We Are Your Epistles:

How Christian Writers Communicate the Work of the Holy Spirit Through the Art of Spiritual Memoir

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For my mother Gloria ... You carried me in your body, next to your heart. You nursed me and sustained me. You introduced me to Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life.

I miss you.
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Abstract

Within the nonfiction genre of memoir lies the spiritual memoir, which emphasizes a divine element at work in the lives of mortal beings. Christian tradition, beginning with the Bible, is rich with accounts of God intervening in people’s lives. By writing and preserving their stories, our spiritual forebearers left behind relics of encouragement and instruction for future generations. This thesis aims to inspire Christians to continue the tradition of preserving personal stories in written form.

This thesis is presented in three parts. The Artist’s Statement explains the author’s connection to this sub-genre of creative writing. The Critical Research essay is a literature review of Christian memoirs, examining common biblical elements therein. While there is a variety of styles and experiences within these narratives, there are many commonalities as they are written by followers of the same Master Teacher. The Creative Selection portion of this thesis, which holds the bulk, is a selection of original true stories written with the aim of glorifying God.
Artist Statement

I am a follower of Jesus, wife to Joe, and mom to Javan, Nevaeh, Ever, Evangeline, Levi, Reeve, Avram, and Vander. I am a journalist, a writer, and a lover of true stories. This project is a labor of love, an opportunity to dive into some of the great Christian memoirs, as well an opportunity to give glory to God for some of the wonderful things He has done in my life. I believe the best spiritual memoirs focus less on the author and more on the “author and finisher of our faith” (NKJV, Hebrews 12.2). I hope my research encourages Christians of all backgrounds to write the stories of what God has done in their lives, so we can leave written testimonies for our children and for future generations.

As I was growing up, my dad sold advertising for our small-town newspaper, the Eastern Graphic, in Prince Edward Island, Canada. On my walk home from school, I would often stop by his office, climb up on his stool and study the ads he had cut and pasted on the drafting board. The office buzzed with reporters coming and going, click-clacking on their typewriters. Those reporters seemed to me larger-than-life. One day they might be covering a visit from the royal family, the next day a single mom struggling to buy groceries. They grilled strawberry pickers and potato farmers with the same rigor as politicians and celebrities.

Their high standard of journalism came under the watchful eye of their boss, Jim MacNeill, a Scottish immigrant who pushed himself and his staff to the limit. His first issues were the size of church bulletins and full of spelling mistakes, but he persevered. He wrote about bridges that were poorly constructed and tourism campaigns that ignored our part of the province. Jim was always “out and about,” hearing the stories of local residents so he could print those stories in his paper.
Jim MacNeill never let his reporters attend press conferences or write stories based on press releases. He required them to read budgets and policy packets cover to cover to find out how they would actually affect local residents. He shocked everybody when he printed the salaries of local politicians. Some hated him for it; some loved him. He didn’t care. Journalism professor Michael Cobden once said of Jim MacNeill: “He was an equal opportunity critic, always the official opposition, no matter which party was in power” (Hurst). Jim MacNeill’s relentless style didn’t make him easy for my dad or anyone else to work for, but he was a darned good journalist. His tenacity sparked in me a desire to seek out and communicate truth to people. First, though, I had to find my identity in the God of all Truth.

My parents brought me to church as a child, and I readily accepted the good news that God, my Creator, loved me because I already understood that sin was something I couldn’t overcome on my own. While I wanted to treat others with kindness and selflessness, there seemed to be another force at work whereby I was willing to hurt others to get what I wanted. The gospel made sense to me, and I was sincerely thankful that God Himself had bridged the gap between us through the person of Jesus Christ.

I was baptized at age eight and began reading the Bible, as well as everything else I could get my hands on. My mom would often come home from garage sales with boxes full of miscellaneous books, and I would read them all. I devoured Harlequin romances and horror stories and all sorts of inappropriate stories. And yet, each of those books shaped me into the kind of reader and writer I wanted to be. I found I had little interest in mass market paperbacks that didn’t seem to respect the art form. I was most captivated by authors who told true stories, as I found there was so much to learn from them about life. After reading Erma Bombeck’s *Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession*, I was impressed that a housewife could write about
the details of her family life in a way that made people want to read about them. I thought, *I love what she’s doing, but there’s something missing. There’s more meaning that can be pulled from these stories.*

While I have always enjoyed reading books by diverse authors, the ones that have impacted me the most are the ones that not only tell a story, but also communicate truths about God. Authors such as C.S. Lewis, Corrie Ten Boom, and Jim Cymbala stirred my heart as they recorded their personal stories in such a way that gave God the glory for what He did in their lives. Their memoirs weren’t just about themselves, but about God.

Ironically, the first spiritual memoir I remember reading was Shirley Maclaine’s *Out on a Limb.* It came at a time in my teenage years when my relationship with God had taken a backseat to my friends and a party lifestyle. While I still believed, I wasn’t living for God. Far from drawing me away from the God of my childhood, Maclaine’s book spoke to me that without the Bible, people can make up whatever they want about God and spirituality. It was a reminder that at some point, I would come back to Jesus.

When I started to make that turn back toward God in my late teen years, I read other books that impacted me such as *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* and *Illusions* by Richard Bach. Flipping through those books years later, I was surprised not to see a gospel message there. Those books had stirred in me such a spiritual curiosity, I assumed they lined up with scripture. I believe that when a person is looking for God, He will reveal Himself anywhere and everywhere, be it through a donkey, as in the biblical account of Balaam, or in the pages of a new age book. I don’t recommend those books for people who want to know God, as the Bible is sufficient, but I do believe God will speak through diverse media as we earnestly seek Him. God is at work everywhere and in all things, redeeming mankind and making all things new.
When I was 19, I fully surrendered my life to Jesus Christ and hopped on a plane bound for Bible College in Saskatchewan. Every day of class felt like oil was being poured on my head. I was a sponge, soaking up every word my teachers taught from the scriptures. I spent three years getting grounded in the Word of God, and then, at last, it was time to think about what direction to take professionally.

Alone in prayer one day, asking God to give me direction, I heard these words clearly in my spirit, “You won’t be satisfied until you pursue journalism.” Of course, it made so much sense. My mind went back to afternoons in my dad’s office as I watched reporters type out the stories that would inform their community about the world around them, and I wanted to be one of them. I immediately enrolled in university, earning two degrees and a career in print and broadcast journalism, including a two-year stint with CBC Radio.

The past 20 years, journalism and writing have taken a back seat to my job as a mom. While it was hard to shelf a career that I loved, it seemed to me (and still seems) that children grow better in their natural environment under the nurture and care of a parent, and it has been a worthy sacrifice. My job is challenging yet wonderful, exhausting yet exhilarating. The highs and lows of family life, adventure, loss, joy, and disappointment have provided me with a plethora of material to write about.

With a large family, it’s easy to feel overwhelmed by the demands of life, but I have learned that times of communion with God need to be the starting point of everything I do, including writing. I remember the words of Christ who said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt 11.28-30). Not only are we to bring our burdens to God, but we are to learn
strategies from Him about how to live life well. He is gentle, therefore we also ought to be gentle. He is humble, therefore we also ought to be humble. God, our amazing Creator, is also an artist, and there is a certain fulfillment to be found in channeling the creative energy that He has given us.

Five years ago, I decided to start my master’s degree as a hobby. Our family was grieving the loss of our baby David, who had died in utero at seventeen weeks, and I needed a creative outlet. I knew it would be hard to find time, but I also knew I had to cultivate the gift God had given me, and also to take some time for myself. I had no idea we would soon be moving to a new state, then to another new state. I had no idea I would get pregnant again and give birth to our son Vander when I was 44 years old. I certainly didn’t know that when Vander was three months old, I would be diagnosed with stage IIIB rectal cancer and undergo surgery and chemotherapy. And I didn’t know my mom would pass away suddenly, leaving a much bigger void in my life than I could have ever imagined.

Each of these life events strengthened my resolve to write about God’s work in my life. Facing a serious medical diagnosis and then my mom’s death reminded me that life is temporal. I won’t always be here, and I want my children to have a written account of what God has done for us. I want to record the stories while I am still young(ish) because only God knows how long my life will be.

I want my children to remember the life and death of their brother Joseph, who was born premature and died after the hospital refused to do life-saving measures. After writing about Joseph in this graduate program, my story was picked up by Live Action, the pro-life organization that gained attention by posting undercover videos at abortion clinics. There was vulnerability for my husband and me in seeing pictures of our son’s lifeless body on the internet,
but it was important for me to show the world what a baby looks like at 21.5 weeks gestation. There are so many lies in the world that say abortion is okay because a fetus is not really a baby. By writing and publishing the story, I was able to communicate the facts in a wide forum, while also preserving Joseph’s memory. As a mom, I gave my son the legacy of showing people the truth about his life.

Having a background in journalism and a love for that form of writing has helped me dive into the art of spiritual memoir. I’ve been inspired by writers such as Lee Strobel (The Case for Christ) and C.S. Lewis (Mere Christianity), who approached the facts about Christ and Christianity investigatively. While their emphasis is on apologetics, both authors highlight their personal experiences in their texts.

I believe quality journalism is about more than telling the news of the day. It can also be a powerful springboard to communicating personal stories. I agree with Matt Tullis, journalism professor at Ashland University, who writes,

Some of the best creative nonfiction I've read over the last five years was actually journalism, and by that, I mean stories written about the lives of other people, reported by people who know how to report and synthesize what they have reported, then craft a story that captures a place, a time, a person—sometimes all three—to give readers an experience they won't soon forget, one that reaches truths which fiction and memoir strive for but often fail to reach. (Jones 64)

I would add that journalism and memoir need not be considered separately, as they can work beautifully together. The effective journalist must be an excellent storyteller. She must communicate the human experience in a relatable way to her readers. As editor Sol Stein states,
“All storytelling from the beginning of recorded time is based on somebody wanting something, facing obstacles, not getting it, trying to get it, trying to overcome obstacles, and finally getting or not getting what he wanted. What has interested listeners, readers, and viewers for centuries is available in the conscious use of desire in nonfiction” (232).

The Christian’s desire is, of course, communion with the Almighty. That desire seeps through the pages of the spiritual memoir—a longing for more than this world has to offer, a hunger and thirst for the supernatural. That desire is not only the theme of the story, but also the impetus for writing the Christian memoir. We want our children and future generations to know that we pursued God and that He was faithful. We want our readers to know that we have faced incredible obstacles along the way, and yet God has always been our hiding place. We want the world to know the truth that God is good.

In the process of writing, the memoirist, like all writers of nonfiction, faces the challenge of trying to lasso facts, while recognizing that these facts are at the mercy of faulty memories and subjective interpretations. As English professor Chris Mays points out, “Writers will never be able to fully control or stabilize what is truth, fact, or fabrication in their writing, and the boundaries that separate them will never be universally stable” (336). I concede that my perspective as a writer is limited, and my interpretation of facts is incomplete. However, as a Christian, I believe the story of God at work is unchanging and not subject to my limited understanding. In his article, “Does Truth Exist?,” linguistics professor David A. Ross discusses the difference between natural truth and spiritual truth. He writes, “We can celebrate the unity of all Christians who acknowledge the divinity of Christ, recognizing that unity among Christians depends on shared contents of the realm of spiritual truth, but not on a shared understanding of
the realm of natural truth” (268). We see this spiritual unity displayed through the shared themes of Christian memoirists throughout the ages.

In our post-modern world, there is a push toward subjective truth, the idea that whatever a person believes to be true is true for them. As a Christian holding to a biblical worldview, I reject that notion. Biblical truth is unchanging. Just as we cannot change properties of mathematics, we cannot change the fact that our universe was established by the hand of a loving Creator God. Mankind was created to live in harmony and intimacy with God, but was separated from Him through the consequences of free will and the choice to sin. God reconciled mankind to Himself through Jesus Christ, who died as a sacrifice once for all. Free will is still ours; God has never rescinded that gift to us. I believe that the good, the beautiful, and the true are summed up in the person of Jesus Christ, and it is my aim to glorify Him in my writing and in my life.

The first part of this thesis is a critical research essay where I look at a variety of examples of spiritual memoirs, written testimonies in book form, that feature God as their central character. My hope is to draw attention to the fact that the art of memoir needn’t focus on self. Christians have a wonderful opportunity to showcase the work of God through the art of spiritual memoir.

The bulk of this thesis is a collection of my personal stories. God has done so much in my life, and it is my honor to give glory to Him through these stories.

I believe that all good things come from the loving hand of God. “The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it” (Ps 24.1). The fields of journalism, creative nonfiction, and memoir-writing are wide open for Christians willing to trust God to give them a voice. I believe every Christian has stories to tell of how God has stepped into their lives and
redeemed their souls and their circumstances. It’s my pleasure to share a few of my stories, as well as to highlight the stories of other Christian writers, through this project, and hopefully to encourage others to do the same.
God the Protagonist:
A Literature Review of Christian Memoir

“I’d like to tell you a love story” ~ Marie Monville (9)

Marie Monville lived a quiet life in Pennsylvania with her husband Charles and their three young children. One day, unexpectedly, Charles opened fire on an Amish schoolhouse, killing five girls and then turning the gun on himself. Marie’s life was shattered. A few years later, she found the courage to share her story in her memoir, One Light Still Shines. Corrie ten Boom was held at Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany and suffered immense hardship for helping Jews escape the Nazis. She told her story in The Hiding Place. While many Christian memoirs are birthed from trauma, others find their narratives in regular patterns of life, such as Eugene Peterson’s The Pastor. Regardless of specific events, these memoirs share a focus on the character of God who is, above all other attributes, a God of love. The Christian memoirist willingly steps back from the forefront of the story to make room for the living God. In the Christian memoir, God emerges as the central character of the story, revealing Himself through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and through biblical themes such as repentance, prayer, forgiveness, and victorious hope.
“Tell your children about it, let your children tell their children, and their children another generation.”

~ The prophet Joel conveying God’s words, Joel 1.3 (NKJV)

The demand for memoirs, those slices of life well-told, has never been higher. While celebrity stories have always been popular, previously unknown authors such as Jeannette Walls (The Glass Castle) and Tara Westover (Educated) have also been hugely successful. Journalist Thomas Larson calls memoir “the literary form of our time,” adding that “Americans are an impatient lot. We don’t want to wait until we’re old and grey to discover what has mattered to us … Unlike autobiography, memoir doesn’t require swaths of time to pass before a writer attends to an illness, a joy, a tragedy.”

Within the genre of memoir emerges the sub-genre of the spiritual memoir, which emphasizes divine intervention in the lives of humans. The spiritual memoir, while engaged by writers of all faiths, is a natural expression of the experience of followers of Christ. Christian Education professor Robert Pazmino sees the art of Christian memoir as a natural expression of the call of believers. “We offer both who we are and whose we are in that engagement proclaiming in teaching and preaching the wonders of the gospel. Part of that proclamation can include the writing of educational and spiritual memoirs” (427).

Christian memoirs are distinct from other spiritual memoirs because of the hope inherent in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Writing for The Christian Century, Divinity professor Richard Lischer writes, “A spiritual memoir becomes explicitly Christian when it derives its literary power from the power of the gospel. It doesn’t preach, it shows, and it does not—or should
not—generalize or go soft-focus at the hard parts. It is a narrative in which some dimension of Christian faith, thought, or practice shapes the character of the work as a whole.”

Christian memoirists join their voices to a long tradition of faith. The Bible itself is a collection of stories recorded by mortals interacting with an immortal God, skillfully harnessing the unharnessable works of God through mere words. Pastor Eugene Peterson says when he came to that realization, it changed how he read the scriptures.

My reading of the Bible was becoming a conversation. I was no longer reading words—I was listening to voices. I was observing how these words worked in association with all the other words on the page. And I was learning to listen carefully to these voices, these writers who were, well, *writers*. Skilled writers, poets, and storytellers who were artists of language. Isaiah and David were poets. Matthew and Luke were masters of the art of narrative. Words were not just words; words were holy. (85)

Building on the New Testament tradition, the Church Age has seen a wealth of Christian “artists of language” who glorify God as they testify to His goodness through their personal memoirs.
“But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.”

