

SOME THINGS YOU KEEP

Copyright ©2015 by JJ Landis
Cover Design by Daliborka Mijailovic
Cover Photograph by Kyle Meck www.kylemeck.co
Author Photograph by Howie Hartman www.doublehmedia.com

All Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version
©1984.

Quotation from *Ghosted* by Shaughnessy Bishop-Stall ©2010 used with permission.

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of
individuals.

ISBN-13: 978-1501083433
ISBN-10: 1501083430
Library of Congress Control Number: 2014922514
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, North Charleston, SC

To LL

SOME THINGS YOU KEEP

Letting go. Holding on. Growing up.

JJ Landis

This is not a “tell all” story, but a journal of my journey to redemption. God’s hand was on my life even when I was wholly unaware of it. I want you to know there is no heartbreak He cannot heal, if surrendered to Him.

I admire my parents Jer and Cher for their lifestyle of prayer and service. They deserve a medal for what they went through with their children. As you read, see no fault in them. My perceptions of what was going on were not necessarily reality. Memories are colored by emotions—my sad and lonely feelings bled over everything.

“Some people,’ she said, ‘if they live long enough, their regrets turn into skills.’”
Shaughnessy Bishop-Stall

“There’s been an accident. Mom fell asleep in the garage. She’s dead.” When I heard my father say those words, I stood motionless beneath his hand that rested on my head, wondering if he was truly talking about my mom. The reality soon set in, but the grief and healing were years off.

Growth comes from letting go of past and pain and stepping forward each day. And with growth, the wisdom to know what to hold close and what to keep. And what to let go.

We’ve all suffered; we’ve all rejoiced. Every one of us has been on a pilgrimage, and we are all still hiking.

Fire

My pink bedroom rug provided a rectangle of warmth on the wooden floor where I sat and played with a Little Red Riding Hood doll. Red's hood, when lifted, exposed the wolf's face. Her deep ruby skirt could be turned inside out, totally hiding the girl within. This upset me. Under the same rug I tended to and protected an odd collection of smoothly folded paper bags holding nothing. In my small world, I chose to collect and care for emptiness.

As I played with Red, the happy songs of the Brady Bunch kids sang off my plastic record player. The Bradys were the family of my dreams. I pretended to be Marsha in my poncho head-dress, crocheted with golds and yellows. Flipping the yarned hair over my shoulder, I tried wishing my make-believe siblings into existence.

Next to me, the closet housed my favorite ankle-length Holly Hobby patterned dress. It hung beside the crimson taffeta and satin prom dress my mother had worn in high school. She told me she had been an embarrassed, blotchy teenager with a pimple on her nose. Sometimes I wore the red gown; I danced and twirled, pretending to be a princess.

My daydream of golden locks and a family full of brothers and sisters was interrupted when the door opened. "It's time for dance class. Get your leotard on," my mom said as she peeked in. The blond diva morphed back into the little girl with muddy eyes and the tears began. "No! Please, I want to stay with you. Please," I begged. But I put down my fairy tale doll and obeyed.

When we got to the dance studio, I clung to my mom but she peeled me away and escaped, leaving me there alone to wallow in my fear. The class lined up to practice the tap dance for the impending recital, but I continued to cry. A woman with freshly washed, damp hair and flowery perfume that clashed with the leather odor of the studio held me on her lap.

As I listened to the dancers' "tap tap tap," I loathed my scared, six-year-old whiny self with puffy eyes. Self-confidence would have been a better fit with my white and pink polka-dotted tutu. The show must go on, but I kept getting in my own way.

That timidity kept me from yelling for my dad when I saw flames shooting from the home in the cul-de-sac across the street. In our middle-class neighborhood, I often skateboarded with the neighbor boys down their steep driveway. Now I numbly watched through the sheer white curtains of my second-floor bedroom as their house burned. Fire trucks, loud and fast, rushed in.

Seeing the fire destroy a house in minutes silenced me. My dad finally emerged from the bathroom, shaving cream still covering his black whiskers. Sometimes he kissed me before he shaved, leaving white puffs of scented cream on my face, but this morning as he rushed to my window to see the commotion, shaving cream kisses were forgotten. Sirens rattled my walls and nerves. The emergency was close, but not mine.

Everyone escaped in time to avoid injury. Although the fire, started by a small splatter of grease, intended to destroy, newness ascended from the ashes. Within months,

the house was rebuilt and life on my all-American neighborhood block returned to normal. On our speck of the world, neighbors borrowed sugar and shared extra helpings of casseroles. Kids played in the streets—we sat on the curbs poking earthworms with rocks; we rode our bikes from corner to corner; we raced the scruffy, gray poodle named Smokey from one end of his fence to the other, always claiming victory over him.

Like on the morning of the fire, my dad and I were usually together after my mom went to work. We were buddies. Often we went to Perkins Restaurant for breakfast. Each sticky table held a coffee creamer shaped like a cow. In the pea green vinyl seats that were torn and pinched my legs, we prepared for the day. He taught me math with my silver dollar pancakes made six to an order. “If I eat two pancakes, how many will that leave for you?” he quizzed me. Our kind waitress, with unruly, auburn hair gathered at the nape of her neck, chatted with us, her regulars. I was a big girl with my daddy, just the two of us. He enjoyed me.

What I learned from the fire was one spark can destroy an entire house.

Neediness

Just like that, the breakfast routine was disrupted when Dad moved out, leaving for his own place a few blocks away. Divorce, usually a messy situation, was eerily uneventful in my family. One day all was well, the next day Dad was living on his own in a one-bedroom apartment. Surely the separation must have involved more than I saw. We were a non-confrontational lot who steered away from battle whenever possible. This served me well during the divorce as I was spared the violence and hate that accompanies many family break-ups. However, I did not escape the absorption of pain and anger, shoved in places deep, where they festered. Lessons learned: Don't show emotion and don't stop to catch your breath. Just move along—all systems normal.

I now had a broken home. I was a statistic, a child of divorce, floating between two households. I lived with my mom and brother and visited Dad on Wednesdays and every other weekend. I needed two different skill sets and became exhausted from holding in feelings and keeping the peace. My brother, Jeff, seven years my senior, was too old and hip to want much to do with things at home. His life was his own. He sought his peers while I still amused myself with toys.

Dad owned and operated a nursery school where I spent a lot of time. Not too long after the divorce, he remarried the mom of one of my friends from the school. In addition to the school connection, my dad and his new love shared mutual friends. The upheaval and anger that I was supposed to have felt as an eight-year-old simply didn't surface. Having a stepsister and stepmom complicated things, but in a chaotic, enjoyable way.

My new sister, Christy, and I, both eight and going into second grade, rarely tired of playing together. We pretended to be horses. We acted out and sang every song from the musical *Grease*. We roller-skated while listening to the Bay City Rollers. Swimming at the apartment complex swimming pool was another favorite pastime, which resulted in more than tanned skin. We developed crushes on the lifeguard with shaggy, sun-kissed hair, feathered just so around his face. He sat on his perch, ready to heroically save a life at any second. Little girls fawning over cute boys—the dawn of adolescence.

Though I was charmed with my dad's new family and didn't directly connect with the hurt of divorce, I struggled with dark thoughts. I imagined what life would be like for me if one of my parents died. Sometimes Mom let me fool around with the tools at the workbench in the garage, dusty from lack of use, their intended purpose forgotten. I would secure wood into the vise and hammer nails into the lumber, and often felt like I was in a vise, being squeezed. I tried to choose who I preferred, Mom or Dad. *Who would I pick if I could have just one?* Pressure and guilt rooted deep.

