



I GUESS ALL OF THIS IS TO SAY

A BOOK OF MEMORIES, POETRY, AND THOUGHTS

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Memories

And so we begin.

I think the hardest thing ever is realizing you're not so great.

That might not be hard for some people. I get that we're all different. We've all gone through so many different things, and maybe greatness has never been part of your vocabulary.

It has been mine.

When I was young—I'm talking roughly ten years old—I'd have conversations with Oprah. Not the real Oprah. That would have been weird. Just the imaginary one that lived in my bathroom mirror.

There we go. Much more normal.

I'd have conversations with her on the yellow leather couch in her studio, sitting in front of a live studio audience, recounting how well my latest novel did on the New York Times best sellers' list.

I was focused at a young age. I knew I'd be a novelist, but I also knew I was going to be a great novelist, a famous one.

I was going to snub my nose at everything that seemed utterly provincial in my childlike mind.

Here's the thing: you've gotten to see how that all played out, and by now you've probably figured out Oprah's nowhere in sight.

It's hard when you believe the lie in your head. For me, it was if I'm not greater than those around me—if I don't prove how talented I am on a large scale—then who am I?

What am I?

I know now the truth. I am Christ's. I'm the vessel He uses to paint pictures with words and to show Himself to a select group of people. I'm His masterpiece, given tools and talents, honing them all these years not for my own pleasure but for His.

The moment I realized this, the moment my life unhinged from the "could have been" and anchored into the "what really is," things changed.

It only took me thirty-seven years.

So, moving forward, this is where I'll chronicle my journey, searching my past and walking toward my future with God. I'll be truthful even when it hurts because it truly is the truth that sets us free.

Little miss perfect.

I was raised in a uniform, which is probably why real clothes scare me. It was like I turned eighteen and everyone was all like “okay, go find clothes to wear,” and I was like “you mean this?” indicating a gray, stained t-shirt I found on the side of the road next to a dead armadillo.

I’m starting to think that’s not what they meant.

Catholic private school. No, scratch that. Catholic ALL GIRLS private school.

It was, to say the least, a real trip.

When I unearth what’s beneath my breastbone, digging through years of muck and all the things I shouldn’t have done, I see the beginning seeds of my perfectionist tendencies when I was a kid.

I remember being in my mother’s classroom. She taught at one of my schools and was my teacher for the first and second grades. And I remember sitting there one afternoon, waiting for her with the door open. A few kids walked by, and a “teacher’s pet” drifted through the door and smacked me in the face.

It should have stung. It should have made me feel a little ticked off. And at first, it did because I thought the person was a coward.

If you’re going to say something to me then come and say it.

But I started to like the way that name felt. I *was* the teacher’s pet. First of all, I was her daughter so there was that. But I also was a straight-A student who didn’t say “boo” to anyone. I didn’t just do the one reading assignment, I did both options that were presented to us and honestly thought I had won the lottery.

Apparently, nobody else felt that way.

When you realize things about yourself, you tend to use them to your advantage. It’s the human way. If you’re pretty, you use your looks to get ahead. Funny? Then you crack those jokes until the job is yours. If you’re smart? You do whatever it takes to get even smarter, and you make sure everyone around you can smell it on you.

It's the vice that sent our kind to build the Tower of Babylon. Why wait for God when we're obviously smart enough to drag Him down from Heaven ourselves?

As the days dragged on, there were warning signs. I had a high sense of anxiety that I trotted around like a dog on a leash. I think it was partly because my mother had Crohn's disease, and some days she'd be late picking me up from school due to a flare-up. In these moments, I always pictured her dying on the side of the road (why are things always dying on the side of the road in my imagination?), although my brain was fully aware that this was normal. It would be fine. She'd eventually come and pick me up.

But my body was constantly in fight or flight, my guts knotted and pulsing.

Here's the kicker: I couldn't say anything about it. I couldn't tell my teacher that I was panicking. I couldn't tell my friends who were always after-school stragglers (and never seemed to worry about the fact that their parents could possibly be dying on the side of the road somewhere too) that I felt the intense urge to vomit merely because my mother was five minutes late to pick me up.

I wanted them to think I was calm, cool, and collected.

The very opposite of who I am on the inside.

My guts continued to knot and throb as I grew older. At sixteen, I was the mess of messes even though I put up a good front. I spent the whole summer eating next to nothing and running for miles in the hot Houston sun. I'll probably write more about this at some point, but what I want to talk about now is the time I had a nervous breakdown.

We were assigned to read *Cold Mountain*, and I'd go sit in my closet with the book in my lap. My closet had a window, and I'd look outside

the window and then at the cover, and then back outside at the window and then back at the cover, and then my hand would go to try to open the cover and I would start to cry like someone was taking a knife to all those knotted guts.

I was too young and too unskilled to understand the pressure was killing me. The pressure to look perfect, to act perfect, to make perfect grades. Let me be very clear here: my parents never put that pressure on me. They never worried about me doing well because I was my own slave master. They simply loved me and supported me and did things like help coach me in tennis (even though my father never played a day in his life but somehow was exceptionally good at it. You'll meet Mel in more of these posts...this is pretty much his M.O.) and take out beautifully crafted full-page ads in my yearbook to let me know how loved I was.

I wish I could have just paused in that love to really enjoy it as I do now. But I was too busy keeping up the rouse.

We ended up moving that summer anyways, which took away my excruciating circumstances and which I mistook for all my problems being solved.

I eventually break again in college. I'll get into that later, too, because that time in my life deserves its own book. An unhinged sorority girl/poetry major (I'm pretty sure I was the only one to have ever existed) who spent her time drinking because As were way too easy to make after you've beaten them into yourself for all those years.

I snapped. Like hardcore snapped. But I suppose God can only work when you're willing to give Him your pieces.

It still creeps in sometimes, even as I'm wearing my gray, stained, dead armadillo t-shirt. The need to perform, to perfect. But what little power

I have to do so. Just like the builders of the Tower of Babylon, I stand, my eyes straining upward, as God scatters me out into the beyond bit by bit. And then it's just me and Him and my eyes forward as He walks me through my past, and we leave it, dust at our heels.

Exploded in light.

I once caught an episode of the *Today* show in college. They had Jamie Lynn Sigler on who played on *The Sopranos*. I wasn't really paying attention because I never watched her show, but she wasn't there to talk about that. She was there to talk about her exercise bulimia.

It was like a light bulb went off in my head and my brain exploded in light. That's what I had. That's what I had been dealing with for so many years, and I never even knew it had a name.

I never even knew it was really a problem.

College was hard for me. Not the grades. Just the social aspect.

I had a 4.0 in the honors college, and I remember rolling the thought around like a lozenge in my mouth whenever I started to feel too hedged in. It didn't matter that I wasn't popular or barely had any friends in my sorority (all because of my own doing, *thank you very much*). The sole reason I had been asked to join anyway was because of my GPA since their collective score was tanking, and they needed all the help they could get.

Even from the likes of me.

I wasn't fair to them. I know that now. I think of all the missed opportunities to sit and talk with people. To get to know them and lead them away from the darkness. But how can you lead someone away when you live there yourself?

The blind leading the blind.

I would get so drunk on Saturday nights, sometimes close to blackout. I remember walking down sidewalks, enjoying the cool breeze on my face, anyone liable to snatch me up and take me away without me hard-

ly noticing. For all my anxiety during the day—my watchful eyes on anyone in case they made one wrong move—drunk Ericka was quite the opposite.

And maybe that's why I liked her so much.

Drinking curbed my anxiety. It of course causes a plethora of other problems like bad skin and weight gain (not to mention the moral and ethical degradation of one's soul when it becomes a god to you). And that's what it was, my god.

It was my savior.

When I'd drink too much, I'd eat too much the next day. A whole large supreme pizza just for me.

I'd eat it in the dining room of our sorority house where nobody would be on a Sunday. Some might have been at church, others with boyfriends.

But I didn't care. I had a whole pizza to eat and then a day at the gym to punish myself for it.

As a Gender Studies minor (Creative Writing major), I was pretty perturbed that it was officially the 21st century now and frats could invite us sorority girls over to party, but we weren't allowed to do the same. So, I took the initiative to devise a secret party with my roommate when our house mother was out of town.

We, of course, got caught the next day. And when I was questioned by our house mother and a few alumnae who I suppose gathered for these kinds of situations, I was asked about the party, and I point blank told them that yes, I did know about it because I was the one who had come up with the idea.

They didn't kick me out because I was the only one who was honest with them. For all my problems, I couldn't stand a liar. Oh, the irony.

I was still punished, however. They took away my drinking privileges at all sorority functions.

I thanked them for their time and then went to visit our President to tell her I was quitting.

I'd rather leave a semester before graduation than have to quit drinking.

When I talk to God, I ask Him why He spared me. I could have died so many times because truthfully, I've only given you a quick glimpse of what this particular season of life was like for me. It was so dark, and I seemed to crave its darkness.

I was drinking the poison, thinking it was the cure.

He never answers me, but then that's not correct. I actually suppose He does. In the way my husband loves me unconditionally and my daughter is growing and thriving at her new school. In the way I can still write these words even though you'd think all that alcohol would have dumbed me down by now. In the way I'm healthy and can move and breathe and bring in this new upside-down kingdom that has nothing to do with placating our fears with evil but giving those fears over to a good, good God.

In the way He counts my heartbeats.

People in the desert.

Poor Moses.

He tells those people in the desert, the Israelites, so many times about the God who loves them and won't leave them.

And how quickly their hearts are willing to leave that God.

Or Paul who tells us to renew our minds constantly. That we are saved but we're also in the process of being saved and will one day be saved as well. How incredible that concept, how outright insane.

It's happened and happening and will happen.

The beginning and the end. Always and forever.

He won't stop loving us.

In college, when I wasn't getting drunk to forget my ex-boyfriend or spending every waking moment with my current one (who I still want to spend every waking moment with. Love you, Matthew), I'd sometimes spend time with my church group.

You read that correctly.

It was odd being an atheist in training and being a part of a tight-knit group of young women who had so many problems and few answers.

I was raised Catholic, and this group met at the Catholic church on our campus. We called ourselves the Setons after Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first saint to be canonized in the United States and who is the patron saint of Catholic schools, widows, and seafarers. We were none of those things, and I can't even remember why we were called that. I do remember that our leader (let's call her Jane) had a reason for liking Elizabeth so much, and I remember trusting her decision at the time.

So, let's just go with it.

We met once a week on Sundays, later in the evening. Way past my pizza eating and punishment time in the gym. My friend, let's call her Rochelle, would join me and so would my roommate. Rochelle was someone I empathized with. She suffered like I did from a deep darkness inside of her. She was one of pretty much no other people who I could look at and go, "She's making my crazy look tame." I wonder about that. If maybe I sought out that relationship so I could get a foothold on my own self-worth.

How miserably wrong of me.

Because Rochelle had such a warm heart. And beneath the pain and suicidal thoughts and drunken breakdowns, there was a girl who missed her father.

And now I realize we're all those little boys and girls who miss their Father.

Anyway, we'd meet up and share the week's burdens, and we would pray together. I don't remember ever really feeling this way about church. I mean there's a beautiful aspect to Mass, but I think I needed something more than beauty. I needed community.

I didn't want to look at an altar. I wanted all of us to look at each other.

And that's what Setons was. It was a circle of us sitting and talking and praying and feeling the Holy Spirit. For a newbie atheist, it was quite potent. And I'm sure it would have served to strengthen my faith and cut through my own deception if I had let it.

But like my sorority, I finally quit it too.

Or maybe we all just stopped meeting. I can't really remember. But when the writer of Hebrews implores the early church to not stop meeting together, I understand why.

You drown without a life raft.

I'd wander for a long time after this, searching for that feeling of speaking and being heard. I don't often feel like that—like other people, other women always hear me. But God has blessed me with a precious few who do sit and listen and ask questions and pray.

And for all the gaping mouths and wide-eyed stares facing their altars, there are those souls you'll find who would rather face you.

A reminder really, that God sees us too.

A liar but only sometimes.

There's always the checkbox. It asks me if I'm Caucasian, and I say yes. And then it asks me if I'm of Hispanic descent.

I sometimes say yes. And sometimes say no.

I am. So, I'm a liar but only sometimes.

I'm fair-skinned. No, that's an understatement. I'm paper-thin white, a lovely shade you don't often see soaking in the sun. I do tan, which I suppose is due to my Hispanic descent, the heritage I often avoid on most official documentation.

Sometimes, I guess I just don't feel worthy.

What would this privileged white girl know about anything like that?

The thing I remember most about my grandfather was his hands. He had part of his finger chopped off when the hood of an airplane came crashing down and smashed his fingertip. That happened when I was old enough to process it. I felt like I lost my own fingertip too.

Another thing about his hands was how brown they were. When I was young, I was in love with Rudy Huxtable. I wanted nothing more in life than to *be* Rudy Huxtable. And I figured my grandfather was my ticket to truly embracing my African American roots. And when I discussed this with him, he just shook his head and said, "Sorry, I'm Mexican."

That blow was as painful as losing a fingertip.

My grandfather told me a story once. When he joined the Air Force, they'd bus him from Eagle Pass, Texas (which was where he was from) all the way to Little Rock, Arkansas at the Jackson Air Force base. The

first time he headed back home on that bus, he had to wait at the bus stop. He remembered walking inside, looking for a seat, and seeing two signs. One said “Whites” and the other said “Coloreds.” He told me he looked down at his hands then back at the signs and then back at his hands. He chose the sign that said “Coloreds.”

He went to sit down, and a white gentleman stopped him and said, “No son, you’re with us.”

So, he went with the white man and sat with all the other white people and pretended nothing about what had just happened was the least bit confusing.

I got a nosebleed once. Well, not only once. I suppose several times in my small lifetime. But this one time, when I was five, I was watching the Miss America pageant with my grandfather and a slow red trickle of myself trailed down my lip. My grandfather told me to lie down, so I did, and he put a cold washcloth on my forehead. I watched his brown hands hover above my face—the cool feel of terrycloth against my skin—and noticed his fingers, long and whole.

It would only be a matter of time.

In the back of my grandfather’s car, I watched the world go by. We were going somewhere on the highway, my grandmother sitting in the passenger seat. We were listening to the “oldies,” the sounds of their youth, and I’d study the side glimpses of their faces, making my brain see them as maybe they once were.

And as I looked out to my left, two young white guys were shouting and throwing up their hands at my grandfather who hadn’t been doing anything wrong. But my grandfather just ignored them, staring straight ahead, and all my brain could process now was the brown of his skin.

In the sixth grade, my social studies teacher was teaching us about the ethnic makeup of the greater Houston area. We were taught that the Mexicans lived on “the other side of the tracks.” I never understood where these tracks were or how I was never aware they even existed. You would have thought I would have at least received a memo.

Later on, a cherished family member would talk about her maid, about how this maid was Mexican, and how she lived on “the other side of the tracks,” and I told her how I was part Mexican.

“Oh well, you’re a different kind,” she said, smiling reassuringly.

I don’t talk to my grandfather anymore, for reasons that I won’t go into here. I love him, I forgive him. I pray for him weekly. And losing him, I suppose, hurts much worse than losing a fingertip.