~ The apostle Paul, 1 Corinthians 12.7-11 (NKJV)

Christian memoirists testify to the work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the biblical Trinity, specifically with regard to the gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12.7-11. Corrie ten Boom supernaturally knew she would never see her friend Harry again, and also that she should work with a man named Rolf. She writes, “How long, I wondered, would we be led by the Gift of Knowledge” (95). Marie Monville says of supernatural faith, “It is a mystery, this gift called faith. I had not mustered it on my own; it had simply been given to me” (33). In a letter to his friend, Sheldon Vanauken, C.S. Lewis writes about his wife Joy’s miraculous healing, “The cancerous bones have rebuilt themselves in a way quite unusual and Joy can now walk: on a stick and with a limp, it is true, but it is a walk—and far less than a year ago it took 3 people to move her in bed and we often hurt her” (Vanauken 227). Of course, all healing is temporary, and death must be faced sometime. Joy’s disease eventually returned, and Lewis was widowed, prompting him to write his personal experience in A Grief Observed.

In a miracle reminiscent of the biblical accounts of feeding the 5,000 (Matthew 14.13-21) and the widow’s seemingly bottomless jar of flour and jug of oil (1 Kings 17.16), Corrie ten Boom and her sister Betsie were amazed when a crucial bottle of medicine didn’t run dry. “The Davitamon bottle was continuing to produce drops. It scarcely seemed possible, so small a bottle,
so many doses a day. Now, in addition to Betsie, a dozen others on our pier were taking it” (ten Boom 202).

In his memoir, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, Jim Cymbala tells the story of a woman named Diana who was delivered of an evil spirit (110). He says the discerning of spirits, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in general, are normal operations of the Church seeking to follow Jesus. He writes, “It takes more than academic rigor to win the world for Christ. Correct doctrine alone isn’t enough. Proclamation and teaching aren’t enough. God must be invited to ‘confirm the word with signs following’ (see Heb. 2.4). In other words, the gospel must be preached with the involvement of the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven” (138).

Beyond the demonstration of the Holy Spirit in signs and wonders, a common theme among Christian memoirists is that the greatest miracle of all is the miracle of souls set free. In *Things as They are: Mission Work in Southern India*, Amy Carmichael writes, “One has often longed to see Him work as He worked of old, healing the sick by the word of His power, raising the dead. But when we see Him gathering one—and such a one!—from among the heathen to give thanks unto His holy Name and to triumph in His praise, one feels that indeed it is a miracle of miracles, and that greater than a miracle wrought on the body is a miracle wrought on the soul” (29).
“And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.” ~ the prophet Joel conveying God’s words, Joel 2:28

Dreams and visions are common occurrences in Christian memoirs, in keeping with a tradition of biblical examples such as both the Old Testament and New Testament Josephs (Genesis 37.5-9, Matthew 1-2). Corrie ten Boom gives the following account of a vision she had before her arrest:

A kind of odd, old farm wagon—old fashioned and out of place in the middle of a city—came lumbering across the square pulled by four enormous black horses. To my surprise I saw that I myself was sitting in the wagon. And Father too! And Betsie! There were many others, some strangers, some friends … All together we were slowly being drawn across the square behind those horses. We couldn't get off the wagon, that was the terrible thing. It was taking us away—far away, I felt—but we didn't want to go … (62)

Marie Monville tells of a vision God gave her after she learned about what her husband had done.

In my mind I saw myself as a tulip petal falling away from the flower—still full of color but dying. As the petal fell, I saw the hand of God come and scoop it up—right before it hit the floor—and then he cradled me securely. God was here; he was with me. I didn't know how it would happen, but I felt certain of his promise that he would help me through everything. I would be carried through my weakness and into his strength (28).

It is a common theme throughout Christian memoirs that God uses dreams and visions to warn, prepare, and console His people.
“And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

~The apostle Paul, 2 Corinthians 12.9-10

A common feature of Christian memoirs is the theme of God’s strength among human weakness. In contrast to the plot device of Deus ex machina, whereby a deity shows up in the final hour to solve the unsolvable, God, as the main character in the Christian memoir, is most often present throughout the narrative as One who comforts, teaches, and makes the impossible possible.

Jim Cymbala and Eugene Peterson, both long-standing pastors who write of their early days pioneering churches, share how God’s strength was sufficient in the midst of their shortcomings. Cymbala writes, “When I was at my lowest, confounded by obstacles, bewildered by the darkness that surrounded us, unable even to continue preaching, I discovered an astonishing truth: God is attracted to weakness. He can’t resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need him. Our weakness, in fact, makes room for his power” (19).

Peterson’s account echoes Cymbala’s: “It was a miracle that didn't look like a miracle—a miracle using the powerless, the vulnerable, the unimportant … When Paul described his first-generation new-church development in Corinth—‘not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth but … the low and despised in the world’— he could have been writing about us (127).
Likewise, Corrie ten Boom, standing before a Nazi lieutenant, made the following declaration: “In the Bible I learn that God values us not for our strength or our brains but simply because He has made us. Who knows, in His eyes a half-wit may be worth more than a watchmaker. Or—a lieutenant” (160).

In these examples, we see the Christian memoirist, believing in God as an ever-present strength and humans as naturally sinful creatures, writing in the spirit of John the Baptist who says, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3.30). God, rather than the narrator, takes center stage in the Christian memoir.

“And when He (the Holy Spirit) has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” ~ Jesus, John 16.8

The Bible teaches that a primary function of the Holy Spirit is to convict people of their sin and the need for repentance. After Corrie ten Boom testified of her faith before the Nazi officer, we see the officer unable to sleep as he experiences conviction of sin. Ten Boom asks him, “Is there darkness in your life, Lieutenant?” to which he responds, “There is great darkness … I cannot bear the work I do here.” He goes on to say, “I am in a prison, dear lady from Haarlem, a prison stronger than this one” (161-162). While the lieutenant saw ten Boom as being spiritually free, she herself understood the Christian’s need to continually walk in repentance, as sins such as selfishness and self-reliance often creep in (213).

Of this need for continual repentance, Cymbala writes, “Anytime people get hungry to truly know the Lord, the Holy Spirit quickly puts a shovel and broom into their hands. Husbands and wives begin to deal with long-buried issues hurting their marriages. Adults take a closer look
at their choice of TV programs and movies. Church members begin to see the damage wreaked by their gossip, their racial attitudes, their criticism” (159). Cymbala says this conviction is a positive experience for believers and their communities of faith. “When a visitor comes in [to church], there should be such a mixture of God’s truth and God’s presence that the person’s heart is x-rayed, the futility of his life is exposed, and he crumbles in repentance” (134).

Sheldon Vanauken, writes in his memoir, *A Severe Mercy*, about when his wife Davy began experiencing the conviction of the Holy Spirit:

I know now, of course, that she had experienced the classical conviction of sin. Christianity knows all about it, but I didn't know all about Christianity. If I had actually understood what was happening, understood it as a spiritual process, I should have been wildly alarmed. Or, again, if I had deeply understood, perhaps I shouldn't have been alarmed—but for deep understanding I'd have had to be a Christian. For the Hound of Heaven was after her, following after with unwearied pace. (68)

With the conviction of her sin heavy upon her, Davy surrendered her life to God in a few literal steps of faith. She says, “Today, crossing from one side of the room to the other, I lumped together all I am, all I fear, hate, love, hope; and, well, DID it. I committed my ways to God in Christ” (Vanauken 96).

Davy’s words could have been written about a marriage ceremony. The Christian commits his or her life to another person in an act of faithfulness and love. This person, God, becomes the passion of the Christian’s heart. It is a theme echoed universally across the spectrum of works in the art of Christian memoir.
“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” ~ The apostle Paul, 1 Thessalonians 5.16-18

Prayer is an integral part of the Christian life, so it is not surprising to see it emerge as a central theme in Christian memoirs. Of the importance of prayer, Jim Cymbala writes, “If we call upon the Lord, he has promised in his Word to answer, to bring the unsaved to himself, to pour out his Spirit among us. If we don’t call upon the Lord, he has promised nothing—nothing at all. It’s as simple as that” (27).

The Christian memoirist sees prayer as communion with God, but also as a weapon in spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness.

Satan’s main strategy with God’s people has always been to whisper, ‘Don’t call, don’t ask, don’t depend on God to do great things. You’ll get along fine if you just rely on your own cleverness and energy.’ The truth of the matter is that the devil is not terribly frightened of our human efforts and credentials. But he knows his kingdom will be damaged when we lift up our hearts to God. (Cymbala 56)

When Sheldon Vanauken decides to also follow Jesus after his wife’s conversion and tells C.S. Lewis about it, Lewis responds, “There will be a counter attack on you, you know, so don’t be too alarmed when it comes. The enemy will not see you vanish into God's company without an effort to reclaim you. Be busy learning to pray” (Vanauken 102).

Amy Carmichael says her written accounts with evil spirits in India “are best read alone in some quiet place with God. For the book is a battle-book, written from a battle-field where the fighting is not pretty play but stern reality” (4).
Many female missionaries in the 1800s experienced the spiritual battlefield as Carmichael did, and many met with early deaths. That period of history produced a prolific number of female missionary memoirs, most of which were published posthumously. In fact, history professor Ashley Moreshead argues that many female missionaries saw their memoirs as their primary, rather than secondary, missions. “The very success of missionary memoirs as a subgenre of religious biography indicated that women who joined the movement could play a significant role simply by contributing their writings to the evangelical print culture that supported foreign missions, regardless of how much they actually accomplished overseas” (59).

Spiritual warfare is one facet of prayer. Another aspect can best be described as wrestling with God in the midst of life’s difficult seasons, in the same way that Jacob wrestled with God in the Old Testament (Genesis 32.24-30). After losing Joy to cancer, C.S. Lewis writes,

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you're happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other hope is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seems so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present to commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble? (Lewis 17-18)
Marie Monville experienced a similar raw reckoning with God after her husband’s horrible crime. She writes, “Lord, the color of my life has been drained. I’m empty. How quickly our hearts can plummet from moments of grace to deep despair. I felt stripped bare, like a young tree once full of tender shoots but now dismantled, branches and bark torn away. Only the ravaged trunk remained, struggling to remain upright” (127).

Even as the Christian wrestles with God in brutally honest narratives, he or she knows that faith in God is independent of whether or not His presence is felt. “Our circumstances do not prove or disprove God's love for us. His love is not measured by her circumstances. It is meted out instead in terms of his sacrifice, his grace, and his redemption” (Monville 202).

Elisabeth Elliot may not have felt the comfort of the Lord as she stood on the Ecuadorian soil where her husband Jim and four other missionaries were killed, but she and the other widows chose to focus on God’s promises. In her memoir, *Through Gates of Splendor*, she writes:

Olive Fleming recalled the verses that God had impressed on her mind that morning: ‘For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.’ *He who has prepared us for this very thing is God ... ‘Therefore we are always confident, knowing that whilst, we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord.’* (236)

In her memoir about surviving breast cancer, Sarah Thebarge writes, “I began to see God as both my Father and the Great Physician. He was the infinitely loving, infinitely wise parent standing against the Procedure Room wall of life, watching me suffer as tears welled up in His
eyes. He was waiting for the moment when the trial had finished its work in my life, ready to pick me up the second it was done and carry me home” (234).

Christian memoirists acknowledge that God doesn’t always take them out of the fire; sometimes He walks with them through it. Monville writes, “He didn’t fix the tragedy. He redeemed it … He didn’t prevent the loss … But oh, how he sustains me through it” (312).

Another element of prayer, and a common theme in Christian memoirs, is thankfulness. Corrie ten Boom recalls her sister Betsie saying in the concentration camp, “Do you know what I am thankful for? … I am thankful that Father is in heaven today!” (186). The ten Boom sisters were initially disgusted by the fleas in their barracks until they realized God was using those fleas to keep the officers away so they could share the gospel with other inmates. They gave thanks, then, even for the fleas (209).

“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.” ~ The apostle Paul, Ephesians 4.32

One would be hard-pressed to find a Christian memoir that doesn’t emphasize the power of forgiveness, as the gospel itself rests upon this premise. Elisabeth Elliot and the other missionary widows chose not to hold onto bitterness toward their husbands’ murderers. While many people prayed for them, their own prayers were for the souls of the tribesmen. She writes, “Only eternity will measure the number of prayers which ascended for the widows, their children, and the work in which the five men had been engaged. The prayers of the widows themselves are for the Aucas. We look forward to the day when these savages will join us in Christian praise” (248).
For Corrie ten Boom, forgiveness toward the man who had betrayed her and her family didn’t come easy. She writes of carrying a “burden of rage” toward him until she realized: “Didn’t he and I stand together before an all-seeing God convicted of the same sin of murder? For I had murdered him with my heart and with my tongue … That night for the first time since our betrayer had a name I slept deep and dreamlessly until the whistle summoned us to roll call” (180).

Forgiveness isn’t a one-time deal, and opportunities continually arise for Christians to walk in forgiveness. After her release, ten Boom saw an SS man at a church service in Munich, who thanked her for her witness of Christ. She writes,

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I pray, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a sigh a prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness. (238)

After that prayer, ten Boom writes that she felt an electric current surge through her arm, and her heart was suddenly filled with love for him.

If the world remembers Marie Monville’s story, it is for the Amish community’s quick and complete declaration of forgiveness. Monville writes that she was initially worried when she saw Amish men approaching her home, but she was astounded to learn that they came out of concern for her and her family. She writes, “The Amish could have chosen hate or blame, yet they chose love. They freely gave love in its purest form—they poured grace unimaginable and Divine Mercy generously into our lives. Before my eyes, the gospel was being powerfully lived
out. They come to my door to reach across the threshold, extending unconditional love” (49).

Then, at her husband’s funeral, the Amish men stood in a wall of protection around Marie, shielding her from the press.

We see the nature of God, his characterization if you will, through these written testimonies. The Christian memoirist, having experienced the forgiveness of God in Christ’s sacrifice, extends forgiveness to those who have wronged them.

“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” ~ The apostle John, 1 John 5.4-5

The Christian memoirist moves from God’s forgiveness displayed on Calvary’s cross to the victory inherent in Christ’s resurrection. Religious Studies professor John Gillman sums it up this way: “Hope for Christians is grounded in the conviction that nothing, ‘neither life nor death,’ will separate them from the love of God [Rom 8.38-39]” (161).

Marie Monville experienced that sense of victory, even as it seemed her life was falling apart: “I knew that the enemy would believe he had the victory through whatever losses those sirens were now rushing toward. But I decided that this would not be the end for me or for my children. Satan would not triumph. We were not going down in defeat” (22).

Dan Richardson went to New Guinea as a missionary in the 1960s and wrote of his experience in his memoir, Peace Child. Of the victorious nature of Christian faith, he writes:
The message would not back away from any form of darkness, for it was light itself! It was not embarrassed if its bearers were sometimes plain, homely or even untaught—in fact it was fond of executing its most subtle strategies through such! To the consternation of its enemies, it could even triumph when its adherents were being decimated by sword or spear. That message was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Its purpose was nonnegotiable—to persuade men from ‘every kindred, and tongue and people and nation’ to repent and be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. That message was now about to invade the Sawi world, about to confront their idealization of treachery eye to eye in a relentless spiritual struggle for the souls of men, women and children. It would match prayer and preaching against spear and barbed arrow; faith and hope against systemized barbarity; love and compassion against entrenched fear and evil. (66)

Richardson also writes about an anticipation of seeing God move.

It seemed, furthermore, that this bracing excitement was not our own, but was being communicated to us through the presence of God—as if God himself had not been waiting such a long, long time to do whatever He was going to do for the Sawi through us, and was delighted that at last the time had come! It had never occurred to me before that God could feel excited, that the One who is omnipresent in time as well as space could actually, as it were, isolate part of his consciousness on a single world-line and anticipate the future as if He were not already experiencing it! (91)

The sense of hopeful anticipation is common in Christian Memoirs. After her husband’s crimes, Marie Monville says her faith was stirred when her mother told her, “I can’t wait until God does something grand in this situation” (135).
“I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.” ~ Jesus, Revelation 1.18-19

Human beings want to be at peace with what happens after we die, so it’s not surprising that many spiritual memoirs focus on death and dying. Of this trend, Religious Studies professor John Gillman says,

These memoirs do much more than chronicle medical diagnoses, treatments, and outcomes. They portray the waves of emotions oscillating between hope and despair as well as the silencing of future plans in the wake of encroaching death. They humanize death, bringing to the forefront individual personalities who, by the onslaught of unforeseen events, are challenged with coming to grips with the inevitable while they continue to live days that are numbered. The prospect of death not only concentrates the mind; it bends the heart and tries the spirit. (167)

Christianity, with its cornerstone doctrine of resurrection, answers mankind’s deepest questions about life and death, bridging the gap between the living and the dead.

Rev. Dr. William Randolph writes on the importance of writing a spiritual memoir, lamenting the fact that his parents died without chronicling their own faith walks.