On Friday nights, Dad performed honky-tonk style music at a hole-in-the-wall packed with admirers. Part musician, part comedian, he was a crowd pleaser. Unable to read music, his ability to play piano by ear amazed his fans. When I remarked how the tight-knit group of folks who congregated around the piano bar always knew where to find a friend, my dad corrected me, telling me of the loneliness and misery of those who pathetically searched for camaraderie in drink.

On many of those late nights, the rest of us visited my stepmom's sister's home in the country. Christy and I played board games with our cousins while Cheryl and our aunt talked and laughed for hours. After midnight, we drove along dim, back roads to

retrieve Dad from his gig. Before bed, Christy and I sat on Dad and Cheryl's king size bed covered in a brown velvet bedspread to count the cash from Dad's tip jar. He was particular about wanting the bills all facing the same direction with the corners straightened. The grimy money, permeated with smoke and solitude, turned our fingers black.

My mom had begun leaving me home alone while she went out drinking. I begged her to stay home, but she would only promise to be home by a certain time. My neediness was useless to change anything. Once when she was five minutes late, I jumped to action and dialed the pay phone number I had for the bar. A woman answered and I said meekly, "Mom?" Laughter squeaked through the receiver and I hated the stranger. I heard her say to the room I imagined was full of people, "There's a kid on here calling me Mom." In seconds, my mom was talking to me. Shamed, I cried for her to please come home, which she eventually did.

Her taste in men varied as boyfriends came and went. There was the slick black-haired city councilman; the older, retired real estate agent; the married father with rebellious long hair; her co-worker from the lumber yard where she worked as a receptionist; and a man with rust-colored curls whose leg bounced with nervous energy. He gave me an Ernie doll which I loved, even though I was past my *Sesame Street* days.

A steady boyfriend finally came. Frank was a burly man who easily passed for Santa when he donned a red suit and sprayed his hair and full beard white at

Christmastime. He owned an accounting firm and two bars, where the seasonal Santa costume came to life.

He regularly rented a pontoon boat on a local lake where we bobbed peacefully over the speedboaters' waves, eating bologna sandwiches. I drank pop, and they drank beer. After finishing a relaxing lunch, I practiced cheerleading, my dream, at the rear of the flat boat. The lake rapidly lured Frank to purchase a speedboat he named "Whiskey Bent and Hell Bound," and gone were the slow days of the peaceful pontoon. I learned to hold on tight as I experienced the blinding joy of riding an inner tube behind the boat. He would drive as fast as I could withstand.

When Frank and Mom had been together for about a year, he took us to Florida. We viewed a Space Shuttle launch from our hotel room. Other than that, I had absolutely no idea what the adults did all week. I spent nearly every moment at the pool, sunburning my nose and knees while listening to the cute guitar player whose specialty was Jimmy Buffett songs. I dreamed up a whole fantasy about him noticing me there among the smattering of people in the audience. My delusion dictated his falling in love with me. Despite the fact that I was only eleven, we would make it work, I just knew it.

On our drive home to Indiana, Mom and Frank teased me for my youthful passion. I ignored them and went to sleep in the back of the dark brown Cadillac, trying to forget my crush. Frank modeled dishonesty as he asked me to help him with a project while we drove. He gave me a bag full of colorful tickets and asked me to scratch off the silver coating until I discovered a winner. He would then safely sell the unscratched losing tickets for a dollar each to his bar customers with the assurance he would not have to surrender any prize money.

Some nights we slept at Frank's A-frame house in the woods. I had the guest room in the loft to myself and played with the antique dime slot machine just outside my door. From this post, I could spy on the debauchery happening at the parties in the living room below. At one gathering, a disagreement ensued between a tall dentist in a flannel shirt and a bald man who mentioned he had a sore tooth. The dentist encouraged the other man to have his tooth properly examined.

The bald man then reclined on the floor against soft pillows and dared the dentist to inspect the tooth, calling him a chicken if he didn't. The dentist shot back with his own challenge, and soon their ego-driven fight escalated. Pliers appeared in the dentist's hands as he straddled the man and peered into his mouth. A minute later, the tooth was extracted. The injured man wailed and bolted to a nearby meadow where he rolled from side to side in the fetal position.

I cringed in terror and was utterly confused. My dentist played soothing music and pampered me when my teeth required maintenance. "Why would someone willingly inflict such pain on another person?" was my unasked question from the balcony.

About this time, Dad and Cheryl began attending church at the urging of some friends. The church became a home to them, and they dedicated their lives to Jesus.

Mom felt condemned and expressed it to me when they offered help or shared Jesus with her. A Bible was given as a gift: "To Sandy, From Jerry and Cheryl," the inside cover said. I don't know if she cracked it open. Mom was embarrassed by her life,

it seemed. To me, it looked like Dad and Cheryl were moving forward while Mom's life crumbled.

One afternoon, my mom and I rounded the corner toward home stopping short in the driveway because a ladder blocked the garage. Dad and Cheryl were removing fallen leaves and muck that clogged the gutters. I sensed her humiliation; it was as if their assistance highlighted her inadequacy. They were showing love and trying to help clean up, yet the mess in my mother's life remained.

Mom seemed distracted. Once, on a morning drive to my dad's nursery school, where I was to spend my day, she pulled into a graveled parking lot next to a playground and let me out to play while she sat at a splintered, weather-beaten picnic table. No other kids were near; seven-thirty in the morning is not a popular time of day for playgrounds. I clumsily fooled around on the rubber swing that creaked its rhythm. She stared at me or into space.

When my brother, Jeff, was eighteen he moved into an apartment above Dad's school, which was a revamped old grocery store on a corner city lot. In his living room one evening, he and Mom smoked pot out of a bong—the water gurgling to cool the fire. I sat invisible and watched as they passed the pipe back and forth, inhaling, holding it long and deep, exhaling slowly. Smoke sat stagnant in the musty apartment.

They cooked up plans that did not include me, so I was made to sleep in Jeff's unfamiliar bed. Mom drew the curtains, tucked me in, and gave me a speech about being brave. The more she talked of having no fear, the more frightened I became about being left alone. They went out and I eventually fell asleep.

At school, my friends and I would search the weather-beaten brick walls for fuzzy caterpillars to capture. As the caterpillars slowly ascended, some lucky ones made it beyond our reach for their destiny as butterflies. Sometimes I saw myself as one of those caterpillars with no hope of becoming a butterfly.

Mom had a best friend, Dotty, a grandmother who belly-danced and cartwheeled in her lush, green yard. I spent many hours on Dotty's dining room floor watching sand fall in a toy hourglass while she and my mom chatted, painted their nails, and puffed on cigarettes.

Dotty's formal living room had a baby blue velvet sofa that remained covered in showroom plastic for protection. During a party for grown-ups, I crouched in a sticky corner of its blueness trying to be invisible. Eventually, my mom sent me home to bed. The song *Dancing Queen* by Abba floated through the night air into the cracked window of my room, just a few houses away. The lighthearted music filled me with unidentified melancholy.

When my mom overdosed on pills, it was Dotty she called, so nearby. I thought that meant she didn't really want to die.

I began going to counseling appointments with Mom after she took the pills. Coloring books and homework occupied me in the sterile waiting room while she dealt with her demons behind the closed door. The issues of her overdose were kept from me and I was left to muddle through on my own.

On a cool night, I lay in the backseat of Mom's maroon Gran Torino and tried to sleep on the twenty-mile drive home from Frank's house. She had the radio turned up loud—Hank Williams Jr.—and the window opened a few inches. Pure night air swirled in around me making me shiver and keeping me awake. I wanted a blanket. So cold. Mom flicked her cigarette out the window. Some ashes flew back and landed near me, but I remained still, frozen. I watched the ash on the seat burn down until eventually it was extinguished.