I struggle with myself sometimes, as if the two versions of me are shouldering their way to the forefront. I want to be something I am, but I don’t know the least thing about being something I’m not. How presumptuous to check a box that holds all my stories. But then my skin. How it always betrays me.

At least the One who created it never will.

Two souls on a skiff.

I live inside the secret world of my father's ambition.

Maybe it isn't so secret.

How to describe Mel? I don't know. I suppose if being a child meant my mother being the sun, then Mel was the moon. There was something about him that lived in me too. Perhaps, our drive.

Our want to leave this world for a better one.

Mel lives inside so many different spaces in my memory. My favorite space is always the early nineties where I look my worst but feel my best. I'm long-socked and crimped-banged and fanny-packed and have developed an absurd need to find and marry Macaulay Caulkin.

I like to think I've grown.

Some.

And Mel's there too. He's the skinny guy in the trucker hat and short shorts at my grandparents' doublewide in Pangburn. He has a mustache but doesn't take that or himself too seriously. I remember him joking and laughing and everyone saying his name, the type of blessing you never concede as one.

And then there's the fish, all hanging dead-eyed on the lines ready to be scaled and gutted. Mel works with an electric meat carver and the smell is metallic, the sort of smell that should turn you off unless it reminds you of someone you love.

As I get older, Mel becomes more elusive. He is the man whose plans went sideways yet he still manages a shade of greatness. He was supposed to be a lawyer and then the governor of Arkansas, but God re-

scinded the memo. He would have been phenomenal at those things. And I think maybe that's why God couldn't let them happen.

We yearn for greatness and then become it. So, who's left to trust but ourselves?

Instead, he becomes a businessman—a national sales manager—and he travels the skies in a metal bird. I think a sliver of me misses him when he's gone but whose heart yearns for the moon when the sun is still around?

We go on trips though. We go everywhere. Disney World and California, out to the desert, and then travel the waters on big boats with all-you-can-eat buffets.

Mel comes alive in these pockets of time because who doesn't cut ties with reality when reality wasn't invited?

As an adult, I want to go back in time and ask things like: "Are you stressed?" "Do you need a hug?" "What are you worrying about right now?"

But perspective is never tempting to a child.

As I get older, I write and Mel reads it—Mel, who's an incredible writer himself. I'd read all his books if he ever got to write them, but again, I think this is something God knows about.

It reminds me of a story a friend told me once. How this man knows he's to lead people to Jesus, but he only leads one man to Christ. But that man becomes one of the greatest pastors the world has ever known.

Is that what's happening to Mel? Is he pouring out all of himself into me because it's spilling over, and all the glasses are dirty?

I know the feeling.

I have a daughter now myself.

I grow and we grow apart. How did that ever happen? Because even in the times when he wasn't around, he was always around.

He's there teaching me tennis and basketball. He's with me when I do my report on Kareem Abdul Jabbar and when I buy my Sean Kemp sneakers. He suddenly pops up like a lone flower in a field at my volleyball games with his infamous hand-held camcorder. And I'm broken-hearted for all the generations who don't know what it feels like to be forever esteemed on VHS.

But we both know there's a boy. There was always "a boy" in that flighty heart of mine, and how I wish I could go back there, down the bleachers and past the screams of sweat-stained parents to meet me on the court and rip that heart right out.

Time passes, and I get older. I hear that happens a lot. And I see the same things my father saw. We sit on that bright edge of darkness, weighing it with words. For so long we watered those seeds of ambition only to realize they grew nothing but weeds. We've pulled them out, the roots dangling in front of our faces, and buried them with all the hope and desire that haunt our human flesh.

They say you relate to God in how you relate to your father. So maybe that's why I'm always in awe or talk to Him like we're just two souls sharing a skiff. All the fish are alive and well and swimming.

But still, I can smell the scent of something we never lost but will never get back again.

Watered-down wine.

She looks at me through the same lens I once looked through to find my mother. But maybe that's not at all accurate.

After all, we're now knee-deep into the twenty-first century. Who am I to her but an old relic who likes to whip out the macarena when waiting in line?

She just loves that.

But when I look at her, sitting in the car with the music blaring, us singing our lungs out to all the music I used to listen to (because originality is not something our culture values), I look at my hands on the steering wheel. How old they've gotten. And then I look at her in the passenger seat and think, "*Who are you?*"

"And where is my mother?"

My mother has dark brown hair and warm skin and freckles, and therefore, I look nothing like her. Whereas my nose has been stuck inside books, hers has sat defiantly on her face, waiting for someone to make the wrong move. She's all heart and smile otherwise, but there's something instinctual inside her I've never had. I think maybe it's her Latina side, a brush stroke of passion God has given her that was weakened genetically like watered-down wine by the time that I was born.

I only tend to get perturbed when my library loan expires.

In the car, we'd sing to Stevie Nicks and Carol King and Carly Simon. And sometimes we'd invite the boys, humming along to James Taylor and Chicago. I used to live in the seventies in a 1990's GrandAm, wondering what it would have been like to be my mother at the exact same age.

But then I remember the story of when she first moved to Saudi Arabia and showed her ankles off to the guards stationed at the airport, an openly defiant Latina-American, and I break out in hives.

It would have been heart-stopping.

I used to love hearing about the boys my mother loved because they were like stepping stones to my father. Here's a bit of life that's gone broken, the pieces and ash swept up by God's own hand, and look—there he made something new, a man that loved her enough to not even think about breaking her.

The seatbelt got tighter, and my legs grew as long as hers. My legs are my mother's legs. I remember trying to elliptical them off in our basement, striding like a gazelle while watching Shakira on MTV. "Lucky I have strong legs like my mother," I'd sing, trying to believe the luck in it.

We'd still sing sometimes in the car, but I'd usually be in my boyfriend's, head against his passenger side window, wondering what life was like beyond small towns and front yards filled with sunflowers.

When she was supposed to die, she didn't. Even when my faulty grasp on prayer was hinging on nonexistent, I still kept frantically yanking the net back in for a catch of God's answers. I couldn't be sixteen and alone with nobody to sing to.

She remained alive, body intact, and it won't be until years later that parts of her go missing. My miracle cat with nine lives and counting.

My daughter has inherited her father's voice and we laugh about it. We sing long and loud in my car now with my ancient hands grasping the wheel, but it's no longer the seventies. We find ourselves on the cusp of the new century as the Back Street Boys sing about wanting it their way, and I think about how much I love my daughter.

And how much I miss my mother too.

The bad news fridge.

At the gym today, I realized that most people have to succumb to the merciless grips of either Fox News or CNN to receive their bad news.

Fortunately, growing up, I had my mother.

My mother was what one would call a curator of a very dismal museum. Instead of bright floral patterns or even thought-provoking pieces that edged beyond the expanses of the human imagination, my mother dealt in small, clipped-out articles of random destruction and had the foresight and adept scissor-cutting skills to make sure that destruction always remained eye-level on our refrigerator.

Headline: Local Man Decapitated While Driving His Convertible Down the Highway

Me: “Well, that seems unfortunate.”

My mother: “Unfortunate or kismet? Life’s what happens when you’re busy not wearing a helmet.”

Headline: Local Girl Drowns in Pond Behind Her Family Home

Me: “That’s just...terrible.”

My mother: “It is. And so is trying to swim right after eating.”

Headline: Local Animal Lover Takes in A Family of Newborn Kittens

Me: “Well, that one’s quite lovely.” *Scans to the headline underneath this one that is circled in red and underlined three times.* “Oh no. Why would she go jogging at ten at night??”

My mother: “Because common sense isn’t an innate life skill. It has to be beaten into your head...by your mother.”

Finally, I moved to college. I attended a small liberal arts school while my parents moved back down to Texas. And for a much-needed and peaceful reprieve (roughly six days), I didn’t even know who was getting murdered where or which manufacturer was currently supplying the best deals on pepper spray.

But then, of course, she found me.

Roommate: “My mom baked and sent me cookies! What did your mom send you?”

Me: “A ten-car pile-up on Interstate 95.”

Some people say I’m, well...different. Maybe it’s just because I truly understand this world for what it is: an absolute dumpster fire. And maybe, just maybe my mother is the smartest, most dedicated evangelist in the world. Because Lord knows it can only be Jesus Himself who will one day come to put a final end to this nonsense.

I mean, it most certainly won’t be me. I’m still waiting for my order of half-priced pepper spray.

Guilt is a bird in my ribs.

If there's a memory that I can feel the taste and smell of everything, it's the day I did the splits and ended up in the emergency room. Not because of the splits but because of the lone piece of wood that popped up unabashedly from the floor to defend itself from me.

Into my leg it went, a pain so clean and succinct, I made myself pretend I had imagined it, the heart in my chest knowing otherwise.

I didn't tell anyone about it until my mother came to pick me up, and only then I whispered it to her like I had been a victim of a very cruel game.

My crime was being alive and not knowing where my voice was.

Years later, I tell a friend about this event, and I laugh because children are silly, and she stares because who suffers pain due to the guilt of feeling that pain in first place?

I do.

The whole time you're a young Catholic girl, guilt licks you like a kitten. It's not all a horrible thing to have a pet, especially one that's gentle. But it follows you around, and you just assume, as young children do, that everyone else is just the same.

That everyone has something small and breathing that nestles against their necks when they have the audacity to do or say something just left of what's right.

There's a friend I have who I truly wish wasn't. I play with her when my other friends can't see. Her name is Marcie, and she's the opposite of cool. I am, too, with my big flutter bangs and coke bottle glasses, but

I'm best friends with the most popular girl in our class so you really can't mess with me.

Plus, my mom's a teacher, and I can make her give you detention. At least I'm pretty sure I can.

I go to Marcie's house, which is cluttered and smells like dust. There's a fine coat of it everywhere, and some dances mid-air in the light streaming through the windows and glass sliding door. We pretend to be veterinarians, her sizable congregation of stuffed animals our patients, and I like typing on the blank-screened computer as I check our patients in.

It's the most fun I've had in a very long time, and when Monday comes, I ignore Marcie completely.

My guilt is a bird in my ribs I shut up with excuses.

Marcie sings in church and her voice is the loudest in the building. She stands in front of me so I can watch her thick, waist-length hair sway like a pendulum. The girls in my row stare and giggle, and my face stares and giggles, too, but my insides wonder what it would be like to do what I really want to do. To sing at the top of my lungs to God, eyes shut to the cruelty of unrelenting hearts.

Marcie dies when we're sixteen, but it's been years since I've seen her. I moved and live in New England while she stayed and lived life in Arkansas. I imagine myself her best friend if things would have remained the same. I can see myself sitting next to her in class and having sleepovers, talking about boys. The best of friends we'd become, time and a backbone changing my outlook.

But time is vicious, and they ran plumb out of backbones, so I never did tell her how much I wanted to sing next to her.

And I suppose her leukemia wouldn't have acknowledged me as a formidable adversary anyhow.

My guilt grew and had to be fed, and it's exhausting when it barks at me late at night. It will be a constant rendering, this existence of quiet prayer in the dark to something I don't even understand and swallowing down that chirping bird until all I can feel is a slight flutter.

Until I can finally go to sleep.

And I didn't even kill anyone.

Working with my father was the best and worst thing I ever did.

Best because it was with my father.

Worst because I almost died.

The first time, we worked on an all-girls school in Massachusetts. It was exactly like you'd imagine an all-girls school in Massachusetts to be. I remember it was made of stone and there were a lot of trees and the bathrooms felt like they were possibly time portals to the 1940's.

Essentially, it's pretty much the way everything is in Massachusetts.

My father was a waterproofer and so was his father, and even my mother's mother's father was a waterproofer who happened to teach my dad's father how to waterproof.

And for the longest time, I had no idea what waterproofing actually was.

But that day, I got to learn.

Essentially, waterproofing is ensuring a building doesn't leak. I can't remember exactly what else I learned that day because at one point I was too busy trying not to die, and during the first part of the day, I was too distracted by what I was going to eat for lunch.

I'm one of those people who you see and say, "Well, my goodness, where does she put it all??"

Wouldn't you like to know.

So, after a morning of attempting to stay fully planted in the year 2000 (even after I flushed the toilet) and balancing in the sky on scaffolding precariously hanging on the side of the all-girls school, we got to eat grinders from a sandwich shop in the downtown area that looked exactly like you'd expect a Massachusetts downtown to look like. We ate in my dad's truck which always smelled like sweat and caulking.

I don't remember what I ate, but it most likely involved salami. After lunch, it was time for death.

I was up on the scaffolding doing whatever it is I was supposed to be doing (which I'm sure involved a strict set of important tasks that were shoved forcefully from my mind to make room for daydreams of Prince William) when I did the thing my father precisely asked me not to do: I attempted to die.

Well, actually, he just told me to be careful to watch my feet because there was one section of the scaffolding that didn't have any boards. And I proceeded to forget this.

I went down quickly. I should have plunged from our thirty-foot perch straight down past the beautiful tall trees and windows to the time-portal bathrooms to my death on the pine-needly ground, but I didn't. My hands reached out, and I grabbed blindly for a board that magically appeared and held on tight as my father helped me back up onto the scaffolding.

Needless to say, our workday was over, and I was forbidden by my mother to ever waterproof again. Which was a shame because, well, salami.

The second time I almost died was when I was working again for my father. I'm starting to see a pattern here. Either work or my dad is trying to kill me. I'll perform more experiments and get back to you.

Anyways, this time, he worked in an office for a waterproofing company, and I was to be his assistant. This was great because never have I been more skilled in the art of Minesweeper or attempting to take a nap under a small desk sandwiched in a cubicle.

Pro tip: bring a coat. It makes a glorious blanket.

On one of these days, I decided to be helpful and make popcorn in the microwave. This ended up being partly unhelpful since I put the

popcorn in for way too long, and we ended up meeting the Boston Fire Department.

They're exactly how you'd expect the Boston Fire Department to be.

I didn't die, and I didn't even kill anyone.

But let's just say naptime didn't feel the same that day.

I have never since been invited back to work with my father. I'm not really sure why since I'm the sort of person who can sit quietly for incredibly long periods of time until I'm either plunging to my death or burning down a building. But that's fine. His loss.

If he's ever interested in hiring me again, he knows where to find me. Under this desk.

There goes the neighborhood.

My great-grandmother used to wash her hands up to her elbows. Which I guess was more like washing her arms. She was obsessive-compulsive, something that wasn't diagnosed until much later in life when she was also diagnosed as manic-depressive and schizophrenic. I remember the smell of soap and old skin, washing away something I just couldn't see.

When my mother and I would take her to the grocery store, I'd always sit under the basket, being chauffeured by my mother who navigated the abuse of someone who wasn't technically in her right mind. I know now this was the love that Jesus talked about, an unconditional concern for those who can't fend for themselves. My mother would pick the wrong can of peas, and there'd be a tug of war, a show for all the world to see (at least the world inside of Krogers), and I was more than happy to be teetering far below it on four rusty wheels.

