



Ericka Clay

THE COLORS WE COULD BE MISSING

A Book of Essays

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An audible heartbreak.

I walk a quiet life. Internally, everything's abuzz, but on the outside, I wonder how nondescript I pull this whole thing off. I was raised on pleases and thank yous and don't know how to handle voices that accelerate beyond a normal mode of volume.

I wonder if this stitching in my fabric will be my undoing. If I can't stand up for what's right to simply maintain the peace, then I think I've met my ledge, and there's nowhere to go but down.

I'm listening to *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance. The whole thing's an audible heartbreak, but the part that drives me to sadness is how the author's no longer a Christian because his father introduced him to evangelical Christianity.

This speaks volumes. Oh, how my ears hurt.

The political scope intertwined with worship. The can'ts and cans (the can'ts being an absurdly long list) that keep a small boy in his own little circle, a cage really. The well-meaning misunderstanding of Revelation and one eye always being glued to the clock.

Two minutes until the apocalypse.

It frightens me how Scripture is abused and taken so far out of its context, it turns a heart to hate the very thing Christ died for: freedom.

Freedom from the sin that shackles us. Freedom to live within God's beautiful order in a sea of chaos. Freedom to choose the just path when injustice is the only language spoken.

We think this world will become a beautiful place in the here and now, but no, it won't. There's only one beautiful thing that has ever happened, and it involved nails and flesh. So here we are. Trying to make sense of such a strangely glorious gift given to everyone who doesn't deserve it. And what do we do with it? We paste a political candidate on it and call it a day.

We remove hope from a young boy's heart.

I still have hope for the Church. Not the one you see on the street corner but the one that is comprised of God's people. I know we can stand up to this world of wrongs because we have the world of truth in our sights.

And I know we won't lose heart, even when the volume's on high with the windows rolled up.

Walking just left of Him.

I was reading a post on Substack today by a progressive Christian. Some of the points she hits on are accurate. She's smart, sassy, full of piss and vinegar.

And she reminds me of who I was as an atheist.

I'm not a legalistic person. But I certainly have a hard time putting the f-word and "Jesus" in the same sentence on this side of salvation.

I don't know. I think of the lenses we view Scripture through, and although I wholeheartedly embrace a softer, kinder approach that chafes against the fire and brimstone thinking of a lot of churches, I'm also no fan of getting rid of the s-word: "sin."

And you know who wasn't either? Jesus.

I think we tend to forget what we want to forget. We like to play on the "how we feel" a little more than the truth.

The truth doesn't care how we feel. It just is.

And I'm grateful there's an entire book of that truth. I wonder sometimes how so many of us can read it and come to so many different conclusions. But what I have to remember is that not all of us are fully surrendered to Christ, and there are some days when I want to veer away from that sense of surrender myself.

What I have to remember is that this truth is not about us at all. It's about Him.

So then what good is it to dirty our language and rewrite a Christ that high fives our cute and playful antics?

Aren't we sick of ourselves yet?

Yes, He loves us. And no, there's no condemnation in Christ. But there's a fine line between being truly with Jesus and walking just left of Him, lest we lose the large crowd whose following our word and not His.

Up and out of ourselves.

I get gross sometimes.

The other day after church, I left in a pretty pitiful mood. My heart was a little dark because of how I perceived certain situations. I put on my “woe is me” hat. Here is Ericka, ever in the background, helping and volunteering and praying for people only to get knocked around a bit.

Just admitting that feels like I need to take a shower.

“Do you see me?” is something I always feel like shouting because I can’t tell you how many times I ask about somebody else or bring up something they’ve mentioned to me to show that I care, and yet? Not too many people ask about me, what I’ve got going on.

In fact, I think a lot of people tend to forget my name.

BUT.

And there’s always a “but.”

God does a great job of knocking me off my high horse. I love reading the prophets. I hate that they struggled, but I love it, too, because their lives comfort my soul. God asked them to do huge things and a lot of the time? Yeah, absolutely no recognition. In fact, in Elijah’s case, there was just a bunch of young ruffians making fun of him, shouting “Go up, you bald head!” and here was a dude who was taken into heaven in a flaming chariot.

I mean...WHO. IN. THE. HECK. do I think I am??

The point is never other people. In fact, the point should be Jesus in all of this. The point should be God our father who gives us breath. The point should be the Holy Spirit who has to sit in the gunk inside us yet is still willing to help us steer our ships.

The point is that I love my brothers and sisters and that’s why it hurts so much. And I’m not good with hurt. I’m good with throwing up my middle finger and giving you a look that would make your heart freeze.

Pre-Jesus Ericka was a little horrifying.

BUT...and there it is again. I have to have the tools to keep going and endure this race. Because Satan will even use the ones I love to hold my own heart against me.

And I'll be darned if I ever let him win.

So, if you've been trampled on, don't retaliate, not even in your head for it blackens your soul.

Instead, think of that beautiful chariot of fire, that amazing God who sweeps us up and out of ourselves and completely into His peace for loving His children even when they don't love us.

I have a feeling He knows a thing or two about something like that.

Fly or fall.

God blesses. God takes away. And here everything and nothing coincide inside you. Sometimes, you just want to find the exit, that glowing red ember above everybody's head and walk out. Into what? Oh, I don't know. Maybe the past where you'll poof into a pile of salt, or maybe the dark deep nothing void of all the black holes Stephen Hawking talked so much about, or maybe into the beautiful abyss of creation, where you'll worship all you're not supposed to.

But I think it's something different because can't you feel it? This pull across the floor, away from the exit, out the window and up the hill until you are with the rest of them, a pair of hands firmly on your back, toes curled over the edge, and you only have one of two choices: fly or fall.

A suffering little fool.

What a far and wide night when you realize the way day looks. I take a tumble into a past and foreign land, and I grow there for a minute, my roots taking root and forging through deep earth that cracks with my tenacity. But as soon as I grow, just as quickly I yank and uproot my desire to stay firmly put in the most ancient of histories.

My daughter is prone to the lie of the life on top, the best life, the world as your oyster. It's a rancid mollusk I wish to snap shut. There is no good in getting what you want when what you want is hardly ever the point.

What is the point then? A suffering little fool they'll have me be, and I'll take it grandly because like Job, here we are with a basket full of sufferings. Take your pick and eat your fill. And watch your heart change with each quick-set beat.

Because the night will starve you for all of its satisfaction and dreamy places to land. It will give you everything until you realize everything is nothing with the lights turned on.

The soul inside you.

Somewhere inside, behind the bones of your breast, there is a spark aflutter, alight that brings meaning to everything I see standing before me.

To deny it, is to deny myself, a vibrant collage of all the same stuff, though different when reflected in the views of our perspectives.

How easy that light can be snuffed out, and sometimes is, a thought we don't want to think about because we misbelieve in an idea that Heaven is for everyone.

But Heaven is for Him, the one who lit our flames, and for those who bow their heads to the One who loves us.

When will we learn to hold our breath? To stop breathing away our birthright?

The peace in this.

What does it look like, this thing dancing around me? I can make it out in its bits and its pieces. I can tie them up or shake them out and watch them scatter. I can read the patterns in them, spending nights, forehead soaked in sweat and heart beating to the tune of my own discontent.

Their shapes are incongruous and harmonious all at the same time, and I become the rope between two sadistic kings. I am pulled back then forth. I am forced to stretch and grow but for whom I'm not sure.

Are You the peace in this? That pleasant little place in the back of my mind? The sweet, soft voice speaking in the grooves of my heart? I am weary. I need rest. I need the softness of what you are like a battered lamb, a jam-stained child.

I need You.

Just call me Gomer.

Oh, what a fool I've been when you've kissed my lips, and I keep looking to the sun as if the sun is You.

Just call me Gomer, girl gone wrong and off the beaten track, lost and lonely in Your wilderness. If only I'd look up to seek You.

I've broken my own heart, which is bad enough, but how many others have I broken, trying to speak Your language, a false prophet on bended knee and tongue twisted with all the wrong words?

But now I sit, a little child, humbled and weary at your feet, knowing the whole world from the ground up, and thankful, so thankful, that You are much bigger than the sun.

The miserable weight of my sin.

Today, I learned that humility tastes like the crumbs of bread my belly aches for.

At Wal-Mart, the woman at the register next to me whispered her need for the attendant to come over, but I could clearly see the attendant swaying to the beat inside her own bubble. So, I re-directed the attendant over to the woman who then whispered a small "thank you" at me. It was the best thing I've done in a long time. I don't mean to make it seem like I'm typically cutting people off in traffic or keying their cars. I just mean there was no personal gain in it or a need to file it in the "ministry" folder.

It just was.

I've been angry with myself. I've turned into a passionate talking head with no real direction. I've stopped that. I've stepped down from my obnoxious platform. I still have my beliefs and my faith in Jesus. But I'm tired of building a wall of "ministry" that separates me from others. Because isn't that the exact opposite of what ministry is?

Jesus said religion was taking care of the orphans and widows. And even though it's also knowing and understanding His Word, that knowledge and understanding is a humble journey and quiet reflection.

It's not the loud clanging gong of reasoning between my ears.

I've failed. But I'm getting back up, dusting off my jeans. I want to write for Him but maybe that looks different than I thought. Maybe that's making people smile or making them think but never leading them away from the small, foundational truths that keep us in community with Him.

Maybe I need to loosen these fingers of mine and let go of the miserable weight of my sin.

A hurt little heart.

It's in between the little bit of light and little bit of dark, the heaven-prone edge of my eye where I see it all unfolding.

And as a tiny, hurt little heart, You'd think I'd want to run away, be something that's nothing like a heart at all. And You'd be right.

But there's this influx of water in my mouth and all around me. I undulate within this globe, suffocated and brought to life with Your love.

And if all the world was like this one moment—the calm after the storm, the dried cheeks after all those tears—then maybe I'd have a chance at taking it on, hurt little heart that I am.

The science of loving you.

I am like fire and tar, burnt out and stuck to the pavement. I'm leftover and left out and everything in between.

But you see, there's a strange culture here, a community, an entire ecosystem where the world thrives around me, and I wither away.

I was planted here, but my roots don't grow. My face to the sun but not an inch to the left.

And all I can see are starbursts, the fourth of July remnants blinding out the edges of everything I once held dear.

But I still love you, you know. Even though I sit on one side of heaven, you on another. I still love you although your eyes aren't blind and your roots are so deep not even Samson could pull you out.

I still love you, and I think often about the science behind it. How all the world can be different inside of another person's heart. But when I look at you, face now nothing more than starburst, I still see the edges of what you were, and who I was.

And I suppose that's all I need to see.

The words on my soul.

Like a dog returns to his vomit...

Oh, that hits home.

The Book of Proverbs hits the nail on the head when it comes to defining fools. And I often feel like my picture needs to be plastered all over it. For the most part, I tend to err on the side of discernment. I mean, I've managed to remain alive for thirty-seven years for what that's worth. But in other areas of my life, I'm a mangy mongrel returning to the exposed contents of my stomach.

Delicious.

When will I learn? When will any of us? I think this is sanctification. The utter removal of all pretenses and an intense desire for utter transparency. Translation: taking the blinders off and seeing reality for what it is.

I got back on Facebook. I got back on Instagram. I then immediately deactivated both. So much head space, you guys. It feels like these online places take up space in my body, and I become more worried about posting there than writing the words on my soul. You'd think I'd learn by now. And maybe I finally have.

I think that's the beauty of a simple life but maybe the crux of it too. Anything that isn't gentle and peaceful and connects me closer to Jesus feels like a splinter beneath skin. I want to follow the rules and connect and live a false life out in the ether.

But I know myself and my God too well to fall into that trap. I'm not doing any of this for me. I'm doing it for Him.

I have to deny my flesh.

So maybe it's okay that I pass on what everyone else returns to. I'm not everyone else. They're not me. And our journeys certainly aren't the same.

Maybe it's okay to be different.

The feel and weight of it.

All of this is much like rubbing my palm into broken glass or the time I did the splits during dance class and a perplexingly long sliver of wood that had popped itself up from the floor entered my bare leg.

I received stitches for that one.

The pain was measurable but this one, not quite. I've dissected myself and posted my findings on the internet. Everyone knows my heart, the feel and weight of it.

I've always been prone to perfectionism. I'm OCD and have struggled with body dysmorphia most of my life. I'm learning that these things are things I can give to God. I don't have to hold them any longer. And what relief to anchor into Him and not the psychosis of my own mind.

