit more. I could still teach my class today. I had four hours to be back to normal.

“Okaay,” she drawled.

I pushed myself up to a seated position. My stomach dropped, and any life blood that was in my face fled to unknown regions. “Actually,” I said slowly, “I think I need to go home.”

Mrs. Wells helped me stand. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re lyin’ to me.” She knew.

“I’m sorry.” I sighed.

Friends immediately offered to drive me to my apartment so I didn’t have to take the bus and told me to wait as they brought the car closer. I sat hunched in my office chair waiting. Why can’t you just pull yourself together and stay and do your job? Other people fight through being sick all the time. Why can’t you?

A friend sat with me until the car came to take me back to my apartment.

Later that week, my counselor studied my face as I told her what had happened on Monday. I’m sure she saw the shadows beneath my eyes.

“Esther, what you’re saying sounds like a panic attack to me.”

I blinked. No one had called it that before.

“I don’t think it is, though.” I shook my head. “It’s not that I can’t breathe; I just get

lightheaded and nauseous and can sometimes pass out. My heart rate goes up, but that's not a panic attack."

"You don't have to have trouble breathing for it to be a panic attack." Brittany's words were even.

I looked away. "I think there are more to my heat attacks though—that's what I call them when I have the symptoms but don't pass out," I explained. "I wasn't even stressed that morning."

"Stress has a way of building up in our body, and it doesn't necessarily have to be a stressful moment for those things to occur." She tilted her head and looked at me. "And you've been through a lot."

I looked at the carpet. "That makes sense," I mumbled. "But I think there's more to it than just panic attacks." My mind flashed back to all the incidents over the past twelve years that doctors had failed to understand in spite of the multitude of tests I had undergone.

Brittany nodded and told me that it did sound like something else was going on in my body beyond panic attacks. Yet she also shared that anxiety may be intensifying these episodes. "Reducing some of your stress might help lower the chances of these heat attacks from happening again. And that's what we're going to try to do."

I nodded. Not because I fully agreed with her assessment, but because I wasn't sure what else to do.

Chapter 6: Maybe Enough

I stood on the black riser in front of the curtain in my jeans and shirt. It was tech week for my high school's production of *The Wiz*. We had just finished the number that was supposed to be vibrant, joyous, and strong. But it wasn't.

Ms. Shelley, one of my music teachers, blazed in from the pit band room and shouted, "You guys are dead up there! There is supposed to be energy and joy! Give it 100%!"

"I am!" I wanted to scream. But I didn't. I bit my tongue and swallowed hard. It was only Monday, and we still had rehearsal tomorrow night before our matinee on Wednesday. We had to get it right.

"We're gonna run that again!" The drama teacher piped up. "I want to see more smiles!"

Fine. You want more. I'm going to give you everything I possibly have.

I could feel an iron rising in me as the trumpets blared the opening notes. Every turn was sharp, every arm arc was strong, and I smiled as big as I could while singing. I was paying attention to every moment that was happening with every excited hand clap and every joyous cheer.

It was on the diagonal arm motions that my throat started to tighten.

I will *not* cry.

I smiled and sang.

The song came to an end, and my body groaned as the teachers conferred. I was grateful for the bright lights on center stage and the less vibrant lights that lit up my area on stage right.

"Okay, guys, better! We're gonna take a break for 10 minutes."

I quickly turned and pushed aside the red theatre curtain. I darted through the hall to the bathroom and slipped into one of the last available stalls. I locked the door and sat, pinching my

nose between my fingers to silence any cries that other girls could possibly hear.

I grabbed some toilet paper and listened. High pitched chatter filled the air as the door to the bathroom swung open and closed. They didn't seem to care that we hadn't given the teachers enough. How could they not care? I waited for the sound of toilets flushing. I heard the rush of water and blew my nose with the hope that no one would hear.

The ten minutes were ending soon. I couldn't be late. I rubbed my eyes and ran my fingers underneath my eyelashes and threw the toilet paper into the bowl.

I unlocked the stall door, walked to the sink, and looked at myself in the mirror.

Not bad. My eyes weren't really red. Only if someone looked closely enough could they tell. I put my hands under the falling water and brought a cupped pool to my eyes. Someone had once told me that if you put water on your eyes after crying, people wouldn't notice.