Losing

Any tenuous grasp I had on my life was lost when I went home one morning after staying the night at my dad's house. We had gone to the county fair the evening before, and I had slept at Dad's after a late night of gorging on cotton candy and elephant ears.

The next morning we buzzed by my house, only a few blocks away, so I could grab some clean clothes for the day. I darted up the front walk of the bi-level with the one-car garage and the weed-dominated flower beds where I had lived all my life, ran inside and up the steps two-by-two. My brother could take the stairs three at a time, but my little legs limited my stride.

A purse was on the kitchen table—my mom's. I called out for her, but she didn't answer. The house smelled odd, but I had no way to pinpoint the odor. No reason to be suspicious, I grabbed what I needed and headed back out to the idling van with Dad and my stepsister, Christy. Off we went for a day of adventure.

That afternoon I found out why my mom hadn't responded. I was at the nursery school where I spent most of my summer days. School-aged kids with working parents attended the school in the summer as a day-care facility. The older gang often went on outings in the afternoons while the younger children napped. Twice a week we swam at a YWCA a mile walk from the school. My dad invariably turned the walk into a trek through the jungle (creek beside the highway) and desert (vacant parking lot).

We went on educational field trips as well. The morning after the fair we had watched local circus acrobats practice. There were children my own age and younger

who flew on the trapeze and performed all kinds of impossible contortions with their bodies. I dreamed of becoming an acrobat or a gymnast.

I was still high on hopes of a life in the circus when we returned to the school near lunchtime. As I entered the side door of the cement block building, I observed a police car parked along the street out front. Cathy, the cook, grabbed me and ushered me into the kitchen for a chat. This was unusual, but I sat on a stool obediently while she smeared peanut butter on Wonder Bread and tried to make small talk.

I was released from the kitchen about ten minutes later when Dad summoned me to the hallway next to his office. We stood still. And then. He uttered the words, “There has been an accident. Mom fell asleep in the garage. She’s dead.”

What he meant was: my mom had committed suicide. The odor in my house had been fumes from her car. She had been found by her boyfriend on the cold floor of the garage with a pack of cigarettes next to her, as though she had sat down and relaxed with a few smokes until she fell asleep.

Rain

I slept at my dad's house the night my mom died. More accurately, I moved in. A few blocks were all that separated the houses—a slight but infinite distance.

My stepsister's double bed held us as it had many times before when I visited. But this time the sleepover wouldn't end. When the sun rose I wouldn't have a home to return to. Home as I knew it had vanished with my mom's last breath.

Morning light broke and Christy awakened me. If I got out of bed my mom would still be gone. I pretended to sleep and covered my head with the comforter. I wanted to die, to sleep forever. Sleep had been a mystery, bringing me peace at times yet tortuous nightmares at others.

That sister of mine was relentless in her attempts to wake me. She talked, sang, jumped on the bed, tickled me through the covers. Her tactics made it very difficult to keep hiding. Finally I peeked out, vampire-like, shielding my eyes from the daylight that streamed in through the cracks in the mini-blinds. Though I tried to choke it back, laughter burst from my lips. *How dare I laugh?* I thought, feeling guilty.

Christy, smug in her success at rousing me, presented me with flowers that had been delivered to the house in sympathy from all the employees from the nursery school. Flowers, prettiness, positivity, hope . . . Christy. Yuck. I wanted none of it, preferring to wallow in misery.

Since sleep wouldn't come back, I rose and dressed in my favorite yellow t-shirt with an iron-on picture of Pink Panther wearing roller skates. The carnations and daisies, bright and healthy, held their heads high and mocked me from their vase of fresh water.

When the last of our Frosted Flakes' milk had been slurped up, Christy and I went outside to skate, metal wheels on black pavement, occasionally scraping the road and our knees. I no longer hid under the blanket, but I did continue to hide.

In the days of limbo between the shock of death and the bleakness of a funeral, I pleaded with my dad and stepmom to allow me to skip my mom's funeral. Already I was establishing a habit of avoiding pain. *Funerals equate to pain, so it stands to reason I shouldn't attend*, I thought.

As my thought progression went, attending the service would somehow imply that I approved of what was going on, which I most certainly did not. I wanted the whole mess to go away, to not be real.

Dad and Cheryl checked with the pastor who was conducting the service about the wisdom of my staying home. His advice was that I definitely should attend. So I did. Seared into my memory was the image of my mom, lying in a casket wearing a blue dress—her most elegant article of clothing, but one she never wore because she preferred jeans.

She had an unreal and unnatural look on her face—a half-smile of sorts, like that of the Mona Lisa, but not as demure or appealing. I hated her face in the casket. But I saw her and confirmed in my heart that she was dead.

If I hadn't gone to the funeral, my brain wouldn't have processed her death in the same way. Even as it was, despite knowing for certain she was indeed there, lifeless, lowered into the ground that August day, I continued to look for her in crowds. I fantasized that she was still alive and had just gone into hiding for some reason (witness

protection? CIA spy? Criminal activity? Lots of possibilities). I dreamed she would show up on my doorstep and beg forgiveness for leaving me.

Days later, the afternoon clouds spilled rain. And heaviness clouded me. Moving and talking were hard. My skin crawled. Anxiety. *I don't belong. I don't belong. I'm in the wrong place.* Everyone else in the house was content with what they were doing—reading, watching TV, normal life stuff.

The need for escape gnawed at me. I grabbed an umbrella and headed out for a walk. It was practically the first time I had ventured so far away from home by myself, except for the half-mile walk to school. I ambled aimlessly, splashing in puddles, all the time knowing I was acting like a little kid romping in the water. But I wasn't a carefree child anymore. You don't get to be carefree when your mom commits suicide.

I felt the rain deep within me. I was cold and wet all through my insides, as well as on the outside. On that dreary stroll I came to realize that my new life would be one of isolation. No one was ever going to understand what I had been through. This was it—my life. I had been lonely when I *had* my mom; she'd been distant, but she was real. Now what did I have?

I resolved to be tough. To protect myself.

I returned home in time for dinner. My dad had ordered our usual pizza delivery with sixteen-ounce glass bottles of Coke for everyone. Dad was a horribly picky eater,

and Cheryl didn't enjoy cooking, especially for someone with an overly finicky palate, so a common meal was pizza from Domino's.

Life was okay—I ate junk food and watched television. But I was in a bubble and could see nothing good or appreciate the people who were now mine. Having had one life ripped away, I determined that I was done. No more investing energy or emotion into something—or someone—that was sure to go away.

Such a Secret Place

Throughout my early childhood a framed picture hung above my bed. A girl with brown hair, on her knees with hands clasped in prayer, was saying, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Ever since I could read I had mouthed that rote prayer before falling asleep. But I was addressing an unknown God.

I included the ritualistic addendum: “God bless Mommy. God bless Daddy. God bless everyone.” If I hoped for something (Shaun Cassidy concert tickets, for example), I attempted to make a deal with God, promising to do something good in exchange for what I wanted. Then I shook His unseen hand.

In my spirit was a desire to know God. I knew the reality of Him, despite not knowing the details. So I prayed.

My mom had visited a Sunday morning church service from time to time, although she was not a regular churchgoer. I never heard where her heart was in regards to Christianity or what she believed about God or an afterlife, but I knew that she mocked church and laughed at the “goody two-shoes” that flocked to church buildings to make themselves feel good. She preferred barstools to pews.