But now that I'm me yet not anymore, the new version that's shadowed behind my Jehovah's mighty arm, I can't refrain from shouting the truth of who He is and what He wants even at the cost of my own life.

It's not like this for everyone. That's the hard part. And knowing where I am now, knowing I'm the very person I used to mock, I can understand as far as a damaged mind can what it means when the world grows colder, and the pain reaches places you can't even see.

And here I sit, pained beyond measure, the whole of me in my right hand reaching out towards His.

Heart full of arrows.

I am most relieved when I lose sight of it. When my heart is face up and my mind has wandered off to play with butterflies.

That niggling in the back of my brain, uppermost vertebrae beneath the skull, where all thoughts comingle and threaten to ruin me. I am chosen. I know this. But I am flailing, broken bird with broken wings in a broken cage.

How would it have been back then? To follow and walk and be thrown on a path of utter destruction? How would it have been to imbibe your own stench and the taste of metal in your mouth, walking endless miles to nowhere you can't even imagine?

Is it any different now? The natives tightly woven around me, and I can hardly understand what they're saying. I am not of their world, I'm of the next one, but the looks on their faces make me doubt even that. They call and talk in a language I once knew but can't quite make out any longer. They bark and call at me, strange woman in a stranger land, the blemish on their brushed canvas.

And circling around me, I walk to their rhythm, taken up by something that is easy to see but so hard to explain. I have nowhere to go but up, so my eyes go there. Exposing my heart to their readied arrows.

These tiny slivers.

There are tiny slivers of this time that I try to pick up and pocket, but you know me. I have no balance anymore. I fall over and away from my intended desire, and there I am, left with nothing but lint.

How is it we're here already? My daughter will be thirteen this summer, and I won't be. I think that's what's mildly discombobulating. It's no longer the nineties, and I sometimes have no idea how to navigate this world.

Pandemics and riots and people calling out others from the safety of their computer screens when all I want to do is watch another episode of *Rocko's Modern Life*.

But then I hear it. *From where does my help come from?* It's a deep-down noise, a guttural expression of truth in a world built on lies. It's the rudder that leads me away from the burden of senseless nonsense, from those who thrive on deception and being deceived.

But now I see. His face. The clear outline of something that hovers over and inside every single heart on the planet.

I heard an analogy the other day. How every human has to play "the game," this one called life. And how some people make up their own rules, jumping two steps ahead, skipping a turn. Knocking the other game pieces off their places. But there are some of us who play it by the rule book, the one written by the person who created the game. How quickly we're looked at as suffering from some sort of hopeless delusion, when in reality, we're the only ones who understand how to make it to the end.

My daughter is turning thirteen this summer. And I am not. I sit sometimes and watch as the edges of everything blurs in my line of vision. As these tiny slivers float away.

The dust of ourselves.

I've been playing at this for so long, I sometimes don't know the sound of my own voice.

I've become the thing I think that I used to hate. The woman sandwiched so perfectly into life that you'd never think to pop her out of it, put her in brand new territory.

Have I gotten stale? Am I nothing more than a useless bag in the wind?

Nah, I'm just thirty-seven.

I had a conversation with a friend about leaving your phone's flashlight on. I've done this several times, but the worst part is scrambling to find how to turn it off. And it's like my brain just can't remember that step, so there I am, illuminating my whole world. Or rather, blinding everyone in the eyes.

My daughter giggles at me, gives me an "Oh, Mom." And I look around like, *is she talking to me?* When did this happen? When did I become a mother of a twelve-going-on-thirteen-year-old? When did this phone become the Rosetta Stone that I've still not managed to crack?

The world would make me think it's all over.

I found my first gray hair a few days ago in the Pet Supplies Plus parking lot. It was wiry and at half mast, and I ripped it out of my head. "Don't do that!" Matt said, and I would have been more suspicious of myself if I hadn't. Who goes around with a broken TV antenna jutting out of their crown and clawing at the sky?

All of these things remind me of the thing I knew I'd never become. Old. No longer easy on the eyes (Ericka had her day, friends). I'm a walking, talking hormonal mess who keeps dilating people's pupils at the random, and I no longer have any balance. I turned my head the wrong way the other day in our shed and almost ended up sprawled over my daughter's bike.

I'm the female version of Mr. Magoo, slightly less myopic and with enough sense to worry about these things. But then again, I don't worry much.

The whole world will pass away. Did you know that? You're sitting here but one day you won't.

I'm typing these things, but one day I won't.

I see the beautiful injustice in it all, but if it were purely just, God wouldn't let us breathe anymore in the first place.

Sinful hearts and all that.

So, what do we do with this thing, you and me? What do we do with aching backs and cracking hips and the dust of ourselves wrinkling and wearing like an old coat that just doesn't fit right anymore?

Well, the world would give a whole lesson on how not to be and look like you. But Jesus, well, He wants every dying second of it.

Because we die, we walk a little closer to Him. And as we live, we're proof that He exists.

Because who else would want a bumbling thirty-seven-year-old who once was going to marry Prince William and now practically loses a finger each time she slices an orange?

He does. And I'll never stop being grateful.

Nights of trouble.

Job. Chapter Seven. That's where I was yesterday.

The title is Job's Life Seems Futile. At least that's how my Bible labels it.

Here are some of my favorite verses:

"So am I allotted months of vanity
And nights of trouble are
appointed me.

My days are swifter than a weaver's
shuttle,

And come to an end without hope.

Therefore I will not restrain my
mouth;

I will speak in the anguish of my
spirit,

I will complain in the bitterness of
my soul.

Leave me alone, for my days are but
a breath.

Why then do You not pardon my
transgression

And take away my iniquity

For now I will lie down in the dust

And You will seek me, but I will
not be." (*Job 7:3-8*)

People like happy stories. I don't tend to write them. I think happiness is fleeting and often a liar. But joy, joy is what Job is searching so hard for. That savior who can pardon his transgression and take away his iniquity.

Jesus. Job is yearning for Jesus.

We have Jesus. We don't have to implore God for something we already have. But Satan will work to blind our minds to the depths of God's forgiveness. When you struggle mentally, it can be really difficult to hold onto the truth of something like that.

I was sent an article yesterday about Elijah and his mental health. Here, a man, a prophet of God, struggling with bouts of anxiety and depression and loneliness. How can that be?

How can it not?

When you live for Christ, the road is not smooth. It's rocky and narrow and the farther you walk, the farther you are from everyone else. The Church is those next to you, maybe a little ahead or a little behind, who know the same unpleasant steps, the same throbbing heartache of walking a cleft path.

Everyone else on the wider, smoother road is laughing. They know happiness. But happiness, fleeting and often a liar, is no match for the joy that comes when your foot will no longer know worn earth but the brilliant streets of God's new creation.

It's a truth Elijah fully knows now.

So, Job's life does seem futile, especially from our small, dusty perspectives. But Christ's work on the cross gives it purpose.

It gives us purpose too.

Mere specks of dust.

I listened to a podcast recently about denying the credibility of the flat earth theory.

You might think that's a no brainer since we already know the earth isn't flat, but there are actually quite a few people out there who still believe it is.

People with degrees who are rather brilliant biblical scholars.

What drew me in about this podcast wasn't so much the subject itself (although debunking anything through a thorough reading and understanding of Scripture is exciting for me...I don't get out much. And I'm totally fine with that), but how it was adeptly and graciously handled by the hosts.

I'm a big fan of Mike Winger. Of any Bible scholar I've listened to/read, I would say the way I process Biblical information is quite akin to his. He isn't easily flustered. He doesn't get all fire and brimstone on you. He's simply a truth seeker who doesn't forget our command to love others. And I think that's really important.

I've been on a journey of repentance. I think I'm always on a journey of repentance, and I think there's many of us who are. I used to think once you became a Christian, it was a done deal. I had so much zeal and fervor seven years ago when I began following Christ, and I just assumed that my zeal and fervor would last forever. And it has, it just takes on a quieter presence nowadays. What I didn't expect was how my sins would become more apparent every day, not to mention the uncomfortable feel of being human. But I know all of this is a reminder to keep my eyes on the cross.

A lot of religions speak of enlightenment and how we can all achieve some sort of magical spiritual goal that's attainable if we do the work. But not Christianity, thankfully. There's no work to be done because we are mere specks of dust without God's breath coursing through us. We are subject to Him, to Jesus whether we want to admit

it or not. Otherwise, wouldn't every day turn out exactly as we had hoped?

Anyways, humility and graciousness are two things I know I could always use more of in my life. And the only solution is to remain close to Jesus. It also helps to hear those two qualities played out in real time, and this podcast does just that.

Mike and the hosts of Cultish, a Christian podcast that examines different "sects" of Christianity (mostly outliers) that aren't truly biblical and the ways their leaders rework the Gospel to manipulate their followers (I recommend taking a listen), take on flat earth proponents in a way that is truth telling but empathetic. What we have to realize is that in a lot of situations, fellow Christians won't believe the exact same things we do. But it's our duty to be kind in our approach and to understand that these people are God's children too. There's a lot that will be revealed on the other side of this life, but in the meantime, we need to depend on God's Word to guide us and the Holy Spirit to lead us in how we relate to one another.

I definitely recommend giving this podcast a listen. It gets into the metaphorical language woven throughout Scripture and reminds us that we can't just take one verse and make it mean what we want. We have to look at how words and phrases are used elsewhere in the text to determine a more probable meaning. Otherwise, we're making Scripture say what we feel it should say rather than letting it speak for itself.

I pray this conversation blesses you and is a reminder that truth in love is a call for all of us.

Let there be no divisions.

I'm reading a book called *The Chronological Life of Christ*. It puts the NT in chronological order. Our pastor gave it to us when we joined our church five years ago, and I'm still reading it! I did push pause on it a bit, but I love reading a section a day with the *Spoken Gospel* bible study I'm doing right now (go check this out - quick and thorough videos that show how every chapter in Scripture points to Jesus).

There's a section in the book that talks about denominations and how we as people get everything so wrong.

How silly that we hide behind this or that denomination and believe that we are the "true" Christians. As if there's something special about one group of followers who have accepted Christ over another. Even Paul is frustrated by this thinking in Corinthians:

"What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?...For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (*1 Corinthians 12-13; 17-18*)

I can taste poor Paul's exasperation, can't you?

How much do we hinder ourselves by living this way? I always wondered why the Christian church was so severed and other religions weren't. Could it be because we are the true body of Christ and that Satan would love nothing more than for us to form "teams" that pit us against each other? How little we'll be able to accomplish if we think "Well, can't go over there and help out those Catholics. You know how they are" or "Don't even get me started on the Free Will Baptist!"

It's a shame we treat God's sheep this way.

I think if we truly understand what Christ asks of us, that we just abide in Him so that Holy Spirit can course through us and we can be His kingdom here on earth, we wouldn't even think about divisions.

The goal, ultimately, isn't unity, but the action of abiding. We need to daily be focused on ourselves (not on who believes what), and when we each do that, we truly are God's church that destroys all dividing lines.

As Paul says again in Corinthians:

"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." (*1 Corinthians 1:10*)

It was never intended for us to be a disunified church. It was intended for us to accept and share the Gospel. And the Gospel is this:

To accept Jesus's free gift of salvation by confessing and repenting (turning from) our sins. We're to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—a beautiful gift God gives us that shows our commitment to His kingdom and the beautiful covenant He's made with his sheep. And then we go and find others and share the good news of Jesus, and if they accept, we baptize them and walk alongside them as they then go out and be light to the world.

We constantly abide in Jesus the vine, or we will wither and be cut away.

If we think we need to add anything on to that in order to be "real" followers, then at this point, we're denying God's Word.

And that's blasphemy.

Denominations won't be going away any time soon but neither will those baptized in the name of Jesus. And so those who understand what Scripture says about submitting to Christ and furthering His Kingdom will also be able to reach out across dividing lines in order to move the Kingdom forward.

I'm not saying we blindly accept the doctrines of other churches. I'm saying we can still work together knowing there's a core belief among us: that Christ is God and died on the cross for our sins, taking our place when we didn't (and don't) deserve it.

Like the book points out: "True Christians of all brands make up the kingdom of God on this earth."

The colors we could be missing.

I cry-read sometimes. This part of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* made me do just that:

"What if the water that came out of the shower was treated with a chemical that responded to a combination of things, like your heart-beat, and your body temperature, and your brain waves, so that your skin changed color according to your mood? If you were extremely excited your skin would turn green, and if you were angry you'd turn red, obviously, and if you felt like shiitake you'd turn brown, and if you were blue you'd turn blue.