At the end of these trips, my great-grandmother would purchase a box of Virginia Slims, and I was eerily attracted to how long and thin they were. I imagined it was something Lucille Ball might have smoked—the heroine of my five-year-old heart—and it's a miracle I'm not a smoker now. But maybe it has something to do with my great-grandmother deciding to quit in her early eighties like she was as tired of smoking as she was of the world's inability to choose the right can of peas.

In her home office, it smelled like the dust of faraway years, the same ones I saw Lucy live on my TV. There was her marble pen and clock set she still used and her drawers with her checkbook and stamps. I can see

her sitting there, almost unconcerned about how old she was and how almost everyone had died, allowing the strength of her will to keep her upright.

In the hallway, outside of her office was the project my great-uncle—one of her sons—had done as a kid. It was a plaque that on one side listed facts about Lincoln, and on the other, facts about Kennedy. And from the tender age of five, I couldn't stop thinking about Lincoln having a secretary named Kennedy and Kennedy having a secretary named Lincoln, and how all the world seems like a mess of coincidences unless you know the truth.

I'd sit at the upright piano where the picture of my grandmother, my great-grandmother's daughter, was framed in black and white. It was beautiful and haunting because she seemed closer to my age even though it was taken on a day God didn't need me to exist.

I'd play from the yellowed piano books in the front room—the same ones my grandmother and great-uncles played from—and make music about little boys and their dogs and clocks that wouldn't stop ticking.

When I was done, I'd creak the pedals of her ancient exercise machine and pretend to watch the broken TV that hadn't worked since the fifties.

The dead fish on the wall my great-grandfather had caught and mounted would watch me as my great-grandmother poured another mug of whole milk into her Campbell's soup mug. She'd drink it down, and I thought maybe it was the secret elixir behind everything—like why her air conditioner had been stolen twice while she was sleeping but nobody had laid a hand on her. Or like how her elderly neighbor had been

kidnapped in broad daylight and beaten and killed in an alley for a gang initiation, but she had remained unscathed.

She wasn't the type to open the door for anyone.

I'd sit on the couch, the hurt in my heart knowing what this house, this home used to be and what it was now. *There goes the neighborhood* was such a heavy rift in the air, you could play it on the piano.

I'm frightened of my great-grandmother even at fifteen when I haven't seen her in years. She's sitting in a wheelchair at her nursing home with the other older people waiting for something, anything, to come through that door. When she sees me, she says, "Ericka, get me a cup of coffee," as a way of a hello, and I try not to be spooked by the fact that she still knows who I am all these years later.

We sit in the dining hall as she doesn't eat and talk with her, or at least my mother does. All the things I know about her like hopping on the back of my cousin's husband's motorcycle that one time or chasing the ones she loved with a hammer are piled high in the back of my mind, and I take a slow climb as I recognize she's scared too.

"Can I have that?" she asks my mother and reaches for the medal chained around her neck. It's of the Virgin Mary, and at the time, I think it was a weird request, but you get used to weird when a person fills a sink full of soap and water just to wash their hands.

Later on, she dies and joins all the ones who already have. Older now, and betrothed to Christ, I know what that fear was. Your whole life you spend washing the past off you and chasing it away with tools in your garage or closing your eyes to missing air conditioners or looking at that funny bass hanging high above your head, and you can smoke all the cigarettes in the world, and take their diagnoses, the ones that pretend to define you.

But.

You'll never truly defy the weight of all that weighs you down. Not unless you find the One whose yoke is easy, whose burden is light.

“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.” (Matthew 11:29-30)

Bottled-up insanity.

The worst thing I ever did was force my mother to return our puppy.

Okay, that's not the worst thing, but I'm striving for a PG rating here, so let's go with it.

When I was in kindergarten, my parents bought me a boxer puppy. I had named it Sox because I believe its paws and legs were white like stockings. I also think I added the "x" to the end instead of the "cks," which is strange because at that time in my life, I was a five-year-old girl from Arkansas who didn't know who the Sox were, red or white.

This puppy was terrifying. I know, you're rolling your eyes, but this thing was insane. And I love dogs. I even got bitten in the face by one when I was three (rude), but that in no way deterred me from them. I wasn't scared. I just wanted to love them like Elmyra from Tiny Toons with roughly forty percent less force.

But the three days I owned Sox, I was in utter terror. I would come home, and my mom would send us outside to the backyard, me in my uniform jumper, Sox in his...well...socks. And the first day wasn't bad because I didn't know the murderous glee this dog was holding inside. You can't be scared of bottled-up insanity. But you definitely can be when it's running at you like a bat out of hell. And there he'd come, lunging at me with every maniacal gallop. And let's face it: boxer puppies aren't small. And kindergartners aren't big. It was a terrible combination. And the worst part was when he'd attach his giant jaws to the edges of my skirt, and I'd twirl faster and faster and faster until he couldn't hold on anymore and there he'd go, flying through the ether, those murder eyes memorizing every curve of my face.

But I didn't have long to watch him soar because I'd be high tailing it back to our kitchen's glass sliding door, the relief washing over me that I was *this* close to freedom. Only to find that it was locked. And I as beat on the glass and waved my hands around my face, my mom would smile and nod at me with our house phone in the crook of her

neck, her finger pointing to the fact that she would rather engage in a three-hour long phone call than scrape my remains off the back patio.

But like I said, the first day wasn't so bad because I didn't know the outcome yet and had pretty high hopes that spending time in the backyard with my puppy wouldn't result in some sort of violent nightmare.

It only took two more days of this until I was ready to ask my parents to return their love for me to the lady who was nutty enough to raise these ferocious beasts. They did. And a few months later, my grandparents bought me a tiny black toy poodle that could fit in both of my hands and only showed her disdain for the world with a quick sniff of her nostrils and a belittling glare.

I still miss Sox. I really like boxers now that I'm practically the size of a full-grown human. I said prayers for him for the longest time until I realized he's dead now because you know, it's 2023, and I'm no longer in kindergarten. But I feel good knowing the God I serve already planned his journey, and I hope Sox got to spend the better years of his life with a masochist who thoroughly enjoys torture.

Every time my heart broke.

I never understood death until my dog died Christmas morning two years ago. I wasn't a stranger to human death. My great-grandmother died when I was sixteen, and before that, my great-uncle. I had seen their bodies still, and I had seen their bodies in motion.

But neither of them knew my heart.

There's a fine line in your life when somebody or something you love can no longer be reached. There is the "before that moment" when life hurts and there is the "after that moment" when life still hurts, and you find yourself shuffling to the corners of your house to find something that's no longer there.

It left me in a panic when my dog, Roxie, died. That evening, I had an attack, one that I hadn't had in a very long time, and only two things calmed me: stepping outside to stare up at heaven and going inside to find my daughter. I could see her body still breathing, a reminder that maybe not all the good had decided to pack up and move away.

When I first got Roxie, I was young and stupid. I was an instant dog mom, dressing her up in clothes (a blue t-shirt and a black hoodie. I didn't conform to the world's standards so why should she?), and I would carry her around like the baby I wouldn't have until a year later. She was so small, she'd belly under our couch just to poop. We didn't even realize she was pooping under there until we moved, and as she got older and I studied her habits, I realized she was uncomfortable with us watching her every time she used the bathroom.

Finally, a dog with some sense.

I think the worst thing I ever did was tell her my secrets. It had been a long six years of suicidal ideation, a fancy word for “I just don’t want to be here anymore.” I loved my parents, I loved my husband. But I never saw in their faces such a pure sense of loss every time my heart broke.

In their defense, she was the only one who I’d ever let see me cry. And given the chance, I probably wouldn’t let them lick my tears.

But she did, with relish.

At night, we’d drink together—vodka water(s) with a twist of lime. She’d lap a drink while I’d watch Bridezilla late at night, watching women fly off the handle. And in cozing deep into my functional alcoholism like snuggling into a down blanket, I’d be thankful I wasn’t anything like them.

At least I had my life together.

She’d sit and watch me as I wrote, my attempts at being the next Shirley Jackson ever-present and as real as the giant aspirations I had created for myself. I’d get famous and maybe cart her around as Paris Hilton did with that little dog of hers, but Roxie was pretty fat, so I considered some sort of baby stroller contraption instead.

But then soon enough, I’d need a real one of those. I was pregnant. I didn’t let my heart catch up to my brain and realize that maybe I never would be what I always knew I would. So, there I was, my dog side-eyeing my growing belly, leery of what would break open sooner than later while I closed my eyes to reality. Something I was pretty decent at if I do say so myself.

My child was(is) a force to be reckoned with, and sometimes, Roxie and I would hold each other, watching the havoc. It was like another

being had invaded our space and dashed my dreams of glory and Roxie's dream of pooping in peace.

We were tormented in the worst and best ways, having to grow outside ourselves. So, we took to our late nights, sharing our vodka and mild regrets but not overly concerned because at least we had each other.

In the house with the demons, Roxie walked the wooden floors, never being able to sleep at night. The clip-clip-clip of her nails was morse code signaling her fear and discomfort until it echoed in my dreams.

In my room at night, God showed me the evil, and it was too strong for me without Him. I gave my life over, trusting Him and not a bottle of vodka to light the darkness. No more late nights and freshly made drinks.

I could tell Roxie was a little miffed.

My soul sang, but my mind was still a mess. Jesus saves, but the darkness especially craves souls willing to follow His lead. I worked hard and late and would look at Roxie sitting next to me on the couch and think, "One day, this, too, will only be a memory."

Years marched as years often do, and when you look around, you realize how things have changed. My daughter grew, her body rivaling mine, and we'd play "pass the Roxie" as I'd teach her things about math and science and personal boundaries people often cross, people who have no real understanding of who Jesus is.

And I also taught her about grace, too, because without it, I would have been stuck on the couch, drink in my hand.

Roxie was who she still is in my heart and mind until she suddenly wasn't. She got sick and her body deteriorated, her spine protruding out of her skin. To hold her was to hold weakness, helplessness, a past slowly wearing away.

The worst part was her eyes because she knew it too. Soon enough, she wouldn't know us anymore. I think maybe they were a soft reminder of my own suffering. How it pained me enough to live behind my own flesh and bone and how I was helpless to help the soul dying behind hers.

I think if anything, Roxie reminds me of Jesus. I mean obviously not the anxious pooping or nonstop barking or clip-clip-clipping across the hardwood floor. But the desire to just sit next to a person and look out into nothing and know the end of something is so near.

And the beginning? How beautiful it always is.

Only the lonely.

There was always a little bit of death on the pages of the books I read.

I think I wanted to nudge my toe against the thought, quickly jostling it with my foot and then bringing my foot back to safety.

What would it be like to die? What would it be like if those I loved died first?

Being an only child is not terrible.

One day, later on in life when I'm an adult and have a child of my own, a woman in one of our homeschooling groups will ask with a slight strain in her voice, "But my daughter's an only child. Do you think she'll be okay?"

I'll try not to laugh. I'm not being cruel. I just think this lady is giving me far more credit than I've ever given myself.

Who on earth is ever okay?

We live in a fallen state of Eden—the beautiful world God created, doing an about-face to our own sense of evil.

I'll tell her, "I was an only child and turned out relatively unscathed." Then I'll whisper softly about hearing the voices again and slowly back out of the room.

Kidding.

I think being an only child was beautifully lonely in a way that a lot of people will never have the chance to understand. I learned what being quiet meant. I learned what listening was.

I never opened my mouth to cut off someone else to get a word in edge-wise or thought what I had to say was more important.

And that's only because I respected the integrity of allowing a moment to be free of my noise.

We don't all always get that memo.

I sure wouldn't have if it weren't for the reality of my circumstances: when I was alone in my room, there was no one there to hear me.

I had friends regardless of my lonely "only" status. Sometimes, friends who were only children themselves.

But more than friends, I had books.

Books were like friends but ones who sought you more than you sought them. They wanted to learn more about that quiet side of you—not to call it out as regrettable but to nurture it because here you are, a soul alone willing to know all of their pages.

I cried when Leslie Burke died and spent an entire evening looking for mixed-up files in a museum. I met an old wise man, The Giver they called him, and stared at the face of God with Margaret who kept asking if He was even there. I looked eagerly for the face on the milk carton and babysat so many kids, my kid kit contained nothing but crumbs and broken Crayons.

I grew and got older and met Sylvia the poet and her good friend, Anne, and made best friends with my own bleak existence in the company of Beckett, Kafka, and Camus.

I baked bread with the yeast of my yearning.

I eventually have an only child too. She's so uninhibited, it feels like she's twenty children in one.

At three, she talks to Jesus in her room, disturbing the hem of my atheism. I chalk it up to fairy tales. I blame it on her poor listening skills.

Doesn't she know she's supposed to honor the quiet with the weight of her silence?

But something is brought back as I watch her standing there at the edge of her doorframe.

Didn't I always feel never alone, even at my loneliest?

Who else was there to listen to all the words I wished I could say?

The moment is long gone when the lady is fretting over her daughter, the one sentenced to a sibling-free life.

I think of what I'd say to her now, now that I know how the moments we let water our worry turn out to be nothing more than drops in the sea of time.

"Fine. She'll be just fine," I'd say, allowing no other option.

Anything at all.

We'd sit shoulder-to-shoulder, knees to chin, waiting for my father to call out the men we would marry.

"That one?"

"Which one?" Maureen would ask.

"The one with the 'Urkel for President' t-shirt and gimp leg." I'd smile and nod, approving the choice while Maureen gazed wistfully into a future filled with "Did I do that?" and hand-crafted canes.

These were just games though. We didn't marry the long line of unaware men who walked around aimlessly with their families at Epcot in the late 90's. Surprising, since my father is such an incredible judge of character.

Alas, we married different men, living lives like two flowers blooming from the same stem. Our past, the root of what sustains us.

Through the years Maureen and I have been called to walk in different ways. She's brilliant and has a face full of joy, and when I think of her, I often compare people I meet to her because in eighth grade, I had an entire room of new students I could have sat next to in religion class. But I chose her, and I often try to dissect the "why" behind that choice.

Maureen is emotionally intelligent, a quality that is often found lacking in our socially thirsty world.

Because of this, she's done well in the medical field and has a solid marriage and is raising a beautiful son. She's the other side of the coin in my mind when I'm putting away my organic tofu deep in the recesses of my refrigerator.

"I wonder what Maureen is doing right now?"

I have a flare for dependency. I sometimes wonder if I didn't hone this skill with Maureen who's always been a gentle and patient friend to me. I'm quite contrary, and despondent, and gaze often too hard into my navel that I'm afraid I might trip and drown. But she's always looked

inside out, and what a kind face to see when you're turning back inside yourself.

Maureen's broken up with boyfriends for me. She listened to all of the drama with my high school boyfriend and didn't even throw me an "I told you so" party the day I realized this relationship wasn't the best fit. She's watched me dance at a warehouse party in Brooklyn, buzzed out of my mind and laughed good naturedly when I became best friends with her toilet that night.

Again, I flip through the people I know, how I love them like pieces of art I've displayed on the sill of my window. But Maureen is like knowing the artist herself, the ticking inside her head. That question in the back of my throat. "You're so good at what you do. So why me?"