One night after her death I crawled into my warm bed and said my customary prayer: “God bless Mommy. God bless Daddy. God bless everyone.” I felt like an anvil fell from the sky, like they do in cartoons, and crashed down upon my head. *My mom was dead!* And still I’d been mindlessly saying those words. Such a fool I was.

Self-loathing festered within me. How could I be so dumb as to ask God to bless my dead mom? It was too late. His blessings were no longer an option, and God hadn’t

bothered to answer my earlier prayers to begin with. I reasoned that if the blessings I'd been praying for had happened, the suicide wouldn't have.

I stopped praying.

Christianity and church attendance were virgin concepts to me until I was in fifth grade and Dad and Cheryl joined the Lutheran church their friends invited them to. Before that, God had always hung there in the air, just as a word that prefaced the word "damn."

Church was a social event for Christy and me. Though on our first day in Sunday school we had no idea who Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were, we quickly learned the basic tenets of Christianity and, more importantly for girls our age, made lots of friends.

Freshly deserted by my mom and full of questions, I felt somber on my visit to church the Sunday after her funeral. I wanted to don a fleece of bravery so as not to stand out.

Before we made our way up the aisle to our white plastic chairs that substituted for pews, a little girl, about five or six years old, approached me. I knew her from the congregation and was friends with her older sister. Her mom stood by her side, but she spoke for herself. In my hand she placed a tin box, shaped like a heart and adorned with minuscule red roses detailed on yellow paint. Her words were simply, "I'm sorry your mom died." With that she walked away.

The container snuggled in my palm for a bit until I positioned myself in a seat for the morning service. When I opened the box, I saw two pennies.

In her own way that child had reached out to me that Sunday morning. Her actions weren't earth-shattering; a trinket box and two cents aren't in themselves significant objects. Yet she placed in my hand a treasure, a tangible piece of love. She empathized with my hurt, probably thinking about how she would feel if she were to lose her mom.

I had given up on God because it seemed as though my prayers hadn't worked. I wasn't able to accept God—not yet—but I was able to receive and embrace that small gift from another human being.

That kid had no wisdom to offer. No meal to cook. No significant money to give. No Hallmark foil-embossed sympathy card to send. Yet she handed me what she had. And I knew she cared.

Disrupting Balance

The most noticeable room in my dad and stepmom's house was the library/den combination. Floor to ceiling bookshelves lined one wall. A heavy, black iron jail door guarded the entryway. In the corner was an antique phone booth with a light-up "phone" sign and a sliding door with glass windows. A metal seat with robin egg blue paint allowed the caller to rest while talking.

Christy and I shared her less conspicuous room for some time after I moved in, but eventually I was given that funky room as my own space. Back when I had been a visitor, I had enjoyed playing in the jailed library, never guessing it would become mine and in the process lose all its charm.

The solid shelves stayed, but the books were relocated to make room for my knickknacks, books, makeup, and all other manner of preteen paraphernalia. The phone booth and jail door were removed. Dad built me my very own doorway. After the eclectic wonderland it had been, the room was now plain vanilla, just bland.

Guilty. Guilt. I had the sense of interfering with something delicate. I was the intruder, uninvited but yet there. My mother hadn't even considered me worth living for; my value was exactly nothing.

"We had to sell off our antiques to make room for you. Your poor, drunk, weak mother dumped you on us. We like you and will take care of you, but we'll also resent you for your invasion." These sentiments loomed in my imagination. I didn't hear anything resembling that message spoken by my dad or my stepmom. No, the issue was

my heart, which discerned these imaginings as truth. I heard these words from within me, and I absorbed the supposed rejection, sponge-like.

My new bedroom's entrance remained closed and usually locked. The jail door was gone, but I chose to live in captivity, in self-inflicted solitary confinement. I hid, but from what I didn't know. A new family? Everyone was kind to me, but I refused to be accepted. There was plenty in my head that wouldn't come out anyway, even with an open door. Being alone was fine with me; I was good at it. My heart—inaccessible.

A few weeks after the funeral, the finality of it all set in, and I wanted to cry. Pent-up tears needed to be let out. I was filled with angst but thought for some reason that it was too late to grieve, to show emotion. Life was moving along. My dad and Cheryl left me alone, probably fearing for my mental health.

Often my dad's musical friends would gather around the piano bar in our home for sing-a-long parties. At other times, when just the family was home, Christy, Cheryl, and Dad would sing. Christy's voice was gorgeous, and she harmonized effortlessly. I didn't join though. My vocal talent remained locked in my head.

Christy and I both tried out for the school's show choir. I sang Debby Boone's "You Light up My Life" so quietly in the audition room, and in so low a key that the director had to ask me to switch songs to "The Rose" by Bette Midler, the song almost all the other girls had chosen. She had the sheet music already on her piano from the other million people singing it.

Christy made the group, but my efforts proved futile, even with the song switch. Honestly, I was slightly relieved at not making the cut, but also disappointed because I had been sure all my problems would be solved if I could just be accepted into that choir.

Before I auditioned I refused to practice in front of anyone. Too embarrassed. If I didn't possess the courage to perform for my family, I wonder how I expected to croon for the music director and later for the entire school and beyond. What disturbed me about not being selected for the elite choir was the attention Christy got from my dad when he sang with her and helped her practice. She sucked up all the adoration I so desperately longed for.

When the piano bar buzzed with music and happiness, I remained anchored to my new bed, in my prison, unwilling to set foot outside the door to join in the fun. Who was I to disrupt the balance in this already established home? I was in the way, had taken over the extra room in the house. I couldn't even sing with them, couldn't fit in. I was an outsider.

Resigned to my pursuit of solitary self-torture, I watched hours of television in my room—*Little House on the Prairie* followed by two hours of sitcoms, my routine. When the local news began at ten o'clock, I turned off the TV to try to face sleep and the invariable dreams that were sure to haunt me. Dreams of a mom who was no longer real. She still showed up sometimes, but she never stuck around.

The Land of Tears

Immediately after Mom's death I didn't soak up sympathy or accept hugs and comfort because I was numb. In my shock, I was a statue. I was easily embarrassed, shy, not used to being in the limelight.

When a few weeks had gone by and the initial trauma of my loss had lessened, the stiff, rigid statue began to soften. I was ready for my pain to be acknowledged. But I believed my sympathy window had been slammed shut, that I had missed my chance to let the cool breeze of love and care flow over me. Holding everything in, all the while seriously yearning to let it all out, was exhausting.

Middle-school students are by default self-centered. I was in the heat of things, between grades six and seven, at the time of my mother's suicide. Add a heavy dose of trauma to the already innate adolescent egocentrism, and you get yourself quite a fusion of feelings. Unresolved, untouched grief was trapped inside me, fighting to escape; it was too big, too heavy to carry with me. I wanted the waterfall of tears to pour from my eyes, releasing me from the burden of my grief.

Some girls at my school blubbered all the time. I envied their uninhibited way of living with no filter. They were transparent, if a bit melodramatic. A sour friendship, a mean boy, a love poem—anything could cause a flood. But not for me. The thing I had to cry about was so huge—so much bigger than a poem or a boyfriend. I couldn't cry, no matter what I thought about, what I did.

Like junk food, the more I craved and went without, the deeper and more desperate my desire to grieve. I yearned to weep for two reasons: One, to release pent up

emotions; the other, slightly more convoluted motive for my need for tears was my hope that the world, my world, would see that I was sad. I wanted someone to take note and ask, “What’s wrong?” and then care for and fix me.

I wanted attention, validation for my grief. I thought I had missed my chance, which left me feeling that much more deficient and needy.