Because I have come to realize just how much my own faith journey was influenced by my parents’ relationship with God, I have learned how important it is to write—and periodically update—my own spiritual autobiography. I know the gift that a spiritual memoir can be to loved ones left behind. But even more so, I am aware of the gift that spiritual memoirs or autobiographies can be to those who write them. They can help their
authors better appreciate their own lives and comprehend God’s presence throughout their lifetimes. (Hughes)

There are different reasons to write a memoir, and Marie Monville says she chose to write hers because it wasn’t about her. “I understood that the hunger of those interested in hearing my story was not really about me at all—it was about the experience of loss or pain or struggle or mystery in the lives of my listeners. Their lives were also filled with sudden storms and dark places. What they were searching for within my story was the secret to navigating their own darkness” (11).

Christian memoirs are an important element in communicating spiritual truths. They are a heritage passed on from one generation to the next, an encouragement for believers who find themselves in the struggles of life, vital relics of exhortation as we pass through this life on our way to eternity.
All Things New: Selections from a Memoir

Introduction

The creative portion of this thesis is a collection of snapshots of my personal spiritual memoir. It is not intended to cover every detail of my journey, and readers will find large gaps between some portions. There are landscapes that could use more color, scenes that need context, characters, relationships, and themes that need developing. These are not necessarily the most important moments in time; they are just the ones that I chose to write about during the course of this program.

I do intend to continue working on this project and filling in the details about particular characters and circumstances, with the aim of publishing it at some point. For now, consider this an unfinished canvas, a work in progress. Consider this a sampling of stories about God at work, doing what He does best: beckoning each of us to walk with Him, and taking the broken things of this world and making beautiful mosaics.
Prologue

I slept on the hospital chair beside my mom the night before she died. Her breathing was slow and erratic, her body jaundiced and bloated. It was clear she was near the end. Every once in a while, she would gasp and I would exhale, knowing that she was still there with me. I didn’t want to be the one with her when she died. My heart felt like a ball of yarn that’s been unraveled and then haphazardly rolled back together in a ball of chaos. Primal yearnings to cling to the woman who had nursed me fought against my mind that was still, after forty-six years, trying to find the boundaries in our relationship.

I wanted to touch her, to try one last time to feel her love, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Every time I reached out to stroke her arm with my hand, I imagined her eyes opening wide and her scolding me, “Why did you wake me up?” I couldn’t bear the thought of that being my last memory of her, so I didn’t touch her. I didn’t want to speak too loudly in case she had the same reaction, so I just whispered, “Mom, I love you. Thank you for giving me life. Thank you for leading me to Jesus.” It was the last time I would see her in the land of the living.

Back at the hotel room, I tried to sleep on the pull-out couch, but after a short time, there was a knock on the door. I opened it to see my brother Matt, my mom’s youngest. His eyes were red and puffy, and I knew what he had come to tell me. After a few minutes of small talk that served to delay the inevitable, he said, “She’s gone.” We clung to each other in a long, soggy, convulsive hug.

Mom’s last moments were spent with my sister Jenny and brother Jon holding her hands, singing to her and encouraging her, a perfect way to draw the curtain on her seventy years on earth. Mom’s five children had traveled from our homes across the continent to be with her in her final days, a testament to the place she held in our hearts.
God, who designed this messy yet wonderful thing we call family, is always creating beauty out of brokenness. Where we fail each other, as human beings always seem to do, God never fails. He loves. He redeems. He is making all things new.
Chapter 1 - Hippies

“Run, the hippies are chasing us! Run! Run!!!”

My feet took off under me and I pushed my way through the bushes. My heart beat quickly as I tried to find a safe place. I could hear my older sister Jenny and our friends Ivy and Sarah screaming as they too ran to escape the hairy, bearded men who were close behind us. I spotted the park restrooms and crouched beside one, hoping and praying the men wouldn’t find me. I knew I was close to the main park, but I was terrified to make that last dash. It felt like a nightmare, but I knew it was real.

Just a minute earlier, we had been walking in the woods behind this park in our little town of Montague, Prince Edward Island (PEI), and decided to venture farther than we ever had before. Suddenly, we found ourselves in a vast clearing filled with tents, with scruffy-looking men walking around. We stood in silence a few moments, trying to process what we were seeing, when Ivy’s voice rang out.

“Hippies! There are hippies here!”

We tried to hush her, but for some insane reason, she continued taunting them.

“Hey hippies, yoo hoo!”

A couple of the men turned and started chasing us.

I looked up now from where I was beside the restroom and saw one man close behind Ivy, her long black hair trailing wildly behind her.

I took a deep breath and bolted for the main park, not daring to look behind me. Finally, I got close enough to see my mom standing with Rose, Ivy and Sarah’s mom, and I ran toward
them. They were deep in conversation, keeping half an eye on their younger children on the playground.

One by one, Jenny, Ivy, and Sarah came busting through the trees behind me. We bombarded our mothers with the story of what had just happened to us, talking loudly over each other. They didn’t seem concerned.

“What’s a hippie?” I asked, after catching my breath. Because even though we had just been chased through the woods by hippies, I didn’t actually know what that was.

“It’s a person with big hips,” my mom answered, smiling.

WHAT? Four children had just been pursued by strange and scary men, and that was the answer? Was she joking? Because I was pretty sure the size of the men’s hips was irrelevant. I didn’t know what had just happened, or why, but I wanted answers.

“Mom, what’s a hippie?!” I repeated, but my question fell on deaf ears. The women were busy talking to each other and were ignoring our childish pleas.

It’s been about thirty-seven years, but I’ve never found a comfortable place in my mind for that bizarre memory. I never figured out why the men were camping in the woods or why they were chasing us. My best guess is that our parents knew there was a colony of drif ters squatting behind the park, and that they probably actually knew them and knew they were harmless. At least that’s the story to tell myself. Later, when kids at school started pointing out that my parents and all their friends were hippies, I decided hippies must be long-haired, bellbottom-wearing, free-spirited people.
Chapter 2 – Father to the Fatherless

My mom’s dad, Gordon Laviolette, had been a firefighter with the Canadian Air Force, and her family lived in various locations around the country when she was growing up. Gordon was a cruel alcoholic. Once, when Mom was little and accidentally wet her pants, he tied her to the doghouse in the front yard with her underwear on her head. She said she kept waiting for her mom, my Nanna, to rescue her, but she never did.

Nanna was beautiful, intelligent, hard-working, and absent. Her kids, especially my mom, who was the oldest, had no protector, no defender. Gordon’s worst vice was his sexual appetite toward Mom. He abused her from the time she was ten until she was fifteen, at which point he died of a heart attack. Mom said she pretended to be sad at his funeral, but all she really felt was relief.

Shortly after Gordon’s death, Mom met a young man named Steve, the friend of a boy she’d just broken up with. He walked her home one day in their brick neighborhood of Manor Park, Ottawa. The two hit it off and soon started dating.

Steve, who later became my dad, had spent his teenage years living as a foster child with his piano teacher and her family. His father, Lloyd Duquette, suffering from leukemia after serving in World War II, shot and killed himself when Dad was four and his brother Brent was one. He didn’t want to be a burden to my Grandma Jean, but the burden of carrying on after his suicide was too much for her. She spent years in and out of mental institutions, undergoing ineffective interventions such as electric shock therapies, until she could no longer care for Dad and Brent. Thankfully, both boys were taken in and raised by loving families.
My parents, each bearing distinct wounds of trauma, found in each other a refuge and a friend. They were inseparable from the beginning, planning adventures and dreaming dreams together. At one point, they drove from Ottawa to the west coast, where they lived in a driftwood hut on Wreck Bay, Vancouver Island. They secured their hut with plastic to keep out the rain. Even though the beach was stacked with other like-minded wanderers, the novelty of the experience wore off, and my parents only stayed for the summer before heading back to Ontario.

They bounced around jobs and houses, living as Dad would later say, “without any sense of continuity or purpose. We just went whichever way the wind blew.” They rented a cabin in the hills north of Ottawa and soon decided to get married. They said their vows at a church they picked based on appearance, as neither one had grown up religious. A black-and-white wedding photo shows the two of them standing in front of a stone building. Dad’s long beard, long hair and glasses conceal his youth, but his smile and thin frame are unmistakable. Mom is wearing a long, simple satin dress with embroidered flowers on the breast. Her long dark hair is tied back midway, featuring a couple of fresh daisies. Her smiling eyes are wide and clear. She looks young and hopeful, as if she has no doubt her life will be good, and this man by her side will always be there.

After a brief stint at Guelph University where Dad impulsively studied bee farming and Mom took general electives, Mom discovered she was pregnant, and they quit school. When their good friends, Richard and Diane Furlong, received an invitation to move into a family home in Prince Edward Island, Mom and Dad jumped on board and went with them, baby Jenny in tow.

Their dream was to live off the land, far away and free from the hustle and bustle of Ontario’s big cities. Dad landed a job at the local newspaper, and they bought “the Kilmuir
house” for four thousand dollars. It was 1974, and four thousand dollars was worth more then than it is today, but that was still dirt cheap.

Kilmuir is a rural area in PEI known at the time for the McGowan Tractor Company. Every little pocket of PEI has a name. In other parts of the country, you might drive long stretches of road identified only by the nearest towns: “We’re forty-five minutes south of Regina” or “Two hours north of Montreal.” But in PEI, every stretch of road, every little rural area has its own name. Islanders would never say, “I grew up half an hour outside Charlottetown (the capital)” or even “I lived three miles outside Montague (our nearest town).” We would say, “I grew up in Kilmuir,” and despite Kilmuir only boasting a few homes and one business, people would know exactly where you grew up.

You can drive across PEI in four hours. Its population in 2023 is 154,000. In 1974, it was about 115,000. My parents were always known as being “from away.” Our last name, Duquette, didn’t help. Certain surnames are extremely common in PEI, such as every name that begins with Mc or Mac. The phone book even gave Mc/Mac surnames their own section rather than organizing them under the “M” section. There are also a number of French and Acadian surnames in abundance, one of which is Doucette. While the phone book had pages of Doucettes, there was only ever one Duquette that I found, and that was us. We were just a little different. We were from away.

The Kilmuir house was a run-down two-level home on the side of a hill thirteen miles inland from where the boat came in. Every ninety minutes, the Wood Islands ferry would disembark and fill our little highway with a stream of tourists coming to enjoy the land of Anne of Green Gables. When my parents bought the Kilmuir house, they had no running water or plumbing. My early baths were taken in a big metal basin with Jenny, with water Mom had
pumped from our well and warmed on our wood stove. We got our first toilet when I was five, but before that, we had to walk outside to the outhouse. A trek that was miserable enough in the summer but doubly so in the frigid Canadian winter. We had a bucket by the back door for nighttime needs, and more than once, that bucket got knocked over by sleepy kiddos shuffling in the dark and failing to position their bottoms properly.

In 1974, when my parents arrived on the Island, young people all over North America were searching for meaning and truth. The free love movement of the 60s, with its emphasis on psychedelic drugs, had run its course. The Jesus Revolution, as featured on the cover of Time magazine in 1971, was still going strong. My parents, along their long-haired hippie friends, began reading philosophy books and came across a Christian mystic named St. Seraphim of Serov. Seraphim’s work steered them away from eastern mysticism that many young people were gravitating toward, in the direction of Christianity, something my parents had no experience with. They began visiting churches all over the Island, dubbing themselves the “church of the week club.”

They found themselves drawn to gatherings that emphasized the power of God and the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit and kept coming back to a Pentecostal Bible study in the harbor community of Murray River. They formed friendships with Rob and Rose Ethier, Ivy and Sarah’s parents, who grew their own food and sewed their own clothes, and Marty Reno and Sharlene MacLean. Marty was a musician who wrote music and traveled with Gene MacLellan, famous for his songs “Snowbird,” and “Put Your Hand in the Hand,” recorded by Anne Murray and Elvis Presley among many others. Sharlene (Shar) was a beautiful actress who graced local stages with her performances. Marty and Shar’s two daughters, Tara and Shaye, became more like our sisters than friends.
The gospel message was new and transforming for our parents and their friends. Mom and Dad had never been told that God loved each and every person so much that He had sent His Son Jesus Christ to reconcile the world to Himself, and they found this simple message more powerful than anything else they had ever heard.

In the summer of 1975, six months pregnant with me, Mom knelt down alone in the living room.

“I asked God if He was real, if the Jesus we’d been hearing about was true, to come into my life and be my Lord,” she would later say. “And then my whole body was filled with a warm feeling, a tingling all over, an amazing feeling of joy, and I knew that I knew that God had saved me.”

Dad’s salvation experience came shortly after that, a simple “yes” to the message that had been tugging on his heart for many months. By the time I came along a few months later, my parents were living “sold out” for Jesus.

God took two young adults out of their broken places, out of their trauma and tragedy. He drew them to a beautiful little red-soiled island in the Atlantic Ocean, known to the Mi’kmaq people as Abegweit, “cradle on the waves.” God held my parents close to His heart and became to them the father neither of them had. He cradled them in His love and called them His own.
Chapter 3 – The Music Fades

My brother Jon was born two years after me, followed by Rachel, and then Matt. Mom had always wanted to be a stay-at-home mom, but she found the experience isolating. Despite her spiritual experiences, she was lonely and hated living in the country. She had no money, no vehicle, and no friends nearby except for the elderly Mary McGowan, who lived across the street. My parents might have moved to live off the land, but I don’t remember them so much as having a garden, just the wild raspberry bushes that grew in our yard that yielded sweet and juicy berries.

Church was Mom’s main social experience during those years, and she was eager to raise her children in the Lord. One night when Jenny and I were asleep in our bunkbeds, Mom came in with a banana and a smile.

“God is like a banana,” she said, proceeding to peel it and take a bite.

We waited for her to chew and swallow, then she showed us how the banana has three natural slices.

“It’s only one banana, but it has three parts. There’s only one God, but there’s the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

I thought about it for a minute, then asked, “Does that mean Jesus is only part of God?”

“No honey, He’s fully God.”

“But a third of the banana isn’t the whole banana.”

“Well, you get the point. It’s just an illustration,” she said, slightly irritated. “There’s no perfect way to show it.”
Despite imperfect object lessons, I invited Jesus Christ into my life around that time, believing absolutely in a God who loved me.

When I was eight, we moved into Montague, home to 1,200 people, three miles down the road. My parents got a great deal on a five-bedroom bank-owned home on Main Street. Each room had its own color scheme, and it seemed like a mansion to me. We kids now had freedom to roam around town and hang out with our friends, steal candy from the store and pray we didn’t get caught.

Church was a regular part of our lives, a holy-rolling, tongue-talking, fall-down-under-the-power-of-God experience several times a week. One time, the pastor had the small congregation come to the front to hold hands and pray. There were two rows, and I was in the back row. Suddenly, the young man in front of me powered backwards, breaking the hand chain between my neighbor and myself. His head hit the ground with a thump and I was afraid he had died.

“Don’t worry,” the pastor assured us, “When it’s God, you don’t get hurt.”

The man lay there for a long time, and I had a hard time concentrating on the group prayer after that. But sure enough, he eventually opened his eyes and stood up. I was too shy to ask him if he was hurt, but I heard later that the young man said he hadn’t felt a thing. I knew it must have been supernatural because I had heard with my own ears how hard he had hit the ground.

Even the greatest spiritual experiences can be marred by human weakness, and shortly after we moved into Montague, my parents got offended by something the pastor said, so we quit going to church. For a while, Mom tried to fashion her faith into new methods.
One day I came home from school, and she was sitting at the kitchen table dressed as a clown. I giggled before asking, “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to tell people about Jesus,” Mom answered, grinning as she showed me a stack of Bible tracts she planned to hang out.

“People don’t always want to hear about Jesus, but everybody loves clowns. Do you want to come?”

“Uh, no thanks,” I replied, hoping there wouldn’t be any kids from school walking down Main Street that afternoon.

Other than Mom’s occasional bursts of spiritual fervor, my parents were running out of steam with religion. Dad, who worked long hours for little pay at The Eastern Graphic, decided he wanted to pursue his love of music. He joined a rock band that covered Top 40 songs called Follow That Car, and they started jamming in our living room several nights a week. Our home was filled with music. When the band wasn’t practicing songs by U2, The Cars, The Moody Blues, Honeymoon Suite, The Cult, and Bon Jovi, cassette tapes belted out long-ago hits of Abba and Bob Dylan.