Everyone could know what everyone else felt, and we could be more careful with each other, because you'd never want to tell a person whose skin was purple that you're angry at her for being late, just like you would want to pat a pink person on the back and tell him, "Congratulations!"

Another reason it would be a good invention is that there are so many times when you know you're feeling a lot of something, but you don't know what the something is. Am I frustrated? Am I actually just panicky? And that confusion changes your mood, it becomes your mood, and you become a confused, gray person. But with the special water, you could look at your orange hands and think, I'm happy! That whole time I was actually happy! What a relief!"

This book is about a lot of things (and I highly recommend reading it so you can find out about all of those things), but what's beautiful is that one of the narrators, Oskar Schell, is a young boy and an atheist. And his heart hurts because his father was killed on 9/11. He invents things in his head to quell his anxiety, that ever-creeping fear that all we have is darkness, and we'll fade away into nothing, just like the people we love.

As believers, we know differently. But as believers, we could really use an invention like this one. I think this is why it's so important to

treat each other with kid gloves. In fact, being a true believer means you display fruits of the spirit.

Paul tells us the fruit of the spirit are:

"...love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." He goes on to say, "against such things there is no law." (*Galatians 5:22-24*)

Because who would outlaw a kind word or gentle hand?

These things are what it means to be Jesus to one another.

I'm really going through a hardcore sanctification process right now. I'm not too shabby at head knowledge. I've always done well intellectually, to the point that I get frustrated sometimes because this is my reality, and I make the horrible assumption that this is everyone's reality too.

But what a terrible reality when you think about it. Because if all I have is a vast number of words in my head, what on earth is happening in my heart? Can I not see it? The different shades of invisible colors flashing on everyone's skin? Can I not forget for a moment where I end and someone else begins? Because if all I have is this dying brain of mine, I better call it quits.

Nobody is resurrected because they knew everything about Jesus or the Bible. You're resurrected when you've confessed your sins, repented, and submitted to Christ.

You're resurrected when you've humbled your heart.

So maybe today we forget the frowns and hard exteriors of the world and think of all the colors we could be missing.

The forest for the trees.

Wisdom. It sometimes seems like a dying art.

But it's understandable. The world's not kind. It's a hateful place, insidious really. It stands for a lot of things like love and toleration but then bites back if you're not a zealot on one side of the argument or even the other.

It's hypocritical, and therefore, a liar.

I'm listening to a book called *Ordinary* by Michael Horton. This book alongside Charlotte Mason's *Ourselves* will be required reading when I'm president. We'll also be breaking out into small groups to discuss the vast, brilliant nuances of *The Office* so you might want to brush up now.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

But this book is great in so many ways, but I'll just hit on one: there's a very strange phenomenon in this country on what's considered Christian, including certain legislation that points to "Christian" ideals.

Ask yourself why this is. Why do we want major platforms to stand behind?

Maybe because it's easier to yell from a safe distance than to speak softly and look a hurting person in the eyes.

We often miss the forest for the trees, don't we?

We might argue that these particular platforms are Biblical. And some do coincide with a general understanding and respect for life that's threaded throughout the Bible. We all need to honor God's creation and be prepared for the consequences when we don't. But the last time I checked, our duty isn't to bring noise against things that don't support our American Christian perspective.

Our duty is to die to self, love God above all else, and love our neighbor. And sometimes, when we pridefully hold onto our bumper sticker theology, our favorite pundit at his pulpit, we let go of what Christ desires of us.

James says this about wisdom:

"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." (*James 3:17*)

Other versions say "willing to yield." Are we willing to yield when it comes to our favorite political/religious positions so we can actually listen to another human being? Are we willing to pray for someone who'd much rather spit in our faces?

It's true. We must have a defense of the faith, but ultimately the faith can defend itself. This is Christ's church. Not even the gates of hell will keep it from spreading.

Think of it: Jesus, who most people think of as some guy who probably never even existed (there's so much proof to deny this it makes my teeth hurt, but I digress), hung on a cross over two thousand years ago and what should have fizzled out before it even started has become a movement that's slowly and steadily fighting the darkness. Has the Church always been perfectly holy? Nope, but then again it consists of people, and as our former pastor once said, "people have an uncanny knack for screwing things up."

So, it will continue to move and breathe throughout this world to the end of time itself. And God will redeem the pain we leave in our wake. But we can still choose the way in which the Church grows, hopefully with wise judgment and a heart for others.

It's easy to get angry and confuse this anger with God's righteous anger. It's easy to go online and argue until you're blue in the face with a nonbeliever or even worse, a believer, a brother or sister in Christ. It gets us nowhere.

But what does get us somewhere is loving the orphan and the widow. Taking time to get to know the person who lives next to you. Not wavering in your ideals but sharing them in a way that shows the love of Jesus.

That is true religion, and that is its own true political movement when you think about it.

Because nobody ever knows what to do when they witness self-control. It's an antidote to the chaotic thought process that gives birth to platforms and podiums and pronouncing our opinions that may be true but may not be wise in the way we tend to share them.

It's easy to scream in the darkness. It's a lot harder to stay calm and light a match.

Pray they will grow.

As believers, we get a few things wrong sometimes. And I think one of those things is how we approach spreading the Gospel.

One of the most beautiful images from the Bible is the garden. And the concept of planting runs deeply throughout the overarching narrative. One day, the angels will reap, separating the wheat from the tares (*Matthew 13:36-43*). The angels will separate those who choose Christ and those who don't. But who will do the planting?

God will, through us.

And that's the important thing to remember. There's no quota here. There's no direct set of instructions requiring us to beat down somebody's front door to see if they've chosen Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. Instead, there's a noted desire for friendship and relationship that's underscored throughout the Bible.

Christ ate with the sinners. He got to know them. And He loved them so much that he expected good things from them, notably a change of heart and a moving away from their sinful desires.

But Jesus never rushes anything. And He never pats Himself on the back for "converting another one." His goal is to gather His sheep, the souls God has placed in His hands.

And if we take a softer approach to this and think about planting, we'll understand that sometimes seeds are sown but they don't yield a crop until much later. And you might not be the farmer there to see it happen. That's okay, because ultimately, this isn't about you and me.

This is about bringing glory to God and working for His kingdom, not ours.

Ultimately, we can't force someone to know Christ just like Christ never forces us to know Him. It's a gentle knock at our door, not a banging of fists. And just like the phrase, "You can bring a horse to water, but you can't make him drink," leading people to Jesus is one thing but their accepting Him is quite another.

All we can do is plant those seeds and pray they will grow.

Through the fire.

I went down a Calvinist rabbit hole once that was pretty terrifying. The thought of God just arbitrarily predestining whoever He wants to heaven and others to hell seemed evil to me.

And I suppose without further understanding of Scripture, that very thought is evil.

Because God never does anything arbitrarily. And there's a lot more to this process: namely man's input.

We have free will. That's something God has granted us, a beautiful thing really. Every day, I'm thankful for the chance to love Him and love others, to suffer the consequences of this earth in order for my heart and mind to be totally in surrender to Him.

Although, let's face it. I'm sometimes a pansy when it comes to the suffering part, but alas, you have to go through the fire to withstand it.

We have a choice whether we'll love God or not. And God's foreknowledge of our choices and where our hearts lie are two of the major factors that determine His decision.

We serve a just and holy God, yet we are not just. We are not holy.

What great mercy to let us off the hook by simply loving and obeying Jesus? I mean, this world is messed up, you guys. No one else is extending us a better offer.

So, what do you think? Do you feel that tug to dive into something that seems horribly scary? I get it. Admitting you're wrong and jumping headfirst into something you declared you would NEVER do is a hard pill to swallow, not to mention how choosing Christ sometimes means the ones you love most will walk away from you in the exact opposite direction.

But like Christ said Himself:

"Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be di-

vided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (*Luke 12:51-53*)

Choosing Him sometimes means losing those who don't.

I'm not sure where you are in life, but you'll never go wrong giving everything to God. And I've found the more vulnerable you are, the more wicked, the more hardened, the better the relationship because how much can God move and change what you and I can't even begin to?

There is such a thing as a second chance, but it won't be there forever. May we all truly consider taking it today.

A shrine for ourselves.

I was listening to a podcast by Denaye Barahona called *Simple Families*. I like listening to Denaye. She has a pretty calming presence and talks slowly. I, too, would one day like to master the art of the slow talk. Maybe whenever coffee's outlawed.

Anyways, Denaye had on Lena Derhally, a psychotherapist and expert in narcissism and the author of *The Facebook Narcissist*. Their conversation was fascinating, and I kept nodding my head along whilst navigating traffic. How quickly we humans turn something that could be pretty beneficial into a shrine for ourselves.

I've been going through some real introspection lately. I have a sinner's heart (just like the rest of us), and I've been known to hit "publish" without thinking before, especially when it comes to my personal profile. As Lena points out, who doesn't want affirmation from our peers? But when we live for that type of validation, confirmation that says a perfect-looking life is the ONLY life how horrible do we feel when we know our lives aren't that perfect? That the photos only serve to cover the reality of the situation?

Something else Lena mentioned was how many people in her feed are over the top with their affections for their significant others, posting photos and gushing accolades for their spouses only to seek her out behind the scenes for couples counseling because in reality, they've found themselves in really bad places in their marriages.

How easy to build the life you want but can't figure out how to achieve.

This reminds me so much of the person I used to be and the person who still likes to whisper in my ear. I'm a recovering perfectionist and would love to paint my life in all the colors and hit that "publish" button. But I've made a little pact with myself. I've quit social media again and will use my blog to show you the truth of who I am and how Christ time and again heals my heart and mind.

I think this podcast is a refreshing reminder that everything isn't as it seems and that maybe a little introspection isn't a bad thing. I know what it feels like when life backs you into a corner and you want to fight back, showing off all the good you've managed to achieve. I don't think there's anything wrong with reaching goals God provides for you and of course doing it in a fair and honest way. But tearing down those walls and flipping those tables in a sanctuary that should only be fit for the God of the universe brings a person so much peace.

We were never meant to worship ourselves.

He only has to read my heart.

We're instructed to not be afraid 365 times in Scripture.

You'd think I'd catch on by now.

Last night was a good night, but my heart had a hard time seeing it. From afar, I could capture it. Logically, it all made sense. Food and friends and fireworks. People I love and live to serve, and how often have they served me in some way?

So many times it's hard to count.

But my soul is lined with pockets of fear. Little places I put my worries and hold onto them like lucky arrowheads. I have a hard time socially. Not one-on-one so much. Not in small groups I'm comfortable with. But in vast groupings of people where I feel like a buoy bobbing senselessly in a sea.

Most women are communicative, verbal. They've been wired with such an easy way about them that if I pointed this out as a gift, I bet most would laugh. What gift is there in waking up and being yourself?

You have no idea, friend.

I have a hard time "being myself." Sometimes, I barely know who that person is. I suppose that's why Jesus is my refuge. I can see myself in who He is. I feel loved and noticed. I don't have to talk and wait for the inevitable moment I stumble through my words. He only has to read my heart.

I'm going to see someone about this, the way my brain thinks and my body feels in situations I can't control. Maybe it's chemical. Maybe it's learned. Maybe it's the unconscious drifting towards something familiar even if it's meant to destroy you.

Either way, it's a battle I won't lose, not with God by my side.

"For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:6-7)

The problem with eating people.

There's been an internal damage done within the hearts of people.

And now, we're hell bent on eating them.

You might have heard about this phenomenon, the one where we're so angry with rich people, we become inclined to swallow them whole. Or perhaps chopped up into fine little pieces smothered in ketchup.

I'm not sure how the process is supposed to go. I only work here.

I find that sort of thinking completely shortsighted, obviously. And if I have to pile it into any specific category, I suppose I'd go with an old favorite: "the pile of malarky where I have to stop being a human being to others and let my lying feelings determine my fate."

You know, my favorite category.

There are rich people. There are poor people. There are black people and white people. And straight people and gay people and people who are one day a her and the next day a him.

There are people who can't see and others who can't hear and some who do both at the same time like Hellen Keller. There are people who love dogs and people who love cats and people who made an entire childhood out of torturing God's creatures. And there are people who lean towards the good and others who lean towards the bad.

And guess what?

We're all sinners.

To ascribe our precious feelings onto another soul buried in a meat sack is a waste of time. Time not wasted would look like this: knowing the truth, knowing what's bad and what's good and loving another human anyway. Because we aren't to judge. We ARE, however, to clothe and feed and humble ourselves even before the ones who spit on us. Even before the ones who are making this life just a wee bit unbearable.