I can't answer that for Maureen. I have my good days. Like that time I stopped a car from running over her cocker spaniel. Granted the car was twenty feet away, but I really feel Goldie and I accomplished something that day. I can be funny. I can be patient and gentle (sometimes) despite myself. But maybe it's because I've always understood Maureen's heart at a level it can be dangerous, like standing too long at the mouth of a furnace, closing your eyes to the way that feels.

Sometimes, things hurt but in a different way. We're older and people seem meaner than they used to. They aren't gentle and patient like Maureen, or even halfway patient and gentle like I am. They don't see the world with child-like eyes, waiting for their father to tell them what lies ahead.

Sometimes, I don't think they see anything at all.

This crazy thing called life.

One year, we moved.

We seemed to do this for several years, somewhat sporadically. We weren't nomads or degenerates on the run. My dad just kept getting promoted or changing jobs, and we'd find ourselves in Texas, and then Massachusetts, and then Texas, and then Massachusetts again.

We somehow managed to forget other states existed.

But the first time we moved to Houston was one of the best Christmases ever because nobody bought me anything.

That sounds terrible, but I suppose now that I have a kid, I can appreciate how really hilarious it is. "Merry Christmas! Open this box. Just open it!" as I have my iPhone camera waiting, and I'm trying not to giggle until I choke.

Some would say that's pretty cruel. But that's probably just because they haven't met my daughter.

The first part of an IOU Christmas involves your mother finding your father's fake office plant that's wedged in the back of the U-Haul. You have to give it several good tugs, and then everyone shouts "Christmas shall commence!" as a couple of plastic leaves are shed and one annoyed spider hangs on for dear life.

This tree is then placed in the middle of your brand new and preferably very empty dining room. You don't bother putting actual furniture in it because you just arrived the night before and you still have "car body" that makes you feel like walking spaghetti. I mean whose grand idea was it to put Arkansas so far away from the Lone Star State?

But no worries. You don't need furniture. What you need is an imagination.

IOU Christmas is much like that scene from *Hook* when the lost boys teach Robyn Williams (okay, I guess they're actually teaching Peter Pan) how to use his imagination as he's "eating," and suddenly real food will appear. Except instead of a five-course meal, it's more like

those jeans your best friend wears and you've always wanted and a poster of Hanson.

"Look! It's the Game Boy I wanted!" And everyone oohs and aahs as you lift up a tattered sheet of paper your mother ripped from the back of her People Magazine with the words IOU sharpied on it.

"Somebody's going to get a lot of use out of that!" Your grandmother says as she sips from an invisible mug of coffee because nobody's unpacked the dishware yet.

It really is hard to choose the best part of IOU Christmas, but mine really is the familial trek to the local Marriott where you eat a holiday buffet with roughly nine other people who either also have car body or accidentally lit their kitchen on fire.

Together, you consume some of the more traditional Christmas fare like crab legs on ice, or macaroni and cheese with way too much salt, or a lone pudding cup that you're pretty sure is pudding. It's best not to ask questions.

As you look around, you're thankful to be there because you're alive, and besides, Christmas is not about the gifts or home cooked meal. It's about Jesus and being with the people He gave you to weather this crazy thing called life.

And for the fact that when you get home, you'll get to watch that brand new IOU TV for hours because nobody can fight you for a remote that doesn't exist.

Forge me anew.

Sometimes in the space of my ribs or the span of my arms, I'm still three. I'm sitting on my grandfather's lap, and he's feeding me sips of his beer from his bottle cap. My grandfather's hair is black and shiny and smells of V05 hot oil, and I'm the most important person in the world until my mother comes and takes the bottle cap away.

Sometimes in the space of my ribs or the span of my arms, I'm still five. The boy across the street comes over, and we swing on the swing set in my backyard. I'm swinging higher and higher and he twists and he twists his swing around until he sets himself free, and I see the train-wreck in the width of a second. He hits me hard as I fly high, setting out into the ether with no one to bring me home except the solid weight of gravity and the sick thud of my body against ground. My father shuffles him out to the tune of my wailings. I never want to see that awful boy again, and my father pats him lightly on the shoulder, knowingly nods, and in a quick glance, offers a lifetime of sympathy, knowing himself the shrill sound of the girl you hold in your heart.

Sometimes in the space of my ribs or the span of my arms, I sit shell-shocked as my mother leaves us at the chicken sandwich place. My father and I gape, two fish at a table, the checkered tablecloth covering the nervous bounce of my knee. She's never left me. She's never walked away. And it's only years later with a husband and child and two dogs that bark a nervous twitch in your eye that you understand the art of wanting to leave and the grace of coming right back.

Sometimes in the space of my ribs or the span of my arms, I'm a stupid teenager who did stupid things and loved a boy and lost all of it like the time I was three and I dropped the crystal bowl at Jones department store after my mother firmly told me not to touch. Everywhere there are shards of it, bits of story and one-liners, and lost smiles, sunflowers growing wild like weeds and every bit of happy I'm sure I'll never have again.

Sometimes in the space of my ribs or the span of my arms, I'm a grown adult who spits in Your face. I do it like rhymed verse and broken characters and swooping storylines that lead to nowhere, and my hands are invisibly inked with the pain of wanting to lose yourself tub-deep but not even having the guts to start the faucet.

Sometimes in the space of my ribs or the span of my arms, I let go, my pride like broken diamonds crushing into the soles of my feet, and all I can see is the bright lights of the megachurch above my head, and that deep water, that filled tub, that turned faucet, and down I go, buried with You, until somebody's strong arm brings me back, and I'm there again where I started, only it's not the same place in the slightest.

And there You were, all in the thick of it, even when I couldn't see You. I sometimes wonder, why didn't You stop it? The hard parts, the pain, the constant whine in the back of my spine? That voice that licked at my ears and broke my heart? But then I know now, You were there, on Your knees, broken shards stabbing through the skin of Your palms, picking up my lost pieces, holding me close until it was time to forge me anew.

Ready for you to eat.

When you're seven, eating is happiness. It's a great relief to fill your belly and walk quietly around with a dog-eared copy of *The Bridge to Terabithia* and understand the world through death's lens. Not a lot of people would understand that about a child, except your mother knows you're not like the other ones, and you often wonder what you're like to her. A fine China bowl, a raging bull in the China cabinet, or just another person whose feelings are tucked so far inside themselves, she's forgotten they exist?

When you're thirteen, eating is a bad habit. Your body betrays you and becomes the woman you're not ready to be. The boys like you. A lot. They're curious about all you can't control and darkly feed with sugar between your teeth and a chemical tongue. When you wear shorts, you get honked at and when you go swimming you get leered at, so your only reprieve is reading words until they stack so high in your head, you can climb them, going up, up, up and out to anywhere but here.

When you're sixteen, eating is the enemy. Your head is a dark place. You hear about a woman drowning her own children and everyone is aghast at this, but not you. You harbor this little beast inside you, and you deeply understand how evil can gnaw the core right out of a once-sane mind. You sit in your closet and you gulp and cry big tears when you read the books your school has assigned you. A panic attack. That's what it's called but you just know it by the way your body insists you suffer. You eat nothing but carrots, and frozen grapes, and little pockets of air that you swallow as you run your worries away in the hot Houston sun. Maybe you'll become a puddle that'll soak through the sidewalk and run dutifully down the drain so nobody knows where you've gone, not even you.

When you're twenty, eating is an antidote. You've drunk yourself stupid again, and food is the remedy that soaks all that stupid right up.

You are ineptly beautiful. The kind of pretty that gets you stopped in the street so men can tell you straight to your face. This isn't the best kind of attention for an introverted feminist, so you scowl and pretend you walk with a limp. You write poetry and eat your words up through the week, so full of yourself because you're the best writer in your classes and your professors blatantly tell you this immeasurable truth in front of your peers. So, you start to look down at people who aren't as pretty or as smart or as well-dressed or as anything as the girl who vomited up all those words in the toilet last night and watched them whirl themselves away.

When you're twenty-seven, eating is a trend. You put your family through the rigorous act of veganism, cutting all animal products from your vocabulary, excising your memory of medium-well hamburgers and charred hotdogs on the grill. You become a culinary queen of all things plant-based, your cart the cleanest in Whole Foods—a source of pride with that baby strapped to your chest who will one day proudly grow her own herbs and purchase sustainably-sourced seaweed. Your hair has never been shinier, your skin has never been clearer, your belly has never rumbled louder, and your deception has never been as opaque as the glass of almond milk still sweating at the side of your sink.

When you're thirty-eight, eating is a gift from God. You've gained weight in your hips and your thighs and no longer wear the size zero you have worn all these years, sometimes easily, sometimes fitfully as if conquering hell. You instead embrace the imperfection of yourself because it's a losing battle anyways and also because that battle's already been won by someone who's not you. You calculate your past, flick it into order like a deck of cards, and start to realize your need to control your body because something had to be controlled, didn't it? But sitting now in the warm summer air, you smell the truth most clearly and understand on a whole new level that you're not the one who is in con-

trol and never have been. And so, you rest in the One who is, listening for the timer to tell you the bread is baked and ready for you to eat.

Like birds on a wire.

I'm not like these other women.

One is a trained violinist and her husband is an award-winning movie writer. I mean of movies I've actually seen. One used to manage Churchill Downs and knows Tom Brady. The other married a man from a wealthy, established local family and the other has a husband who's a successful hedge fund manager and drives a massive Infinity even though she only has one child.

Ericka, how did you get here?

Let's start with the ending of this story first. These women are all beautifully lovely. They like me, on a deep level, and even though the outer them is intimidating, the inner versions have depth and stories and hearts that question their own purposes and places in their country club worlds.

I wasn't expecting that. I was expecting an opportunity to roll my eyes and walk away.

Instead, we meet nearly every day after preschool ends, a preschool that costs as much as my child's future college education. Our children love each other, which gives us a common bond. So, there we stand on the sidewalk, like birds on a wire. Watching what we've made play like they can trust their mothers' decisions.

I'm the one living the lie, keeping up with the Joneses because once upon a time, I was the Joneses, and now my life is much like clinging to the side of the Titanic, pretending to float and not sink.

But boy, are we sinking.

It's the time of my nightmares, edging close to my literal come to Jesus moment. The feel in the dark plagues me, but my own deceptions wrap me warm these late afternoons.

One day, I'll be able to drive a fancy car too.

Years later, it's not the cars or clothes or elaborate birthday parties that stick with me. It's the line of women standing shoulder-to-shoulder

der in the cold, our coats making barely a dent in the thick chill around us. How we talked about God and Jesus like they were things we'd really like to have one day. How we talked about loss and heartache like they were things inside our cabinets, dusted them off, held them out with hearts in our ears.

I know now a person is just a person, clothed in the trappings of a lifetime of expectations. And all I want to do is hear those hearts.

The blood God pulsed in our veins.

We're children, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that we learn to dance, more specifically, the polka. Why the polka? It's not really a question we ask because we all very well know we go to a Polish Catholic school and the question is somewhat akin to "Why breathe?"

Marcie's grandparents teach us how. Full disclosure: her great-aunt and her grandmother married her great-uncle and her grandfather...or some combination of the four. I can never keep them straight in my head. I just remember warm smiles and whole histories that are often lost on us early '90s kids. I just remember them being kind, and I suppose that's the most important thing I could ever remember.

I'm paired with my best friend, Alex, who is a boy and has to be led correctly due to this impediment. But then I quickly learn that it's Alex who is supposed to be leading me, and after a quick break for me to giggle at this insanity, I'm then led around by someone who feels like bird bones in my hand but who has always beat me rollerblading regardless.

I'm then paired with Patrick, and I think even one time Gregory who kissed me on the back of the head in kindergarten, setting off an explosive desire to have him arrested for his poor decision-making and lack of regard for my personal space.

We 1-2-3—our feet quick and agile—during designated school time, and I don't even think it's during recess. I think we get both recess and this absurd exercise that doesn't at all seem absurd when it functions as a sense of one's history.

We eventually go to "the competition." Other kids are dancing, too, but I don't remember them doing the polka. I think perhaps they were ripping off dances from other people's cultures and using them as an excuse to try and win first place.

Not us.

We danced the way Marcie's grandparents taught us because there are people buried behind the old schoolhouse in the cemetery where

people we know still go to be buried. We dance because of all the black and white and sepia photos of people unsmiling that we've seen since that first regrettable year of kindergarten when Gregory usurped my dominion over my very own skull.

I often think of the blood God pulsed in our veins, and the community that grew because of it, and how grateful I've always been to do something nobody else can or ever really cares about.

And I'm not even Polish.

How much we don't deserve.

He looks good for 105. Okay, he's technically just fifteen, but for a dog, he should be dragging at least one hind leg around and losing teeth in his breakfast.

Instead, Rocco reminds me of one of those old men you see walking in a jogging suit around the mall while his wife phones it in and sits morosely with an Auntie Anne's pretzel in front of Hot Topic.

He just won't quit.

And this is evident by his smiley dog face and waggy tail, both of which are set off every time he tries to urinate a small puddle roughly the size of a half-dollar on my carpet. I mean either go or don't. Why make me get out the steamer vac for dribble?

Rocco's lost a lot in his life: his sister and two uncles. Okay, he wasn't technically related to any of them, but I'm not sure that matters in dog world. I think it just matters that he loved them with that same stupidly open dog grin that reminds me how my heart isn't as pure as I wish it were.

Riley was the one we worried about the most. Technically, according to my parents (mostly my father now that I think about it...maybe he is trying to kill me¹), Riley is the fourth born. It was me and then my sister, Fifi (she always had a knack for pulling off a tiny bow in her black curly hair. Not fair considering we all can't be poodles) and then Ross who was overgrown as a puppy and had a permanent worried look as if he cheated on his diet and he was afraid somebody was going to rat him out. And then there was Riley.

Riley. If a dog ever needed a helmet.

1. <https://erickaclay.com/2023/01/27/and-i-didnt-even-kill-anyone/>

Riley was afraid of the fan. Riley, in short order, was pretty much afraid of everything. He was an apricot standard poodle, and there was something almost otherworldly about him. Like he was some sort of alien-slash-deer that ended up on my parents' couch one Christmas.

My mother had asked for another toy poodle like Fifi, and instead, my dad decided to get Riley because who doesn't like it when a full-sized dog vomits during an anxiety attack?

Maybe he's trying to kill both of us. Hmm.

Anyways, I'll always remember Riley looking far off, as if his mind was somewhere his body would never catch up to. It seemed like a nice place, wherever it was.

My parents were excited to get a puppy, but when I stumbled home one college night into their room, I wasn't met with a puppy.

I was met with a chocolate-colored butterball turkey shaking with anticipation on its doggy bed. I sat down on the hardwood floor, and the butterball let me pet it, and it calmed down a little. It was thick, soft, and about ten times the size of Fifi who was perched on my parents' bed, giving me a look that said, "Can you believe they did this to us?" I could just foresee a future where all three of us were sitting in the lawyer's office, the entire estate being given to Butterball Ross and Fifi fainting from the audacity of it all.

Good thing dogs have shorter life spans. And can't own property.

Ross was solid in body. You'd often see Rocco lying on Ross's back like one of those birds that eat insects off a hippopotamus. He was good-natured, and a great snuggler, and was easily embarrassed when he passed gas, and my father would make a big to do about it.