After ten years of living in the country, Mom seemed to enjoy, at least to a certain extent, the energy of living in town, where more people stopped by unannounced. To the amusement of her children, she began dancing with her friend Claire. Claire had a daughter named Marion, who was one of my best friends from school. When Mom and Claire started hanging out, Mom would often take us out to visit them in the country, where she and Claire would put on a record such as The Neville Brothers, and dance around the living room in the weirdest way possible while
Marion and I sat on the stairs and laughed. It seems obvious now that they were probably smoking some Island weed.

While Mom enjoyed the social life and dancing, she also seemed to be annoyed with Dad a lot of the time, and they argued more and more. I didn’t know at the time what a mid-life crisis was, but had I known, I would have seen this was a textbook case. Dad was in his late 30s, married with five kids. The other guys in the band were in their late teens or early 20s, single and carefree.

Jenny and I, only eighteen months apart in age, would often invite our friends over to watch them jam.

“Leave the band alone, girls!” Mom would scold, but as soon as she wasn’t paying attention, we would sneak back behind the couches and poke our eyes over the top to catch a glimpse of them.

We loved when they played for teen dances because we could go right up to the stage and talk to them. At intermission one night, I walked up to the lead singer, Barry, asked him for a hug, and he kissed me smack on the lips instead! I thought it was such a sweet thing for him to do in front of all the popular girls from school.

While I relished the excitement of the band, there was a part of me that missed going to church. Every once in a while, Mom would remember that she wanted God to be important in our lives and would summon the family together.

“Everybody to the kitchen table!” she called out one evening. We kids all took a seat, with Dad noticeably missing. She walked back to the bottom on the stairs and called up, “Steve!” It seemed like a long time passed before Dad reluctantly sat down at the table.
“We’re going to do a Bible study,” Mom said. “And since your dad is the head of the family, Steve, you can lead us.”

There was an awkward silence, and I could tell Dad was trying to think of some way to get out of this situation. It wasn’t that any of us were against doing a Bible study, just that we were out of practice. We hadn’t been to church in a couple of years, and with Dad’s new identity in the rock band, God had taken a back seat in our family life. Plus it was super awkward how Mom was trying to make this happen. It seemed like a desperate effort on her part to push back the force of a wave about to crest, as if she suddenly realized our family’s identity had changed dramatically, and there might soon be no turning back.

Dad sat in silence a few minutes, then opened his Bible as if he realized that would be the only way to get this over with. He read a random chapter, then looked up at Mom for approval. She seemed satisfied, then proceeded to ask us a few questions about what we had read. We kids mumbled quick responses and finally she dismissed us, saying we would start doing this every evening. We never did it again.

By the time I was eleven, the only place I was hearing about God was at Emmanuel Bible Camp, where Shaye and I went together every summer. Shaye’s parents, Marty and Shar, were classic artists, living nomadically without a steady paycheck, and often Shaye would end up staying at our house for long periods of time. A family visit would end with Shar saying something like, “The girls are playing so well together. Why don’t I just leave Shaye and come back later?” Mom would agree, only to discover that “later” meant days or even weeks. If Mom was irritated, she never said so. She treated Shaye the same way she treated the rest of us, which is to say she mostly barked at us to do the dishes and clean up our messes. Camp was a chance for Mom to have a couple of less kids under her feet for a week.
I loved going to camp: the activities, the songs, the friends, the boys, the message. The summer I was eleven, I came back from camp on an emotional and spiritual high, when my parents sat us kids down.

“Kids, we’re going to do things a little differently this year. We’re going on tour with the band,” Mom said.

“What?” Jenny asked. “School starts in like two weeks!”

“We’re going to homeschool,” Mom replied.

“What does that even mean?”

Homeschooling was so “not normal.” Jenny and I were both going into seventh grade (the school had skipped me up to fifth grade halfway through fourth because I was doing well). We were both at an age when “not normal” was not good.

“Where are we going to live?” Jenny persisted, voicing my thoughts as well.

“We bought a motorhome,” Mom answered.

“You want us all to live in a motorhome? What about our house?”

“We’ll sell it.”

“No, Mom! You can’t just sell our house and pull us out of school and homeschool us and make us all live in a little motorhome and follow the band around. It’s not going to work!” Jenny’s protests were ignored.

The motorhome idea didn’t work. We kids were fighting all the time and nobody had anywhere to go to be alone. Homeschooling meant we worked on our own whenever we felt like
It or whenever Mom yelled at us, we planned our own assignments, and we graded our own papers. It was fun for about five minutes. The motorhome kept breaking down, too. Our septic tank broke one day when we were parked along a busy street in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, dumping a mound of excrement.

“What are we going to do?” I asked, equally amused and horrified.

“Time to go,” Dad said, as he fired up the vehicle.

“Dad, you can’t just leave a big pile of poop behind!” I exclaimed, my amusement suddenly swallowed up by horror.

“Oh, sure we can,” he said as he began driving away. “The rain will wash it away. Nobody will even notice.” I wasn’t so sure.

Living in a small run-down RV with five kids and traveling constantly was wearing down my parents’ marriage, and they would often send us outside to play at a park while they stayed inside to yell at each other.

One day the fighting seemed especially fervent, and they didn’t take the time to drive us to a park, parking instead in a mall parking lot. There’s only so much you can do in a mall parking lot on a Sunday when nothing is open, and it wasn’t long before we were knocking on the door because we were hungry, tired, too hot, too cold, bored, etc. Each time we knocked, one of them would yell, “Just a little longer” or “Go pee behind a tree” or “We’ll get food soon” or “Leave us alone!” We heard them shouting, and we heard crying, and then we heard nothing. And finally, after what seemed like hours, Mom opened the door.

“Kids, come inside. We need to talk to you,” she said, her red face streaked with tears.
When we were all inside, she continued, “Your father has chosen the band over the family.”

There was moment of silence, and then we all started crying. All five of us wrapped our arms around Dad, begging him not to leave us. He was crying too, and telling us he loved us, but it wasn’t enough to make him stay. I don’t remember if somebody came to pick him up or if Mom dropped him off somewhere. I just knew that for eleven and a half years of my life he was there, and then suddenly he was gone. I loved Dad deeply and couldn’t bear to think about not being able to see him every day. I was sure it was Mom’s fault, that she had driven him away with her moodiness. Blaming her was my way of coping with having my heart ripped out of my chest.
Chapter 4 – All Who Wander

Mom drove us kids fourteen hours west to her hometown of Ottawa. As she drove, I watched the rain beat on the windshield as the old beat-up wipers tried to wipe it away. As more rain fell, the wipers wiped quicker, never quite keeping up. They pushed the water aside barely enough to see, but the rain kept coming. Only God could stop the rain. But why would He? If He didn’t care enough to stop a father from abandoning his family, why would He care about the weather?

It was October when we settled into a house and school. Mom started getting social assistance, which paid our rent on a small brick home in the Glebe, one of the nicest areas in Ottawa. I found myself going to school with kids whose parents were diplomats and scientists. I felt a little uneasy when kids asked about my family, but they thought it was cool that we moved there in an RV after touring with my dad’s band.

Mom cried a lot. She convinced herself that Dad would be home for Christmas, that he had made a bad choice but would soon come around. He didn’t come home for Christmas, though. He called instead and told Mom he had moved on.

“I’m with somebody else now,” he said, as we kids gathered around, straining our ears to hear the conversation.

“What’s her name?” Mom asked.

“Tracey,” Dad said.

“Well, I think God wants you to be home with your family,” Mom tried desperately to persuade him.
Dad paused before revealing, “She’s pregnant.” He went on to explain that Tracey was
only seventeen years old, and they had met at one of his gigs.

My parents’ marriage was over. It was information I just couldn’t process. I loved Dad, I
knew he loved me, and my heart ached every day to see him again.

Despite everything I was going through, and despite my secret belief that Dad wouldn’t
have left if Mom had been a better wife, a part of me still felt sorry for Mom. Clearly, this had
torn her apart. She tried at first to reconnect with old friends, but so many years had lapsed, there
wasn’t much common ground. She took us to church a couple of times, but her broken heart
couldn’t find a resting place.

For twenty years, Dad had been Mom’s life.

“I just thought when you got married, you were married for life,” she said. In her family,
even the worst marriages had stayed together.

While Mom felt betrayed by Dad, she also felt betrayed by God and started believing that
He didn’t love her anymore. God was no longer the center of our lives, and Mom soon filled the
void with marijuana. Lots and lots of marijuana. She even took up smoking cigarettes, something
she had never done in her life. She also went through a string of really bad boyfriends who made
life challenging for all of us.

We lived in Ottawa for a few months, then back to PEI for a few months, then back to
Ottawa for a year. Then back to PEI. Mom was determined not to get stuck anywhere again. We
finally settled in Charlottetown, PEI, when I was thirteen years old and a high school sophomore.
Something happened there that I really, really liked: I became popular. I have no idea why—high
school works in mysterious ways—but suddenly, the cool kids wanted to hang out with me. It was something I hadn’t tasted since before I’d skipped a grade and had become “the smart kid.”

Brigitte Burke was the prettiest girl at school, and one day she called to invite me over. Walking to her house that day, I kept repeating to myself over and over, “I’m going to Brigitte Burke’s house,” “I’m going to Brigitte Burke’s house,” “I’m going to Brigitte Burke’s house.”

Brigitte lived on the other side of town, where all the rich kids lived. Kids like twins Darren and David Smith, whose dad was a stockbroker. Darren and I quickly became best friends, and he would often pick me up on his bicycle to go hand out at this house. Socially, I hit the jackpot. It had been two years and five houses since we had quit touring with Follow That Car, and finally I had found my people. It was such a good feeling to be wanted, and I decided I was going to hang onto it at all costs.

Needless to say, that decision didn’t lead me down righteous paths. I spent all my time with my friends just hanging out, drinking booze, and generally doing a bunch of bad stuff I still regret. In the summers, we spent endless days at the beach, soaking up the rays and swimming in the cool Atlantic waters. My friends became my whole life, my surrogate family.

I held onto my faith in God, though our relationship had faded into the background of my life. I was having fun with my friends, but a part of me knew I wasn’t on the right track, that I needed to come back to Jesus. The summer I was fourteen, I decided volunteering at the Bible camp I had attended as a kid would be a good way to rekindle my walk with God, and I set my heart on serving as kitchen staff.

A week before camp, Mom told me to pack my bags because we were going to Ottawa for a visit. Someone she knew was heading that way and we could get a free ride.
“Just you and me? What about Rachel and Matt?” I asked. Jon was living with Dad at that point, and Jenny was long gone. She had refused to move all over the place and had convinced my mom to let her live in a foster home, which is where she spent most of her teen years.

“They’re going to your dad’s this week,” she answered.

By that point, we had all re-established contact with Dad, and even Mom was on good terms with him. Even Tracey, resented by all of us to one extent or another, had been reluctantly welcomed into the family after my brother Mikke was born.

“I can’t go Mom, I’m volunteering at Bible camp with Shaye next week,” I protested.

“We’ll get you back on time.”

“How?” I knew she didn’t have a plan, and I didn’t want to risk being three provinces away when the time came.

“We’ll figure it out.”

“I can’t go … I’m not going. I’m going to Bible camp.”

“Well, you can’t stay here by yourself, and I’m going to Ottawa.”

Knowing I had nowhere else to stay for a week, I cried and begged, but the best I could do was get Mom to give me her word she would get me home in time.

A couple of days into the trip, I began to suspect that Mom wasn’t working on a plan to get me home.

“How are we getting home, Mom?”
“We’ll get you home, don’t worry about it.”

The day before we would have to leave, Mom came to me with the dreaded news.

“We might not make it in time for you to go to camp.”

“But you gave me your word!”

I was crushed. I knew I was far from God, and that I had to reconnect with Him. Bible camp was the one place where I’d always felt revived and spiritually focused. Out in the woods, away from all the temptations, I could repent the first night from my long list of trespasses and enjoy Him and His creation the rest of the week.

I cried myself to sleep that night. After these few years of wandering, I was just so hungry for Jesus, the “bread of life” (John 6.35).

Mom woke me up very early the next morning.

“Come on, we’re going home,” she said.

“What, how?”

“We’re hitchhiking.”

Mom had one of her friends drop us off outside the city, and the two of us just stood on the side of the road and stuck out our thumbs. God must have been watching over us because we had kind drivers the whole 850 miles and never had to stand on the side of the road long. There was one interminable, rainy night in a leaky tent somewhere in New Brunswick, but even then, I was thankful to be heading in the right direction.
I arrived at Bible camp the next day with big expectations for my own reform. What I hadn’t anticipated was the freedom that kitchen staff had compared to campers. My camp days had always been so structured, but now Shaye and I were only needed before and after meals. The lifeguards had lots of down-time too, and that made for a bad combination because we roomed with them and they were just there working, not because they cared about connecting with God. We smoked cigarettes and talked about boys. We weren’t expected to go to chapel, so sometimes we skipped it. Before I knew it, the week was over and my spiritual reawakening just hadn’t happened.

Shaye and I decided that what we needed to do was start going to church. We had asked one of the camp counselors where she attended, but when Sunday came, we didn’t have a ride, and we ended up walking several miles. Still, we told ourselves it would be worth it because we needed more of God in our lives.

When we got there, we found our acquaintance and walked over to where she was sitting.

“Can we sit here?” we asked.

“Sure, we’ll make room.”

She sat there staring at us, though, and that’s when we realized she was wearing what appeared to be a doily on her head. In fact, all the women were.

“Did you bring a head covering?” she asked.

“No …” Shaye and I exchanged raised eyebrows, as neither of us could think of why we might have wanted to bring one.

“I think we have some extras,” she said, “Let me go see.”
She came back with two ugly pastel doilies and handed them to us.

“And just curious,” Shaye began, “Why do we need to wear these?”

“Because the Bible says women are to cover their heads in church.”

“Oh … okay.”

We put the doilies on our heads, embarrassed that they didn’t match our outfits we had so carefully picked out. After church, we took them off, dropped them on the wooden pew, and walked back home.

“I don’t think I want to go back there if we have to wear those things and if nobody’s going to offer us a ride,” I said.

“Me neither.”

It wouldn’t have crossed our minds to ask Mom for a ride to church. She was usually busy with school, as she had gone back to university to pursue a psychology degree. She also had Rachel and Matt to take care of. And anyway, her standard response when I asked her to drive me anywhere was, “What do I look like, a taxi service?”
Chapter 5 - Marion

With church off the agenda, Shaye and I started planning our next adventures. We would ride bikes across the country after we graduated. We would find some sort of communal colony and live there for a year, just for the experience.

The only exciting thing that happened the fall of my junior year, though, was that my good friend Marion moved to Charlottetown from Montague, thirty miles away. She had been struggling with some of the kids at her school and hoped that moving in with her dad would give her a fresh start. Now I had another friend to hang out with, and she had her driver’s license and a car. She also knew how to throw awesome parties when her dad was out of town. I embraced her move for selfish reasons.

Charlottetown was set to host the Canada Winter Games that year, and Marion was determined to compete in cross-country skiing, so she wanted to get in shape. She asked me if I would ride my bike alongside her after school and time her while she ran, so I went with her once. Then she wanted me to keep going with her, but I had other people I wanted to hang out with, and I didn’t feel like bike-riding every day, so I told her I would try to make it happen, but I never did.

Marion got frustrated with my lack of commitment to our friendship, and she started hanging out with a different crowd. We were still friends, but she had distanced herself. I didn’t blame her; I knew I was living a shallow life, but it was the life I had chosen. I didn’t know then how desperately she needed people in her court. I wish I could have seen beyond myself.
At that point in my life, I didn’t have much of a moral compass. I just went along with the crowd and tried not to be as bad as some other people, like Jenny, who moved home our senior year. With her around, I didn’t feel like anything I did was very bad.

Her first day of school, someone ran into my classroom yelling, “Catfight! Catfight!”

Our school was obsessed with fights. I don’t even think kids usually had a reason to fight, other than showing off. There were a couple of tough guys who did it more or less as a sport. Scores of kids would gather round them and cheer them on, until someone either got knocked out or teachers broke it up. A catfight was especially exciting, though, because they didn’t happen very often. There weren’t many girls who were willing to risk messing up their faces for a few cheers.

When I heard the word “Catfight,” I had a feeling it might be Jenny. First day of a new school, and it would just be like her not to hold anything back. Sure enough, another girl had called her a cuss word over a guy they both liked or something like that. Jenny just punched her in the face to shut her up and got herself suspended. I was bad but not that bad.

I smoked marijuana and hashish occasionally, but that got boring pretty quickly, and I started wondering if there were better, more exciting drugs. I had heard stories of fantastic hallucinations on LSD, and I decided I would do it just once.

I wanted Mom to know what I was doing that night, just in case I had a “bad trip” or something, so I went by my house on the way to the dealer’s.