We are not to eat them. Jesus didn't eat people. Remember that.

Every single one has a heart that beats, and I might be going out on a limb here, but none of them taste very good.

So, take your own bleeding heart and wipe it up. Stick a band-aid on it. And realize, it doesn't look much different than anyone else's.

The middle of everything.

I am most peaceful when I seek Jesus, and in seeking Jesus, I can clearly see the “middleness” of things.

There’s a point from which you walk one way, or you walk another, and suddenly you’re up in arms against and far from the middle.

When I read Scripture, I don’t see a vast expanse that takes me into emotional hysterics or a conservative theology that makes me turn my face from any good thing in this present life.

What I see is “sober mindedness,” the ability to process the world around me through the lens of Christ and to never be caught up and away from the path He sets before me.

This is often what man-made religion does. It arcs the path just a bit so that one moment you’re behind the Savior, and the next, behind somebody else.

Church, in some places in time, in some places in the world, becomes a fractured set of ignoble rules and regulations or a people stagnant and in need of a good shaking.

It is often not as Christ defined it: the bride, the body of disciples walking, crosses strapped across backs and enduring the race that is never easy, never kind.

It is often as we define it though: a place to receive an encouraging pat on the back and a “go get ‘em!” as we carry a prosperity gospel close to our hearts.

We have deceived ourselves. We have walked down roads never made for us.

The answer isn’t in the current state of things. The answer is always something, somewhere else. It’s back to the beginning point, to that place where you find yourself in the present moment, to the place where your finger marks Scripture.

The answer is in Jesus who is in the middle of everything.

Trees I'd lay to waste.

My Google Docs file looks a bit like my brain: an unwieldy mess of words and half thoughts that are crammed into digital airspace nobody is bothered by but me.

It truly is killing me slowly.

I'm writing a novel, and I no longer want to be writing this novel. I love the idea, the premise of it. But I'd much rather a better novel writer actually do the writing and maybe I could make the cover and tell them how nice they look in that sweater.

See, now that's a job I'd love to have. Except that's not a job at all, and I think that's the basis of my reality: I can't put hands on who I am and how I'm supposed to be. I just feel...here.

And I'm grateful for the "here." I know a ton of people don't get to exist within it anymore. But I often hear a clock ticking somewhere within the whirl of words and half thoughts, and it brings me back to where I've always been.

Part of me is sad for the old me. Yesterday, I found an old passport photo. I was young and cute and had the clearest skin, and I get why now everyone always said how pretty I was. I don't look like that anymore. Time and stress and hormones have done a real number. But I'm not as depressed about it as I probably should be. I see through that veil of fleshly desires, the vanity that stealthily slithers towards me, but look now at the ax in my hand.

There's a lot more to ponder in this life than a clear complexion.

A friend of mine talks about writing down all the negative thoughts and then crumpling up the paper. Sometimes, I think of how many trees I'd lay to waste.

In the end, whether it's my own cluttered mind seeking to devour me or somebody playing puppet to the devil himself, I remember something, a bit of red on my peripheral.

How God wrote my heart before it even thought to beat. And how that all came to pass without me even thinking about it.

He remembers that we are dust.

I think it all boils down to these little minds of ours. How we can see the world with big eyes or ones that are appropriately small.

How we can either play God's game or ours. Because in the end, the latter choice is the choice to lose. And it's hard living in a world run by the losers. But even harder knowing what happens to them in the end.

This is the true crux of living.

God is a God of order, not chaos. From the very beginning, He takes the tahu vavoho—the wilderness and waste—and creates an organized creature that exists within the perfect parameters to thrive. The right amount of oxygen, the exact turn on an axis. An environment that keeps bodies walking, bodies that don't survive on batteries or electricity, but God's breath itself. He created the order. And we? We rise against it like a bird battering itself against the cage.

I was that bird once. How bruised I felt.

But then one day I marveled at the simplicity of living within my lane. I put aside the big, bright ideas I had because didn't you know I'm the center of the universe? I tucked them under my bed and fell to my knees. I asked the God of my existence, the God of everything, the God of the pain searing through my mind and heart to reform me. To make me into something new.

And part of that journey has meant understanding what it means to be a woman on God's great creation. It means remaining responsible to the ones who depend on me. It means working with my husband on all sorts of matters and trusting his good heart to guide our family. It means scraping off the sticky residue of bitterness and resentment that clings to a soul like gum to a shoe.

It means taking me out of my world and placing me firmly at the feet of my Savior, no longer the star but a hopeful participant.

A lot of the time, I think of God, when he made Adam then Eve. How here was the framework, the working material at His feet. He

must have combed through the dampened dirt and sand and felt the nothingness in His hand but knowing the everything in His heart.

Here were the unformed shoulders He'd build the world upon. The beautiful things that would take life and motion but turn their faces away from Him.

But instead of running His finger over the canvas, an erasure right down our middles, He lets us carry on the play He's written because He remembers that we are dust.

Playing with dolls.

I suppose it's quite like an Elijah/Jezebel thing. Who am I, a mere mortal to stand in the way of money, power, and avarice?

Who am I to tell a different story?

The Gospel is the most amazing tale ever told, woven from the very beginning of time and still braiding together, thread after thread, to this day. It is a story of our dirtiness, our sin, our unwillingness to bow down to God and how God still died for our unholy hearts.

It's a story of how the things we think we want are just worn-out band-aids covering our soul-level problem. That the only way to Jesus is to drop the way of this world, confess and repent our sins, and follow Christ as He wears down our path.

It is not a story easily told to those whose hearts have hardened.

I see their faces, and I see the old me. I see the mocking glint and puckered mouth. I see the rolling eyes and manicured hands. I see the bravado and the pride I used to wear nestled close like the Coach bag against my body.

I was a real piece of work, and I know that kind of work when I see it.

Humbling myself to that kind of thought process is grueling. I really just want to start smacking people, if I'm honest. But as a fellow human being, I know that's not conducive to peeling back the layers of this world to show what's at the core of it: a deep and dirty lie that keeps you apart from God.

Some people have no qualms about that, separation from Jesus. I personally shudder at the thought. The idea of an eternal hell with no hope, separated from the Maker that knows every inch of me? It's not something to take lightly.

So, I'll think about that when I see their well-groomed hair and expensive clothes. I'll remember they're nothing more than a dressed-up

doll playing at life, at the idea of being something more than the plastic parts that are surely meant to break.

As the color of my soul.

I wear black and gray and sometimes navy blue when I'm feeling a tad festive. I blame the fact that I wore a uniform for thirteen years, but I also like to say I wear the colors of my soul.

Kidding, not kidding.

There's always a dichotomy within me. And I'm so keyed into it that I worry how far away from other people I really am. Do other people feel their sin with raw fingertips, the touch just a bit too irritating to the point of constantly overworking it in their minds?

I'm gonna go with, "Are you feeling okay?"

No, apparently not.

It's been a rough season for all involved. We've all been thrown around like a loose sack of marbles, and I feel we're held captive in either two categories: those who have suffered and those who have watched the suffering.

It's a mental merry-go-round. It's a cannon, one spark away from exploding. The world as we know it is no longer the world. It's a sinister slithering in our ears.

As believers, we're not to make friends with this world. It's something I lose sight of from time to time. Not that I'm going to cash in my chips and make plans to head out to Mardi Gras any time soon. But I sometimes get a foothold in my chaos, and I like to watch it order itself into place, if only for a tenuous minute. But then, like everything else, it falls and washes away.

The only true, real, and forever thing in all of this is God. No matter how hard we work the details to fit our own perspective and understanding, God will never fail us but everything else will. Everything else will fade away and all that will remain is the glorious face of God.

I find nothing depressing in that. If anything, it's the only true answer I can rest my heart on. Because I don't understand the bleak landscape, the cold and distant colorless colors that I choose to wear some-

times. I can't explain my hard-won devotion and then the weak attempt at following what I sometimes don't even want to follow.

But I can bet my life on the always was and always will be. On the true and beautiful thing that shines light on my damp and darkened threads.

I can bet my life on the fact that as I think, so I am. But more importantly, so is He.

Perfectly imperfect.

ADHD. It's the non-existent thing that is very existent.

At least in our lives.

I used to be one of the naysayers. Even as a kid when I knew a few friends who were supposedly hyperactive, I always thought it was a copout.

Their parents were horrible people who just couldn't handle the gig.

Oh, Jesus. You're a riot.

I love control. Even if it's a disillusioned sense of having everything together, I absolutely love it. I ~~think~~ *know* that's part of the reason I had to get off social media. I liked the idea of looking good and everyone knowing it.

And really, I think in a sense that's something we all kind of crave. It's a ridiculous drug meant to get us hooked and then take us down.

And even though my online presence is much smaller nowadays, I still get the cravings. I want Ava to listen. I want her to be quiet. I want her to be more like me.

I want her to be perfect.

And here's the problem with that: there's no such thing.

For a while, we were doing medication. She did well with it in the beginning, and it's something that God introduced, and I was grateful for. She was able to still her body for the first time. She was able to take direction.

She could focus.

But all good things must come to an end and our season ended this summer. The side effects became too much. She started to get headaches and nausea and she wasn't gaining the weight she needed to. I was done with it. We all were.

And honestly, I wanted her back. Her funny personality and her unchecked courage.

I think there can be a vital good in doctor assessments and medication. But when those things start to feel like a warped crutch that's doing more harm than good, it's time to let them go.

So, we have this summer. And we've begun the journey of behavioral development and growth, not without a few bumps along the way. But overall, this has given me the opportunity to look imperfection in the eye and give it a firm hug.

Just like God does with me.

All the shades of gray.

I am in the valley.

And not the bad one where vultures are circling and dying to stab out my eyes with their...beaks?

Do vultures have beaks? I don't know. I only went to private school for a million years.

But a valley no less.

I am grateful. I say it over and over again, and I know it too. It's more than a feeling for me. It is me. Because for so long, I was the opposite of it. But right now is a low time. Not in a deeply negative way. Just in a "lull me to sleep and don't set the alarm" kind of way.

Because here's the thing: I'm a doer.

And I'm doing a lot of things. But I'm not doing "the" thing. And I'm starting to learn, my friends, that "the" thing doesn't even exist.

As a perfectionist who wants to box myself in and do that one thing that will mean I've finally arrived (even if it's being the best fitted sheet folder this side of the Mississippi—okay who am I kidding? That honor goes to my mother—or the best vulture knower-about-er in these here parts) I want to shine. And not even for myself anymore. Just to know I'm honoring God.

And that's the kicker. Because in the small still moments, or in the sad, dark moments, those are the ones where I feel Him most.

The everything moments? The ones where I'm on top and killing it? I can't even feel Him hovering.

So, there's a point to the slowness (even though, to be honest, my schedule is far from slow). I guess I mean there's a meaning to the disconnectedness of it all. That black and white are sitting so close together, that I can swipe them both with my brush, only to see the gray.

Nothing in my hands.

I've been doing this all wrong.

In my own self-centered way, I've been raising my daughter in my image. I'm not good at the letting go, the giving up. The watching as control slips its hand out of my own.

She's not me. And I am not God.

I've had a renewal in my faith recently. You might think the Christian life goes something like this: no God, and then God, and then absolute perfection from here on out.

Ha.

Life as a Christian looks more like an EKG. The ups and downs of the human heart are always inevitable. So, there has been a wide desert I've been roaming for some time now. My faith shattered, my heart on a deep coast downward. But we've been listening to Tim Mackie of *The Bible Project* who gets down to the nitty gritty: this whole thing is a story of life eternal with Christ at its core. It's not about harps and white robes and angelic singing in your ear. It's about the here and now and the constant renewal and restoration God freely gives us. It's about the heartbeat of this world that will keep beating into the next. And how all of this is merely reliant on a faith in a God who's bled real blood for us.

And if life is determinant on something way beyond me, why do I expect to be the one to "fix" my daughter? My daughter doesn't need fixing. My perception does.

She is beautiful and bold and says and does things I only dare to do in my head. She can't be caged in and "good girl'd" into submission. She is truly and fully her own creature who is hell bent on charging forward in a rush of pure justice and laughs almost maniacally sometimes when something hits her funny bone.

And she can be crude and rude and find the words that weave swordlike into your soul because nobody is perfect. Especially not her.

And yet, she is exactly everything God has intended her to be.

So, I can't force her submission to Him. And I certainly can't let fear play into my hopes of her loving Christ and committing to Him through an act of baptism. I have to let her choose Him in the same way He's chosen her.

He's the one who's writing this story. I'm merely the reader.