At the start of my seventh-grade year my mom’s obituary, clipped from the newspaper, was taped inside my school loose-leaf binder. Since the death had occurred over the summer, I assumed no one at school knew what I had been through. For many kids, an ability to fade into the background after losing a parent may be construed as a blessing. And given the stigma of suicide, the prudent option may have been to hide, to keep my secret and consider it a blessing my tragedy had happened during a break from school. But who knows what normal is in such a case?

I strategically left my binder open on my desks as I went from class to class, hoping that someone would notice the newspaper article. In science class, fifth period, my seatmate at the black worktable did mention it. She glanced over and said something benign like, “What’s that? Oh, your mom? Why do you have that here?”

What I *heard* her say was, “What? Are you a nut case? That’s totally weird.”

With that trace of recognition, which had been my goal all along, I realized how peculiar it must have seemed for me to carry an obituary to middle school. That afternoon in my locked bedroom I gingerly removed the Scotch tape from the delicate newsprint and hid away the story of my mom’s death in a photo album.

My secret desire was for all my peers and teachers to be informed about my loss. Within the workings of an adolescent mind, I supposed this information would earn me

street credit, the life experience badge that would excuse me from ever having to be well-adjusted. In reality, however, I was becoming a shell of the already shy girl I had always been. Rational thought shrank with each passing day, lucidity popping like bubbles every day I went unnoticed.

On the basis of this quest for attention, I should have been thrilled when the redheaded smart kid approached me in the school library. “Hi, JJ,” he greeted me from behind the swiveling rack of paperbacks I was browsing.

“Oh, um, hi.”

“I heard about your summer. Do you live with your dad now?” *Oh wow! Cool. He wants to know about me. I should talk to him. Oh no. He’s a boy and I’m a dork. I need to run,* were my battling thoughts. The timid me won the war and I quickly answered in the affirmative, jumped to the other side of the rack, and threw my face into an open book. It was virtuous of him to acknowledge my disrupted life, but I couldn’t handle it.

Similar situations arose with a few teachers as well. The girls’ gym teacher pulled me over to the sidelines during a volleyball game in class and asked, “You okay?”

Uncertainty overtook me. *Shoot.* I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t an athlete and was more focused on my bra that day than on the ball. My training bra, intended to hold not-yet-existent boobs, slipped up whenever I lifted my hands above my head. I nonchalantly (but probably obviously) tugged at it every few seconds while the volleyball game went on around me.

Her question, “You okay?” could have meant “Are you having bra issues?” or “Do you understand the game? Because it sure looks like you’re afraid to hit the ball” or

“I know your life sucks. Are you okay?” In my confusion, I nodded and gave her a huge smile as though I were fine. I was always okay. Always *just fine*.

For someone who so craved the chance to shine in the spotlight of sympathy, I continued to confound myself. I was getting what I thought I wanted, yet I rejected all perceived inquisitions into my well-being.

A week or so later the boys’ gym teacher invited me into his office for a chat. I was far from the type of person who would ever “chat” with a teacher. Especially this man. All the girls had a crush on him—he was tall and tanned, with smooth brown hair and a sunny smile.

He sat me down in the red vinyl chair across from him at his desk. Awards hung on his wall, things that probably should have impressed me. He propped his long legs, calves covered in tube socks, upon a bin of basketballs next to his desk, looked at my face for several sharp seconds that felt like an hour, and then calmly told me I could talk to him anytime, if needed.

My mind was screaming at me to tell him I was sad and did need to talk to someone, but like a dummy I didn’t respond. I just smiled and quickly stood up and left without so much as saying thanks or good-bye.

I wanted this, wanted people to see me and recognize my need to vent, yet I froze when people did reach out to me. “Talk to someone. *Anyone!*” my conscience screamed.

My life must have been the gossip thread in the teachers’ lounge. A third one, the music teacher, a Princess Diana look-alike and wannabe, also approached me, offering help when I was playing a card game with three friends during class. I was never sure

why we were allowed to play cards during choral music class, but we shuffled the deck more than we sang the scales.

She glided over to our configuration of four desks pushed together and asked if I would step into the hallway with her. The other kids first complained about the halted game, but then chuckled at the incongruity of the teacher needing to see *me*.

As laughter is contagious, I started smiling and then snickering. By the time I made my way out into the hall, I had a full-blown case of the obnoxious giggles. Through my insolence, Princess Di gently asked if I was okay because I seemed a bit down lately. I laughed in her face, unable to hold in my giggles any longer.

As the school year wore on, the apparent buzz died down and I was left alone. I knew I should have, and wished I had, been honest with those teachers. No one else bothered me after that, and yet I so wanted to be bothered. Strike three, you're out. My opportunities were gone. It was time to move on.

Every day that I remained in my unemotional, stilted, immovable state of being, I became more ashamed of the storm of thoughts churning in my overworked brain. And the more I wanted to cry.

So desperate was I for tears that I began to explore options other than my mom's death to elicit emotion.

Kids at school traded yearbook photos with classmates. All the pictures had a gray background and featured awkward preteens with their head tilted and hair freshly styled with the black comb handed to them while waiting in line for the photographer. I had a picture of Johnny, the cutest boy in my grade. But alas, as middle school drama dictated, he was in love with my best friend.

I wanted Johnny to like *me*, not my friend. She was a pretty, perky, popular cheerleader, and I was her sidekick, her shadow. I idolized her, her family, and her black and orange cheerleader uniform. And her relationship with my hunky Johnny.

I stared at his two-inch tall photo in my bedroom, trying with all I had to be devastated by his lack of affection for me, trying so hard to feel the depth of heartbreak that should have been mine as a girl caught in a trap of unrequited love, but for all my concentration I couldn't work up the tears. I also tried writing love poems about one-sided romance, but the spark of emotion didn't stimulate anything within me, and my face remained dry.

When I concluded that infatuation with a boy couldn't help me grieve, I decided that more forceful measures were in order to get the water to burst from my eyes. More than once I stood alone in the school bathroom looking in the mirror. My face resembled my mom's, though her eyes had been blue and mine were brown. With the fluorescent lights (placed there, I was convinced, for the sole purpose of making the girls hate their appearance) glaring down on me, I poked myself in the eyes to stimulate my tear ducts. I reasoned that crying at school was a sure way to attract sympathy and get myself on the path to healing, to wellness.

Two boys went to work on the back of my left hand. A burn developed as they bore into my skin with the eraser. I withstood the pain until they could go no further, deeming me a lesser sissy than they.

This current middle school craze was called a sissy test. In the music class with Princess Diana, we broke from card playing so two boys could rub pencil erasers on classmates' skin until the victim would yell for them to stop. The longer the pain was endured, apparently, the less of a sissy the person was.

The teacher eventually stepped in and got me a gauze pad and some ointment. I had no idea where she was while they were defacing my body. She disappointedly told me that I would have a scar on the back of my hand the rest of my life; that it would show up in my wedding pictures when my ring was photographed. She, like Charles and Di, had recently wed. My wedding pictures were not my concern. Apparent victory, though short-lived, had come through pain, but what a fool I ended up looking like to those around me, especially my teachers and my parents. And not surprisingly, fellow students did not view me as a hero. I cleansed my wound daily with hydrogen peroxide while pus oozed from my swollen hand.

My friend Katie lived in a house with the same floor plan as mine, the same as every third house in our neighborhood. Her room was in the basement. Someone had painted clouds on her ceiling, splotches of white paint on blue. Where the washer and dryer were in my house, in hers was a bar, stocked with what seemed to me like endless alcohol.