I know, Ross. But at least he never tried to kill you.

And he, of course, was the best swimming instructor money (or the absolute lack of it) could buy. Our three-year-old daughter would hold onto his back in my parents' pool, her legs kicking as he took her

around, and she'd choke him silly with her tiny arms and massive-sized floaties.

Maybe that's less dog smile, and more dog terror, now that I think about it.

I find myself randomly missing Ross, like when a day is really cold and the chill has wormed its way inside of your bones. Or when I see other chocolate labs, none that are as thick or soft.

But there's something about them that catches your eye like you're seeing a ghost. Like you're catching a little piece of something you used to know.

Roxie. What else can I say that I haven't said before?

Nothing, I guess.

But maybe, I should look at it from a different angle as if I'm holding a small diamond in my hand.

If there ever were poster children for sibling rivalry, it would be Roxie and Rocco. From head humping to charging into each other to get out the back door, these two were a constant study into how to not make friends.

And yet, they loved each other.

At three o'clock sharp every day, Rocco would clean Roxie. He'd lick her face, and inside her ears, and scrub her eyeballs hard with his tongue. And she'd sit like the queen of Sheba, sending a strong vibe of "Jealous yet?" to which I'd firmly shake my head, "Um, no."

It always looked like a one-sided love. Rocco, the beta, sitting dumbly by as Roxie eats the last bits of his food with what she's considered stealth and planning when in reality a rhino with a metal bucket on his head would have been quieter. But there would be moments when she thought no one was watching, when she'd put her head on his neck and those freshly scrubbed eyeballs would be looking into something I couldn't see.

Like when she was dying.

I think I'd like to always remember them together to know that kind of love can exist. You don't have to like everything about a person to love them. It's sometimes a choice whether their tongue is in your eye, or they've just stolen a bite of your cookie.

You can choose to walk away, or you can still meet them every day at three o'clock sharp.

The choice is always yours.

Rocco keeps trucking. Everyone else is long gone, everyone he loved. I like to think he still loves them, but I'm not sure, considering sometimes, he eats his own vomit.

I think a lot about God, how you can see Him in the intricacies of a wide-open dog eye and the warm assurance of its tongue letting you know the world isn't always as cruel as it lets on.

Because in the beginning, there was the Word, and there was constant relationship with our beautiful Creator, and there were animals He made to keep us company.

To love us, even though we know how much we don't deserve.

Poetry

From beginning to end.

I'm feeling clipped and left in the pile,
only hoping to be whittled,
or used for some sort of decorative
mantle piece that will gather dust
and spiders,
but suddenly I'm lifted high,
and I can feel Your face like the sun.
The root in me is the root in You,
and all is deepened and brought water
and learns to rest, then grow,
an undulating dance of branch
against vine.
And all I ever thought I was is merely kindling
for the fire,
but all I ever am in You is everything from beginning
to end.

Even on a good day.

My darkest fear
and biggest regret
are all the children I never thought to have
because aren't we to go out and multiply?
But then I see the one that God
has given me on a short, lifetime loan,
an embodiment of all those children
I never thought to have. Her sculptured skin
and carefully carved heart, her moving lips
and wind-whipped hair, are all the things I
could never think to own, even on a good day.

The elder's wife.

Sometimes, I consider writing
down all my sins and pinning
them to my shirt. Or maybe holding
a sandwich board that reads
“I’m not an elder’s wife,
but I play one on TV.”
I can hold a hand as hard
as I hold a smile, but is
this the real me or is the real
me the one who came before
and spit on any desire for hope
I ever had?
Then I know from the deep down,
walking one day should-to-shoulder
with a daughter whose love is the
ephemeral whisp I keep pinching
with the tiniest bit of luck.
He made me for this moment
and all the “those moments”
that I hardly ever measure up to.
But oh, how He measures me
with a generous cup, spilling over,
spilling over.

The dog that bites.

All I want to do is sit in the sad of it,
to Miss Havisham it all as I watch the decay of it.
to keep my ears shut to Your say of it.
And to poke at the barely eaten scraps of it.
But I can't even crawl through the thick of it
because my mind is lost to the heart of it,
and when I try to remember the crux of it,
my aging brain alludes to the wrong shade of it.
So here I sit wishing to wander through the mess of it.
only to be cleaned and renewed from the grime of it,
and up, up, up You take me away from it,
like a child squealing for the dog that bites.

Upon the hot earth.

In all the world,
there was only one man
like Jonah,
who knew Your voice so well,
he came to ignore it,
and even in the belly of that
great big fish—
three days, rotting and stinking
in the acidic waters,
crying out to the Lord
who wanted only to giveth,
while he longed only to take away—
he emerged at the feet of a people
he declared as rotten as the stink
in that stomach, and only had a heart
for the plant that gave him shade.
Of all the people, I link hearts with the prophets,
how great Thou art, and how great the journey,
the message.
How great the need and great the desire.
But like Jonah, how I'm spit out upon the hot
earth, eyes opened to the boiling sun,
wondering about the who behind the why,
and is it worth it,
and where's a leaf when you need one?

To watch You work.

I've pummeled the fish and the bread
has gone dry from all the times I take it out
and put it on the table and try to move it
with my brain. A useless practice of trying
to take what I've made and making
it into what it will never be.
So here is my bread, my miserable fishes,
all the things I possess only because You've
let me possess them, and here I'll sit to watch
You work.

Tastes like peace.

I have a sad peace in my heart
that tastes like the time you yelled,
and every bit of you drowned my senses.
You were a man like Pharoah, the good
that could have coursed through your hands,
but those hands turned on Moses,
on me,
on everyone we ever knew,
and the sad I have tastes like peace.
And how sad it is to know that.

The only answer.

I thought about a different man
and skinnier women
and the solution to all my problems
and the hope I had in anyone
But You.
But trusting what comes from dust
is like trusting a dream,
and all I see is death,
mine and theirs and everyone's,
and so, all I can think is the only answer
to Your question.
Yes.

No one but me.

I'm sitting inside the sad place of my heart
that grows teeth and bites when I'm not looking.
I get lost there, stuck there really, because an incisor
has snagged my sock, and as I pull hard, I'm hurting
no one but me.
What is that moment like, telling this truth to a stranger
whose face could say it all,
whether they, too, bare holes in their socks
or practice pretending you're the only one who's
ever known what it means to cry?

Nothing but dreams and dust.

How is it all those memories
are made of solid block, the type
I bloody my knuckles on?
The type where I'm breaking hearts
and my own will, then foraging the pieces
like truffles deep in the wood? Everything
is dank and soiled and smells like my heart
set to rotting, but none of it is real, merely made
of salt like Lot's wife—loose resolve and a bad sense
of direction, and yet here I am—Your masterpiece—
solid and forward facing, ignoring the fact that I am
nothing but dreams and dust.

Like a flower breaking earth.

You're still here in all your flesh,
and memory serves to correct me
on the little details caught up
all around me like dead skin in dust.
How often I look at photos memorizing
the ghost lines of a gone face,
paying my condolences to an empty casket
and curled consciousness, yellowed with the wear
of bringing you out and setting you in my sun.
And grief is a cruel mistress, keeping the dead alive,
or maybe the living just dead enough for me to still own you,
take your future captive,
to tell stories to my friends of the used to be,
ignoring that there is a right now going on in a universe
I don't belong to.
And it's only when I set my heart on my Portion,
On the lone One who knows the intricate weave of all the cells
I can't see,
That I can see my right now, too, how it doesn't have to be
darkened by the once was.
How I can bury you whole and still breathe,
watching you breaking through all my wrongs
like a flower breaking earth.

In the quiet of a moment.

The hardest thing about you dying
is that you're still alive.
Didn't they know back then
That all this knowledge of all things
good, all things evil
would make us hold the hand of death,
swinging its weight this way or that?
I don't want to hold its hand.
I just want to crouch down
with my lips at the back
of your head and willingly
forget all the things I know
and all the things still waiting
for me to know them like
watching the breath you borrowed
from God go still in the quiet
of a moment.

The nearness of God.

I don't know that we truly know Job
for the man who God took everything
away from but gave back so much more,
because in the neatly-tied-bowness of it
how much to do we forget the bittersweetness
of it, knowing new children can't replace the old
And new homes are often built on tears
that taste of the nearness of God?

Thoughts

The human bits.

Last night, we went to a worship event our church puts on regularly. We all stood in a circle singing, and I was reminded of hearing someone on a podcast say that when a group of people sing, it's been scientifically noted how their heartbeats sync.

And it reminds me of the beautiful artistry, the in-depth details of God's handiwork.

Even our hearts align.

Moments like these, God uses to peel my layers like dried coats of paint. I'm realizing something about myself: I can often get preachy in my writing.

I really don't mean to. I want to say it comes from a place of love, but I think it often comes from a place of insecurity.

I'm often overwhelmed by the thought of letting people into my life, and I'm not a fan of vulnerability. The strangely ironic thing is that I've been at my most vulnerable at the church we attend, and I've formed strong bonds with those who also have bared their hearts so God can heal them.

It's just that there are others who I'm not often sure about, and I wonder how I stack up in their eyes, which leads to moments of pure panic and anxiety. Which then leads to moments of control via the one thing I'm most at ease doing:

Writing.

And then I remember what God's been saying to me all along:

"Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Galatians 1:10)

How often I've wanted to stop writing, not because it's what God's asking of me but because I often wonder what others will think because my words aren't heartfelt but tinged with the need to control my environment.

What a horrible way to live.

After prayer and reflection and an awful lot of thought, here's what I know:

- ◇ God wants me to share my story, not my opinion.
- ◇ Grace can only be given in abundance if it's not hampered by criticism.
- ◇ Being quiet is often the most overlooked right choice.

And here's how I'll be applying what I know:

- ◇ I'm removing the "how to" and sharing only the "here's where I am."
- ◇ I think grace will abound once I give over the crutch of criticism.
- ◇ I'm also not recording my thoughts audibly anymore and instead pausing to listen to whatever God has for me and writing out my responses.

It's hard to grow. It's hard to look at the wrong you've done and not justify it.

But if I truly believe my talents are for His glory, then I have to be willing to pick out the human bits that are often strewn in like stray olives and enjoy the dish as He intended.

Back from the dead.

How much are you an accomplice to everything intent on killing you?

You don't think this is a question you would have once considered. In fact, this question would have seemed absolutely ludicrous.

Because, after all, you can never stop anything from happening to you.

And maybe in some circumstances, that's the case. Maybe there's a loose grasp on the reins so there's no surprise when the horse bucks you off.

You live there in the dirt and don't give it a second thought.

But at some point, you noticed the dirt wasn't really the best place to live. And when you lifted up your head, you noticed how clean everyone else was.

But there you lay, as everything happened and with no reins to hold.

Suicide seems like such a lofty goal for some. An insidious undertaking that claims a loved one or a person of someone you used to work with who always brought bologna sandwiches to work. But it's never really been about you, even though you collect your own dark moments when it's tried to nuzzle your shoulder.

But you don't talk about that. Those things won't get you followers on Instagram. So instead, you collect those instances like stray kittens with no mother, foster and hold them awhile but only in the quiet.

On the outside, everyone thinks you're the best.

After a while it wears. Being the best. Being the smartest and being pretty and being fit and being...well, everything the world craves.

Eventually, those things wear away. We have the Fall to thank for that, and even though it all goes on its slow, downhill march, you still claw at it. Your humanness always needs to be fed.

It's such a headache to feed it because it mostly means starving yourself. You don't eat, which means you sleep standing up but never laying down. When you're in bed you count the stars and talk to no one because you don't believe in God. You silently pat yourself on the back for not needing a crutch.

You, my friend, are so strong.

The bags are thin-skinned under your eyes and you rub your ring finger round with concealer. You pat-pat-pat, pretending you're erasing away every little regret.

At work, you are the best worker. There just isn't another option for you. You eat in the breakroom, careful to look like you're feeding your unfed body because everyone knows rumors are worse than calories.

You're promoted and there's a vile sense of self-worth from everyone's projected hate. You only need friends from the outside looking in.

You go home alone to no one but a cat who is less concerned about you than you are. You drink white wine and accidentally chip a tooth on the glass, but you keep on drinking anyways.

Your stomach rumbles, a reminder that you're in control, and you will let it rumble with every ounce of will you have left. You watch a show on Netflix about tiny homes, wondering why seemingly competent people would be willing to contort their bodies just to live in a shoebox.

Your days are weeks now and your family are voices lost in your voice-mail. You sometimes call back when you know they're not available and turn off your read receipts on your phone.

You text like Lazarus, back from the dead.

Everyone smiles if they see you in Wal-Mart, but their well-wishes are tinged with an “Are you okay?” You thwart it, though, with a question about the baby, a soft touch on the arm, a general warm undertone that emanates from your malnourished skin.

“No, absolutely not,” your eyes struggle to say, but you swat them away, batting your lashes.

There’s a church you drive by where all the people are. You think about those people more than the people you actually know. What is so different about them that they can congregate every week, being their same selves, and not panicking or vomiting as they walk up the steps?

What’s so different about you that the notion plays like astrophysics in your head?

One day, you think, *Maybe I’ll get there. Maybe, I’ll clean myself up, scrub off all the dust, and walk in like I’m my same self too.*

There’s a tug deep, deep, deep. It’s inside of you as your eyes scan the out. You’ve sunk chin-deep in the tub. It’s the perfect scenario for your friend, Death, to come and whisper all the things you already know: you’re alone, you’re so hungry and tired. That cat won’t stop staring at you. Why don’t you just walk away? Let’s walk away together.

You sink, sink, sink, a little deeper than you thought you might. The water is warm. There’s a soft end to all the hard you’ve had to endure. Don’t you deserve it?

But then, a still, small voice. It says your name. How does it know your name? You push up, break the surface of your bath and look around, but the only thing you see is the cat staring back at you. Again, you hear your name, as if it were knitted long ago before your cells

ached and danced. You want to hear your name forever, so you clutch onto it, wondering why it feels like it's inscribed in your very DNA.

All the regrets under your eyes are there in the tub, and something guides your hand, removing the plug.

The water—it washes you clean as all the burden swirls down the drain.

Your heart finally has something to hold on to.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. (Psalm 34:18)

Not the one laughing.

There's a character on one of the episodes of *The Simpsons* named Frank Grimes. He moves to Springfield and starts working at the same nuclear plant as Homer. Frank is flabbergasted by Homer's incompetency, by the way his friends fawn over him, and the fact that Homer has been afforded such a nice job, and family, and home while Frank remains alone and forever given the short end of the stick despite his intelligence and acute awareness of life's little hypocrisies.

I relate way too much to Frank Grimes.

As a Christ follower, I'm to "love them anyway." My heart is no longer a heart of stone but a heart of flesh. But whenever I go to feel it, there's the hardness in it. The understanding that I'm to multiply grace upon grace to people who seem utterly blind to their own deception.

To be "frank" (so to speak), it's mind-numbingly difficult for me.

I know too much for my own good. I've known too much since I was a kid, looking at all the adults around me and picking up the discontent in their voices. I hear, and see, and feel things I wish I didn't. I just wish I could go blind and slowly be destroyed with a smile on my face too.