One of the smartest things she's said is that she's not ready for baptism right now. She loves Jesus and she's on His team, as she says. But she doesn't want to get baptized just because everyone else is. She wants to wait until she can fully accept the weight of what following Christ is all about.

She's weighing the cost. Jesus knows a little something about that (*Luke 14:28*).

And isn't it ironic that a former atheist turned Jesus freak at thirty-three is overly concerned about somebody else's spiritual formation at this age? I mean a lifetime is a lifetime, and sometimes, it takes that long to know the truth.

To count the cost of what we build.

This one's for you, Mel.

I wasn't going to write today. I've been too busy dancing with a demon and crying at very inopportune times, like driving towards incoming traffic and pretending I'm singing my favorite Hanson song to throw off the faces speeding towards me.

These? They aren't tears. They're mmmmbops.

But then my father called. And after I spoke to him, I had to sit down and write.

My father is the male version of me. Or perhaps I'm the female version of him. I've known this for a very long time on a very deep level. We have our differences, of course. He's the guy who the entire line to Spaceship Earth knows by the time we enter the ride and who is thrown a "Hey, Mel!" as we're walking through Epcot, whereas I'm sitting down in said line, talking to my friend. And by friend, I mean reading a book. And the only time anyone says "Hey!" to me is when I accidentally walk into the men's restroom. But besides that, we're practically the same person.

He has a heart for greatness, just like me. It's just that our circumstances have never gotten the memo.

But here's the thing about my dad: he's the hardest worker I know. And everyone loves him because he genuinely loves them. He's taken care of his family from day one, and I always think how amazing it is in this day and age to have somebody who truly loves you, no strings attached.

So, in my mind, he is great. But just like him, I have a hard time seeing this in myself.

I keep typing up those memos, but it seems like they've all been sent to nowhere.

So, talking to him was a reminder of what great really looks like, and I have to imagine it's the same sort of great God is on board with. A heart outward-focused and a mind tailored to the good of others.

And a soul set free from its former binds.

Now if you'll excuse me, I seem to have an mmmmbop in my eye.

Reading the fine print.

My daughter wants to be a detective when she grows up.

This means she'll have to be a police officer first.

It's taken everything in me not to shout, "Do you even watch the news??" Which would be a moot point considering I already know she doesn't.

Also, I don't either.

But the blaring screens at my gym seem to think being a police officer is a losing game right now, and my child apparently didn't get that memo. She talks about her future career like God's already printed it on her heart, and she's merely reading the directions.

She reminds me of when I was twelve and knew I was going to be a writer some day.

You can't stop what providence is already in the midst of working out. As much as I want to worry and cry and scream and pull out my hair at the idea, I'm also realizing she's been built for this.

Her journey is to bring God glory, not me.

Her life won't be easy, but that's not something any of us are promised. My only hope, really, is that her life is used for the good of others and that she bows to nobody but God.

Bless my rough-edged heart.

Last Sunday, my husband and I were asked to pray over marriages in our congregation.

The idea was perplexing.

Me? The closet lunatic that I am? The woman who sometimes tears up mid-sip of her tea feeling like her plight in the world is to live like Jeremiah, lamenting societal woes, and yet still brushing up on the mechanics of the air fryer just so she can seem to fit in?

You want me to pray? For somebody else's marriage?

Like I said, perplexed.

If anyone were to receive a medal in this world, it would be my husband. Matt's not perfect. He'll claim as such...depending on what day it is. But the man is the epitome of patience and intestinal fortitude, two things with which a person needs to be equipped to deal with a thirty-something struggling writer and stay-at-home mom who claims her oven is trying to break up with her.

It is not easy being Matt Clay.

But he does it anyways, with great finesse, and I started to lean into the idea of praying for other people's marriages because at least he would be standing there with me, watering down my extreme flavor of crazy so that God would stand in our midst and hear our prayers.

But we all know that's not how this works.

Here I am, a raw and vulnerable, imperfect, and rough-edged servant. I want to add "humble" to that list. I think I'd willingly die for that word to be written on my tombstone. But God and I both know we still have work to do to get me there.

So instead, I'll say this: I have a broken heart that always needs mending. And I'm not too proud to announce that only Jesus can do that work. So maybe that's why I was asked to pray for others.

Because I know God hears those who know they need it most.

Just another day.

We're painting our house.

There's a mess all over the floor, and opened containers of paint on my kitchen counters, and wall things that have become floor things, and an overall sense of life being askew and order being put on hold.

My dog ate a bird today. Okay well, really, just killed it and played around with it for a second and wore a big old dog smile like, "What a great way to kick off a Wednesday, am I right?" It got me thinking about when Roxie was still alive and Rocco had killed yet another bird and she kept hopping around in a gleeful little circle, head snapping back and forth between me and the bird in an attempt for me to truly understand how amazing her life was in that moment. Heck, she hadn't even killed the bird, and she was pretty darn proud of herself.

I've always really respected her for that.

Today, my daughter's main project was to sort through the U-haul moving box I've used to store all of her schoolwork and art projects from preschool to present day. And by store, I mean dump into the cavernous inside and cram under the extra desk in my husband's office. She dumped out the contents all over the floor, and everything that's made her who she is today stared right back at her.

She was perplexed at the number of teacher write-ups she received in a not so flattering vein: *Ava decided to randomly bite her friend today as they were sitting quietly next to each other; Ava refuses to listen, so we need to start utilizing the sticker chart again; Ava started a small fire in the girls' bathroom and convinced her friends to burn their shoes while she sang the theme song from The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse.* Okay, that last one may or may not be exaggerated a bit, but you could tell she wouldn't have been surprised if she came across something like that.

It was such a reminder of the pain of wanting what you used to have, when at the time, it wasn't worth the pain of holding it in your hand. But now, spread out all over the floor in the presence of drying

paint and dog breath that stinks of bird innards, I think on that pain, how it must mean we're still here, still alive. And I thank God for the little moments that never seem to matter.

Me and my golden calf.

Sometimes, the prettiest people have the ugliest hearts.

There's a somebody I used to know who was my golden calf. I hated having an idol, but I needed an idol. Something to admire with my eyes and say, "This is what you don't measure up to." And then I'd dig my fingernails into the dirt, crawling and climbing to some version of myself that I thought would measure up.

There is no such version.

This person was pretty, and now? She's beautiful. She lives in a far-away land, and I imagine her net worth is an unending swimming pool filled with a hundred-dollar bills that would give Scrooge McDuck a mild panic attack.

This person is all about this person—so much so, they don't even need me to worship them anymore.

I'm thirty-six. I'm too old for idols. No, that's not correct. I'm too learned for idols, perhaps. I know the Lord. He calls and turns my face away, and the gold is no longer gold but a slight pile of ash.

My heart aches for this woman.

Can you imagine crawling and digging your way until you finally make it? And you cover the truth of yourself in makeup and hair and clothes so nobody can see the way your skin cracks at night, giving way to the ugly inside you? You become what they need you to become, and you believe the lie because the only other option is to crawl back down and come to terms with what you never could before.

Oz behind the curtain.

I think the sweetest thing God ever did for me was to release my claws and set me down on solid earth again. It's where I can stand and see the birds in the beautiful bright sky.

And the only golden thing about this place is the sun, and the way it warms my face.

Up, up, and away.

It's like a long-lost friend and someone I've never met.

It has the most beautiful deep-set eyes the shade of royal blue.

It's like family I never wanted to know and a mother who doesn't know how to love.

It is everything to me and nothing at all.

My first ride with it was when I was sixteen, and there was a sharp bend in the road, and I fell back on myself. And this whole time I thought I was inching forward, but that's what happens when you can't see a thing.

It's addictive, the dark. I didn't quit it until my early thirties, and I sometimes still wait up for it to say hello.

Like a couple of days ago. I'm cleaning up my act and getting off caffeine again. The three days of torment that come with something like that is beyond physical for me. It's spiritual. There was a looming energy that didn't want to leave. When I'm on caffeine, I feel mildly satisfied like a baby with its bottle. But then as the day wears on, there's a poor-tempered spirit that rears its ugly head, just tame enough to not do any real damage. "Bad mood," "grumpy," "short fuse" — different dresses, the same doll. It really isn't a good look on anyone.

God was the one who asked me to get off caffeine again. "Why do all the bad things always happen to me?" That was pretty much my attitude. Not great.

I kept ignoring Him until the physical side effects were too much to take. Oily hair, bad skin, a dull ache in my temple. He knows how to get me. So, I gave in, and I thought not getting my daily high would be the worst of my sorrows.

Not so.

It was a three-day battle with a darkness that kept dragging me back down. A look in the mirror, a whisper in the ear. A whole bottle full of crazy shaken over the drain. If it weren't for the Holy Spirit, I'm not

sure I would be standing here right now. That ever-present guard of my heart who loves me enough to look the deep in the eye and turn it shallow.

I'm on the other side now. No more dull ache in my head. Better hair, better skin. But most importantly better sense of who God is and His purpose for me. How easy we fall into traps because society deems them acceptable. And on the same note, how easy we ban things that might give an inch of pleasure, and in doing so, make them idols as well.

The point is, listen to Jesus and listen to the ones who know Him. All others are chasing a high that'll soon float away.

The long game.

She says something smells, and it must be me. I sniff at my clothes, and she laughs saying, "Did you ever think you'd end up this way back when you were cool?"

She gives me way too much credit.

But no. I didn't think I'd end up like this. There's a multitude of good in it. Sometimes, something that passes as news catches my eye when I run at the gym, and I think about how grateful I am. How grateful I should be. But there's always that bitter lining of reality that's stitched in the seams. It's my own foul attitude toward the things that define me whether I should be grateful for them or not.

I suppose that speaks more to who I used to be. A creator of lies I thought I'd one day live. If somebody irked me, no matter. They'd one day witness me winning the Pulitzer Prize and that would surely put them in their place. Why I imagined a nine-year-old would ever be intimidated by a fancy writing award is beyond me. I guess I thought I'd play the long game.

I am not a Pulitzer Prize winner. I did win a goldfish at a carnival once that lived for three years, so I suppose all is not lost. But I'm finding winning isn't in the bigger things but in the small building blocks of an everyday life. One foot in front of the other. One seed planted in a row. Sprinkle it with water, watch it grow.

She shoves her laundry into the open mouth of the washer, and I sniff at myself again. This time, a little less obviously.

You only live forever.

You don't only live once, you live a lifetime times seventy-seven and will walk eternal. And the dark quiet void of the universe isn't talking to you, but God is certainly beating His fist against your breastbone. And you can "self-care" all you want, putting your oxygen mask on first, but a hot bath and a candle can never replace the Holy Spirit.

And I can be absorbed within the realms of American culture, but here's the thing: I won't.

I've always been an odd duck. I remember one time staging a slight coup where I made my two best friends sit with me at another table while I looked Stacey McStevens hard in the eye. I was tired of being on the fringe of the popular group. I was tired with the idea of popular. I wanted to slice through the cord that still tethered me to the divisive ways of middle school social constructs.

I wanted out. And God has always known that about me.

Jesus culture is an upside down place, a kingdom where up is down and down is up. You humble yourself to be elevated. You bend a knee to save a heart. It is not "me first," but you before me always, and it is so counter to American culture, it makes my soul sing.

I am tired of this place on so many levels. And the idea of swallowing a new wayward, misleading catchphrase of the week like popping a pill is akin to digging out a bad tooth with a spoon.

I'm good, you guys.

What's more heartbreaking is seeing people I love and respect fall prey to the outside world. But there's always something about their faces. Their eyes that are looking out at me like a scared child planting their face against a window. That look, the "I'm okay with this because they tell me I should be okay with this."

But friend, you don't have to be okay with this.

Stand up, stare hard, and go sit where God wants you.

When I miss this too.

I have this knack for missing the everything that's still here.

Like when I was younger, I'd write my father's obituary in my head. He's a lovely guy, and really, it was a lovely obituary. Or obituaries? I've written several and have stacked them within the soft recesses of my brain.

The now is always the thing I'll miss most.

Like last night, that dream. There my husband and I were meandering in a place I've never been before. He had the zippable, fold-up picnic blanket in his hand that I bought a few years ago from Wal-Mart. I bought the gray and black and red checkered one, the only one available. And then the following year they came out with the cutest blue and white pattern as if somebody in corporate was trying to stick it to me. Regardless, there it was in his dream hand, patting the side of his dream leg as we were trying to find a place to sit and hold each other.