There were no paper towels, but I improvised with what I had handy and took another look in the mirror and smiled.

Yes. That would do.

By the time rehearsal ended, it was around 10:30 pm. I hadn't been home all day. My muscles ached, and I knew that I still had homework due the next day.

Ms. Shelley fell into step beside me. "How are you?"

"Fine." I kept walking without giving my words a second thought.

"No. How are you actually?"

I couldn't hold back the dam. Her arms wrapped around me, and I leaned in for a brief moment.

No, I can't break down. I have to be strong.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" Her hazel eyes probed my heart.

“I’m just really tired,” I whispered. I hated how my voice quavered.

Miss Day, the head of the department, saw my red eyes—no time to conceal them with water this time. “Is she okay?”

Ms. Shelley looked up with her hand on my shoulder. “She’s exhausted.”

I knew that I couldn’t keep this up, but somehow I needed to. Tech week was always hard. There was no way around the long rehearsals and late nights. We had to be prepared for opening night and the fatigue came with the territory of being a theatre kid. I just had to deal with it.

On day two of tech week, I sat in our small music room with several other students before Gospel Choir rehearsal. Ms. Shelley stuck her brunette head into the room and asked me to step into her office.

I had no clue why she wanted to see me. Maybe she had a question about some of the costumes I had helped make or was asking about the singing for the Yellow Brick Road ensemble.

She stood inside the door with Miss Day, and they both looked at me.

“Did you get some sleep last night?”

They were just checking in.

“Yes, I got some good sleep. I’m tired, but I’m good to go for tonight.”

“Here’s the thing. We want you to give 100%” Ms. Shelley said, “but you are giving us 150, 200, and you’re making yourself sick. You giving more can’t make up for the people who are giving less and should be giving more.”

Miss Day was nodding along. “Yes, keep giving 100% percent. But no more.”

“Okay?” Ms. Shelley fixed me with her eyes.

“I will,” I promised. And though I would at times forget it, it occurred to me then that what I could give was enough.

~ ~ ~

I didn't understand what was enough for God. I had learned during my time in undergrad that God cared, but I still believed that if I was truly serving him, that meant that I had to drain every ounce of my energy, then crash my body against the rocks to be sure nothing was left. I thought that was how ministry was supposed to be done, but after a while, my body rebelled.

I sat in Brittany's office fingering the rubber on my teal mug as I looked into the eyes of the woman across from me and whispered, “I barely know God.”

She smiled. “Esther, he talks to you. You know him.”

I shook my head. Writing down parts of verses was different than accepting those verses as truth. “He deserves so much more than I can give him, though. My faith is so small.” I thought God was only interested in the big powerful faiths of spiritual giants.

Her curls tilted to the left as her blues eyes searched mine. “As small as a mustard seed?”

I paused. I wondered, did Jesus really ask for a certain amount of faith or did he just ask for faith to be present?

~ ~ ~

On the mission trip, my team and I performed “The Sin Chair” skit and surprisingly, it gave way to cheers from some enthusiastic audiences. I could breathe easily. The skits and shows had been a success. Everything had gone smoothly.

I wanted to come back from the trip with incredible stories of people who had chosen to follow Jesus and live for him, but I didn't. Instead, I came back with multiple small memories. Memories of the dark inky sky awash with stars and a full moon as my team and I sang songs in

the night air. Of long conversations on window sills and in kitchens with friends. But the memory that stands out the most is the one that took place on the streets of Belgium.

I had seen the family across the street burrowed under a weathered blanket as the wind whipped around the corner of the buildings. After several minutes of indecision, I crossed the street and knelt in front of the mother with a paper bag of sandwiches in my hand. I explained in my broken French that the food was for her and her family and that Jesus loved them. Then I stood up and walked away.

My limbs felt heavy; I wished I could have said more or done more, but I didn't know the language, nor did I know how to help. The paper bag felt so inconsequential, so small. All I was able to say was "Jésus vous aimez."

But maybe that was okay.

~ ~ ~

Two days after I begged God on my dorm bedspread to hear me, I sat in the pew of a mega-church where no one knew my name, and no one cared if they saw me. I prayed, "God, please show up today." I felt as if I was balanced on a fence post with a leg over either side. One side held the life of a faith I had always known and the other was a strange wilderness absent of belief. I had a choice between these two options. Everything in me told me to stay with faith; I remembered childhood whispers and telling God that I was afraid I would walk away from him when I got older. Yet here I sat.