We unscrewed lids of bottles with various levels of liquid. Some of the bottles held what looked deceptively like water while some housed liquor the color of honey and darker, almost black. My first few tastes were equivalent to eyedropper amounts.

I was drawn to alcohol and its escapist capabilities. Once I was accustomed to the harsh flavors, I learned I could let go and chill as the alcohol calmed me. I relaxed and felt confident when I had a surface buzz. After a few sips of booze, Katie and I danced around the basement to “Rock Lobster” by the B-52’s and other music her dad hated.

Katie got so ridiculously drunk one night that I was sure she was faking it. Then something happened that made me hope she was truly inebriated. A third friend had joined us for our weekly overnight drinking fest. Katie became sexual and forced her body on top of our friend. From her position underneath an intoxicated twelve-year-old, the other girl furiously pushed, kicked, cried, and finally broke free.

I was scared and passive and did not intervene, not wanting Katie to turn her lust onto me. After that, we all sobered up as much as possible. My desire to be drunk however, was not diminished. I continued to drink whenever I had a chance.

In one sense I was filled to the brim with grief, but in another I was running on empty. I tried to fill the gaps with substances that altered my thought processes.

I stuffed my hollowness full with rags and kept slugging along.

Can't Hold On

Right after my mom died, I wore one of her gold bands on my pinkie and her watch around my skinny wrist. Her boyfriend, Frank, had given her the expensive gold watch. As a wealthy business owner, he had no trouble affording lavish gifts.

He was the one who found her dead. When she wouldn't answer the phone and didn't show up for her job, he went to the house, only to discover the now lifeless recipient of his love and gifts. He told me at her funeral that he had planned to marry her one day. I secretly blamed him for not getting on the ball and asking her—she may not have died if she had felt stable in a relationship, I believed. My anger toward him, though, in no way affected my desire to keep and wear all the gold jewelry he had purchased.

On a walk around our neighborhood with a friend one day, scouting out which boys were zipping up and down the streets of our quiet neighborhood on their mopeds (all the cool kids had mopeds, a cross between a motorcycle and a bicycle) and planning our futures as popular cheerleaders and supermodels, the watch, much too big for my scrawny body, made its escape. Vanished into thin air, or more likely, fell to the ground and landed in someone's yard.

Gone, just like my mom. Lost forever. Unlike the case with my mom, though, I could have looked for it. I could have retraced my steps. But, embarrassed and ashamed, I didn't.

The golden band met a similar demise at an amusement park. When I exited through the gates after riding a rollercoaster, I reached for my ring to spin around my

finger, as was my habit. I found, to my chagrin, a naked pinkie. Mortified, I kept this loss quiet as well.

I told no one about my missing jewelry, in much the same way I held my grief tucked away deep inside.

I didn't reveal to my parents that I was slowly losing all my expensive items. Just as I didn't tell anyone how I felt about my mom. Things in life were slippery to me, and that included people. Nothing could be counted on to stay put, to be permanent.

Wounds

While I was dropping rings and other pieces of my mom here and there, my life went on with no one knowing about my losses. I spent a lot of time with my new best friend, Sara, the one who was adored by Johnny, my crush.

We hadn't been friends until the seventh grade, which meant she hadn't known me before my mom's death. The subject arose on one of our first phone conversations. We talked about our parents. I said I lived with my dad. I could have easily explained why, but I let her fish for a catch. "Why don't you live with your mom?" she asked.

"Because I don't," I said.

"Where does she live?" she asked.

"She doesn't," I responded flatly.

Sara lived with her mom but spent a lot of time at her dad's house. He had chronic health issues, one of which was a back problem. At one point he needed surgery in a city an hour away. Sara invited me to ride along with her and her stepmom to visit him as he recuperated. After a few hours at the hospital, we got cookies and Doritos from the vending machine and began our trek back home.

All three of us rode in the front seat of the large sedan. Sara, on the hump in the middle, fiddled with the radio trying to find popular music like Madonna or Wham. We vowed we would never, no matter our age, lose track of what was popular with teenagers.

The dark sky demanded headlights. Kyra, Sara's stepmom, switched on the windshield wipers as the raindrops started splatting. The car began to slide and she lost

control of the rear-wheel-drive vehicle. We veered into the grass on the right side of the highway, stopping only when the front of the car smashed into a telephone pole.

I took in the scene. Kyra was dazed and Sara held the rearview mirror in her lap. Her head had knocked it loose. Both were conscious and appeared to be okay. My head throbbed. I noticed that the windshield was cracked. Eventually I figured out this was from the impact of my head.

I looked down at my purple stadium jacket, the one I had wanted because, according to Sara, a cool girl, they were trendy (I previously had no idea what a stadium jacket was). Blood covered that fashionable coat, but I didn't know its source. My face, is what I was told.

After a while an ambulance arrived and we all got in. On the way to an emergency room the ambulance lost control in the freezing rain and spun 360 degrees before regaining its position on the road.

I had bitten a chunk out of the dashboard. Unfortunately my lower lip got in the way and there was a gash in my face as well. Before a doctor stitched up my wound, the emergency room nurse asked for information about my identity. It was obvious to me later that she wanted to contact someone to let them know about the accident and my impending stitches. But I didn't understand.

In my incessant television watching I had viewed a show in which a child didn't have a mother. The little girl had nonchalantly told someone that her mom was dead, as though it were easy for her to say. This minor incident had stuck with me because I wanted people to know the same thing about me, even though for some inexplicable reason I couldn't seem to get it out.

When the nurse asked if she could have my mom's contact info, I tried to be like the girl on TV. I said, "My mom is dead."

The nurse, who had short dusky hair and a jagged and sharp eyebrow line, rolled her eyes and retorted in exasperation, "Okay, is there a dad or anyone else we can call?" *DUH!* I felt like an idiot and didn't mention the dead mom again for a long time.

Soon after the car accident, headaches became an unwelcome reality in my life. There is a chance they were caused by my head hitting the windshield, but more likely they resulted from the unremitting stress I was suffering from my family situation. It's quite possible that my constant angst, guilt, and self-focus were putting a significant strain on my body.

Panic set in during the middle of the school year when I learned of a dance that would take place after school in the gym. My anxiety skyrocketed. I didn't want to dance. I was way too self-conscious. It never occurred to me to just not go. Since my best friend, Sara, was a cheerleader (and thus popular), I assumed I had to go to the dance. It was the thing to do. And in middle school, if you're privy to "the thing to do," you had better do it or have a good reason not to.

On the morning of the dance I woke up with one of my typical headaches, nagging pain that radiated up from my temples. I stayed home sick from school and thus had a convenient and noble excuse to miss the dance.

Skipping school turned out to be a surprising and relaxing vacation from reality. The television next to my bed amused me the entire day. My headaches soon became a handy way to avoid school. My parents invariably believed me when I said I was sick and allowed me to stay at home to rest.

I became so friendly with my ten-inch entertainment source that I wrote down my daily viewing schedule on a white scrap of paper and taped it to the top of the TV.

Game shows and sitcoms. The good life. Until the vacation continued even on days my head didn't hurt. My parents took me to a doctor after my truancy had become a habit. Not being able to pinpoint a cause of my distress, the doctor referred me to a neurologist.

My melodramatic performance snowballed. I soon found myself scheduled for a CT scan and an EEG. A small, milky-skinned Asian doctor who smelled of disinfectant hooked me up for the test. Nodules were attached to my head with some sort of paste, and I was left alone in a windowed room while he monitored my brain activity from a nearby cubicle.

I heard him ask my dad if I had a boyfriend. Dad told him I liked a boy at school named Jonathan. The doctor spoke to me, by intercom, and said he could read my mind. Was I thinking of Jonathan? he asked smugly. I laughed nervously, politely.