But I can't.

He who has been forgiven much loves much. That first part hits the nail on the head. The second part worries me beyond belief. I can love my family. I can love the few people who poke and prod at their eyes, aware of their own blindness. But how hard to play make believe with someone who never intends to grow up.

Or maybe they do, they just don't know how. Maybe I'm that answered prayer. In some strange way, God's way, He's put us in such a situation that the sheep need a shepherd, and I need to swallow down my own bitterness and pride and lead those who are having a hard time walking out of the dark, into the light.

At the end of that episode, Frank loses his mind when an attempt to embarrass Homer backfires, and Frank ends up grabbing hold of high voltage wires, which leads to his untimely death. At Frank's funeral, Homer hilariously mutters in his sleep while dreaming, and everyone laughs and laughs as Frank is lowered into the ground.

It's my own bitterness, my own sense of ego that chokes any last breath of love my lungs contained. And I'm certainly not the one laughing.

I guess all of this is to say.

Dear Ava,

I once wrote a poem¹ to you from the future. I'm no Marty McFly, so in reality, the poem was from the right now, but it was a vomited strand of all the darkness in my heart in one place.

Adorable.

Since then, I've come to see things differently. I no longer fear being alone, or maybe I embrace it in a way that speaks to the holiness of aloneness.

You've just got to understand how much it takes out of a person to see and process more than is humanly reasonable.

Whenever they develop a pill for something like this, I'll be the first one at the pharmacy.

For now, here are the things I've come to observe and the awareness God's gifted me, although "gifted" is a word I struggle with sometimes, like putting pants on a toddler.

1. <https://erickaclaray.com/portfolio/dear-ava/>

Everything is about them, not you. Unless it's about you.

Your father pointed out once that I'm often the common denominator in my own stories. This happened a long time ago, and it was a bit of meat that's still stuck in my teeth. I have so many flaws. This is true. Although knowing your father, that's not how he meant it. I think he realized something about me. I have a sincere heart for knowing what I am but a hard time walking away from it.

Isn't that like a lot of us though?

I've learned that sometimes people can't see these things in themselves. If they did, I wouldn't have to point them out and then politely be asked not to come over for Thanksgiving dinner. But alas, here we are.

Kidding though. Kind of.

I've been given grace upon grace for the blackness inside of me, and I've slowly (painfully slowly) been learning that grace can be multiplied and even given and handed out like Halloween candy (the good kind. Think Sour Patch Kids).

How long did I ignore this possibility only to hand out my own celophane-wrapped criticisms and the bitter frustration of living inside my head but nobody else living there too? How hard to communicate the soft parts of my heart, how sorry I am for all of us, and knowing there's not much I can do about anything but type words on a page.

These aren't the things thirteen-year-olds can admire like a brand-new pair of Lululemon leggings. They're the things that most people can't admire. But here you are with a bag full of all the sad things I've put into it over the years.

I guess all of this is to say that you'll one day be the common denominator, too, and maybe give out the better thing—God's grace to those who haven't realized this in themselves.

There's always a bandwagon. So, run. Fast.

I used to be a feminist and then an atheist and then there was my kombucha phase where I made sticky batches of fermented tea on my counter. I didn't eat meat or dairy for an entire year and a half and talked about the dangers of carrageenan like it could literally steal your soul.

I've grown out my hair just to cut it right back off and have sharply edited my body's freedom to look good in a bikini, which I did once upon a time by the way. Stop rolling your eyes.

I think we're all sheep and sheep need shepherds or at least very tall platforms from which to fall. The thing about anything big and looming and trying to steal your attention is that it's often doing so as an aspersion to God. There are no innocent bandwagons, no good-natured soapboxes whether you lean hard to your left or your right.

It's all evil, the same kind really. And if the fronts of all society were removed mid-march, you'd see the same evil pulling the strings of its puppets.

I guess all of this is to say that there's only one way to outrun the masses: live with a humble heart and a fear of the Lord. Otherwise, the ideology of man will have its way with you.

We all believe in something, even when we don't.

You can also claim not to believe in God or anything else for that matter like I once did. I refused to believe, not out of my own volition of a creature separate from creation, but more like a toddler whose pants I still can't get back on. I wanted nothing to do with a world or God who is older than time, older than me, and decided to throw my tantrum for an exhausted audience. I knew better than everyone because I was twenty-one and had read several biographies on Gloria Steinem. Just hand me over that Nobel prize, please. Again, another aspersion to the God who must sit back and burn a million calories from laughing at his children in the way you do when you love someone so much despite the fact that they're pantless.

I'm sure there are more things to say here like a list of all my personal pet peeves (people standing too close to me at the gym, people standing too close in general, people being "polite" at a four-way stop and waving me to go when they obviously got there way before me, culottes...), but this isn't the time or the place. I'm sure the number of times I've thrown up my hands in traffic or stared down a woman who only thinks she's wearing shorts has already brought my personal aver-sions to your attention.

Instead, I guess I'll leave you with this: I only know one thing that's worked in my life and that is to fear God. All else will waste your time and the hair on your head. The fear of the Lord brings you closer to God and gives you enough sense to let your fellow man off the hook. It humbles the stupid behind all of your actions and the ways we keep believing we're the stars in our own shows. We don't have a show. We have this time and space God has granted us the privilege in which to live.

You'll mess up. You'll cut your hair and make weird, fermented tea in your kitchen. You'll wear terrible clothes and pretend you know better than everyone else, because if you don't, then what do you have left?

You'll have your God who loves you, and you'll have me who always had the hardest time keeping you clothed when you were two.

But that's okay, bub, because I've seen our future, and well, there's really not much to complain about.

Love always,

Mom

Except pray.

My thumb fans recklessly through all these years until I find her—blank-faced, the tears a silent delight, the stoniness the only thing that can keep the rough barbs of a thirteen-year-old at bay.

There she is. My mother.

And there I am, small and stupid, because what else would you call a reckless mouth and a self-centered heart? I am young and growing beautiful like a rose rooted in poisoned soil.

I don't know any better, and isn't that the sweetest gift a person can receive?

But one day, I do know better. I'm in my late thirties like my mother used to be. I hit the gym and listen to other parents wax on about parenting. I take my dog for a walk and try not to stumble on loose pebbles. I'm reaching the age of "she used to be," while I'm still firmly footed in the "she is." What can you say when your biggest adversary sprung from your womb?

I shuffle back there again, my finger holding the page to look at my mother's face. I've hurt her again, but to hear me tell it, I've never hurt her at all. I love her, that I know, but I must be going now because sixth, and seventh, and eighth grade, onward and upward, offer all the things a mother can't. And she knows this too. Maybe that's why her suffering is basking behind her steely resolve. What hope is there in hoping for everything you'll never be able to change?

I think of my mother's prayers, each one braided like flowers in my hair. Each one anchoring me in the ground as the angels watched me drink my life away. I wonder about their eyes, round orbs, watching my next move, waiting on God's. What will happen to this girl who thought she knew everything, hoarding nothing at all in the back of her mind?

But I didn't die, and I suppose it was my mother's reckless heart, breaking through any bit of stoniness, her steeliness, her frank understanding that nothing can be done, so nothing she did.

Except pray.

And now here I stand, heart for God as if I've cut it out and offered it in my trembling hand. How powerful those prayers were. I shuffle through the pages, gathering all of them, hoarding them in my empty mind for my own daughter, her face not close enough to touch.

Watch yourself unravel.

I woke up the other night into what would have been a panic if I had been coherent enough to process it.

But it was simply the whisper of the Holy Spirit reminding me of my heart of stone turning into one of flesh.

Those words, too—heart of stone, heart of flesh.

I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 11:14-21)

My heart is often rock within my ribs. I tend to be impatient, overly judgmental, holding my cards to my chest as others spill their secrets.

There's something particularly empowering in being the holder of somebody else's wrongs while yours remain snug within you.

Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)

How we love to fool ourselves into thinking we're the doctor, when really, we're the ones who are sick.

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:16)

I've never been one to share my heart with others, but the last few years God has been knocking down walls while my spirit walks through rubble. I have two friends who I meet with every other week. We sit and talk and share and pray, and I swear, I can feel God in that room every time.

It's an act of worship to not be who you always are. To remove the cynical thread that's knitted you together and to watch yourself unravel at the feet of someone who's in desperate need of Jesus as much as you are.

Like I told a friend, it's the act of free falling backwards, closing your eyes as the thread continues to snake itself away, and suddenly,

you're two halves of a once complete whole, utterly beholden to the One who made you as He gently removes the malignancy of who you've always been and replaces it with who He's created you to be.

The art of never being alone.

It was hard this year.

My daughter was in school, and we put our dog, Rocco¹, down.

I played a game of who am I and what am I doing here?

And God so gently answered the question.

People hate lonely.

I hated lonely once too.

But this season of loneliness I've navigated this past year has taught me so much and has brought me closer to God.

When you're lonely, it seems like you're never alone. There was always something on my to do list: friends to meet with, a husband to love, a daughter to pray for. But there was also this niggling hole in my belly like this whole experiment was a reminder of what really matters.

And it was only when I pulled off those blinders that I could see what was gnawing through the ropes of my bowels: my sin.

Feminism is a thing that winds through my cells, a rhythm, a chorus harking back to the girl I used to be. *I don't make bread. I don't wash baseboards. I don't stay at home because it's not the nineteen fifties, and I'm not your slave.*

And chances are, I'm a whole heck of a lot smarter than you.

But then life turned on its head, and God watched me in the process. He whispered in my ear, *Where are all those book smarts now?* as I walked a new phase of motherhood and learned to solve the equations of the heart.

Apparently, a class I've failed in.

I do like to make bread. I sometimes wash my baseboards. And I'm at home alone with no one but me, myself, and I.

And God.

Teaching my daughter was a glorious gift. I get that now. Home-schooling a child is not merely bringing school to the home. It's bring-

1. <https://erickaclar.com/blog/archive/how-much-we-don-t-deserve>

ing your child a sense of home as they absorb the world around them. It is a deep way to connect with somebody you love and to watch them grow into the person God designed them to be.

It used to be us at the table, dogs in our laps, dog hair in our mouths, one of Mozart's sonatas lulling us through the intricacies of math, and the whole world on hold as we diagrammed sentences and laughed our way through drawing caricatures of each other with a bouquet of colored pencils.

Not every day was great because not every day is great for anyone. But every day had purpose, and there we were, all four of us living like there would always be this much life.

But then the seasons turn, and there you are in a new one, and when you sit down to read, no one's rudely squishing right next to you in your red office chair or living on your lap like the queen of Sheba. You are as God birthed you into this world, except this time nobody's arms are reaching out and nobody is screaming from the pain of it all.

It is so horribly quiet.

But still, you relish it as the new season embarks. The scene is cut sharply, and a new phase emerges. You ready your body, your mind for new territory and relearn the art of never being alone.

And boy, are you ready for it.

Shielding the sheep.

We finished *Shiny Happy People*¹, a new documentary about the Duggar family and the IBLP (The Institute in Basic Life Principles²).

It's an eye-opening look at the wolves who are using Christ's church to destroy individuals and families, and ultimately, themselves.

But what I find more perplexing than the wolves are the sheep who never seem to sniff the wolves out.

Evil can play with the brain. Satan waits for us to get off course to swoop in and question the truth behind Scripture. He encourages man to twist God's Word just a bit, and when this happens, entities who are no longer following Christ grow larger and tend to pile up innocent victims as they do.

That's why we have to take to heart what John says:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. (1 John 4:1)

Take note that Satan is the great deceiver, and so even though someone may verbally claim to know Christ, their spirit (not to mention the fruit that comes from their spirit) won't back up their claim. Hence the repulsive actions of "Christian" cult leaders.

And then we have Matthew:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. (Matthew 7:15)

While I've been chewing and digesting this documentary, I happened to meet two women who know what it's like to fall victim to

1. <https://amzn.to/3P9llWI>

2. <https://iblp.org/>

someone claiming to know the Lord. One of them has written a memoir I'm reading right now called *Married by Myself*³, which is really good. I highly suggest reading it if you or somebody you know has had to deal with gaslighting⁴.

And just to put a bright red bow on everything I was processing last week, my husband and I are teaching *Emotional Maturity*⁵ by Randy Gariss⁶ on Sunday mornings at our church. It's a fantastic series on exploring the ways we react as human beings and being able to find the roots of our misguided behavior in the dynamics of our childhood families. Mr. Gariss points to 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 where Paul references God making our spirit, soul, and bodies whole and fit for the coming of Jesus. We holistically (and emotionally) need to be healthy in order to administer to others as the Church.

We can only be spiritually mature if we're emotionally mature. And if we're not emotionally mature and hold a position of leadership in the church, then how detrimental to the fabric of what God has intended to be holy and pure.

But God's plan can't and won't be thwarted, so may all of us who know the truth of Scripture be willing to shield the sheep from the dark hearts willing to butcher them.

Ultimately, if we're to be good stewards of our lives, we have to be good stewards of the Word that is entrusted to us and stand guard against what looks sweet but is ultimately bitter. And I'm so thankful for the men and women who are able to speak up against evil but still maintain their faith in the true Christ even in the face of prior manipulation and heartache.

That is unshakable faith, and I know the Lord has and will bless it.

3. <https://amzn.to/3X1ZFIX>

4. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gaslighting>

5. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAbFi-fpiIj0qRJSW2FjfkJKGREHHVLPV>

6. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAhFi-fpiIj0qRJSW2FjfkJKGREHHVLPV>

A beautiful act of worship.

I think often of the parable of the talents. And then I often wonder if I'm burying mine.

Not to beat a dead horse (not that I'd ever do such a thing), but the series we're doing in our Sunday Bible study class called *Emotional Maturity*¹ has kept my finger steadily on my own pulse.

I have issues with OCD, I get overwhelmed easily, and I let Satan play into my insecurities as a woman of God.

Not cool.

But the more you know, the more you can change.

Randy Gariss (who teaches *Emotional Maturity*) talks about how we often use seemingly good or neutral things to ease the discomfort we feel with certain emotions.

So, if you love running marathons, maybe you do it to the detriment of your health because you can't deal with your rocky marriage anymore.

Or if you love serving the poor, maybe you spend all your time doing so because you feel appreciated when you do, and it fills your tank of self-acceptance.

For me? It's writing.

I can put it on a pedestal or deeply self-sabotage my efforts with it in an attempt to feel differently in the moment.

Again, not cool.

I've done a disservice to myself and my readers because of this behavior, but I'm a BIG believer in repentance. Sitting in my sin is not an option. So, I'm moving forward.

Christ has given me many talents, so to speak. And He's practically rolled out an entire platform for me to use to honor Him. When I view it this way, these things are just tools. They no longer need to over-

1. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAbFi-fpILJ0qRJSW2FjfkJkgREHHVLPV>

whelm me, and I don't have to do what the Internet says I have to do with them.

The more I live, the more I'm thankful for the small and the quiet and the ability to honor God in the way He's created me.

If you're feeling tired and overwhelmed like you do nothing right and everything's crashing around you, I can't suggest enough this idea of taking this bitter mess to Jesus so He can clean it up and you can rest your head.