We never found a place to sit down. Instead, I had sharp snippets of memory during this dream where I remembered our dead dog. And it was almost like we were on a grief walk, passing a concrete drainage ditch where two young hikers, mere boys, were trying to enter through a steel door, and one of them looked up, clueless as to where they were. And I had that all knowing feeling in my chest, "This is So-And-So-Ville" as if I knew it so well, I owned a piece of it and carried it in my left ventricle. We continued on, and the snippets sharpened, and there my dog was in my dream's dream hands and she was almost the same as when the real me knew every inch of the real her. I think that's what I learned. That I don't really remember her so well anymore.

As we walked on, and the sharp snippets dulled a bit, there was a portion of the walk where we caught up with some children. My daughter was one of them. I looked back over my shoulder, and she was meandering and looping through the crowd, trying to find the group she originally came with. She ended up with another group because she had

friends in this one too. One of the neighbor girls walked with her. I smiled and turned back because her path was different than mine. A loose balloon, that one. Sometimes I grab the string and tug, and then other times I realize my hand is empty.

My husband and I kept walking as I imagine my daughter had floated off with her friends. I remember we kept looking around, trying to find the best spot to sit down and sit still together. We couldn't find a spot. So, we agreed to go back to the starting place, home base, which happened to be built on top of a tree.

I'm not good at dreams, deciphering them I mean. I'm hardly good at fully understanding consciousness. I had this great calling once to follow Jesus, and here I am on this path looking as clueless as that dream hiker kid. I look around, and just like in my subconscious mind, my dog is still dead. And my daughter has gone off with the neighbor kids, racing their bikes and picking onion grass from the lawns of the homeowners up and down our street. She has this grand plan to sell it right back to them. And my husband? He's in his office, and sometimes he comes out and grabs my hand, and we walk around the stamped outline of seventeen hundred and thirty-nine square feet, just trying to find a place to rest.

And Jesus? He still loves me, at least that's what I've been told.

I greatly hope He knows what He's doing.

Feeding the hole in your heart.

The art of simplifying starts on the inside out.

There's a lot of layers of this going on in my own life. I've started to shear back even the amount of supplements I take.

Less is more and more is a heart attack.

Have you ever thought about our daily consumption? Christ gives us our daily bread, and yet, there's so much on the daily for us to consume through our eyes, ears, and mouths. Houses are cluttered and messy. The kids are watching YouTube videos they shouldn't. Obesity is at an all-time high.

And yet we're an evolved species, no? I'm sorry, I wasn't laughing. Okay, I'm sorry again because I totally was.

We are the same people we were when Adam and Eve walked this earth, heads held high to the heavens. We're bent on the same thing: our personal gain. The only problem is that we're a flawed species, ruinous and caustic from the taste of sin. So, our issue isn't owning five toasters still in their boxes.

Our issue is our hearts.

My newsletter readers know I'm taking a novel-writing break and writing a non-fiction book about this very thing. Home (and life) organization can't happen (or at least can't be sustained) without first searching ourselves and knowing where we stand with God.

From that, all other things flow.

Are you spending time with God? Is it in the form of a rote prayer you've said for ages, yet you feel just as stale as the first time you muttered it? Is this time the thirty seconds before you scroll through your Instagram feed?

We're our own worst enemies, you guys. I can't even claim that role for Satan since we all know what will happen to him in the end. But us? We have the power through Christ to claim what God has promised

to us, if only we listen. But how can we listen if we won't even sit with Him for a moment?

Look around you. What's cluttering your head and heart right now? I can guarantee no matter what the problem is, the solution always comes back to whether or not you're standing beneath God's wing for protection. Joy isn't happiness. Joy is the solace of knowing you are God's even when it's storming around you. If you don't know that, it's no wonder there's a million dirty socks on your couch right now.

The good news? You already know the way to reverse the course.

An empty bucket makes the loudest sound.

I've lost my edge, I think.

I'm typically a wound-up top—let me go, and I spin until I crash into the wall.

And not one glorious bang, but several awkward thumps that make you want to squint and look away.

I changed that this week. I'm always perplexed at the idea of not changing. Old dog, new tricks and all that. There are some people who throw up their hands and go, "I am who I am," and I've never related to that.

I am who I am...this week.

I used to think maybe I was roughly two percent sociopath. I mean if everyone else is so uniquely and utterly themselves, why do I play into these different parts of myself like trying on wigs? But I don't hate the thought so much anymore. Being restrained to one thing forever? Now that's what scares me.

God sometimes is the ultimate conductor. I imagine Him watching, perfectly timing my crescendo at the ultimate point so there's nothing for me to do but swallow down my own reverberations and think hard on whether or not I ever want to hear my own noise again.

What I'm saying is this: I've gotten to the point where I've let stress own me. I'm an all or nothing human being. My all? Homeschooling an ADHD child, morphing into a gym rat, OCD organizing my home, living at Wal-Mart (why? nobody knows), being involved in forty-two ministries at church (most of them I don't even think I officially signed up for, they just sort of bloomed like a well-meaning but exhausting flower), and seeking out people I can pour into on the daily.

My bucket was empty you guys, and God sent it clanging down the well.

So I've changed things this week. Did you know you can do that? You can just go, "yeah no more," and make life worth living again? I'm just working out three times a week now, not five, and reduced my exercises. I've come to the realization there's no possible way my house could be more organized and refuse to freak out if I see a lone sock on the living room floor. Deep breaths and all that. I'm loving and learning the ways of my child (thank you, podcasts) and getting more in tune with her needs as she gets older. I've broken up with Wal-Mart (we still see each other on grocery days—awkward but necessary), I'm putting more intention into my church duties now that my overall plate is a little lighter, and this has seeped into my personal relationships with those I'm spending time with.

You are not just the way you are. You are the way you choose to be.

With God's grace we get do-overs every twenty-four hours. Heck, every second of the day really.

When I remember that, I don't beat myself up. I just keep true to the p-word (perseverance—let's just go ahead and clear that up) and walk in step with My Lord who's always waiting with living water.

A fearless heart in the back of a wagon.

I'm not afraid of this world.

There was a time when I became very, very afraid. Like when I first became a Christian and it was that scene from *The Stepford Wives* all over again. I'd look around, and I'd see nothing but blind people more concerned for their caramel macchiato orders than the truth happening all around them.

I used to be one of those people. Hardcore.

In the beginning, it's scary. You lose everything you know. You lose yourself, or at least the person you thought was yourself. You lose friends or people you thought were your friends. You look up, and you're alone.

But then you remember, you're never really alone.

I used to never feel alone growing up. Even without submitting to God, I could feel Him even though I denied it. Sure, I had horrible phases of anxiety and depression and the loneliness that seeps in came with the whole shebang. But I almost felt like someone was watching me, reading me like a character in a book.

What's happening now all around us doesn't surprise me. There's no fear in my heart.

If anything, it gives further evidence of what the Bible has said all along: we are losing ourselves and taking each other with us.

It's easy to do when you refuse to bend your knee.

I wrote a poem once called "When We go to the Butcher." It's about being taken and sitting in the back of a horse-drawn wagon and silently writing an apology letter to my daughter in my head. In the poem, I watch her face, her hands, the everything she'll never get to be because the enemy's won, and I'm helpless to save her from her fate. Here's that poem:

WHEN WE GO TO THE BUTCHER

When we go to the butcher,

I'll hold your hand so hard
my memory will seep
through your pores
and you'll be looking
down on your little eyes
and little nose
and two lips glued
tight into a cherub's smile
and you will hear my heart
at your ear
and the way it says "I'm sorry."
When we go to the butcher
your father will be sitting
at my right, and at my left,
an empty place where fear
resides, and if I could
be a something better.
we'd never be riding
in the first place.
When we go to the butcher
remember all those times,
but not just the good.
Remember me, a little
monster,
a fly off the handle,
hellish time of a girl
turned woman
turned something,
turned and pickled
with fear's empty space.
But when we go to the butcher
also know about my brave

little heart.

How courage is what lights

it a-thump.

And alights yours, too,

with my hopelessly

hopeful prayers.

But isn't that every day though? The idea that we really have no control over anything?

Our children are not ours. WE are not ours. Ownership belongs to God alone and we are merely here to enact His will, one that trumps anything we could ever plan to do.

There's no fear when somebody else is in charge. There's just constant observation and a heart struggling with the reality of seeking light in the darkness.

And really, you can't even hear the "I'm sorry" that plays on my lips anymore.

Just your neighborhood woman child.

I've been praying.

And praying.

And praying.

I know there are people who think praying for "trivial" things is silly, but I pray when I get a paper cut. And I messy-pray. I mean I sound like an over-exhausted toddler God has to constantly carry around on His hip.

I'm thirty-six. I should be invested in the lives of celebrities I'll never meet and air frying the blinds on our windows, but I'm at the point in life where I only have one question on my mind 99% of the time:

God, what is it you want me to do?

I'm a writer by trade. Okay, maybe not by trade because that would insinuate I actually make a living at this gig. I don't. I do it because my heart loves it, and everything in my DNA tells me this is what He wants from me. I used to not think that way. I used to be an atheist who thought I was randomly born with a genius hardly anybody understood, which in my mind, naturally made me better than pretty much anyone.

Obviously, I was never really good at math.

I'm the current day Paul of Tarsus, scales at my feet and my eye open wide. And I'm looking around and want to shake everyone and go, "KIM KARDASHIAN DOESN'T CARE IF YOU GET EXTENSIONS TO LOOK LIKE HER!" but I feel like my noise would fall on deaf ears.

And yet? Jesus has written a message within me, and I know I'm tasked to put it on (digital) paper. Okay, and real paper, too. So, my prayer, the answered portion of the "What should I do?" question is this:

What I made you to do.

My newsletter peeps already know how I shut down my social media and my blog. All that social stuff is gone for good for me (I enjoy quiet and living life without captioning it in my head for Insta way too much). But I missed blogging. It's going to look different. All my past posts served their purpose. Now, I think I'm just supposed to show you who I am without a smidge of pretense.

I am a woman child who still likes Hanson and wonders why nobody smiles anymore. I'm a woman child who's loved by Jesus and wants to show that love to others. Not to convert them. I can do no such thing. But to remind them whose they are, and to pray deeply that they return to a Father who's never stopped loving them.

Also? I'm back to writing a book. It's a small and secret project that I might talk little about or everything about. Who knows with me.

I'm grateful to be walking on the right path. Funny how many twists and turns there always are, but I suppose that's half the fun of it.

In the meantime, I hope God's limbered up that hip of His. I feel another prayer coming on.

The one in which I die.

I think what I'm about to embark on will be huge but not in the sense that I always thought it would. And I'm starting to realize the gift in that.

The younger me (let's call her "Little Ericka" for funsies) would spend hours in front of the mirror, pretending to sit on Oprah's white couch as she deprecatingly answered all of O's questions about how she was able to publish fourteen million books and marry Prince William at the ripe old age of sixteen.

Delusions of grandeur. I'm afraid to look that phrase up in the dictionary lest I see somebody I used to know.

Nowadays? I'm dying. I don't mean that literally (although technically, we're all doing that, some just slower than others). What I mean is that I'm suffocating the illusion I always had in the back of my brain of who I was "supposed" to be. Or maybe I should say "disillusionment." I am no more that naive little girl who thought blinking would produce a multi-million-dollar book deal.

Let's just say, I'm sitting here because it definitely didn't.

Who I am is no longer wrought by my own hands. Instead? I've given me to Jesus. (And yeah, considering I was an atheist five mere years ago, I get how weird that will sound to a lot of you). But I've given everything I am over to my Creator, and I'm patiently waiting as He reveals the me I shall become.

You know that phrase "it's all in the journey"? They're not lying about that. It's not about the goal itself, or achieving it, or the way your heart beats to break your ribs when you've accomplished the unimaginable. It's about persevering as God molds you into the perfect version of you for *HIS* glory.

Not yours. Certainly not mine.

It's about Him. It's why I created this imprint. I want to be the vessel He uses to bring others (and myself) closer to Him.

I've never met Oprah. I most likely never will.

But I've met an incredible Father who keeps opening doors and windows for my willing little heart. And really? That's all that matters anymore.

Running with wolves.

I gave my testimony the other night before the women's group at my church. It was surreal. I hate public speaking, and crowds, and people focusing all their attention on me (which is why I'll ask you a million questions so I never have to talk about myself), but I prayed hard that the Holy Spirit would take the lead and boy, did he ever.

I'm pretty sure I blacked out, but everyone said I did well so there's that.

Following Jesus means doing hard things. It sometimes means giving everything about yourself for little return. And here's the rub: why am I even holding my hand out, waiting to receive something in the first place?