I wondered who he actually was. I wanted to know if he was really the God who was behind my exhaustion. What was his character? Did he even care? I knew that he did, but I couldn't see any evidence of it. So I sat on the pew cushion blankly staring at the "Not I, But Christ" logo with heavy eyelids waiting.

The worship leader enthusiastically encouraged us to get on our feet and praise the Lord. I stood slowly and looked up at the screen. The words appeared: “I hear the Savior say / Thy strength indeed is small / Child of weakness, watch and pray / Find in me thine all in all.” I looked toward the ceiling.

The pastor stood up and said in his southern drawl that that Sunday they would be looking at the nature of God. If I had the energy and lack of awareness, I would have shouted, “Are you serious?” in the middle of the service, drawing disapproved looks from the older crowd I’m sure. But they didn’t know what I had prayed for. They didn’t see the significance of this answer. I realized there was a third option I hadn’t considered: letting my faith be shaped by the words in the Bible beside me instead of the mouths of others. That day, I walked down the stairs from the balcony of the church to my dorm, the words playing over and over again in my mind, “God, you did that for me?” I believed he had and that it was a sign that he cared for me, in the midst of my struggles.

Chapter 7: Learning to Accept

The pungent smell of hairspray and foundation filled the room as the girls chattered away while applying lipstick. The sound of someone onstage singing for mic checks came over the intercom in the dressing room and mingled with their voices. I walked to the costume rack, took my yellow tutu off its hanger, and pulled the rustling tulle over my blue bloomers and tucked my floral shirt inside. The hubbub that filled the room was infectious. We were ready for an audience to finally see this show. I picked up the apron with the pink heart from the back of my chair and felt the fabric cinch around my waist. I looked in the mirror at my braided hair wrapped around a wire and tied with pink bows. I tweaked one of the braids; the hairstyles for the Whos in Whoville needed to be precise.

I looked at my “station” in the dressing room and smiled thinking of the cards people had left there earlier. When I had first walked in, I had paused at the door looking at the flowers my best friend left for me. My nose had touched the petals as I tried to draw in the floral scent as best as I could. More surprising, though, was the stack of notes from other ladies in the cast and crew. I hadn’t expected that. I had never seen so many notes at my station on an opening night before.

I opened each one with eyes wide. The cards are now stored as keepsakes under my bed, and although I do not remember who exactly wrote them or what they said, I remember their essence. Kind words wishing me all the best on my last academic show in university. Friends thanking me for being an encourager. Handwriting that said I was loved.

I put the cards in my little basket that housed my cosmetics instead of on my mirror. It didn’t seem right to display them.

~ ~ ~

Mr. Peters leaned forward in his chair, saying something about allowing ourselves to be known and allowing ourselves to be loved. I think he said something about loving others like God loved us. We were taking a break from our normal mission prep time, and people had begun sharing their struggles and fears. I didn't say anything.

He studied us and decided to give us a break but said that we needed to find someone in the room, look them in the eye, and tell them that they were loved by saying, "I choose to cherish you." I could do this.

I stood up, went to one of the girls, looked into her eyes, and said, "I choose to cherish you."

She looked at me with a piercing stare. "I choose to cherish you." Her eye contact threw me. I smiled and started to move. She held my hands. I looked up.

"I choose to cherish you," she repeated.

Something cracked.

I let her hug me then walked to the door in the corner, through the hall, and into the privacy of a bathroom stall. I had tried to tell myself for so long that words that told someone they were worthy of love didn't matter to me. That it was okay if I was the first person who said I love you and that other people probably said, "I love you, too" out of obligation rather than sincerity. I could love others, but I didn't know how to accept love from others. Love was too entwined with performance, and it seemed easier to keep performing rather than accept love and have it wrenched away.

I looked at the stall door in front of me and knew that I probably shouldn't have walked out. But I didn't want to burden someone. A chasm was opening, and I didn't know how far I would fall. But maybe it was a starting point, an opening in the earth that allowed a seed to be

planted with the faintest hope that maybe I could be worthy of love because I simply was. I didn't see how that was possible. I walked back to the rehearsal room once I had pulled myself together.