All of this can be a beautiful act of worship. But only if we let it.

Half an inch to the right.

A few days or weeks or months ago, I was digging through a box from my attic and found a twenty-page paper on gender fluidity in Woolf's *Orlando*.

I'm guessing this isn't something one usually finds crammed next to their Christmas tree.

But alas, there I was, digging deep into the brain crevices of another Ericka, one who was apparently lauded for her "brilliant" exposé on the male-female dichotomy being nothing more than a simple social construct and yet, who also routinely transposed her homophones.

Nobody's perfect.

What that paper didn't comment on was how fluid I felt when the night was dark and the drinks were strong.

How nothing has any meaning at all if you try hard enough.

But what can't be penned away (regardless of how many homophones you indeed mix up) is that God is a God of predictability, set parameters, a plus b equaling c, and the moon never shifting half an inch to the right.

That you can redefine any construct at all that you'd like but too much vodka equals too much toilet, and a hangover never looks good on anyone.

I can rewrite my world any way I want regardless of the fact that I was not nor ever have been the one who created it.

And even though I've constructed the details of my finite minutes, I keep living like nothing's finite at all, like death has no sting.

And yet, it still does, unless you accept the ransom is paid.

The new Ericka has, of course.

But the old one is still shifting through an existence of her own making, sweating thin lines of ink between the spaces of one word to another, where up is down and down is up, the box is dark, and everything reeks chemically of fir.

What does it mean to be a woman?

I have a soft niggle in the back of my head.

It's the next steps for a project God would like for me to plan.

I've been praying and asking for what comes next after *A Bird Alone*, and so far, I have this:

Write about biblical womanhood.

Well, okay.

It's interesting the journey that's led here. I have a minor in gender studies and absorbed pretty much every work Gloria Steinem ever published (not to mention Betty Friedan) from the age of twelve. I wanted to be these women because being these women meant getting my power back and shoving my heel against the head of the patriarchy.

And now? I laugh knowing human power is nothing more than a whip of breath within the hand of a mighty God.

We get it all wrong from both angles.

When I was on Instagram, there were women who seemed to have some sort of pack, their dress and demeanor the same. Femininity was almost weaponized, and if you weren't in a long skirt and beautifully-crafted bun and didn't homeschool your kids, did you really know Jesus?

But then there was also the progressive sect—the type that knew Jesus as well as they knew the f-word, and they seemed to use both to indoctrinate women who lived in the gray. How easy to hear what our flesh wants and then to put a bright red bow on it, imagining Jesus outstretching his hand to give us the gift of our desires.

But here's the kicker—our hearts should extend grace to all Christian women, whatever their leanings.

Paul puts it this way:

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who

eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Romans 14:2-4)

However (let's go ahead and put that HOWEVER in all caps), we can't have true grace without absolute truth as God has handed it down to us. And the truth is that God created women and has a very important part for us in this play called life.

But what is that part?

I believe God wants me to write something that reflects His glory and answer the question of what it means to live Biblically as a woman.

My ask? That you pray for me as I start this journey and put the purpose of who we are firmly in God's hands.

The luxury of closing their eyes.

I wrote an email to someone trying to explain what it is I'm doing and why God's asked me to do it.

This is what I managed to sputter out:

"American Christianity (and the fiction it produces) tends to sugarcoat truth, and I think it's a detriment to those who are suffering and truly wish to seek Christ. If we hide our faces from travesties such as abuse, addiction, etc., then how are we to truly administer to them in Jesus' name? I'm not against taking a 'brain break' so to speak and seeking out works that are on the lighter side. I just know I'm to write words that can heal those who are suffering and don't have the luxury of closing their eyes to their own struggles.

And ultimately, I know I could easily write genre-specific fiction within the Christian literary space and make far more money than I do now. But I think that's the problem and the driving force behind a lot of what's written and catered to Christians, and I never want to be a part of that problem."

Now, if you would have asked me to verbalize that in person, it would have sounded pretty much akin to, "Durr..."

I, out of everyone, am flabbergasted by what God has given me, and I typically feel like an awful steward of it. My mind wanders, and soon enough, I'm traveling down rabbit holes that convince me to do everything bigger and better.

And it ultimately always fizzles out.

In our church community group on mental health, we're doing *A Mentally Healthy Faith* by Dr. Henry Cloud. He points out how he knows what God's gifted him with, and he's at his most joyful when he stays in his lane.

I get you, Henry.

My lane? To write through this world's hypocrisies whether it be through this blog or my books, shifting our gaze away from the world and back to the Gospel.

Our world has done an absolute travesty to define us as men and women. I'd much rather God have the honor.

So, thank you, Jesus, for the words you put in my fingertips and the computer you've lent me and a few faithful readers who can feel it in their bones too—this world just isn't for us. But Your kingdom is.

Morgan and her boyfriend.

Morgan and her boyfriend slept in the hotel room next to us. I don't know the boyfriend's name, but I did catch a glimpse of him in a way where he didn't notice me glimpsing. He seemed a lot nicer than his words.

When we were in the room, we were trapped on our bed. Morgan and her boyfriend had come back from the pool. I know this because Morgan's boyfriend screamed it at her, how they had been at the pool all day and all she could think to do was to complain about her sunburn.

"I worked hard for this trip, Morgan! And all you can do is complain!"

Apparently, Morgan has no real concept of reality. You see, according to the screaming lungs of her boyfriend, she's stuck in perpetual childhood, holding no real job and relying on her father to purchase her a vehicle. She has friends who make "three hundred thousand dollars a year," and has the audacity to balk at the mere pennies her boyfriend makes. Morgan cares more about Morgan than anyone else, so it seems.

There on the top covers of our bed, my iPad balancing precariously on my nervous knees, I was thrown back into the garden where God had made all things good, but man had decided that "good" wasn't good enough.

And here we are living that same lie all over again.

Matt taught me about the "ezer." How woman was created to be man's helper. And how "helper" is barely the true reality of that word.

In Hebrew, there's an emphasis on the savior component because only God is described as this kind of help mate, the one who truly rescues and protects us.

We are to rescue and protect the men we've pledged our lives to.

As much as Morgan's boyfriend irritated me, he also broke my heart. How many times have I spouted off the obvious so viciously because my own feelings were hurt? Here he's merely trying to love a woman who faces away from him, yearning and craving all the things he can't give her.

Oh, Morgan. Friend, I've been you.

And how hard this road to knowing my true place has been. Again, in Genesis, the Hebrew translation for what a lot of Bible translations refer to as the "rib" of Adam, is actually his side. And "adam" actually means "humanity," referring to both man and woman. So here we are, two sides making a beautiful whole, and all we can think to do is belittle each other, subtly or forcefully.

Either way is an affront to heaven.

But here's a thing my mind and heart often come back to: God is in charge of everything, even the mold.

In Leviticus (v.31-36), God references that the Israelites might have to battle mold in their new homes in Canaan and how He is the one who would put it there.

He is in control of the good and of the bad, even if He's not the one who ever causes it. He is in control of one side and of the other, the two parts of us playing out and completing what should have been a glorious resemblance of everything holy.

But here we are in a hotel in a beautiful part of the country, not realizing the repercussions that ripple out like rocks tossed in a pond.

How much better to understand the truth of everything under the sun and the One who created it (sun included), and turn back to that sad, loud, screaming voice, wondering if anyone is really listening.

No longer sticks.

I am stuck in the wait.

It's a place that I almost expect to be at this point. I have moments of sheer gladness in it, but other times I'm deeply disappointed.

All of these parts are moving beyond my control, and maybe that's why they play a bitter screech in my ear.

I'm not the one moving them.

I'm listening to a book on God's covenant with his people by Kay Arthur called *Our Covenant God*¹. It's been salve on my skin. Because while I'm in this wait, I've had a few instances with some who have been less than kind (whether they actually realize it or not) and their unkindness has chafed the very parts of me that are vulnerable by nature.

Satan is tricky that way, but he's never unexpected.

Thankfully, Kay's words and my husband's love (who I always see God in) has moved me beyond hurt feelings and a bruised ego.

They've moved me to a place where I realize how God is never giving up on me or any of us who claim Him. This act has nothing to do with me or what I manage to do or not do but everything with God's will, which naturally exceeds my own.

And how relieving to know none of us are tasked with that sort of control.

So, here's my prayer: I give it all to you, Lord. Every inch. I can't but You can, and so I'll wait until the stuck no longer sticks.

1. <https://amzn.to/3KWw84P>

All I could never imagine.

I met my past yesterday.

I've always been the biggest Annie Leibovitz¹ fan, and my family and I were able to see her exhibition at our local art museum.

But even more amazing than that was seeing Joan face-to-face. Annie had snagged two photos of her with her husband, John. Black-clad with a giant pair of sunglasses on her face. A casual glimpse at someone God has gifted.

I am not a Joan of *Play it As it Lays* fan. I am a Joan of *The Year of Magical Thinking* fan, the book she wrote after her husband and daughter passed away.

Yeah. I am that person.

Like with Carson McCullers's *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter*, *The Year of Magical Thinking* always left me in the same place—a depth of hurt for others and no door to exit.

I lived a long life without that door.

But now, I go back and look at some of the photos I've shot myself.

The dogs² are all gone. My daughter³ is nearly fully grown and bigger than me.

And I try to find that place where I once was when I shot their inquisitive looks and wet-eyed wonder, like feeling the wall for a knob that's not there.

But then there it is, the soft-cold feel of metal and a hope that plagues my heart.

And I walk through into all I could never imagine.

"However, as it is written: 'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived'— the things God has prepared for those who love him..." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annie_Leibovitz

2. <https://erickaclaray.com/2023/10/20/how-much-we-dont-deserve/>

3. <https://erickaclaray.com/2023/10/20/i-guess-all-of-this-is-to-say/>

I pray nobody knows.

This is my third attempt.

I first started with a podcast. It's good for SEO. Maybe people would like the sound of my voice and hypnotically end up on my site, books in their checkout basket before knowing what hit them.

Or maybe I'd try YouTube. Throw on a little concealer so all the years I've tried and failed would be a little less noticeable under my eyes and give them seventy-two free ways to publish a book.

Or maybe I could write this post and be honest like always even though I hear honesty is never really en vogue.

I don't know what I'm doing.

There.

I pray to God all the time, but I also have a sick feeling that prayer is only as good as the person who prays it.

I am not good. I am barely so-so.

Scripturally, I know better. But humanly, I don't. I feel the human edge to all of this, the twenty million ways I can say everything I do is for God and truly believe it, only to realize I've made an idol for myself.

I want people to buy my books. And I sometimes feel deep shame in that.

I'm not sure why. It's a hard puzzle to crack. I'm tired of doing for the sake of doing and pretending that all these little efforts will somehow be the key to success.

But can I even define that? And is it even mine to define?

I guess what I can do is what is most comfortable. That's to write to nobody and pray that nobody reads these words. That maybe there's a book I've written, a story I've told that nobody wants and nobody will buy it and read it and learn a little more about how God calls a human heart and coaxes it out even when it's lodged so deep within them, the whole world has had a terrible time trying to dig it out.

I pray nobody knows what I've been trying to say from the very start.

Lil 'ol me.

My daughter is back in school. This was a prayerful decision and a quick transition, which made it feel like God had it waiting on hold for us.

The reality is sinking in for her and for me. It's bittersweet on my end, and maybe a tad too bitter on hers. I think maybe she's realizing reality is a lot different than the dreams we dream up.

But what a beautifully needed lesson.

She will remain the year regardless of whether she wants to come home or not. A commitment is a commitment, and she'll be able to decide where she wants to be for high school.

We've been a back-and-forth family when it comes to education, and I firmly believe it's because my daughter is a back-and-forth person. And aren't we all? I can't hold tightly to what I vow to do because in that, I'm probably not giving God enough room to move.

So, I don't close the door on traditional education, and I don't close the door on homeschooling either. I think we can get a bit too "one way or the other," and then all of a sudden, doors are shut and we're sitting in a stinking pile that God would have otherwise had us circumnavigate.

I tend to be a "one way or the other" person. And usually that way is my way. But God is showing me the back and forthness of this life. He's showing me seasons and change and that not everything (if anything) is so black and white. That I have to loosen my grip and watch my heart break free, stumbling along into the void known as middle schoolness as I pray, and watch, and have faith that there's someone who is much better equipped to steer this ship than little 'ol me.

Die on the vine.

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9)

I find that I do end up caring a lot for people. And I find that I thoroughly connect with the ones who are honest with themselves because honesty is my love language.

If a spade's a spade, I'll call it in every bit of detail I can muster.

But then there are those who refuse to see its shape and color.

Being a part of Christ's church has drawn my heart to the understanding that being a good steward of my time and mental energy is also a heavy requirement.

And I'm starting to realize there are those who smugly don't want any ounce of love you're willing to give. They just want to complain about how the world has wronged them, and oftentimes, they'll bitterly hold your attempts at love against you.

So, do we stop loving? Do we stop caring?

No.

I do think, however, we redefine our boundaries. Again, there's only so much time and mental energy that can be spent in a day, and if I'm still administering to someone who enjoys festering in the dismal reality of their own making, I'm not administering to someone bent on repentance. And that's who I can freely give my encouragement to.

I don't believe in giving up on people, but I do believe in reassessing who I've allowed in my small circle and staying firm in Scriptural teaching:

You're going to find that there will be times when people will have no stomach for solid teaching, but will fill up on spiritual junk food—catchy opinions that tickle their fancy. They'll turn their backs on truth and chase mirages. But you—keep your eye on what you're doing; accept the hard times along with the good; keep the Message alive; do a thorough job as God's servant. (2 Timothy 4: 3-5)

I'm a firm believer in inspiring and encouraging people, not tearing people down because of my own internal shortcomings or living in the squalor of my sin.

I do sin. But I'll never live with a heart of unforgiveness or eyes that are blind to how my actions affect others.

Because if I did, we might as well call the race right now, leaving the harvest to overgrow and die on the vine.

Goody-two-shoed.

Martin Luther was once asked what we contributed to our salvation.

He said, "Sin and resistance."

My thoughts always fall on those who don't feel good enough to be a Christian because I used to fall into this camp too. I remember watching Ned Flanders on *The Simpsons* (one of those shows I can quote in my sleep, right alongside *The Office*), and I remember thinking how living like Ned was not only unattainable but not nearly as fun as being Homer.

It colored my opinion of the goody-two-shoed Christians who I had absolutely nothing in common with. But what it didn't do was tell me the truth.

The truth is that none of us are "good enough." There is no person who has ever been born absolutely sinless except for Jesus Christ. And it took what He did on the cross for us to erase all of our sin (those committed in the past, those we might commit today, and those we might commit in the future) and to invite us into an eternal relationship with the Father.

There is nothing "goody-two-shoed" about any of this.

Instead, this is life. A hard long look at the end of the barrel knowing no matter who or what pulls the trigger, nothing can EVER separate us from God.

I was talking to my next-door neighbor (also no Ned Flanders), and we had a fascinating discussion about what it means to follow Christ. Someone in his life is convinced that they have to achieve a series of "points" in order to get into heaven—I suppose some sort of Chuck E. Cheese-like system where we get to cash out at the end. But there is no earning our way to God, and if we have any questions about that, we can remember what happened to those insistent on building the tower of Babel.