“Mom, I’m not asking for permission, but I just want you to know I’m going to do LSD tonight.”
“Oh no. Why would you do that?” She sounded concerned, which surprised me. Mom never seemed concerned about the decisions I made. She had gone back to university to get her psychology degree, and she was focused on that and taking care of Rachel and Matt, who were ten and seven at that point. I always just did my own thing, so it took me off guard to hear concern in her voice for me.

“I just want to. I’ll be fine.”

“Oh Ananda, don’t do it. It’s a dangerous drug. Too many people have never been the same after doing it.”

“I’ll be fine Mom, bye!”

“No seriously Ananda, don’t do it. I’m your mother and I’m asking you not to do this. You’re playing with fire.”

“Gotta go, Mom, love you, bye!”

I walked over to the dealer’s house, but he had no LSD that night. He suggested a couple other places, but nobody had any. My friends had told me there was acid all over town, but for some reason there was none for me that night. Mom was relieved the next day when I told her I hadn’t done it.

“I prayed for you,” she said.

Unlike acid, getting beer never seemed to be a challenge, and one night my friends and I decided to go drink in a field. I wandered off by myself and sat down under the canopy of stars. I was tipsy, but the sky was so beautiful, and I was moved to start talking to God. I don’t know what I said, but I heard His voice clearly in my mind telling me not to do acid. I hadn’t heard
God’s voice in a long time, but I remembered what it sounded like. I was ecstatic to have heard from him, and I walked back to where my friends were, announcing, “Guys, I just had a conversation with God!”

Everybody stopped what they were doing and stared at me.

“You what?” somebody finally asked.

“I talked to God!”

There was a momentary pause, and then the crowd of friends broke into uncontrolled laughter. Finally someone asked, “What did He say?”

“He told me not to do acid.”

More guffaws and belly-aching laughter.

It took my friends many months to stop teasing me about that, but I didn’t care. I knew I had heard from God, and I never did go in search of that stuff again. I did keep living for my own pleasure, though. I was like the fig tree in Matthew 21:18 that should have been bearing fruit but wasn’t. There were people in my life who could have benefitted from a more fruitful tree. Like Marion.

I didn’t know how deep Marion’s struggles were. I felt that she wanted me to be a better friend than I was willing or able to be. When she stopped calling and wanting to hang out with my friends and me, I shrugged it off and hoped she was happy.

One fresh April morning, I was sitting in English class chatting with friends. I could see piles of snow outside the window, beginning to yield to the spring sunshine. With only two months to go until graduation, we were in the final lap of high school and excitement was in the
air. Suddenly there was a knock on the door and a teacher asked for my friend Nick and I to be excused.

We followed her down the hall in silence. When we asked why we were called out, she said just to keep following her. She led us into the office where several of our friends were sitting in a circle. We sat down and looked from face to face to face. They were all in tears.

“What’s going on?” I asked, trying to stay calm. I was trying to ignore the knowledge that the only person this group of people had in common was Marion. My friend Susan looked up, and when she saw me, she ran over and knelt in front of me, hugging my legs and crying.

“Is it Marion? … Sue, is it Marion?”

She looked up with a red tear-soaked face and nodded.

“Marion … killed herself,” she said.

Marion’s death shook me to the core. I knew it wasn’t my fault, but I also knew I might have been able to help her, had I not been so wrapped up in myself. She had tried to tell me one night and I couldn’t even hear her.

“Ananda, I want you to know I’ve been thinking about this for a long time and I’m going to go away,” she had said one night, as we sat on a friend’s boat.

Charlottetown is a magical place in the summer. Tourists come from all over the world to visit the home of Anne of Green Gables, and the city just comes alive. That night, lying under the stars in the city harbor, we could hear the laughter and joy of visitors enjoying their Atlantic vacation.

“Where are you going?”
“Far away.”

“Well, you’ll come back. We’ll see each other again.”

“No, I’m going to go away forever.”

“That’s crazy. You’ll be back. You think you’ll go forever, but you’ll be back.”

“No, I won’t ever come back,” she said.

It was stupid of me not to hear what she was saying. Another friend who had overheard the conversation told me she thought Marion was talking about suicide, but I told her there was no way Marion would ever do that. But she did.

Marion’s death was painful, not just for me and my friends, but also for our parents. Mom and Marion’s mom, Claire, were good friends, and their family had been a part of our lives for as long as we could remember. The day I came home with the news, Mom had already heard. She was sitting at the kitchen table crying.

“I want you to know I love you,” she said. Big tears rolled down her cheeks, and she looked like she wanted to say more but couldn’t put the words together. It was a rare show of emotion. Usually, Mom and I communicated by arguing.

“I know, Mom,” I said, as I hugged her. “I love you too.”

We didn’t hug each other often, and neither of us wanted to let go. I think we were both aware of how wide a gap that hug was bridging.
Chapter 6 - Adventures

“Let’s go to the west coast!” It was probably Ivy’s idea. The same girl who had riled up the hippie men so many years earlier was still leading Jenny’s pack of friends. I was seventeen, restless, tired of small-town life, and ready for an adventure.

There were five or six of us girls, and we decided we would work hard all summer until we each had a thousand dollars, and then we would take the train across the country in October and settle in Victoria, British Columbia. I immediately calculated how much I would need to put aside every paycheck from my minimum wage doughnut shop job for the next few months to make our plan happen.

For the next couple of months, we talked about our upcoming adventure constantly, and all the things we would do once we got to the big city.

“I’m going to start running.”

“I’m going to take an art class.”

“I’m going to be an actor.”

When level-headed friends would point out that those were all activities we could have been doing all along, we shrugged them off. Life was going to be amazing on the west coast!

When the weather started cooling down, our beach days ended, and we didn’t see each other as often. I assumed we were all sticking to the plan because I hadn’t heard otherwise. A few weeks before we were planning to leave, though, the girls sat me down and revealed that none of them had actually saved enough, or really any, money that summer. They still wanted to go but would have to postpone the trip.

“Are you okay waiting for us?” Jenny asked.

“No, I’m going.”
“You can’t go alone, it’s dangerous!”

The girls pleaded with me not to take the trip solo, but I was ready to go. I had moved out of Mom’s house and was crashing at my friend Brigitte’s dad’s house. Brigitte had decided to move in with her mom shortly after I moved in with her dad. It was an awkward situation, and clearly time to move on. I boarded a bus with twelve dollars in my pocket and was thankful when my friend Nick jumped on board right before we left and handed me two hundred dollars for the journey, suspecting correctly that I was ill-equipped.

The bus took me across the ferry to New Brunswick, then I hopped on the train. I stopped at a few places in Ontario to visit family and friends along the way, then continued out west. The ride through the Rocky Mountains was the most extravagant display of God’s handiwork I had ever seen. I sat on the observation deck with my eyes wide open, bathing in the dramatic glory of the mountains, the valleys, the vibrant blue lakes, the lush green trees, the winding turns, the ups and downs. It overwhelmed my senses, and I turned my mind toward my Creator. I had stuffed a Bible in my backpack before I left almost as a good-luck charm, but it didn’t occur to me to read it. I was experiencing God through His creation, but I wasn’t ready yet to go deeper.

I settled in the beauty of mountainous Victoria with Shaye, who had moved out there to be near her older sister Tara. We got a basement suite together, and I started working a minimum-wage job at an office supplies store almost entirely staffed by Christians. My teenage co-workers talked to me constantly about the love of God, but I was mostly just interested in partying.

Victoria wasn’t quite the utopia I’d planned, since Shaye and I were broke, and it was a challenge just to scrape together money to ride the city bus or buy macaroni and cheese. I
thought Jenny and the other girls would be coming to Victoria soon, but they all decided to move to Vancouver instead, three and a half hours away.

Also, something was different between Shaye and I, which I didn’t understand. We had been best friends since we could walk. Unlike Jenny and Tara, who often got into loud and even physical fights as kids, Shaye and I were chill. I couldn’t have imagined what she was going through as a child, as she told me later about being sexual abused by several men. She was an innocent, quiet, and vulnerable child. A truly beautiful person, and I loved her deeply.

When we moved in together, she was instantly protective of her friends and would rarely invite them over. One day I ran into her friend Jess at the grocery store and told Shaye about it when I got home.

“I saw Jess at the store, and she gave me a ride home,” I said.

Her eyes were strangely jealous.

“My Jess?”

Shaye stopped bringing friends to the house after that, other than her quirky boyfriend Dean, and I was lonely and bored stiff. I hung out with friends from work, but my heart ached for my PEI friends, and I started trying to convince them all to move out west. It didn’t take long. PE Islanders are always up for an adventure. Maybe it's the hearty immigrant heritage that sets our eyes on the goal and goes for it at all costs. Maybe it’s growing up in an economy largely dependent on tourism that shuts down in the winter, beckoning residents to look elsewhere for their livelihood. Whatever the case, it’s not a hard thing to convince Islanders to come along for an adventure, and about two months after I arrived, my friends Duck and Joe were crashing in our living room. As more and more friends came out that winter, our landlord got tired of all the people coming and going, so the guys rented their own house. Things got better between Shaye
and me, but she still didn’t seem like her old self. I wanted to help her, to pull her out of her pit, but it was like the blind leading the blind. I had no more answers than she did.

One night I had a bad trip. A few of us smoked marijuana, then sat around laughing at some silly thing. I brought my head down in laughter, and then when I brought it back up again, I felt an intense terror. Our friends were laughing, but suddenly it seemed to me like a darkness had taken over the room. Their laughter was like a horrifying mockery of all that was good and beautiful. I tried to communicate how I was feeling, but they thought I was joking. I stood up and ran to my bedroom. Shaye followed me and kneeled before me as I sat on the bed crying, trying to explain to her what I was feeling.

“You’re going to be okay, Ananda. Just find your happy place.”

Shaye’s words seemed ridiculously insufficient.

“No Shaye, you don’t understand. There’s a darkness. I need to find God—He’s the only way out of this.”

“You’re just having a bad trip,” she said.

“It might be a bad trip, but it’s real,” I said.

After Shaye left the room to let me rest, I prayed to God, “If You get me out of this without losing my mind, I will seek You, I promise.”

It was a sleepless night, but the sun rose the next morning, and I still seemed to be in my right mind. I went to work, and then the first thing I did when I came home was open my Bible. I tried to remember everything I could from my Sunday School days.

“God, I believe You love me and You sent Your Son to die on a cross for me ... What does that even mean??”

Not long after that, my co-worker Tracy approached me at work.
“Hey Ananda, would you be able to pick up a couple of shifts for me?”

“Why, what are you up to?”

“There’s a youth retreat in Saskatchewan a few of us are going to.”

I didn’t answer right away. My heart started beating faster, and for some reason I couldn’t explain, I didn’t want to cover her shifts. I wanted to go on the retreat.

She must have read it on my face because she asked me then, “I didn’t think to ask. Do you want to go with us?”

“How much does it cost?”

“A hundred and twenty-five dollars.”

“When do you need to know by?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Okay, I’ll let you know tomorrow.”

That was a lot of money for me at that point, and I knew I didn’t have it. The desire was so strong in my heart, though. Walking home from work that day, I prayed, “God, if You want me to go on this retreat, You’ll have to provide the money.”

I stopped by the ATM to pull out a twenty to buy a few groceries and was shocked to see that my balance was exactly 125 dollars over what I had expected it to be. I didn’t see it immediately as an answer to prayer, just a coincidence or a bank error.

The next morning at work, I collected my pay stub from my boss and was confused by the amount.

“Val, what’s this extra 125 dollars on my check for?” I asked my boss.

“Holiday pay.”

“But I didn’t work any holidays recently.”
“Actually, it’s back-pay. We forgot to pay you overtime for a couple of holidays a while back.”

I was stunned to think that God would just answer a prayer so quickly like that. As a child, I had believed that God answers prayer, but once I had asked Him for a roomful of candy and He didn’t give it to me, so I hadn’t made many specific requests after that.

The twenty-hour winter bus ride to Caronport, Saskatchewan had me wondering if I’d made a bad decision. I was eighteen, two years out of high school, and had already done a year of university. These kids seemed so young and sheltered. They talked about homework and teachers and who was dating who, while I just tried to sleep.

The wildly popular Christian rock band Petra was headlining the entertainment that weekend, but it wasn’t their music that moved me so much as their words. The last night, the lead singer began sharing about what it meant to know Jesus Christ and to live a life set apart for Him. I thought, I won’t fall for it. He’s just getting everybody worked up emotionally, then he’s going to give the altar call. I’m not going forward.

But while my mind was firmly planted in the back row, my heart was up at the front. My heart must have led my feet because before I knew it, I was kneeling at the altar, bawling like a baby.

I cried the whole bus ride back to Victoria, and that poor group of Christian kids didn’t know what to do with me. They talked about how the music compared to last year, and what would make the retreat better next year. I pulled my hood tight over my face and cried out to God, aware of the weight of the decision I had just made. I thought about the social life I had built, and what it was going to cost me to walk away. I had so many friends that I loved deeply, who I knew would not understand or appreciate me walking with Jesus. I thought about my sins,
the ones I enjoyed, and how hard it was going to be to give it all up. Mostly, I thought about being alone without any friends, and I was scared. But I also knew there was nothing in this world that could compare to God’s love.

What followed wasn’t a quick turnaround for me, but rather the beginning of a restored relationship with Jesus that had sat idle for many years. I didn’t walk away from my old lifestyle overnight, but I started reading books about spiritual matters and attending church and youth group. Step by step, God was showing me what He wanted from me. I would give up one little piece of my life to Him, then another little bit. I didn’t know it then, but I would see later that God wasn’t interested in being a part of my life. He wasn’t even interested in being the biggest part of my life. God wanted me to surrender my whole life to Him.

The more interested I got in God, the stranger Shaye’s behavior became. When I told her I was expecting a call from church regarding a volunteer position, she changed our answering machine from a generic message to, “Hi, you’ve reached Shaye and Ananda. We’re not here right now; we’re probably out walking the streets and selling our bodies. Please leave a message.”

She thought it was funny, but I was horrified. Another time, she showed up where I worked as an aquarium tour guide and lifted up her shirt in front of the whole audience, exposing her bare breasts. Eventually, I got tired of living with her and got my own place. I still loved her and prayed for her, but I knew she would have to find her own way.

One day I called Dad to tell him about the retreat and my re-commitment to Christ.

“Praise God!” he said.

“What did you say?” I asked, baffled.

“Praise God dear!”
“What are you talking about, Dad? Why are you praising God? What’s going on?”

I hadn’t heard Dad talk about God in many, many years, probably since he’d joined the band. He never said anything against God or religion; he just never said anything at all. To hear him vocally praising God was a sweet surprise. He told me an evangelist had come to PEI and had been holding revival meetings. Dad and Tracey had gone, and both had made public commitments for Christ. And not only that, but they had invited Mom, and she had re-committed her life to Christ as well.

I had been in Victoria just over a year, and it was clearly time to go home. Brigitte, who had hopped on the bandwagon and come out west, was also ready to head home.

Money was tight, so Brigitte and I came up with a plan to use some male friends’ train passes to get back east. We had settled into our cozy train seats, and were eating fruit and coloring like children, when the conductor approached us asking for ID.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have ID,” I said.

“What about you?” he asked Brigitte. She shook her head.

When we showed him our train passes, he wrinkled his brow and looked first at me, then at Brigitte.

“Your name is Craig?” he asked me.

“Yes sir,” I replied, trying to look as innocent as possible.

“And you’re Michael?” he asked Brigitte.

The conductor picked up his walkie talkie and told the engineer he would need to stop at the next station. After lecturing us, he escorted us off at the next stop. Port Coquitlam was dark and unfamiliar, and Brigitte and I had no money. Thankfully, Jenny and her friends scraped together the money to pay for our cab to their place after we called them from the station pay
phone. After that, I drained a bank account I had been desperately saving for university tuition, and Brigitte and I flew standby back to the east coast.

When I got to PEI, I started going to church as much as four nights a week. Sometimes the services were too much for me, and I wanted to leave. One night I slipped out of the service and called Dad.

“Dad, this is crazy. The preacher’s praying for people and they’re laughing and falling down, and it’s just weird. Can you come get me?”

“No, dear, you can stay.”

“Seriously Dad, I’m uncomfortable. I don’t want to be here. Please come get me!”

“No, I’ll come get you later.” I think Dad knew the Holy Spirit was using those services to get ahold of my heart. Or possibly he was just napping on the couch and didn’t feel like getting up. In any case, it turned out to be a good thing that he refused to come get me.