This isn't about me. It's about Him.

In Luke (14:25-34), there's a passage that talks about counting the cost of following Jesus. I've encountered people who seem to think church is just a weekly commitment, a Sunday ritual that's as familiar as making a morning cup of coffee but not much more.

Why even go?

I don't go to church to socialize. I HATE socializing, which again, is why I have to pray every second I'm there that the Holy Spirit takes over and softens my heart. I tend to be a cynical creature and have to ask God on the daily to tame my acerbic tongue and steady my eyes in my head lest they roll right out of their sockets.

The old Ericka was a real peach, FYI.

I go to church because hurting people go to church, and I want to know those people. I'm a "fringe seeker." I want to know where the pained ones congregate so I can be there too. I want to hear their stories. I want to pray with them. I want them to see what's happened to me, behind what looks like a relatively put together person. Because we all have that: our outward persona. It's our inward one that's worth sharing.

Jesus said to be shrewd (Luke 16:1-13). To keep our eyes out for the wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 10:16). I think this is something that most Christians forget about. People generally just want to be nice, and make friends, and not rock the boat. But I want truth. I want to use my brain and heart to navigate towards those who are truly called to seek God.

Because that's the thing: not everyone at church is.

But again, I have to also give my thoughts and words and mind and heart to Jesus. I am not the judge here. I keep my eyes open, but I also have to keep my love constantly available.

Because I used to be the problem, the wolf likely to devour a few beating hearts.

And if I can change, well, so can anyone.

The Chosen.

Growing up Catholic, the idea that God has chosen the elect before he even set to creating our physical forms left a bitter taste in my mouth.

I've always been in favor of choice, of people making their own decisions and basking in that warm beautiful glow of free will.

And of course, when I became an atheist, this notion took root and weeded through my barely beating heart.

But ultimately, I'm a writer. And if I look too deeply into my (newly renewed) blood pumping organ, I can feel the idea of knowing and watching and willfully deciding fate at any given time sitting snugly behind my breastbone.

As a creator, I control the created.

As God, he controls our salvation.

I was listening to a podcast about this by Dale Partridge. If you haven't listened to *Real Christianity*, I highly recommend you do. The American version of Christianity that runs rampant on every street corner does a poor job of giving followers a real Biblical perspective of the world around us.

And if you're anything like me, books are the road maps to this life. Good thing, God has written us one.

A thousand paper cuts.

Writing this feels a little like walking to the guillotine. Honestly, I've never done it, but I'm sure my physical reaction would be similar.

My eyes hurt from the unchecked tears, and I can't breathe. My skin feels like it's suffering a thousand papercuts.

It's death, just the slow-stepped version of it.

Our dog died Christmas morning. That sounds too neat. Too cut and dry.

Okay, so here's this: my everything died Christmas morning. Not just my dog, but my past, my security, my understanding of this world.

My mistaken hope in what I can see and hold with my hands.

Roxie. Her name was Roxie. And we had her for thirteen years. A lifetime compact in a small body who loved me, unconditionally. I don't know how to do that, frankly. I don't know how to love anything so complete and pure. But she did. She taught me that.

I'm still learning.

The worst is maybe at night when I've forgotten who I am and what this feels like until my eyes open, and for one unfiltered second, everything is as it should be, until it isn't. There are no good morning kisses. No early breakfast or bathroom break. No sharp barks at her bowl and the back door to inform me of the former. There's no her. There's no holding her and the way she'd grab my face with her paws and kiss me, and I swear that kiss could heal my heart.

I'm not always so good at living. I'm not always so good at peopling. I doubt myself and play the reel tape of all my mistakes, and Roxie was like having an assistant coach who'd kick me in the shins and tell me to stop being so hard on myself.

I guess my greatest fear is that I don't know how to navigate something like that alone.

There's a new phase on the horizon. It was inching in while Roxie was still here. My daughter is growing older and plays with her friends

in the afternoon. My husband has a full-time job. And then there's me. I write. I do that. I'm not that bad at it, I guess. But the thing is, my computer never talks back. It won't give me a hug. It won't wake me out of my reverie with a sharp bark and a look.

I am now left to my own devices. The world is my oyster, as they say. And it seems to taste pretty rotten.

There are good things that have come from this. God has stripped me bare, and when He does that, I have to cling to Him. There is no other option. I can get angry. I can walk away. But when I do, I feel more alone than before.

He's making me move, and my feet stumble towards him.

But there's also the unknown, the bitter fact that there's no Scriptural evidence that dogs go to heaven or anywhere pleasant for that matter. But I suppose, also, there's no Scriptural evidence that they don't. It would just be nice to have a window in the sky, a thin piece of glass I could press my nose against to watch her. To know she's still safe and loved.

And that's the thing. I'm no longer in control of that. And it hurts like hell.

So, here's something I'd like to say:

Dear Roxie,

You were and are so beautiful. You prepared me for motherhood. You helped prepare my heart to love others. You saw so much. You witnessed who I was before Jesus and who I was after. You gave me so much love and friendship, and when I doubted who I was and what I have to offer, I could see it reflected back to me in your eyes. We all miss you. Daddy and me and Ava and Rocco. We're peering down a tunnel that leads away from this place, this moment. And it's hard to keep walking and leave you here. But I'm afraid I don't have any other option. We've been really good to each other in our grief. And we'll continue to love each other like we loved you.

I'm sorry, baby girl. I'm sorry I have no say in this. I'm sorry I couldn't keep you here forever. And my biggest prayer is that all of this is quite all right. That somewhere, you're kicking me in the shins again, you're holding my face in your tiny paws, and you're telling me everything is perfectly as it should be.

I love you.

Mama

Like I said, a thousand papercuts, all screaming for attention. And all I have in my back pocket is the wind on my face and a Father who heals all wounds.

I pray with all my heart, it is enough.

"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)

God only knows.

My most favorite and maybe even most fearsome picture is one of the author Joan Didion. She's standing on the upper decking of a beach house that sits nestled close to the ocean, cigarette in hand, as her daughter Quintana and husband, John, lean against the railing close together, lips lifted in small smiles.

The things that grab my heart like two hands:

1. Joan is looking at them, not the camera.
2. Several years later, Quintana and John will die two years apart and Joan will live to write about it.

Live to write about it.

I feel like I'm doing a lot of that now.

My favorite prophet is Jeremiah. This seems like a non-sequitur, but I promise, it isn't. He's tasked with a huge ask: to share God's words condemning idolatry, the greed of priests, false prophets...

He was only a child. And his reluctance took flight like a bird in a closed fist.

I feel that feeling. It's like looking around and everything being in its exact place, but you know something's off because you simply can't breathe.

It reminds me of what I read (okay fine, listened to) about C.S. Lewis. One of his biographers dubbed him a reluctant prophet because He was an atheist called to God, not some studied Biblical scholar who knew all the answers.

The thing about C.S. is that he acknowledged the answers were very few but the evidence palpable. We can see enough of the detail to make out the picture. Or we can choose to be blind.

C.S. changed his entire paradigm for Jesus. He was also given a wife who died of cancer and he, too, lived to write about it. And so, he did.

Because God asked him to. But he couldn't swallow for a while. Swallowing, breathing. Different steps to the same dance.

I am not saying I'm a prophet. I am saying there's a message shoved deep, a small bundle of letters trapped between the rocks of my ribs. There are so many different colors about this place: the bright red that tastes like bile because I can't go back. There's a wall every time I turn around; a yellow, nauseous aura that consumes my mind when I first wake up, and that feeling of everything being the same but everything being different when I breathe in air; the cold hard blue of truth that God is in control and anything I ever thought tasted like it was mere metal in my mouth.

If you need proof, God already gave it to Job (Job 38:1-18):

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

'Or who shut in the sea with doors

when it burst out from the womb?—

when I made the clouds its garment,

and thick darkness its swaddling band,

and prescribed bounds for it,

and set bars and doors,

and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther,

and here shall your proud waves be stopped"?

*Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,
so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?*

*It is changed like clay under the seal,
and it is dyed like a garment.*

*Light is withheld from the wicked,
and their uplifted arm is broken.*

*Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?*

*Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?*

Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?

Declare, if you know all this.

I sometimes wonder about that picture of Joan. I have a nonsensical thought, that maybe if she could have just looked up at the camera for one second, maybe the outcome would have been different. Maybe living and writing wouldn't have been her only options.

But I know I'm a fool to think that. She chose the better thing. To look at all God had given her (whether or not she knew that's what she was doing) and to prolong that one moment before her worst nightmare became the only task God asked of her.

You take up your cross. You carry it. And God only knows to where you shall walk.

We don't live there anymore.

I'm starting to realize I've cried more for a chihuahua mix this past week than I ever have for any human being.

I'm starting to worry about myself a bit.

But I'm also not worried one iota. This week has been the hardest and the best one of my life. For the first time, my toes have edged the threat of death, and I've gotten the opportunity to stare it directly in the face.

And I'm still here.

I'm realizing now where the suffering in my heart is coming from. Sure, I'm devastated I won't see my dog again here on this earth, and there have been a few growing pains knowing life is still moving around me even when my chest feels empty (and that it's probably less than beneficial for me to wear last night's pajamas while watching Dr. Phil and eating ice cream straight from the carton in bed—but how fun, right?). I have to go out. I have to look people in their faces. But what's even harder to swallow than that is knowing I have to look back on the gift God gave me and weigh the purpose Roxie put forth in this world.

Love. Unconditional. It's what she taught me. That, and having a gusto for playing ball and eating until you want to pass out. But I'll probably take a rain check on the latter.

I've made it my life's mission to do just this. It will look messy and awkward and have a complete Ericka twist to it where you'll tell me something and then I'll have you repeat it because I was busy daydreaming what it would be like to zoom through Wal-Mart wearing a jet pack.

I have a lot going on upstairs. Apparently.

But my heart will be in the right place even if I have to keep roughly repositioning it.

I didn't cry last night. I didn't have a panic attack, wondering about the void that is death and how it feels like its consuming every inch of me. I slept peacefully.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (*John 16:33*)

It's what I wholeheartedly believe.

Two things: Horatio Spafford wrote "It Is Well" after his son died in the Great Chicago Fire (which also ruined him financially) and four of his daughters died on a ship he put them on because he was delayed helping D. L. Moody with his upcoming evangelistic campaigns. His ship had to pass the exact location where his daughters had perished, and as his own ship moved past their final resting place, he wrote this:

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

That, my friends, is what true faith is.

People always ask why bad things happen. As a writer, I couldn't understand a world in which they didn't. The bad is a dark shadow on a lonely plane and on that lonely plane is a house. It's where we used to live and wallow in darkness but at the right exact time, the moon comes, and hovers above, it's great orb of white highlighted by the other side of the sun. And we are bathed in everything good, and we feel it too: the high of letting go and loving until it hurts, bits of us flecking off like dust back to the earth.

And then the door opens and our feet are spurred to move down the path, closer to God.

And at that exact moment, we realize, we don't live there anymore.

Burn those boxes.

My experience of following Jesus started with the demonic. It was a black night terror sort of feeling and yet a strong powerful buzz that rushed through every single one of my cells.

God showed me the true darkness that lies beneath the shiny facade of this world. I didn't know why until I had time to think and pray on it:

1. I would never have become a Christian unless something drastic occurred (check).
2. He wanted me to understand the power Satan can have over people (check check).

It's easy to turn on the television and see skin and flesh and hate it with all your might. And if we go that route, that's exactly the sort of thing the enemy will enjoy, sitting back to slow clap.

“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*)

A lot of us are trying to make sense of all these things and jam them tight into poorly made boxes. It's a waste of perfectly good energy, friend.

And then, on top of that, once the boxes are crammed and the seams are spent and broken open, we like to go online and talk about what we've just done. How we're right, everyone else is wrong, and ultimately, we've solved the problem.

No. We are all wrong. Jesus is right. And he already solved the problem by dying on the cross.

You feel itchy, no doubt. Your hands want to do something, your mouth wants to say something. Well, there's good news. You've already been given a directive and here's how that plays out:

“Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'” (*Matthew 22: 37-39*)

Oh, and one more:

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (*James 1:27*)

There are no sides. There are just people. As Christians—let me rephrase that—As TRUE believers (because not everyone who calls themselves a Christian actually is), we're to be medics and help any and everyone who needs our help. We're to humble ourselves to Jesus and follow His command.

We are not to dole out personal judgment.

Does that mean we agree with the state of the world? No. But the world is the devil's playground, a mere carbon copy of what it was originally meant to be. The boxes here are warped and won't carry a darn thing.