After the exams and some trial medication, I still experienced the headaches. The tests, however, revealed no obvious cause for my pain. No brain tumors. No physical maladies to explain why my head hurt nearly every day. The next step was admittance to the hospital for further assessment. This worked out well, as the TV hanging from the

ceiling above my reclining bed was much bigger than the one in my bedroom. And school was definitely out of the question.

Mornings in the hospital were filled with tests and procedures. One consisted of my staring into a strobe light while my eyesight or brain activity or something was being analyzed. My afternoons were occupied with television and playing card games in the sitting room with a friend from school who was kind enough to visit regularly.

Todd, the redhead who had spoken to me in the school library about my mom, found his way to the second floor hospital room I shared with a little girl with a hernia. His after-school visit shocked me, because we weren't necessarily buddies. I giggled nervously and made attempts at small talk. For seventh graders with very little in common (different socio-economic class, different gender, different friends), chitchat wasn't easy to come by.

Two nursing students visited me to conduct an interview. Their names were Jennifer and Christina, the same as mine and my sister's. Many questions were thrown at me about my diet, my surroundings, and my schoolwork as they tried to ascertain possible environmental stressors contributing to my headaches.

Jennifer asked me whether anything in particular had happened that could be causing me undue strain. I clumsily responded, "Um, not really. My mom died. She killed herself. But it was a long time ago." It had been only a few months.

After about a week I left the children's wing of the hospital and once again took up residence in my bedroom. I was prescribed some kind of medicine. Because I couldn't swallow pills I broke the capsules apart and poured the powder into applesauce to eat; the

taste sensation brought to mind licking the acid off an old battery. Christy joked, “Well, we know she’ll never do drugs since she can’t swallow pills.”

Chill in the Air

From third grade on I wanted to be a cheerleader. Prior to that my dream was to be on the PBS show *Zoom*, and if that didn't work out I'd settle for being a school teacher who was also an actress on popular TV shows.

My cheerleading dreams required me to learn every cheer and chant ever uttered and to be a learned gymnast and acrobat, in case the cheer clouds ever parted to spill droplets of popularity on me. Long before I was eligible to become a bona fide cheerleader, I pedaled my bicycle in and around my neighborhood practicing my yells and hand motions: "W-I-N, the Mustang team will win!" The neighbors must have thought I was *so cool*.

More grandiose than my desire to cheer was my wish to wear the school's cheerleader outfit, a black and orange skirt and black sweater with orange stripes down the sleeves and a mustang across the chest. Four seventh-grade and four eighth-grade girls would be shot to stardom by earning a spot on the squad. On game days they wore their uniforms to school. Even on the cold, wintry days of basketball season, their legs were exposed in their short skirts with bobby socks hugging their ankles. What celebrity power! Bare legs in the middle of winter—amazing. The life of a seventh-grade cheerleader was glorious.

Back when my cheer dreams were still young, a new girl arrived at my school. Cindy and I were in the fourth grade, and our moms hooked us up to be walking buddies. Each morning I meandered through the maze-like streets of our subdivision and collected her on my way to school. We were instant friends, bonding over important world events

such as Shaun Cassidy and his feathered hair, Mork and Mindy rainbow suspenders, chess, and cheerleading.

Cindy and I spent most of our fifth-grade year plotting out our futures. Mine involved being a famous cheerleader (there are, after all, *so many* famous ones). Cindy was resigned to being my coach and manager. She drilled me on cheers (we both knew them all). Choreography and skills. Stiff arms. Loud, choppy voice. Smile, smile, smile!

Sadly, Cindy's dad's job forced the family to move to another city about a week after my mom died. I lost a lot within a remarkably short time. Not just my mom and my best friend, but the camaraderie of having a buddy with the same interests.

Cindy's departure didn't stop me from coveting the superstar job of cheering for a team—any team. I was completely overjoyed when a family friend offered me the opportunity to cheer for a Police Athletic League football team. The woman had handpicked me, *ME*, to be a cheerleader. A real one!

I didn't even care that this was a lesser position not associated with school at all, completely undesirable for the truly popular, talented, beautiful girls out there. I tried not to care that this job didn't come with the cute skirt but rather with navy sweat pants.

I spoke to my mom the day I found out I was going to be a cheerleader. We chatted on the rotary telephone hanging on the wall in the kitchen of my brother's apartment. Because it was located above my dad's nursery school, Jeff's apartment was a fun hangout for me when I needed to escape the masses of short, loud people at the school. My mom and I talked about our plans for the evening. I asked whether I could go to the fair with Dad.

The next morning she would be dead. Regretfully, I ended our call without her knowing of my fabulous cheerleading opportunity. I clobbered myself, thinking: *What if I would have told her? Would it have made a difference?*

When I began to cheer, I realized I had spent so much time learning my trade that I had neglected to learn any rules of football. All I cared about was that I got to stand on the high school track and use my well-honed, choppy voice and stiff arm movements to inspire spirit for my team of little boy football players.

On a sunny, storybook Saturday morning my brother sat in the stands to watch me cheer. Crisp fall air, bright sun, slight breeze, hoods and hats on the heads of almost everyone. It should have been a perfect day. Perfection was impossible, though, because our mom had bailed on us. We were alone, the two of us, surrounded by noise and crowds.

During or after the game Jeff took the time to scrawl a note on a pink piece of paper: "Dear Sis, You did a great job cheering today. I'm here if you need me. Love, Jeff." I did need him, but didn't realize just how much.

Although it had been a goal of mine to be on the school cheer squad, I chickened out when seventh-grade tryouts came about. Each of the girls vying for the four spots on the team performed a solo cheer in front of the assembled student body. Spectators cast a secret ballot for their favorite, and the winners were announced at the end of the day. It was a ridiculous popularity contest, concocted to crush the self-esteem of young girls.

I told myself I was too unlikable, too shy, and not perky enough to be cheerleading material, despite my *vast* experience (four or five games) rooting for the PAL team. My chance for being a seventh-grade cheerleader was nailed shut in a coffin of lost dreams.

The tide veered slightly by the time eighth grade rolled around. I had summoned the courage to try out. I just knew that being a cheerleader at school would change my life. I would have instant friends, ones who knew how to wear makeup and style hair. I'd be cool and popular. I'd get to wear that amazing black and orange uniform to school. Pure bliss and perfection.

On tryout day the other girls wore black shorts and orange t-shirts. This wasn't a required outfit but rather a tradition. I rocked the boat by wearing orange shorts with a black shirt. I was certain the voters would appreciate my scandalously brave move. Switching of the standard audition wear would earn me a few votes, I reckoned.

The names of the winners were posted in the girls' locker room after school. A sheet of lined notebook paper was carried into the room by the gym teacher. She wove her way through the throngs of expectant girls, all thinking they would just die if their name didn't appear on that loose-leaf paper, and taped the list to the gray cinderblock wall.

Girls pushed their way to the front to peer at the holy grail of middle-schoolhood to read the names of the coveted eight slots for cheerleaders. To find out who would be the stars.

My diminutive, noncompetitive self was in the back of the mob, waiting for a chance to move forward. I heard a few exclamations of “OH!”—some in happiness and others in obvious disappointment—before I inched my way to the list.

A girl next to me, Marybeth, with long brown hair and muscular calves, jumped up and down squealing (quite uncheerleader-like, I might add) that she had made it. Other girls congratulated her, and she responded, “Oh, I can’t wait to tell my mom.”