I started to see a pattern: when church got uncomfortable for me, I would leave (or try to leave) and talk to God earnestly. I found myself pouring out my heart to Him, and the more I did, the more I was able to hear His voice. God was using my discomfort to draw me closer.

I tried desperately to hold onto my old life and friends. I was weak, though. I would get pumped up for Jesus every Sunday, then turn around and go to the bar with my friends. I would usually drink too much, feel bad, repent Sunday, get pumped up for Jesus again, and repeat the cycle.

After a few months of that, I realized that it was time for me to make a major decision. It had to be one or the other. I couldn’t go to church and sing songs to God and tell people I was a Christian without actually living my life for Him. God was tugging at my heart, saying, “Okay, it’s time. You’ve sat on the fence long enough and now I want you all to Myself.” Finally, my
restless soul realized it could only find rest in Jesus Christ. God’s love overtook me, and I couldn’t resist it anymore. It was a love I knew I couldn’t find anywhere else. Sitting alone on my bed one night, I prayed and yielded my life to the One who gave His life for me. It wasn’t a matter of my own willpower and strategy, as I had imagined; it was a simple “yes” in my heart.

I knew I would have to leave Charlottetown again if I was going to live 100% for God. I had too many friends that I loved, and I didn’t feel like I could leave the party scene without abandoning them. Right away, I started penning letters to dozens of Bible colleges across the country, requesting information.

The responses started arriving in the mail, and one afternoon, I sat on the couch with the stack of replies. When I saw the envelope marked “Faith Alive Bible College,” my heart jumped with excitement. I didn’t know it at the time, but the Holy Spirit was showing me where He wanted me to go. I was so hungry to experience God and not religion. I had tried to find satisfaction in the world, and it wasn’t there. I was a thirsty woman crawling in the desert, knowing that the only thing I wanted was water. Living water. I wasn’t interested in checking boxes to feel good about myself. I wanted to know the God who made me, who had called me from my mother’s womb, who had waited patiently all these years for me to come back to Him.

It was a warm August morning in 1995, and the sun was just beginning to rise over the Atlantic Ocean, when Mom drove me to the Charlottetown airport. I was nineteen years old and about to embark on the greatest adventure of my life: the adventure of surrendering my life to God. I kissed Mom goodbye and stepped on the plane bound for Bible College in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. After the youth convention the year before, I didn’t think I’d ever have a reason to go back to the coldest place on the planet, but God had other plans.
Chapter 7 - Only Good Things

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” ~ Jeremiah 29:11, NKJV

In my dream, I was hiding in a dark basement, ashamed. I had tried to do something helpful and ended up hurting someone. I heard footsteps coming down the stairs and looked up to see a blonde, professional woman who I immediately understood to be a prophetess. She said, “I understand you’ve been praying for another. He wants you to know it’s not too late. He has only good things for you.” And then I woke up.

I thought about the dream as I got ready for work and out the door of my one-bedroom apartment in a historic downtown building in Regina, Saskatchewan. I welcomed the fresh spring air in my lungs as I walked the short ten minutes to the CBC Broadcasting Centre. The dream kept coming back to mind as I scrambled for last-minute story ideas for the morning meeting, and as I lined up interviews and wrote scripts for our morning radio show.

A week later, the dream would begin to make sense.

I was surfing the internet at home one evening when I entered the word “Christian” in a search engine. I wasn’t looking for anything in particular, just curious what would show up. The first hit was a website called www.singlec.com, and my eyes popped out. It was an online dating site for Christians. Years later, that would become the norm, but in 2002, meeting online was a relatively new concept. I didn’t know any couples who had met online, and it seemed crazy and wonderful at the same time. There were fifteen thousand profiles of Christian men on that site. In the churches I visited, there were usually just a couple of guys that I could coax my mind to even
imagine a future with. And usually that was a stretch, as was the case with Andrew, who I had recently broken up with. We were obviously mismatched from the start, and friends and family dropped comments to that effect. He was three years younger than me and liked to play video games and keep his truck shiny. I had two degrees and a Bible College diploma; he was satisfied with a high school diploma. We didn’t have much in common, but it was slim pickings in my circles, and he was one of the better ones.

When we broke up, I felt small and embarrassed and started questioning if dating was really God’s way of doing things. How could it be? Giving pieces of your heart away over and over until someone turned out to be the “right one.” I didn’t think God needed my help finding me a husband anymore, so I decided I would let Him take the lead. Sitting in my pastor’s office one day, I said, “I’m not going to call someone my boyfriend again until I know that I know that he’s the one God has for me.”

Within a couple days of speaking those words, I had the dream. And then I found the website. And when I tapped into this smorgasbord of eligible guys, I went all in, thinking this might be my answer to prayer.

The site advertised a free ten-day trial, and I told myself, “If my husband is on this site, I’m going to find him before the end of the free trial.” I immediately started compiling a list of top picks, maybes, and definitely nots. I wrote a short blurb about myself that I pasted over and over and over again as I contacted guys. It went something like this:

“Hi, my name is Ana [not my real name] and I live in Regina, Canada. I’m a broadcast journalist, twenty-six years old, and I love the Lord with all my heart. Blonde hair, average build, 5ft. 7in. I like reading and writing, looking for someone who loves Jesus and adventure. Open to
relocation within North America.” I was in the process of packing up to move back to Saskatoon, so all my pictures were buried. The only picture I had available of myself was my driver’s license photo, so I posted that.

That first night, I stayed up until midnight sending inquiries, and the next morning, I woke up early and sent some more. As the replies came in, I either moved the guys up the list to top picks or they got eliminated. Many didn’t respond, of course. Some guys weren’t actually active on the site; they had just forgotten to cancel their membership, but they could still receive messages. Which was the case with Joe.

On the third day, after late nights, early mornings, and even running home at lunch hours to check the site and organize my lists, my heart skipped a beat. On the screen, there was a picture of a clean-cut, good-looking guy wearing glasses and a formal white shirt, with a wide and seemingly genuine smile. His profile said he was from Nebraska and thirty-three years old. A little on the old side, I thought. The part that really set him above the others was his write-up about himself. Not so much what he said, but the fact that he could write well. I pasted my little blurb in a message to him, but instead of saying my name was Ana, I wrote, “My name is Ananda.” Something about his smile told me I could trust him. I put his name on the top of the list, and then I waited. And waited.

I kept checking my inbox the rest of the day, keeping busy by contacting more guys and organizing responses. In all, I sent out well over a hundred messages. Many looked promising, but Joe was far in the lead. He was a good writer, but there was something else about his profile that made him stand out, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. It was as if his profile was lit up in my mind, and the others were all in the background.
I didn’t want to take the next step and talk on the phone with anybody else until I heard back from Joe. The next day, still no response. Finally on the third day, he messaged me and said he got my message and would like to get to know me. I gave him my phone number and waited. And waited.

That was a Wednesday. Thursday, he didn’t call. Friday night, I went out with friends and when I came home, my phone finally rang.

“Hello?” I answered, trying to sound like I hadn’t been waiting all week for this moment.

“Ananda? This is Joe Peters.” We talked that night for five and a half hours.
“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” ~ Galatians 2:20, NKJV

That first phone conversation with Joe lasted well into the night, in part owing to Joe’s midwestern drawl and calculated manner of speaking. Just like his well-thought-out blurb online, each spoken word seemed to be carefully chosen. There was an innocence about him that drew me in, like I was stepping into a black-and-white TV town.

“I only ever lived in two houses until I left for college,” Joe said. “One south of Hay Springs, Nebraska, and one north of Rushville.” I googled those towns as we spoke and found out Hay Springs had five hundred residents; Rushville had nine hundred. I had lived in small towns and big cities and everything in between across Canada, about thirty-five houses in all.

Joe was raised by married parents on a small wheat and cattle farm. All of his aunts, uncles, and cousins had stayed true to their wedding vows. Every one of my relatives was divorced.

Joe told me how he grew up believing in God, attending church and Bible clubs, and even earning a theology degree in college. However, he had only truly surrendered his life to Christ seven months earlier. I told Joe the number one thing I was looking for in a husband was someone who loved God. Not just a guy who went to church, but someone who was “sold out.” Joe assured me his commitment to Jesus was solid.

“I have else something else to tell you about me,” I said. “I can’t be tied down to one place. I don’t mind living in the States, but I need the freedom to move around if life gets boring.
I know that might sound weird, but it’s just the way I am. It comes from my mom.” I held my breath waiting for Joe’s response.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he said, to my surprise. “I get bored in one place too. I usually spend a few months in Texas every winter.”

Joe told me about his years in the army and about living in the Middle East twice, working for a charity organization. Once he got stuck in Bahrain during an attempted coup. Another time, he borrowed royal stationery (with permission, of course) and petitioned foreign governments for funds for his organization. His global adventures melded with my stories of hitchhiking a thousand miles with my mom and my solo cross-country train ride at seventeen.

“One more thing,” I said, knowing this could be a deal-breaker since he only had one sister. “I want a lot of kids.”

“I’d be open to that,” he said.

Everything seemed to line up perfectly between us, except for a couple of fears I was harboring. My second biggest fear was that this guy would turn out to be a stalker, a lunatic, and/or a mass murderer. I had watched enough crime shows to know how these things unfolded. My biggest fear was that my guy friends from church would find my profile online and never, ever let me live down the fact that I had advertised on the internet for a husband. I had to find my soulmate quickly and take down my profile before that could become a reality.

At one point during that conversation, Joe told me God had given him the gift of intuition, and sometimes he just knew things that he had no earthly way of knowing. As a roofing contractor, he said it had happened a couple of times that he had driven through a town knowing it would soon be hit by hail, and it was.
I challenged him by asking, “Okay, so what do you think I’m wearing?” He paused before answering, “I think you’re wearing black pants and a green shirt.” I looked down at the outfit I had worn out with friends that evening and was speechless. I weighed the possibility that this guy really was a predator and had put cameras in my apartment. My curtains were drawn—he couldn’t be looking in a window. But he just didn’t sound like a murderer. He sounded so…nice. Like really nice. He sounded like the nicest guy I had ever known. I decided I would let it go for now but would be on guard if more warning signs popped up.

It was 2:30 a.m. when we finally said goodbye. I felt a peace about our conversation and thanked God for it. I didn’t know the future, but I knew God was faithful. My thoughts were interrupted when my phone rang again. I didn’t have caller ID but assumed Joe must have forgotten to tell me something.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Hello darlin’,” said a male voice. The words were deep, hurried, raspy, and breathy, and didn’t sound at all like the sweet man I had just hung up with. Suddenly I felt very afraid.
Fear and faith are two sides of the same coin. Like Queen Elizabeth II and the Canadian moose. Like George Washington and the American eagle. They’re both powerful. Fear is believing that something bad will happen. Faith is believing that God will carry you through. Unlike a normal coin toss, we get to choose which side it lands on.

When the phone rang in the middle of the night, I panicked for only a minute before realizing the caller on the other end was my oldest and best guy friend, Darren, calling from Halifax. The friend who used to drive me doubles on his bicycle around town in the days before driver’s licenses. The one who came before boyfriends and girlfriends and breakups and broken hearts, before I got religion and he got married. It was a coincidence that he called the moment I hung up with Joe. His deep raspy voice was meant as a joke.

Unlike my guy friends from church who might tease me endlessly about looking for a husband online, Darren actually didn’t think I was crazy.

“I’m a little scared,” I admitted. “He could turn out to be a nutcase.”

“What’s your gut say?” he asked.

“I think it’s okay. I think he’s a decent guy. I mean, he just doesn’t seem weird, but probably a lot of weird guys don’t seem weird at first, right?”

Darren laughed, “Maybe don’t think so hard. This could be a good thing.”

I thought back to the dream. He has only good things for you.
“And if he’s a big jerk,” Darren joked, “He’ll have me and Bev to deal with.”

I fell asleep that early March morning doubly blessed. First by a wonderful conversation with a stranger from Nebraska, and then by a comforting conversation with a trusted friend.

The next night was Saturday, and Joe and I talked again for several hours. When we spoke Sunday, we started making plans for him to come up and visit me. I told him I wouldn’t be in Regina by the time he got there, that I was moving at the end of the week back to Saskatoon, two and a half hours north, to be closer to family and church.

Monday morning, I strolled into the office on a high that was quickly dashed during our “Morning Edition” meeting. Sheila Coles, our prolific host and the face of public broadcasting in Saskatchewan, started telling us about a book she was reading.

Her words went something like this:

“This book is about how fear is actually a really good thing because it warns us about danger. This woman met a guy on the internet … Can you believe that? Women are actually going online and meeting men and then meeting up with them in person, and it’s so dangerous. This woman invited this man to her apartment and right when they got there, she felt fearful, so she didn’t let him in. And then he started getting aggressive with her, but she was able to fight him off. She found out later he was a dangerous sex offender. Her fear actually saved her. This book is really fascinating.”

I looked around our small circle. Paul, our producer, married forever, was nodding. Jim, our tech guy, same. Brooks, award-winning journalist, married, agreed with Sheila. Then there was me—relatively young at twenty-six, single, naïve. I felt the blood rushing to my cheeks. It seemed like they were all staring at me, waiting for my opinion. I thought I might change the
subject, but then Sheila asked the question I was dreading: “What do you think, Ananda? Would you ever trust a guy you met online?”

I knew that everything she was saying was true. For one thing, she was Sheila Coles. She was the voice thousands of people woke up to every morning. She told everybody what was important in the world. But beyond that, her words made sense. Fear is an instinctual reaction to danger. It can protect us. Fear can be good. And meeting a stranger online can be bad.

But fear can also get in the way of receiving God’s blessings. To Abraham, the angel said, “Do not be afraid.” To Mary, the mother of Jesus, “Fear not.” Over and over and over in scripture, God’s people are told not to fear. When the high priest Zacharias spoke words of doubt about becoming a father, the angel shut his mouth, and he wasn’t able to speak for nine months.

Jesus said, “Have faith in God.” God is good. God is faithful. God is love. I believed the scriptures, and I also believed in what God had done in my life. He had saved me out of a selfish lifestyle and given me purpose. He had healed my family, brought my mom out of her heavy marijuana and hashish dependence that characterized her years after Dad left. He had helped Mom forgive Dad and had restored their friendship in a way that only God could do. He had spoken to me in dreams and visions. His presence was closer to me than my own shadow.

In that moment, I had a decision to make. I could yield to the logic of the conversation, or I could take a seemingly ridiculous stand and say my God was bigger than fear. Coins don’t land on their edges.

I took a deep breath and tried to steady my shaking vocal cords.

“I met a guy online,” I said, “And he’s coming to visit me.”
“A man’s heart plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps.” ~ Proverbs 16:9

My colleagues stared wide-eyed while I explained that I’d invited a man from Nebraska to come visit me. My assurances that I would be careful seemed small compared to Sheila’s story about a woman fighting off a dangerous sex offender she met online.

“Well, Ananda … I just don’t think this is a good idea.Honestly, I think young women have to be so cautious these days.” I could see Sheila was trying to be gentle, all the while thinking I was crazy.

“I know, thanks,” I quickly replied, ready to move on to our morning story meeting.

That week at work, I continued pitching story ideas, pre-interviewing morning show guests, and writing scripts. In the evenings I went home and packed up my apartment. I was excited to move closer to my sister, mom, and church family. I didn’t have a contract lined up, but I was stepping out in faith that there would be enough work filling in at the CBC station and freelancing.

“You don’t leave one boyfriend until you’ve got another one,” my executive producer, John Calver, had advised metaphorically when I told him I was making the move, meaning that I had steady work in Regina, but Saskatoon was less certain.

“Yeah, but a girl doesn’t always need a boyfriend either,” I said, smiling. But she does need a husband, I thought. I knew where I wanted to be, where I believed God wanted me to be, and John’s attempt to talk me out of it only solidified my resolve.
I moved into a one-bedroom apartment on the sixth floor of a downtown Saskatoon apartment building where a variety of sirens blared beneath my window nightly, where drunks yelled and fought in the middle of the night. The back of my building faced the back of the newsroom, making my commute time a total of three minutes, including the elevator. I loved it. I had found the apartment before I started talking to Joe, thinking I would be there a long time. I had made my plans, but God was directing my steps. Good thing I was on a month-to-month lease.

Just a few days after moving in, and ten days after our first phone conversation, Joe rolled into town in his shiny copper Chevy Silverado. I was nervous as heck as my sister Rachel drove me to the hotel lobby where we would meet him together. Not one to usually fuss over my appearance, I had spent a long time that evening trying to decide which outfit said, “I’m confident and pretty, and not desperate to please you.” I finally settled on a soft baby blue sweater and straight-leg blue jeans.