~ ~ ~

It would be another few weeks into the semester when doctors would discover that I had mono and shingles together. All I knew at the time was that I was tired. I couldn't work. And I couldn't eat. But I had to keep going; I didn't think I had a choice.

Coming back to graduate school had been hard. I didn't know how I was going to do all of the assignments again and keep up with my teaching duties on the side. This sickness hadn't helped. I looked up to where the olive walls met the ceiling of my apartment. "Heal me, God. Please." I slowly bent my body until my knees then my forehead touched the taupe carpet. I knew that the words of joy and life I read on the thin pages of my Bible were true. I believed them. But I saw the essays, the assignments, the meetings, and the oatmeal I scraped into the trash when I couldn't finish it in the mornings, and I wondered how much more of this I could take. How long until my hopeless spirit would run out of its final fumes.

Just before the first symptoms of mono came with a vengeance, I remember a GSA work meeting that had gone on for far too long, and we were still no closer to an understanding of the essay than when we had begun. I could feel the frustration just below the surface. How could we be expected to teach an essay when our bosses weren't even sure what the assignment was? I walked with purposeful steps to one of the women in charge when everyone was dismissed. I would not let my freshmen students be as lost as I felt.

We sat down and twenty minutes later came up with a sample thesis for our students. Finally, the idea was clear. I pressed my thumb hard against my pointer finger and curled my

fists then clenched my hands together, holding tightly. I smiled and thanked her for her help, then walked down the isolated hallway to the “secret” bathroom—the one most students don’t know is there.

I walked in and bit my tongue with my back teeth. I crossed to the wall and pushed on it with all of my might, imagining that I somehow had the strength to move the solid mass. But nothing moved. Nothing changed.

I looked in the mirror and shook my head. I couldn’t do this. This constant feeling of being overwhelmed. This hopelessness.

Was exhaustion a permanent part of life? And if so, what was the point of trying to fight through the difficulty?

I didn’t have an answer.

And that scared me.

I knew life and death were never meant to be in my hands, but in that moment, I felt like it could actually be mine to decide. I shoved the thought aside, reminding myself of the people in my life whom I couldn’t simply desert. I realized, though, that I needed a stronger reason than that to continue fighting. The thought wouldn’t be so easily deterred.

Several days later I sat in a coffee shop, with a mocha in front of me that I had used a free voucher to buy. I looked up at the decorative lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling. The warm air of the coffee shop contrasted the dreary cloudy day outside, and I sat and watched a woman give up her table for two young girls as I listened to the hum of activity around me. Connection. Light. Warmth filled this place. Those things were still real. I looked across the room and saw a mother holding her daughter against her chest.

In the same coffee shop, I wrote myself a letter. Words that said, “Tomorrow is a good

day; you just don't know it yet. And there is purpose waiting for you in that tomorrow just as there was purpose in today even if you felt like today didn't matter. It did. So remember that, okay? There are too many reasons and too many important moments that have yet to occur. You keep your eyes up. And yes, it's okay to cry."

Those words were lifelines in the days ahead. They were reminders that the future was not bleak, that it did indeed hold hope, and I first saw the faint lines of hope in the details. In the day I received a free sweater that swam around me when I put it on and did an impromptu dance. In the day I performed a Broadway song in my kitchen for the first time in a long time simply because I wanted to. And one precious day when my roommate, who knew I enjoyed walking in the rain when it was warm, asked me if I wanted to go out in the thunderstorm with her.

I threw on my shorts and t-shirt, and we locked the door together then ran out to greet the pounding drops. We walked up the street and found a huge puddle. I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I jumped. Smack into the middle of it, the water flying every which way, and I laughed. I used my ankle to splash my roommate's legs and heard her squeal as she reached down to push some water in my direction. No one was watching. No one was grading. I was not doing, not performing. I was being.

~ ~ ~

I glanced down at the scarf in my hands. It was noon, and my counseling appointment was supposed to have ended. I had just said as much to Brittany before I asked if there was a place that I could lie down while I pulled myself together. My stomach had been twisting at the end of the session, and my head had slowly begun to fill. I knew my body well enough to know that I needed to deal with the situation before it got worse. She told me to stay put and left the room for a moment.

I put my head between my knees and my arms over my hair and begged, “Jesus, please help me.” I don’t know how long I sat there breathing, willing the heat attack to end.