So, leave them. Walk away. Look at the world with fresh eyes and look at the people as flesh and blood and hurting hearts. We're here to heal them, not break them. Something to never forget.

The black hole of bitterness.

It's easy to not want to forgive. To slide feet first into the black hole of memory and bitterness.

It's punishing yourself over and over again.

People have theories about forgiveness, especially people who lack forgiving hearts. They see it as pardoning someone else, owing a horrible human being a favor because anyone who steps on somebody else's pride has to be horrible right?

You're the innocent. A sacrificial lamb. There are no black marks bruising your own heart.

False.

None of us are innocent in this game called life. When I remember that, it's a lot easier to spot the momentous wall I've built up against the world and to smash it to smithereens.

I have a choice: choke on the pure image of I've made of myself (an idol that doesn't actually exist) and my ruinous intent for the person in question or breathe.

Choosing the former is easy. It feels good. It takes no resolve or dignity or internal fortitude to allow yourself to be consumed by bitterness and rage. It's just a matter of standing still and letting it happen. And then watching the years go by as you turn into someone who doesn't love and doesn't receive it in return.

But forgiving someone is an act of worship. It is active and a complete denial of the evil that started this whole mess in the first place. It's a strong indication to Satan that you are not someone to be messed with. You will not be blindsided by his attempt to stroke the fire of your anger.

You rise above.

Jesus was the ultimate forgiver. He laid His life down for everyone who didn't deserve it, and he did it with a heart for God.

It wasn't about Him. It wasn't about the mountainous work of growing His hatred, an act that never truly affects the person we're angry with but works like cancer in our own body as well as our relationships. It was about glorifying God and proving that nobody and no thing would ever make the detrimental mistake of believing He'd side-step His purpose for a lifetime of internal misery.

Forgive. Let it go. You owe it to yourself and your God.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)

My friend, Ericka.

There's another Ericka Clay.

I receive her emails from time to time (I suppose our email addresses are pretty close), and I've learned a lot about her.

She's from Chicago. She has a daughter. She's African American and enjoys martial arts and drives a luxury sedan. She travels a lot and has her own personal travel agent who plans vacations for her, like trips to the Bahamas.

Her two friends, Pam and Melvin, are getting married, and I'm invited to the wedding. Okay, she's probably the one invited to the wedding, but I'm the one who technically received the digital invitation and can do a killer electric slide.

So, you do the math.

It's strange seeing your online counterpart live life and to take an extreme personal investment in someone you've never even met.

Well, maybe for some people.

I pray for her, Ericka Clay.

I pray for her friends, Pam and Melvin, that they have a beautiful wedding and a marriage that is the true embodiment of God's never-ending love for them.

I pray for Ericka's daughter and her upcoming parent/teacher meeting, which I'm sure will turn out just fine if she's anything like her mother.

I pray for the trips Ericka takes and the car she drives, that both keep her safe on the road and in the air.

I pray for a woman I don't know and will most likely never meet and who looks nothing like me and can't know the thoughts in my head or the words in my heart.

But I pray for her, because her pulse throbs, and mine does too. She's a child of God. And so am I.

I have His breath and so does she.

You see, it's that simple.

We all need to stop making everything so complicated.

Complication is the devil's dance, and right now, he's doing it beautifully.

Let's trip him up, shall we?

Let's pray for and make friends with and serve those who are nothing at all like us.

And yet, everything we are, too.

Like Marie Kondo, only meaner.

There's a very small and beautiful Japanese lady called Marie Kondo who goes into people's homes, helps them assess what's needed in their life and what isn't, and then has them say a deep and heartfelt goodbye to all of the personal items that once had a place in their existence but have long since wreaked havoc on the state of their affairs.

She's basically me if she came with a set of matches and an affinity for the phrase, "Do you really need that sweater seeing that we're all gonna die one day anyways?"

Matt and Ava have learned how to hide their things. It really is a glorious art to find that pair of sweatpants with the knee in the hole and the waistband that's too tight, scrunching itself into a neat little ball in the closet as if I'm some well-mannered Japanese TV host with a penchant for sparing people's feelings and who doesn't enjoy the smell of burning fleece.

I just feel that stuff is stuff. To tag a sentimental value to something seems almost foreign to me, save for the few trinkets from close friends and family that actually mean something. But gathering stuff for the sake of stuff gathering is akin to the man storing surplus grain in the larger barn he builds so that he can take a load off, pop open a cold one, and enjoy the fruits of his labor (*Luke 12:16-21*).

Oh but then spoiler alert: he dies.

I have to ask myself daily where my treasure is. I have to light my own match and hold it close to the things I think I own. I own nothing. I am a steward of God's good graces. I am merely borrowing my home and my car and my dog and my daughter and my husband and all the other things that surround me that reflect an erroneous semblance of safety.

There is nothing safe about this world. Remember that. I'm not saying there is no joy, no hope. Oh gosh no. WE are that joy and that hope to a barren world that thinks it knows better. Which is why it's so im-

portant to burn the mental ties to anything that keeps us from being salt and light.

The more tethered we are to "our" treasure, the less valuable we are to others.

But the more we light the fire to the ties that hold us to worldly thinking, well, we lift up and away, feet dangling, eyes toward heaven.

Talk is cheap.

So many people argue about whether abortion is right or wrong.

So many people are wasting their time.

I always go back to this: "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's..." - Jesus of Nazareth (*Matthew 22:21*).

The government's going to make decisions. Some of them will be vile and poisonous and champion the cause of Satan and present this package with a crisp white bow on top.

We're not to be fooled. But we're not to cause chaos because of it. We're to be in the trenches, loving and aiding those who are bereft and find themselves in a position that they can't even fathom breaking through.

Because we have the power of God within and us and a host of angels at our shoulders, we KNOW that this moment, this idea of a whole world, a whole life changing is not a mountain that can't be climbed. But they don't know that. And that is why the Church is to be the Church, never to condemn but to sit side-by-side women who have found themselves in a position they never thought they'd be in. We are to pray for those who have been viciously attacked and offer a servant's heart.

The law will be the law. But we will be the people of God.

And when we sit bickering at one another about what that means, we waste precious time helping those we feel we're fighting for in the first place.

The second part of that verse? "...and to God the things that are God's."

We are to give God what is His, which is us. We are made in His image. If we were to truly do this, give EVERY part of ourselves and aspect of our lives—our sexuality, our bank accounts, our parenting, our jobs, our social lives, etc.—our world would be one in which the idea of abortion would be obsolete.

But we don't live in a perfect world. We live in this one. And like Christ redeemed the broken, we, too, have that opportunity. He didn't do it by shaking His fists and opinions in people's faces. He did it by ushering in the Kingdom of God, an upside-down kingdom that begins on bended knee.

I will serve the brokenhearted and the scared. The lost. And not because Caesar requires it, but because God does.

As it should be.

The twins are two men I've stumbled upon during my daily outings. Well, not literally. They're always safely stored within the confines of a 1980's Nissan Vanette and are looking at me like I have no business looking at them.

But let's be fair about that and break down the facts:

- They drive a 1980's Vanette. I know I've already mentioned that, but I think it's worth mentioning again.
- They are grown men who always sit in the front and passenger side seats. This seems like a non-issue except for the fact that...
- ...they're twins and wear the exact same outfit.
- I always see them as they're going in the opposite direction of me, which means I get a full shot of them practically being the same person, wearing the same outfit, and sitting in a van roughly ten people on this planet have ever actually owned.
- They wear expressions on their faces as if they are any other people who don't look exactly the same, roaring through the side streets of our sleepy little area in a machine that takes me back to the days of fanny packs and crimped hair. It was a simpler time.

Another fact: they only ever didn't wear the exact same outfit just one time. It was the first time I saw them after my dog passed away. I like to think it was their way of grieving with me.

I told Ava about The Twins. She didn't believe me until she fortuitously saw them cruising towards us one afternoon. She was in disbelief.

"How..."

"I don't know, Ava. I just don't know."

And then there was Matt who is used to my natural gravitation toward fancy. But Matt being Matt didn't blink twice the first time he saw them.

"Looks like that thing's running pretty well," he choked out, solidly ignoring the fact that two grown men roughly his age were coming at him in matching V-neck sweaters with white undershirts slightly peeking out.

"I'll say," I said, stifling a mini panic attack.

I think about The Twins way too much. They're an anomaly. A weirdness to my day that would only be made weirder if they didn't exist. I know in roughly a few short hours, I will see them careening toward me on Dixieland as I head to the gym. I am already mentally preparing myself to keep my face straight and eyes somewhat on the road. And I'm ignoring the short conversation they're probably having with each other this very second:

"Time to go see that weirdo in the maroon Honda Civic."

And everything is as it should be.

And then I'll smile.

At night, near the end, Roxie would come into our room, requesting my pillow. She'd do this by sitting at the end of the bed and looking at me silently. Her eyes were my downfall.

She might as well be asking me to give her the moon because I was three pillows in, my back perfectly situated several inches from the wall behind my bed. But I'd do it. I'd remove the middle pillow (admittedly, the least plumpiest one), and put it there on the floor where she'd lay down and breathe heavily for the rest of the night.

One day, I was in the kitchen, and I was looking at the picture our daughter had drawn of our family. We are a small family, three people. Big personalities. Not to the outside world, though. To the outside world, we are the Clays. We are small people who are kind and generally seem to have it all together.

We are nothing if not con artists.

I don't mean that in a bad way. We're not going to swipe your wallet any time soon (although Ava's a bit of a wild card, so stay alert). I just mean we hold our cards to our chests because they've all been defaced with that dubious art of living.

We'll be honest with you. We'll love you through unending acts of service. But except for a select few, the curtain will remain closed.

Nothing to see here, folks.

I was studying that picture. I look like a dowdy fraternity house mother who needs to get her roots touched up and Matt looks like the questionable neighbor leering out his window across the street. Then there's Ava, mouth wide in an excited "o," (smiles are so last year), holding Roxie who looks more like a horrified meerkat than a dog, and then Rocco, a wild fox/half lemur at her feet.

I remember looking hard at that picture, at Roxie, thinking one day, this picture will be a lie.

And now it is.

I had a conversation with a friend yesterday about how I hate the cold and hate the hot but also love winter but then kind of despise it.

She laughed. And I put up my hands and said, "I don't even know what I want."

This over a plate of tacos.

I don't want the past, necessarily. But there are moments of it I'm still swimming in. The present is too complex for me to think about sometimes, and the future? The future is the enormous rock down the lane that my feet walk towards, but I'm too put off by the fact that I have to walk there myself to realize how much closer I've gotten to it.

I think about this. About the universe God created and how much reason and logic has been drilled into it. We don't go spinning, uprooted off this earth on Tuesday only to be safely spun back down on Wednesday. I think about chaos theory, how there's an infinite number of ways to lose your mind and break your heart, but at the crux of it is God's hand, His order, always guiding you home.

He can't leave me. I won't let Him. Because without Him? There's no more honesty. There's no more unending acts of service.

The curtain becomes a wall, and He's no longer allowed to live behind it.

So, these are the things I think about, and then someone comes up, a new person. Someone who will see me, small and slight, particularly unassuming. They will think, *she looks like a nice person*, and find comfort in the modest way about me and come to say hello.

And I will want to peel back the surface of hair and pore and skin and skull and brain until they see the workings of my own chaos, how it's patterned and approaching a reasonable sense of stability.

But instead, I'll just say "Hi, I'm Ericka."

And then I'll smile.

Resources

Below are the people, podcasts, and websites I mention in this book.

***Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance:** <https://amzn.to/3GxlBun>

Mike Winger: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/bible-thinker/id1358056327>

***Cultish*:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mec9mp7UF3I>

***The Chronological Life of Christ* by Mark E. Moore:**
<https://www.amazon.com/Chronological-Life-Christ-Mark-Moore/dp/0899009557>

***Spoken Gospel*:** <https://www.spokengospel.com/>

***Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer:**
<https://amzn.to/3RzdmnQ>

***Ordinary* by Michael Horton:** <https://amzn.to/47RqnPg>

***Ourselves* by Charlotte Mason:** <https://amzn.to/48bkn3P>

***Simple Families by Denaye Barahona*:** <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/social-media-ft-lena-derhally/id1202569587?i=1000568913045>

***The Bible Project* by Tim Mackie:** <https://bibleproject.com/>

***Real Christianity* by Dale Partridge:** <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/does-god-create-people-for-hell/id1408224071?i=1000498171459>

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