Joe was sitting on the tan lobby couch, and he stood up smiling when he saw us walk in. He was wearing a maroon collared shirt tucked into jeans. *I wonder why he tucked it in, it would have looked better untucked,* I thought. But how could he have guessed what I would think about an untucked shirt? I grew up thousands of miles away from him and was only in elementary school way back when he was in high school. How could anybody separated by years and miles and culture ever guess what would impress somebody else? And shirt tucking aside, I was impressed.

Joe was handsome with stunning blue eyes, but just a bit more filled out than the shirtless picture he had sent me of him working on a roof. Doubt kicked in, and I wondered what I was thinking, inviting an American stranger to come see me. But his wide, straight-toothed smile was
so warm and kind. Rachel and I both hugged him, asked him questions about his drive, and then we sat down and talked and talked and talked. Rachel, normally less chatty than me, had a million questions for him.

“Have you ever been married before? Do you have any kids? Have you ever been arrested?”

I realized I hadn’t told her much about Joe up to this point.

I could see Joe was nervous by the way he was holding the decorative pillows close to his chest. At one point, I giggled because he had about six of them piled up.

Eventually, we decided we were hungry and would go eat at a nearby restaurant.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Joe said, “I brought you flowers. It’s pretty cold outside, and they might freeze if I leave them in the truck.”

“Well, my apartment’s not far. Rachel, why don’t you go get us a table and we’ll drop off the flowers?”

Rachel agreed, and I rode with Joe in his pickup. We drove around the downtown core a few times before we found a parking spot, and then we had to walk several blocks. When we got to my apartment, I realized I didn’t have a vase suitable for the massive bouquet of wildflowers he had bought me. With my belongings mostly still in boxes from the move, I started ripping off packing tape and searching for anything that might work. I was moving slowly because Joe and I were talking the whole time. Finally, I found an ice cream bucket that did the trick.

Meanwhile, Rachel, waiting alone at the restaurant, started to panic when we took too long.
“I couldn’t believe I just let you get in a vehicle with this guy you met on the internet. I was so scared!” she told me later.

By the time we arrived at the restaurant, I was done wrestling with my own fears of Joe being a mass murderer. I figured if he was a con man, he was a really good one and nobody would fault me for falling for him. We had a delightful meal and conversation that evening, and with each sentence, each golly-gee-whiz midwestern authentic statement he made, my heart warmed up to Joe-in-the-flesh.

When the meal was over, I looked across the table at Joe and smiled. He smiled back. In that moment, I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that I wanted to marry this man.
Chapter 8 - Joseph’s Story: Fighting for Life

I was 21.5 weeks pregnant with our son Joseph when I began cramping. I thought at first that it was constipation, but the cramps got strangely regular, and after almost twenty-four hours, I told my sister Rachel, “This feels like labor.” Joe and I bundled up and ventured out into the bitter Saskatoon cold, leaving Javan and Nevaeh, our two toddlers, with Rachel.

The nurses at the Royal University Hospital told me to dress in a gown, and then I went to the bathroom. Suddenly I felt a gush of fluid pour out of me. Back on the hospital bed, the nurse took a swab, and when she looked at me, I saw that her eyes had welled up with tears.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, “That was your amniotic fluid.”

I didn’t understand, but then she explained that I would soon go into labor. She said our baby was too young for them to try any life-saving measures.

“When they’re younger than twenty-four weeks, there’s just no hope,” she said. “Even at twenty-four weeks, the chances of survival are slim.”

So Joe and I waited in that cold, dreary hospital room, lying together and holding each other. We prayed and cried and hoped while nurses came in and out. Friends and family stopped in to pray and cry with us. The nurses told me the amniotic fluid could possibly replenish itself. It sounded like something they had made up, but at the time, it was all we had to cling to.

After about a day, the cramps started getting painful and closer together.

“You might not have to wait until you’re ten centimeters to deliver,” they told me, “Because your baby won’t be that big.”

“What will happen to him?” I asked.

“He probably won’t be born alive,” they said. “Coming through the birth canal is too traumatic for them when they’re that small.”
It came time to push, and Joseph was born alive, gasping for air. The nurses wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in my arms. I have never felt so hopeless in my life. Joe and I kissed him all over his beautiful body, bathing him in tears. Our baby Joseph took a few more gasps of air and then he had no more fight in him. He died in his daddy’s arms.

I was amazed at how perfectly formed Joseph was. He was thirteen inches long and weighed thirteen ounces. His fingernails were completely developed, as were his toenails. His little eyelids, his facial features. He looked exactly like a full-term baby except that he was smaller, and his skin was darker. I wondered how we, as a civilized society that has accomplished so much in terms of technology and innovation, can still be so ignorant of the development of human life inside the womb. How could any rational person deny the humanity of a baby in the womb?

I believe in my heart that Joseph would have lived if the hospital had been willing to help him strengthen his lungs. Joe and I have gone on to have six more children and my babies are strong. They have all been big and healthy, born fighters.

The hospital’s decision not to perform life-saving measures until twenty-four weeks was, in my opinion, wrong. It should have been up to us, his parents. Even if they had told us that his chances for survival were “extremely slim,” we would have fought for him. We would have done everything in our power for him. I would have even lied to save him.

Years after Joseph’s death, I heard about a Florida woman named Sonja Taylor, who had delivered a baby girl she named Amillia, just two months before Joseph was born. In desperation, she lied to the doctor and said she was two weeks further along than she was. Amillia was born at twenty-one weeks and six days. She weighed ten ounces and was nine and a half inches long, smaller than Joseph.
The hospital in Miami put Amillia on a ventilator until she could breathe on her own (Wilke). Today Amillia is a healthy teenager. In my eyes, Sonja Taylor is a hero. I put her in the same category as the brave Germans who hid Jews in their homes during the Second World War. When officers came knocking, they said, “No, there are no Jews here.” I wish I had thought of lying to save Joseph’s life. I wish I had requested a c-section to eliminate the stress on Joseph’s lungs. I wish, I wish, I wish, but we can’t go back in time.

All we can do is tell the world about the humanity of the unborn. I think lawmakers and parents in difficult circumstances might re-consider abortion if they saw how perfectly formed a baby is at 21.5 weeks. At least I hope so.
Chapter 9 – That Phone Call

I was changing Evangeline’s diaper on Rachel’s dining room floor when the phone rang. I reached for it as the baby twisted her fat body and started crawling away from me. She had just started crawling and loved the newfound freedom. I grabbed her foot, struggling to control her.

“Hi Babe,” I said when I saw Joe was calling. I cradled the phone on my shoulder while I tried to wrestle Evangeline back to the floor.

“Are you sitting down?” Joe asked in his typical, slow and calculated way.

“Kind of,” I answered. “What’s up?”

“I bought a truck.”

I had Evangeline pinned on her back now, and I was winning the struggle. Left side of diaper attached, right side. Done. I lifted her up and pulled her flowery dress down over her bottom. She shuffled away.

“Okay …?” I sat down at the table, sensing there was more to the story.

“And I quit my job,” he said.

I didn’t say anything at first. I was trying to process that my husband had just quit HVAC sales, our main source of income.

“Okay …?” I repeated.

“And I’m driving to Nebraska to chase a hailstorm.”

“Babe, no! Can you just wait until I get home? I’m coming back to Billings tomorrow. And it’s our anniversary weekend.”
Joe said he’d been offered a job selling roofs with a hail-chasing company, and he couldn’t wait.

“We gotta make hay when it’s time to make hay,” he said. I smiled at the midwestern equivalent of the saying, “You’ve got to strike when the iron’s hot.”

We talked a little longer while I wavered between supporting his decision and panicking over money and not believing that Joe, who always discussed everything with me, had made such a big decision while I was away visiting my sister. But in my heart, I knew he wasn’t doing anything reckless or inconsiderate. This massive decision, like every decision he’d ever made, would have been extremely calculated. I trusted him.

Early the next morning, I portioned out snack bag for the four kids to eat on our ten-hour drive back to Montana from Saskatoon. I would be careful this time not to let them have them all at once. On the drive up, Javan, who was seven, had consumed all his snacks within an hour of departure.

I threw piles of clothes into a duffel bag, and then walked through Rachel’s house, picking up toys and trinkets from under beds and couches.

Rachel walked into the kitchen in her white bath robe, rubbing her eyes. Her long, tangled, blonde hair hung tired around her sweet face. She came close for a hug.

“I love you. Drive safe. Trust Joe,” she said. “He’s not impulsive. You know he’s thought this through.”

When she stepped back, I saw the tears in her eyes, and my own eyes started to water. There was no point saying I wished we lived closer together, that I wished I could be a better big
sister and be with her as she began her own journey into motherhood. Life was too complicated and unpredictable for wishes like that.

One by one, I woke up my little sleepers and told them to go potty and get in the car. I woke up Javan first and then Nevaeh, five, who jumped out of bed smiling. She ran to get her shoes on, inspecting the snacks on the counter on the way.

Ever was harder to rouse. Her blond curls covered her plump cheeks. Her mouth was wide open, and her two-year-old snoring made me smile. I sat on the bed looking at her for a minute. So beautiful, so peaceful. But I knew that in a few minutes, she and her baby sister Evangeline would be awake and needy, and this tranquil moment would be a memory.

I loaded the kids into our thirteen-year-old, red Chevy Blazer. Evangeline’s car seat up front in the air bag-free passenger seat so I could take care of her while I drove. Ever’s car seat in the middle in the back. Javan and Nevaeh squished so tight on both sides of Ever they could barely move. I checked the air conditioner just in case by some miracle it was working. No such fortune. It was going to be a hot August day. Maybe someday we could afford to fix the AC.

I started the engine and waved to Rachel, who stood on the porch. The sun was beginning to rise, lighting up her face and reflecting off her hair and robe. Like an angel. The thought stabbed my heart, and I had to turn my head to the windshield and focus on the road ahead.

As I drove away, I thought about what lay ahead for our family. Were we moving to Nebraska as a family, or would Joe travel back and forth? Would I have to pack up the house by myself? How could I possibly pack up the house with these kids in tow? Within a few minutes, my thoughts were interrupted.
“Mommy, I have to go potty. And I’m hot.”

It was going to be a long day.
Chapter 10 – Full Circle

I stumbled out of the hot Blazer into the muggy Montana evening. My four kids were finally quiet, mouths gaped open, their clothes damp with sweat. The past ten air-conditioning-less hours of driving past endless fields of dry grass and black cows had seemed like twenty. Windows went down when the heat was unbearable. Windows went up when we couldn’t stand the jet-engine wind anymore. Up for a bit, down for a bit. Just like my state of mind. I can handle change. I can’t handle change. I can handle this. I can’t handle this.

The kids had been hot and hungry and irritable on the trip. They seemed to tag-team naps so that at least one was always awake and in need of something. And then, just before we arrived at our front door, they all crashed at once, suddenly becoming beautiful again. I stood outside the vehicle, smiling for a few seconds, admiring the fruit of our marriage.

Today was our anniversary. It had been eight years since Joe and I had promised to love each other for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. Best decision ever, I thought, even though Joe was six hours away selling roofs. He always worked so hard to pay the bills. Money was usually tight, but Joe and I had decided early on that we would always honor God with at least the top ten percent of our income. God had been so good to us, and we trusted Him to provide for our needs.

I unloaded the children and transported them inside our downtown converted church-home. The kids woke up, went potty, drank water, whined a lot, and finally went back to bed. Then I called Joe. His deep voice was honey to my soul.

“Happy Anniversary, Babe. Eight amazing years.”

“I’m so glad I married you,” I said before asking, “Are we moving to Nebraska?”
“Yep, the hailstorm wiped out the whole town of Chadron and I can make good money here.” He sounded excited at the possibility of being able to provide for his family beyond just making ends meet.

“When?”

“Right away. Can you call the landlord tomorrow and let her know?”

“Yes,” I said, slightly dreading another move.

After I hung up, I sat for a few minutes, thinking about this crazy life we lived. Many of my friends were nervous to even travel without their husbands, and many had lived in the same town their whole lives. On the contrary, God had given me a wanderlusting mother who taught me the value of travel and adventure. Before I met Joe, I had crisscrossed Canada alone several times in barely roadworthy vehicles. With each child, though, the desire for stability was growing stronger and stronger.

Joe and I had married a few months after meeting online, spent a couple of months in Nebraska, a winter on the Canadian east coast, a cold spring in Saskatchewan, six months at his mother’s, two years in an apartment in Colorado Springs, a couple more years in a Billings duplex, then this home in Billings, and now we were setting off on another adventure. Each move brought something better. A better job, better weather, a better apartment. Maybe this time we would settle down.

Whatever challenges Joe and I had faced were undermined by the gift of flowing together. We rarely disagreed and never argued. We naturally yielded our wills to each other and were somehow able to make light of the tough stuff. I never understood when people said,
“Marriage is hard.” For us, life was sometimes hard. Marriage had always been easy. Whatever challenges lay ahead for us, I knew God would help us link arms and face it together.

I was grateful for most of our experiences, but the time at my mother-in-law’s had been especially challenging. Joe and I had been married less than a year, and Javan was a newborn when Shirley graciously let us stay in her basement in her small town of Hay Springs, Nebraska. Widowed and retired, Shirley enjoyed gardening and sewing and telling me stories about when Joe was a baby. I had no car and thus no freedom. Javan cried and wanted to nurse constantly. My days were long and lonely while Joe ran our roofing business. Summer turned to fall, which slowly yielded to the cold beckoning of winter, and finally, when I couldn’t take it another minute, we moved to Colorado to start fresh. He took a job selling suits at Men’s Warehouse, where he made $28,000 the first year.

That was all in the past now, and it seemed we had traveled a million miles since then.

The next few weeks were busy. The kids played underfoot while I fruitlessly tried packing up the house room by room. Kind friends stepped up to babysit. Joe came back for a couple of quick trips. Then in mid-September, he rolled in with a 26-foot U-Haul, and we drove six hours back to the panhandle of Nebraska.

We unloaded at a storage unit in Chadron and then drove twenty miles to his mom’s to crash for a few nights.

“Did you find us a place to live?” I asked Joe again. I had asked him many times, and he always said he was working on it.

“Not exactly. I thought we could stay here for a while.”
I laughed at his dry sense of humor. He could say the funniest things without even cracking a smile.

“No, really, did you find us a place?”

“No. I can’t find anything.”

I could feel my heart beating faster as I stared at my husband, realizing this wasn’t a joke. I stood up without a word, grabbed the newspaper off the table, and desperately started searching for housing ads.
Chapter 11 – Settling in Not Really

The classified ad search was fruitless, but through a friend of a friend we learned about a rental house in Chadron that was available. With chipped white paint and green shutters, the house on Ann Street looked like it had once been nice. Now the front porch tilted forward. Indoor flooring alternated between classic oak in desperate need of refinishing and green shag carpet. But we had a place to call home, and that was good enough.

We hired college students to load up a U-Haul and transport our belongings from the storage unit. I stood in the driveway with Evangeline on my hip and watched as they hauled boxes and boxes and boxes of books.

“Where do you want these?” asked a young man in sweats and a ball cap.

“I guess in the garage,” I answered, slightly disappointed. My dream of a home library was on hold indefinitely.

“Why don’t we get rid of some of those books?” Joe teased.

“I can’t. I have an addiction.”

It didn’t take long to settle in enough to resume homeschooling Javan in second grade and Nevaeh in kindergarten. My friend Shelly was thrilled to have us back in the area, and every week she arranged field trips, scavenger hunts, and science activities. I said yes to everything she proposed, and the kids got a rich education that fall.

I was still nursing Evangeline, as well as potty-training two-year-old Ever, who was scared to death to poop on the potty and would hold it in until I put her in a pull-up at night.
Then she would let it out. Laundry was constant, and I would often get up at 4 a.m. to start the process.

Joe was busy selling roofs and would usually work late into the evening. One night he came home and handed me a check for seven thousand dollars. I was stunned. The only other time I’d seen a check that big was our tax return when President Bush had doubled the child tax credits. I nervously deposited Joe’s check in the bank the next day, thinking the teller might suspect it was fraudulent. I stopped by to see Joe at his office later and nervously observed his boss, Don Drury, working on paperwork at his desk. Don’s white hair and the creases on his face showed the man had done a lot of living, but it was his giant belly pushing up against the desk that commanded the most attention.

Joe said Don had no tolerance for white American job-hunters. After one young man had come by looking for work, Don had crumpled up his resume and thrown it in the trash, saying, “What the hell’s wrong with guys like that? You grow up in America with all the opportunity in the world and you still want to roof houses? He should be running your own business by now. Damn lazy Americans.”