The door opened as Brittany came and sat down on her seat across from me and urged me to eat the apple in my backpack that I had mentioned earlier. I slowly unzipped the gray pocket and pulled out the fruit, forcing myself to take a bite and hoping that my roiling stomach wouldn’t reject it.

I studied the pattern of the carpet or the bite marks in the apple so they wouldn’t connect with the blue eyes across from me. She was supposed to be having lunch with a girl she mentored, not in this room with me. She had already given me the obligatory hour. The last thing she needed was someone cutting into her lunch time.

I don’t really remember what she said or when I began to push back tears, but she got up and instead of leaving the room, she sat down on the black couch beside me and put her hand on my shoulder. She had never done that before. Everything in me wanted to turn into her arms and cry, but I fought it. What if she didn’t think it was professionally appropriate? What if she was uncomfortable or gave me a little hug then a pat to pull myself together? What if she later warned me not to let it happen again?

But what if this moment was exactly what I needed?

I turned and buried my face in her blouse.

Her arms surrounded my shaking shoulders as salty drops soaked her shirt, and she gently stroked my back as she whispered words that I didn’t realize I needed to hear. “You’re okay.”

Normally those words would tell me that I needed to pull myself together. That I was “okay” enough to march on, but for some reason that day, in her tone and inflection, I heard, “You are okay right where you are. You are okay in this moment of sickness and fear and

frustration. You are accepted and embraced. Right where you are.”

~ ~ ~

“So I kept track of my thoughts this week.” I reached into my bag and pulled out the spiral notebook with the words “Life is Beautiful” fluidly written across the purple floral cover. I held it out to Brittany, a part of me feeling proud of all the data I had collected. She would get what she asked for: all the mean thoughts about myself that had fluttered through my mind that week. She flipped the cover over the spiral binding and began to read silently. I stared at her face. Her brows lowered, and the corners of her mouth turned down. I wasn’t sure if I should tell her there was another page. She flipped it over, her eyes scanning the back. “This one: You’re an ugly piece of . . . what?”

“Yeah,” I shifted and looked away. “I didn’t feel right about writing it.”

“Shit?” She looked at me with eyebrows raised. “Has anyone ever said that to you?”

I quickly darted my eyes back to her. “No! No one.”

She scanned my writing in front of her and looked up at me, those blue eyes drilling into mine, yet she did not speak harshly. “Esther, these are awful.”

I wanted the notebook back.

“What is it like to hear me say that?” She liked to ask me questions like that. Open ended, they could go anywhere. No right answers. I don’t remember my answer, but I remember the ache that started to spread in my stomach. I thought maybe she would be sympathetic or say she understood why I had written those things down and maybe tell me why they weren’t true. There’s a reason she didn’t though. Because if I heard those words, they would have only gone an inch deep. Instead she asked, “Are these things true?”

“No.” I shook my head and wrapped my arms around my midsection.

“But you think they are. You wrote all of them down.”

I shook my head. “But that’s not what God says.”

“But it’s what you say?”

I nodded slowly.

“So your words are more important than his?” She tilted her head and stared at me.

I hated yet loved when she looked at me like that. That combination of kindness and compassion that made it so hard for me to try to maintain my façade.

“My stomach hurts.”

She nodded her head and asked me some questions. I wished that I could take back the pages. I felt like the day the wind lifted my kilt in elementary school, and I had to quickly hold it down to keep from being exposed. But it was too late.

“I’m sensing a lot of shame right now.” She looked at me with her gentle eyes. “Can you tell me about that?”

I don’t know when exactly I told her how much I didn’t like myself. How frustrated I was with the Esther who existed, who could never measure up to perfection. I secretly believed that after hearing people call me “perfect” for so much of my life, I needed to be the one to attain it. And when I couldn’t, I hated myself.

We were back to where we started: my view of myself versus God’s view.

“So saying that you know better than God, what is that?” She tilted her head.

“Pride?” I whispered. My ugly companion.

“And what is pride?” she gently asked.

“Not good?”

She smiled. “Yes, but what else is it?”

“Sin.” I knew it. And I didn’t want it.

She nodded slowly and handed the notebook to me. “I want you to rip out those pages.”

I grabbed the white pages and ripped them from the metal spiral, then tore them in half. Again, then again. I wanted all evidence of my exposure, my shame, gone.