Really think about it for a second. Can we "earn" our way to God? And even if we could, what would that say about Him? Maybe that He isn't as powerful as He should be?

No. There is no earning anything. There is merely accepting the beauty of what He's been trying to give you and me all along.

Either freely accept it or don't. We have a choice in the matter. And I pray every one of us makes the right decision.

The unripe places of my heart.

Maturity. It's the word that bites back at me when I stare it in the face.

As Christians, we move through the circumstance of this life, sometimes head down just trying to survive the brunt of it. But God's been prompting me to take a look around and see the things that I just want to bulldoze through as the very things shaping my heart and mind.

I'm thumbing through my usual go-to reactions—remaining quiet, separation from the noise, holing into myself for deep reflections—and realizing that even though God is very welcomed to search my heart (and please God do), I'm taking a break on taking stock of myself only to beat myself up. I'm also taking a break from my pride.

As I walk forward and keep assessing the road mapped out in front of me, I'm looking at everything with new eyes. Maybe not everything is happening at me. Maybe it's happening to me, but He is with me, orchestrating the hard and the hurt to mature the unripe places of my heart.

The point of this whole operation.

It was my 38th birthday yesterday. This week, this month, this entire year has brought me closer to the point of this whole operation: abiding.

Sometimes, I forget that. Sometimes the cart is so far in front of the horse, that I can't even hear it neigh anymore. I want things. I'm human. And God is pruning away any want or desire for success.

And I'm so thankful.

Pruning is a weird thing. Jesus talks about it in John 15. God, the gardener, prunes the righteous, the ones who are truly abiding in Him. And He takes away what we understand to be good things. Sometimes they are. Sometimes, they're not.

But they must be removed so our fruit can flourish. So, we can truly remain in the vine, Jesus.

I'm not writing to succeed. I'm writing because it's my love language to God. When I write, I feel closer to Him. And I just can't place a dollar sign on that.

And honestly? I think that's okay. It's okay to abide, to obey.

It's okay to watch the fruit flower, a miraculous endeavor that has nothing to do with the work of my own two hands.

A ton of blessing.

My dream is becoming less and less about writing.

Growing up, it was my everything¹.

But as the years have worn on, and God has carved my path, I've realized how this gift is less about my dream and more about His.

And there's a fair amount of grief involved in something like that.

But there's also a ton of blessing. I've been able to help others bring their stories to life. I've been asked to walk others through this writing process. I've given away countless books, praying that something in them has changed a person's mind and heart.

And I've been given the great gift of an outlet.

I don't hold on to fear or bitterness or anger. I have a way to bring it all to Jesus's feet. I'm grateful for that, and as the years wear on, I pray I can do even more, showing others that the hurt in their heart exists much better as truth on the page.

And all because I'm finally understanding what it means to no longer seek the approval of man, but of God alone.

"Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Galatians 1:10)

1. <https://erickaclaray.com/blog/archive/and-so-we-begin>

The cusp of something different.

Putting my dog down felt like excising a good portion of my past. For the longest time, it was my daughter and me and my two pups around the kitchen table, homeschooling and living and laughing and crying and wishing this moment in time would get over itself already and move on.

And then it did.

And now I'm thirty-eight, my dogs are dead, and my daughter is at school. And Jesus is saying, "It's time."

Time for what?

Death always brings new life. And as beautiful as that is, how painful too. Because you can see the future and know that there will be things you loved that won't be walking with you.

But I suppose peace is knowing where those things are, in the Creator's hands. I suppose there's just as much grief in knowing how little I control as there is in anything else.

But also, what a relief.

It's been a hard week, but a blessed one. I've had friends reach out, spend time with me. I have my husband and my daughter who know my history, my past, because they share it too.

And here we stand on the cusp of something different. May God alone guide our weary hearts.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

After God's own heart.

Yesterday, I read the part where David rapes Bathsheba. There's always talk about infidelity, but when God admonishes David, there's no reference to Bathsheba's sin because she didn't sin.

He did.

And this part of Scripture made me cry. It's a vicious act, and yet, here we have a man after God's own heart. How we want to rake David over the coals until his flesh crackles, and yet, we never smell our own burning.

How easy to think we're absolved from the sins of others, hardly ever aware of the sins we harbor all on our own.

When the prophet Nathan rebukes David for what he did, he speaks of a story. There's one man with too many livestock to count, and next door, there's another man, one who loves his little lamb—the only one he owns—like his own daughter. But when the man with countless livestock has to make dinner, instead of choosing one of the sheep he owns, he takes the other man's precious lamb and kills it to eat.

David is outraged by this story and wants to pummel the lights out of this imaginary man. But what Nathan tells him (and he's too blind to see) is that he is the man who has killed the precious lamb.

And aren't we all?

This is the part that made me cry. How many times do we cover our own sin, our hands too weak and too small to do the job justice?

But when we remove them and allow God to cover the very thing that separates us from Him, we, too, become people after God's own heart.

One frustrating bubble.

I miss writing.

That sounds like a stupid thing to say, I'm sure. But I've been recording my thoughts and publishing updates about writing without actually writing, and it's all felt like one frustrating bubble.

But here's what's not frustrating: I'm growing closer to God, and the more I do, the more I revert back to the joy I feel when it's just Him and me and my keyboard.

So, would it upset you too much if I just go back to sharing my heart in written form? As much as I love the sound of my own voice, I want to get back to sharing my memories and reflections and the way Christ has always been at the core of me even when I refused to realize it.

I'm praying about my next post. I'm praying about what God is asking me to write. And in the meantime, I'm rereading my novel, and my heart is happy with book writing again. I don't know what the next book after *A Bird Alone* will be about, but I'm thinking something about Biblical womanhood and how it doesn't exist within liberalism or conservatism but within the Word of God.

Either way, I feel renewed, refreshed. I was burdening myself with all I thought I *had* to be. And the only thing I *have* to do is share what the Lord has given me and find joy as He walks alongside me each step of the way.

Breaking my own heart.

Yesterday, I deleted everything. I felt numb and questioned why I even write.

It wasn't a great day.

I haven't had one like that in a long time. Today, I feel differently. After a friend commented that she couldn't leave a comment on my post (because I had deleted it), I realized these aren't about me. God is using me to give comfort to others. To show that they're not alone. To make them see things differently, maybe from a Biblical perspective for the first time.

Who am I to tell the potter that enough is enough?

I've talked about self-sabotage before, how I'm the queen of it. I often second-guess myself, mired down in my own incapacities. Motherhood is hard. Mothering a teenage daughter? Even harder. And I don't have a long history with children, how they grow and sometimes turn on you, and how your heart has to be guarded and resolved.

Thank God for...well...God.

There was a voice yesterday, small and still. It said there will never be a point where I'm perfect enough to do this. I just have to do this. And that's all there is to it.

So here I am, doing this, whatever this is. Writing words, recording words, breaking my own heart, and watching God get to mending it.

I am tired, so exhausted. And wondering where we go from here.

I have a feeling He'll let me know.

Breath in my lungs.

I come to this moment pretty shaken.

It's quite devastating the strong hold I have on my faith until I don't have it anymore.

I'm trying to find purpose in my work, my everyday life, but I've gotten pretty tired lately. And when I get tired, it's like I lose my mind.

I'm trying to evaluate what it is Jesus wants me to do. I think for a while, I came at this the wrong way. I have a talent for writing. I must do ALL THE THINGS for Jesus.

But what more can I possibly do for our Creator than sit and breathe, knowing the only reason I have breath in my lungs is because He's made it so?

I worry about the people I love, how they think this "Christian" thing is just a fun label I've decided to wear like a pin.

How devastating for them to not really understand, and all I can hear is the seconds ticking away for them. How lost they are, how lost they'll be.

It adds to the exhaustion.

But if I step back and remember Romans, that He makes everything come together for the good of the ones who love Him, I don't have to do this thing called "try."

I can, for the first time, understand this thing called "be."

And I don't wear it like a pin because you don't wear what you are.

Just left of perception.

Jesus shows His scars.

When He returns to the disciples He shows them as proof of His love for them. He doesn't hide them. He doesn't cover them in conceal-
er.

Are we able to do that?

Are we able to show off the nose that sticks out of our face?

Or the thighs that jiggle.

Or the burns on our hands.

Or the empty space where a leg once stood.

Or the hot red x's on our chests, our breasts gone forever?

Or the uterus that won't work or the heart that barely pumps?

Or the lungs that quake with every breath?

Can we show these things now knowing they're a part of this story
whether we like that they've been written or not?

Can we accept that there's no pencil to erase these wrongs, and
maybe even accept that they're not "wrong" in the Father's hands?

That they're the bridge between my soul and yours?

That they're dot, dot, dotting to a beautiful "right" that sits just left
of perception.

Into the ether.

There's a group I belong to that meets every week. It's a beautiful thing I would have never thought of joining back in my "people-hating" days when the thought of sharing my heart was akin to that time I randomly got my period on an amusement park log ride in the sixth grade.

At one time, I wouldn't have known which was more horrifying.

But now I know it's definitely the waterpark thing because sharing your heart is like lifting your burden off your shoulders brick by brick. It's having all these "You too?" moments that make you feel a little less alien and a whole lot more human.

We live alone on all these tiny islands in our heads, only to look up and find the land bridge.

The other day during our group, we were talking about our knowledge of Scripture. I've been accused of knowing the Bible inside and out, which always elicits a "Girl, please!" because what I do know is how much I don't know. And I'm finally making friends with that feeling.

There are a million Bible scholars out there and a million scholarly books on the subject, some of which can make you feel pretty darn dumb if you forget who Esau was or don't understand what the word "hermeneutics" means. (Pssst...it has absolutely nothing to do with Herman Munster no matter how much you protest. Learned that one the hard way.)

What I do know is that my relationship with Jesus has nothing to do with my IQ. As Paul said, I can have all the Scriptural knowledge in the world, but if I don't have love, I am nothing.

If I don't know my God on a relational level, there's no point in reading verse after verse.

Just because you know what something means doesn't mean you *know* what it means.

If you want to know God, submit your whole life to Him. It's that easy. Snort. No, I know, that's not easy at all.

But what is easy? Making millions until there's nothing left to buy? One-upping your neighbor until you realize your neighbor has died, and guess what, you're next?

Living a lie until breathing hurts just as much as not breathing?

Maybe we all just stop pretending and understand what this truly is: God waiting for us to wake up. To stop sleeping. To start reaching out our hands to the only hope we have on this earth.

Or maybe we keep scrolling Facebook.

But me? I'll keep reading the Word and being confounded and loving the truth and hating myself in those small hiccups of deception, and confessing my pain, repenting my sin, and loving the only thing that will get me off this ride and into the ether.

Saved from ourselves.

I had a lady tell me she couldn't connect with me on LinkedIn because she can't connect with any "Jesus people" since they're too toxic and cruel.

I just told her there wasn't any need for an explanation and that I prayed she'd find peace and to have a great rest of her week.

The old me would have said, "And I can't commiserate with bigots so thanks for letting me know!"

But the new me? I'm just sad for her.

I'm sad for, well, everyone who believes in not giving other people a chance and merely assuming things about them without getting to know them first.

But I also know what fertile ground the mind is, and how easily evil can play with it.

It's the reason Paul warns us to take all our thoughts captive to Christ and to constantly renew our minds.

We're not just saved and that's it. We're constantly being saved from ourselves because God is that good, and we are that human.

But if you don't know that, then you're bound to be your own judge and juror, deciding who gets to thrive and who doesn't.

You think we humans would learn by now.

I did say a prayer for peace for this woman. It stung doing so because I'm not naturally one to humble myself. None of us are, really. Humility is the breeding ground for the fruits of the Spirit. And this humble heart can only be attained as a gift from God. If we're not willing to "get over ourselves" can we ever really receive it?

But I have faith God will give this woman peace because she randomly reached out to a person willing to pray for her despite the hardness of her heart. And I also have faith that God will continue to tame my tongue and help me realize my fight isn't against flesh and blood but against the dark evil of this world.

May we all be armored in humility to do so.

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12)

The darkness we spin.

I was reading a post from someone doing a Scriptural word study, and my head spun. And then I saw that post was reblogged, and I went to the person's blog who had reblogged it, and I read their about page and then my head spun again.

I think we often spend too much time trying to decipher mysteries that have already been revealed through Jesus Christ.

We have a desire for the mysterious, the "unrevealed," the "magical," the darkness we spin with a bit of light.

And we often strive for purity when that's a losing battle on our own accord.

So maybe simpler is better.

We're all sinners. As Scarlet Hiltibidal puts it in *He Numbered the Pores on My Face*, it's not good guys versus bad guys. It's us versus Jesus.

We're all the bad guys.

I'm not saying I don't applaud those who share the truth of the Gospel. That's what I intend to do with every word I write. But I sometimes think we edge down rabbit holes and slip until we're looking up at an impossible climb. We don't have to make following Jesus rocket science.

And we don't have to make ourselves seem holier for being on the "right" side.

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. (Colossians 2:18)

Because it's not about us at all. It's about God working through our past hurts and current sin and ugliness to change our minds and move our gaze towards Him.

We don't do any of this on our own volition. And it's not a matter of book smarts or elevating ourselves as the result of a seemingly pious

act of meekness. It's a matter of offering a truly humble (and honest) heart to that same mighty God.

If we're not careful, we make this a human process, and if we choose to build ladders for others to climb, instead of climbing down to them to share our testimonies and show what God can do for their damaged hearts, too, then we risk living in a world of mere words with no real repentance.

So, my prayer is to keep looking outward, to keep remaining obedient to the Holy Spirit, and sharing who Christ is with those who desperately need Him.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Resources

Below are books, documentaries, and articles I mention in this book.

***Shiny Happy People*¹**: <https://www.amazon.com/Shiny-Happy-People-Duggar-Secrets/dp/B0B8TR2QV5>

***Emotional Maturity*² by Randy Gariss**:
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAhFi-fpiIJ0qR-JSW2FjfkJKGREHHVLPV3>

***A Mentally Healthy Faith* by Dr. Henry Cloud**:
<https://app.rightnowmedia.org/en/content/details/769601>

What Does It Mean That Woman is “Helper” (Ezer)?⁴:
<https://blogs.bible.org/what-does-it-mean-that-woman-is-helper-ezer/>

God Created Woman as an Ezer Kind of Helper (Genesis 2:18):
<https://www.theologyofwork.org/key-topics/women-and-work-in-the-old-testament/god-created-woman-as-an-ezer-kind-of-helper-genesis-218/>

***Our Covenant God⁵* by Kay Arthur**: <https://amzn.to/3RD7n0l>

1. <https://amzn.to/3P9IIWI>

2. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAhFi-fpiIJ0qRJSW2FjfkJKGREHHVLPV>

3. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAhFi-fpiIJ0qRJSW2FjfkJKGREHHVLPV%20>

4. <https://blogs.bible.org/what-does-it-mean-that-woman-is-helper-ezer/>

5. <https://amzn.to/3KWw84P>

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