When Don looked up from his desk, I sputtered out my thanks for Joe’s paycheck.

“Thank you so much for that check, it just meant so much. You have no idea how much that’s going to help us. I can’t believe it was for that much money. That’s just so much. Thank you.”

There was an awkward silence as Don looked from me to Joe and back. Later, Joe advised me, “You don’t have to do that next time.”
We had been on Ann Street less than two months when Joe came home early one evening.

“Phoenix got wiped out with a hailstorm,” he said as he stepped into the kitchen. Off-white faux marble linoleum squares curled up in several places, and Joe stepped carefully so as not to trip. The faded yellow fridge and stove looked like they had survived the Great Depression.

“Oh really? Nevaeh, stop! Sorry Babe.” I was stirring the spaghetti with my right hand and holding Evangeline on my left hip, when I noticed Nevaeh chewing something. She had discovered hard wads of gum on the window ledges and tried chewing them when I wasn’t watching. I had tried to explain that it would make her sick, but she just took that as a challenge to prove me wrong.

I put down the baby and the spaghetti spoon and ran over to try to swipe the gum out of Nevaeh’s mouth. Too late, she had swallowed it.

I stood back upright and tried to remember what Joe had just said.

“So Phoenix took hail?”

“It’s crazy! Come here, I’ll show you some pictures. The whole city got wiped out, they’re saying 400,000 homes.”

“Oh wow,” I tried to sound like I cared a little, as I turned toward the kitchen to strain the spaghetti. “I’ll be right there.”

Joe was excited all evening and kept bringing the conversation back to Phoenix.

“You’re pretty worked up about this,” I said.
“Yes! We have to strike while the iron’s hot.”

“Wait, you want to go to Phoenix? We just got here.”

“It’ll just be for the winter. There’s lots of work up here come spring.”

“What about me and the kids?”

“Come with me, it’ll be fun. The weather’s gorgeous down there.”

I didn’t like winter any more than Joe, but I liked moving with kids much less. I was tired. But then I looked around and realized there wasn’t much to hold onto if Joe was gone. I had tried so hard to convince myself that the house was fine, but it was actually a dump. An electrician friend had warned us recently that the wiring was hazardous. The basement flooded when I did too much laundry.

“Fine, we’ll go,” I said, after we got all the kids to bed, and Joe and I finally had a few minutes alone in the living room.

“Good. I knew you’d see the light.”

“Where’s Phoenix anyway, by Atlanta?”

Joe threw his head back and laughed. “Maybe you should go dig an atlas out of your book collection.”
Chapter 12 - Drowning

I was a blithering mess of stress and anxiety that next week in Chadron as I struggled to pack up the house with four young children underfoot. As I sorted kids’ clothes and tried to figure out what we would need the next few months. As I divided Javan and Nevaeh’s schoolwork between what we couldn’t do without, and what could be stored until spring. When I thought about the tasks before me, breathing became shallow and difficult. I was drowning in a sea of diapers and homeschooling and sleepless nights and laundry and uncertainty. Drowning in fear that I would never have a home, that Joe and I would never have time together again, that I would lose my identity in this life of motherhood.

Every once in a while, I would google old colleagues from my journalism days and see what they were up to. Many were now working as reporters at the national level. My colleagues reported on federal budgets and elections; I screamed at my kids to get off the table. My colleagues were editors-in-chief and directed daily newsrooms; I directed my kids to please not eat ice cream off the floor.

I couldn’t blame Joe for my stress. He had taken a mammoth risk to provide a better life for his family, and I adored him for it. Blaming myself would have been too complicated, so I did what rational women all through history have done when they are overwhelmed—I blamed my mother.

When Javan hit his sister with a stick, I wondered why my mother wasn’t around to help me reinforce discipline. When Evangeline woke up in the crying wailing in pain because her molars were coming in, I thought about my friends who could call their moms for respite after a
sleepless night. All those women whose moms came to visit when they had babies, when kiddos had birthdays, when life was just too much to handle. *Where was my mom?*

My mom was different. She valued adventure above all other earthly virtues. How many times as a child had I been uprooted with a moment’s notice and moved to a new house or a new city? There was always a reason. Better opportunities, better community, closer to family, farther from family. And now at almost sixty years old, free from petty constraints such as school calendars, she continued moving constantly around the country. She no longer felt the need to explain herself. A simple “I’m bored here” became reason enough to go.

I longed desperately to be mothered in this season of my life, more than I ever imagined I would. Being a mom was a bigger job than I could handle, and I ached for a mother who could help me. This deep, primal longing went unfulfilled, and there was a stark contrast between what I knew I needed and what my mother was actually willing or able to provide. The distance between hope and reality was filled with disappointment and sadness. Mom told me I had unrealistic expectations of her.

“Why would I come help you with your kids?” she asked. “They’re your kids, not mine.”

One night, Ever fell and cracked her head on the radiator. It was a dark and chilly Nebraska night as I loaded my wailing toddler in the vehicle and drove her down the road to the emergency room. Blood poured down her forehead, flowing together with her tears. As she cried, my own tears poured silently down my cheeks. The doctors stitched Ever up, and she settled down, but my own tears kept coming well into the night. Past tucking her and her siblings in. Past Joe crawling in beside me and kissing me goodnight. When I heard him gently snoring, I got
out of bed and made my way to the living room. I sat on the green shag carpet since we had already moved the furniture back into storage. I buried my head in my hands and let it all out.

“God, I can’t do this anymore!” I cried endlessly into wads of my long blonde hair, begging God to take this cup from me. I never wanted to be a stay-at-home homeschooling mom. I just wanted to follow Him, and this was where He had brought me. I felt betrayed, lonely, and most of all, scared that the rest of my life would be like this. When I had no tears left, I lay down on the gross carpet and asked simply, “God, help me.”

Finally, depleted, I got up to head back to bed. As I snuggled in beside Joe’s tall, warm frame, a strange thought came to my mind: Rock badgers. And then I fell asleep.

The next morning, I told Joe about my experience the night before, pouring out my heart and all my anxieties before God.

“That’s what David did all the time, just brought all his feelings to God. But he was hiding in caves from King Saul. You’re just usually hiding in the bathroom from children,” he said. I smiled at Joe’s ability to infuse humor into every situation.

As I poured cereal for the kids, I remembered the words that had come to my spirit last night. What even was a rock badger? I opened my concordance and found a reference in Proverbs 30:26: “The rock badgers are a feeble folk, yet they make their homes in the crags.” I thought and prayed about that all morning as I bathed and dressed kids and sent them outside to play. It seemed clear to my spirit that God was telling me to ask Him for a home.

For the next couple of days, as I packed up remaining household items, instead of feeling sorry for myself or blaming my mother, I repeated Proverbs 30:26 over and over, and asked God
to give us a home. I was still stressed, I was still anxious, I still felt overcome by life’s demands. I still cried a lot. But I had one little verse to hang onto.

And then one morning, just as the sun was starting to rise over the Nebraska horizon, we loaded our four little children into our two vehicles and started the eighteen-hour drive to Phoenix.
Chapter 13 – Prairie Women

Joe and I each had a couple of kids with us as we drove through the plains of Nebraska south past the “Welcome to Colorful Colorado” sign. Brown grass and dozens of colossal white metal turbines spread out alongside the single lane highway. I wondered who had come up with the slogan.

With the kids spread out between two vehicles, and with the portable DVD players we had splurged on, my drive was mostly quiet. I spent my time thinking. I thought about how other people handled the stress of raising children. Most couples stopped having kids. I cringed at the thought of consuming artificial hormones or of having my fallopian tubes tied or burned. Joe would never have a vasectomy, saying it was “mutilating the flesh to cut off the blessings of God.” We believed God had called us to build a family and that His blessings followed obedience. But the load was heavy.

I thought about the parents I knew who were on antidepressants. Brothers and sisters in the Lord, for whom life was unmanageable without medication. Others sent their kids to public schools. I couldn’t bear to send them somewhere God was ignored for thirty-five hours a week. Private schools were expensive, and while we were doing better financially, we weren’t in a position to spend several thousand dollars a year on each child.

As I looked at the dry, lonely plains outside, I thought about the women who had settled this land in the late 1800s, traveling west on wagon trains with their husbands, hoping for a better life. They dug homes in the sides of hills, birthed babies in homes with dirt floors, and made meals from the produce of their ground and the livestock of their fields. And yet our local histories showed that many had succumbed to suicide. Many others were taken to asylums.
These “prairie women,” as they were called, cracked under the demands and uncertainty of prairie life, where a single hailstorm could wipe out a whole year’s wages. What would they think of my life, where the same hail that could ruin their lives was now providing our sustenance? Would they think I was spoiled and ungrateful, or would they understand that mental health is fragile even in the best of circumstances?

I followed Joe’s white GMC pickup through the fast-weaving traffic of Denver and into the parking lot of a Comfort Inn in northern Colorado Springs, where we checked in for the night. Our ground-level room opened to the outside, and early the next morning, I went outside to soak in the mountain air. This was my city, the place I had wanted to make a life before circumstances had moved us on five years ago. I had left many close friends and a part of my heart behind. I wished this was now our stopping point.

After breakfast, we rolled out of the Springs and drove south on the I-25, admiring Pike’s Peak as it spanned the length of the city. *I lift my eyes up to the mountains, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth.*

We crossed the New Mexico state line and stopped for lunch in Las Vegas, a city I had no idea existed. Joe, of course, had passed this way before. Between his years in the army and his young adult wanderings, it seemed there was no American soil he hadn’t set foot on.

I loved Santa Fe, with its flat-roofed clay adobe homes and mountain backdrops. I was taken in by the lush greenery co-existing with desert shrubs. In contrast, Albuquerque felt like a bad radio song that just kept playing. When we stopped to grab a snack at Burger King, Javan said he didn’t want to get out because it felt “black.”
We crossed into Arizona, stopping for the night at a two-story motel in Holbrook, the kind with doors to each room that look like they’ve survived an attempted break-in or two. Traveling with the kids on this trip wasn’t awful, but there were still intermittent fights and whining. Somebody needed a drink, somebody spilled all their food—the constant, unavoidable needs of small children.

The next day, we pushed on to the majestic mountainous town of Flagstaff, and finally, we hit the two-hour stretch of Highway 17 into Phoenix. As I drove that narrow road that winds up and down, through clusters of tall pine trees and “rock monsters,” as the kids called them, I thought about what lay ahead and what lay behind. And I thought about the women who had blazed trails before me.

I thought about my Grandma Jean, who had lived as an urban housewife in Montreal. Widowed in her late 20s, she was mentally crippled by the weight of raising two young boys alone. I don’t think she ever recovered from my grandfather’s suicide. When I was five, she died by aspiration when she was drinking. Her death tore my dad to pieces.

I gasped when I saw cactus for the first time. These mythical plants that thrive in the harshest of circumstances, holding water for those desert creatures brave enough to stand against the elements and adapt against impossible odds. If the animals failed to adapt, failed to find a way to penetrate the cactus’s spines and access life-giving water, they would die. There would come a point of no return.

I wondered if and when my Grandma Jean had passed the point of no return. When does stress become anxiety, and anxiety become depression, and depression become clinical? At what point is a woman, a mother, stretched beyond reasonable limits? When does the elastic snap?
I knew I had to make a life change. I drove behind Joe’s truck into the parking lot of a Quality Inn, and before I got out of the vehicle, I knew what I had to do.
Chapter 14 – Wagon’s End

We checked into the hotel in Glendale and drove across the palm tree-lined parking lot to Denny’s. I had never seen palm trees, and I felt like I had stepped into a movie set. Those heaven-kissing lanky, leafy posts boasted of their untouchability and, with their lack of shade, their lack of service to anyone. I had been in survival mode so long, I didn’t know whether to feel resentment or admiration for this new superfluous, winterless world these trees represented.

We slid into a booth, and Nevaeh immediately crawled under the table. For the past many months, she had been more of a dog than a human. She sat panting on all fours, her tongue hanging out of her mouth, her round, mischievous eyes daring me to see her as anything other than a canine. I smiled, but we both knew I didn’t have the energy to force her onto the bench. Unless she started barking.

Evangeline’s soggy diaper pushed against my lap as I grabbed my nursing bib out of the diaper bag and single-handedly put it over my head and adjusted it so I could nurse her. She sucked greedily after the long car ride.

I looked over at Javan, whose tongue was just about to lick the saltshaker.

“Javan, stop!” I ordered, a little too loudly, as nearby patrons glanced our way.

Ever snuggled against Joe’s chest, sucking her thumb. They both turned to look at Javan, who had put the shaker down in shame.

We ordered our food, and my heart started racing faster as I thought about the news I was about to give Joe. I looked around Denny’s and saw an older couple visiting while they chewed their hamburgers and drank milkshakes. Maybe this was their weekly routine, coming to
Denny’s for a treat. A break from their mundane, predictable, safe lives. I wondered if they had ever had a dog-child under the table.

Joe’s face bore no expression, but I could see from the prominent blood vessels above his deep-set eyes that he was stressed after the trip. This wasn’t the right time to tell him. But it was the only time to tell him.

“Joe,” I said slowly, as my eyes welled up unwillingly with tears. The full weight of the past three months pushed against the words I was about to speak. The trip home from Canada, the move to Nebraska, the stay at Joe’s mom’s, in and out of the house in Chadron, all the while aiming desperately for normalcy.

Joe turned his face toward me. I had obviously just interrupted his thoughts. I continued softly, “I’m staying here.”

His eyebrows tightened slightly, and I knew he was trying to understand what I had just said. He didn’t say anything.

“Did you hear me?” I asked.

He paused before saying, “Yes.” He paused again before asking, “Here where? Here at Denny’s?”

I looked out the window beside our booth at the broken fluorescent lights from a used car dealership. A purple, souped up, jet-sounding racer with killer rims sped past us on Camelback Road. This was a foreign land. We had nothing; we knew nobody. But behind the concrete and the noise, the sun was setting. God was painting the horizon beautiful hues of orange and mauve.
and purple and marigold. He was doing what He does everywhere and always—creating beauty in spite of our circumstances. And I knew we were going to be okay.

“Joe, I’m staying in Phoenix. I can’t travel and move anymore with kids. This has to be our home base now.”

I waited for his reaction. The words had finally rolled out of my mouth and now sat like a bowling ball that had veered into the gutter and parked itself directionless.

Joe was always slow to speak. He always weighed every angle of every word before it came out of his mouth. I stared at him, every moment seeming like a thousand years.

“Joe?”

I watched his blue eyes scan every part of my face before he opened his mouth.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” he finally said.

I wanted him to say he understood that I would lose my mind if we continued this way and that maybe this was a pre-emptive way of safeguarding our family. Most of the other roofing estimators had been divorced and re-married several times. They traveled alone and then, when roofing season ended, they bought their wives lavish vacations and diamond rings to coax them into sticking around another year. I knew our marriage was strong, but I also knew that I, myself, was weak.

“Babe,” I said with a trembling voice, feeling the weight of the stand I had just taken. I had always gone along with adventures—my mother’s, my husband’s, my own. But my mental health was wavering, and no adventure would be worth sacrificing it.
Finally, Joe asked, “Can you wait to have your breakdown until after roofing season, after we get back to Nebraska?”

I shook my head, smiling ever so slightly because I knew he was going to give me this. I knew he trusted me, just like I trusted him.

“Thank you, Babe. I know we have nothing here, but this is just where my wheels came off.”
Epilogue

God has richly blessed our marriage and family. We have eight children and a successful business, glory to God. I believe children are a blessing. Not a burden or a hinderance, as the world often teaches. As we read Scripture, we see not only that God loves children abundantly, but Satan hates them and tries continually to hinder God’s people from raising godly children, using many deceitful tactics to do this.

God loves kids, and He loves godly families. In fact, He designed the whole institution of marriage around His love for children. Malachi 2:12b-15 tells us God made man and woman one flesh because He desires godly offspring.

I think every Christian mom strives to be great. I saw all of my mom’s shortcomings and determined that I would do everything better. I thought I could be a perfect mom. I’m not. I wonder if I should have lowered the bar, as my mom did. She would often say, “I just tried to be a little better than my mom.”

It’s been a year since I lost both Mom and her mom, my Nanna, who died just two weeks apart. It’s a terrifying thing to look down and see eight children, three daughters, and to look up and see no matriarch from whom to ask advice, or more realistically, to blame. And yet, God is there. He is a father to the fatherless, a mother to the motherless. He calls us to raise godly families, and then He helps us do it. He is our comforter, our teacher, our redeemer. He is making all things new.
Works Cited