“Good, I was going to tell you to rip them up.”

She asked if I wanted to pray, and I said yes. I didn’t want to be so weighed down anymore. I didn’t want to hear this voice constantly whispering in my ear. I asked God for forgiveness for my pride and told him that I would give him my pride and shame. It took two tries before I could actually say those words, but after I spoke them aloud, there was a lighter feeling. Something had shifted that I couldn’t describe. It was a clearer view, like how I imagine someone would feel when they could see vibrant color for the first time in a long time. It was like beauty truly existed, and I didn’t need to be the one to create it. In fact, I wasn’t supposed to. That wasn’t my job. And the accusing voice wasn’t there to contradict me.

~ ~ ~

I walked past others while holding the pink sparkling fabric of my dress so I wouldn’t trip. I grinned as I made it back to my table with the purple whale bath toy, no bigger than my hand. A strange “trophy” to some, but the Cammie Awards were prestigious in our theatre department, and we all waited to hear who would get what award during our theatre banquet. I placed the smiling whale on the table, thinking of how funny it was that such a happy toy represented, “Best Stage Death.”

One by one friends got up from the table and walked beneath the hanging lights in the barn to the front to receive their own whales. I don’t remember my voice getting tired in spite of all of the cheers and shouts; I was grateful. It was my last banquet—my last chance to cheer

these people on in person. I looked at my table filled with many other graduating seniors. People who I didn't even know when I first came to college, but the conversations, tech rehearsals, and classes had bonded us together in a way that I didn't expect.

The awards were winding down to some of the final prestigious ones. Mrs. Camden walked over to the podium after giving out her previous whale and said, "The next award is for the Golden Standard, and it needs no introduction. This award goes to Esther Karram."

My mouth parted, and I could feel the radiance on my face as I walked to the front of the room surrounded by applause. Mrs. Camden looked me in the eye and said quietly, "We'll miss you next year" as she placed the whale in my hands.

"Thank you so much." I brought my eyes to the ground with a slight smile then turned around to walk back to the table when I looked up.

Everyone was on their feet. Still applauding.

My breath rushed in as my hand came to my face. I clasped my hands together and nodded slightly before walking back to my seat. I offered a wobbly smile to those at my table before lowering my head and blinking quickly. I couldn't remember ever seeing a standing ovation like that at any of our banquets in the past. Another standing ovation occurred that night for my friend Ethan, and I was one of the first ones on my feet. He deserved it.

Mr. Peters stood up at the front saying how he had been asked to close off the evening with prayer. He challenged us to find one person in the room who had encouraged us during our time in the department and to lay a hand on them to let them know they had made a difference.

I stood up and looked to where my friend Kelsey sat but knew that my friend Ethan was also close by, and I wasn't sure who to choose.

A hand gently slipped into mine.

I looked to my right and saw, Lucy, a girl who had played my daughter that past year in one of the shows. My left hand was grabbed by another. I looked to my left and saw Ethan, who acted like a kid who had snagged the last candy from the dish. I felt a hand on my shoulder, then another, then another. I couldn't see who all was touching me or the people who were touching the people in front of them.

I looked ahead at Mr. Peters's face and pressed my lips together to try to stem the flood that was building.

I knew these people. I thought back to the conversations in the hallway before midnight, the prayer circles in the rehearsal rooms, the Kleenex collection that I gave out in the dressing room, the laughter in the technical shop.

I remembered the time one friend held me crying in the hallway, the one who had squealed when I got a role, the one who listened as I vented, the one who embraced me when I was sick. These people knew me. Their hands held steady on my shoulders and arms, and they did not waver.

Streams poured down my cheeks.

Someone's voice rang out,

I love you, Lord,

And I lift my voice

To worship you

The voices of over fifty students and staff joined together and lifted into the air.

Oh, my soul, rejoice!

I lifted my face to the lights in the barn and felt the tears slide down my cheeks.

Take joy my King

In what you hear

May it be a sweet, sweet sound

In your ear.

Those around me squeezed my hands and all the encouraging words I had shared over the years were poured back over me.

I walked out of the barn at the end of the night and looked up into the night sky, studying the stars when a bright light streaked across the velvet blue for just a moment. A shooting star.

I nodded with face lifted to the midnight sky and whispered quietly, "Thank you."

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