It was then that I confirmed what I had already known—that the list didn’t include my name. My plummet was punctuated by Marybeth’s ridiculous squawking. Knowing I couldn’t have told my mom the good news anyway, I left the locker room and carried on.

Cut Loose

At the end of my eighth-grade year, I still hadn't let loose my tears. But then an event came along so immense that I could have used it for attention, notice, pity—whatever it was I craved. On a routine afternoon, while I was running errands with my dad getting supplies for the nursery school, he announced that we would be moving.

My outer stoicism conflicted with what I thought the typical melodramatic adolescent reaction should be. I was actually ecstatic at the horrifying news. *Maybe I'll cry*, I thought, *Maybe everyone will pay attention to me and feel sorry for me.*

For about ten minutes after I heard the news, I sat behind the driver's seat in the van with a lump in my throat. I thought I might actually cry. Yet by the time we reached our destination—the bank or hardware or grocery—my lump had already dissolved. I remained my emotionless, dry, hated self.

I attempted to summon that stirring of chagrin at Dad's news many times after that initial shock, but efforts to produce tears remained futile.

Topeka, Indiana, was the place we regularly went for family gatherings, the Mayberryesque town we drove to for Grandma's banana pudding and to gawk at Amish people. We shopped at the dime store, where ten cents could get you a candy necklace or a yo-yo.

My dad grew up in Topeka, first on a farm and then in a house on Main Street. He moved away from the small community when he reached adulthood.

Topeka was a charming, quaint step back in time, the quintessential American small town. One cop, nicknamed Red, patrolled the streets in his unmarked car with a

stick-on swirling light. The center of town, a block from our house, sported one traffic signal forever blinking red, indicating a four-way stop. At that main intersection was a drugstore with a coffee shop in the back, like an old-time soda fountain. The only pharmacist in town knew all his customers by name. Luckily, I caught no embarrassing diseases that forced me to use the pharmacy. It wasn't uncommon to be in the store buying a greeting card or box of tissues and hear him say (not quietly) something like, "Hey Merle! How are you and Wanda and the kids? Your hemorrhoids clearing up? Let me know if you need more ointment." Privacy meant little in Topeka.

Across the street from the pharmacy was the hardware store with a creaky wooden floor painted shiny gray. The caustic odors of fertilizer and weed killer assaulted the customers' noses upon entering. Within walking distance from the center of town were two banks, four churches, a pizza shop, a laundromat, two small grocery stores, a park, and a bar that everyone called "the tap." And our new house.

Christy and I labeled our relocation as oppressive, unfair, and certain to ruin our lives. The movie *Footloose* with Kevin Bacon was released the summer we moved. The main character, Ren McCormack, was a shrewd city kid who moved to a small town where rock music and dancing were banned. He fought the overbearing authority and won, gaining his classmates the right to have a senior prom.

Viewing that film before our move cemented my already formed opinion—I was sure small towns were for hicks and that my life was over. I predicted that our school would be chock-full of simpletons and swiftly cast myself as the female version of the movie's main character, being thrust against her will into small-town hell.

The house I had always known as Grandma's became ours. She had died the year before, leaving the house vacant and available for new life.

Before we relocated, Dad made the two-hour drive many times to renovate and apply tender loving care to the structure that would be our home. The orange-and-white painted cupboards were replaced with modern wooden cabinets. Dirty, worn carpet disappeared, making way for hardwood floors. A modern shower replaced the antique claw-foot tub, and our bedrooms were decorated according to our desires—mine pink and gray and Christy's blue and gray.

Once we were official residents, Christy and I ambled down the badly paved alley to the local park, kicking gravel while discussing our plight. Our new house was spacious and handsome, clean and up-to-date. Though our residence was magazine-worthy, I fought against letting any positivity get in the way of my disgusted disposition. Christy and I ranted about how we would never be able to find any cool friends (because, ya know, we were both so hip). Both of us were fond of drinking, and we spent our time deliberating about who would drink with us and where we would obtain our supply of alcohol.

We stopped for a treat at Nita's, our small-town's equivalent of Dairy Queen, where we parked ourselves on the curb and licked our zebra ice cream, half vanilla and half chocolate, trying to keep up with the August drips. Once done with our cones, we despondently followed the grid of crisscrossed streets through our new hometown, looking at house after house. Piles of horse poop, from the horses hitched to buggies, bedecked the roads. We questioned whether we would ever feel at home. In a matter of days our freshman year of high school would begin.

When we weren't trudging through town along the systematically squared streets, we passed the time on our porch swing. Two new girls on Main Street posed quite an attraction for the locals. Many waves and whistles from boys driving by in show-off cars were directed our way that summer while we perched on the swing. Dating potential wasn't abundant among the small population, so perhaps we signified promise for the boys. It wasn't often that people moved *to* Topeka, especially into such a visible location along the main drag.

This attention wasn't lost on us. Smiling cutely (as only fourteen-year-olds can do), we both absorbed and leveraged our "new girls from the city" status. A raised banister separated us from pedestrians. The swing at one end of the porch served as a place to relax or play, but it also fulfilled the purpose of making the house appear to be a bastion of wholesome American life.

Once Christy and I sat backward, with our legs over the top of the swing, not expecting it to overturn and dump us into the shrubs beneath as it did. Giggling consumed us both as we untangled ourselves from the branches. We were in that middle place between childhood and adulthood.

Glamour

After I was settled in from the move and in the throes of freshman year, on a Saturday afternoon, I went shopping. I filled my cart with groceries from the list given to me earlier that day—milk, bread, peanut butter, cold cuts, nothing extravagant—and stood in the checkout line. I chose a register right in the middle, out of sight of the one-way mirrored window in the office, and waited several minutes for the woman in front of me to purchase enough food to feed ten football players for a month.

Finally, the strikingly beautiful clerk with honeyed hair and a nametag that said Lacey was ready to check out my groceries. She punched in the price for the milk and slid it and the bread along the belt to the bagging area. She punched in the number for the deli meat and shoved it, along with two boxes of cereal, through the line. This continued until the entire contents of my cart were piled at the holding area at the end of the black conveyor belt.

When she told me the too-low price for the groceries, I handed her the cash. She winked at me while we together filled brown paper bags with bounty. I left the store and got into the chocolate-colored Thunderbird awaiting me in the parking lot. The driver and I went straight to Lacey's where we filled her cabinets and fridge with mostly stolen groceries.

The first thing I noticed about Lacey when I met her on the streets of Topeka was her glamour. She had long legs and thick, sun-kissed hair. Taller than average, she carried herself like one from another place, a better place than northern Indiana. She was a high school junior, had a car, and essentially lived alone in a basement apartment.

Lacey's dad technically lived there too but was usually not around. Her job at the grocery store helped her make money, as well as score a few extra sundries. I deemed her exotic, primarily because of her independence. I didn't see her lonely side, the little girl within her who had been hurt as I had. Lacey seemed, despite her young age, to know everything about the world. I was drawn to her street wisdom because I was so uncomfortable in my own skin and discontented enough with my circumstances that I hungered for a new perspective on life. I wanted to break out of the happy family farce I perceived myself to be in—to find some edgy and radical people to show me how to live.

The two of us bonded right away—for some inexplicable reason she took to me. Maybe she saw instinctively that my brokenness resembled hers. We both had been cast aside by our mothers. Or maybe she saw me as weak and willing to be her minion. One way or another, I went along with her plans, her opinions. I did as she said.

She didn't align herself with people from our school, opting for older, rougher friends from a neighboring town, one of the many small towns dotting the northern Indiana landscape. Her social group became mine, though I was an unknown without her next to me.

Like a needy puppy I followed Lacey. On many nights I slept in her dark-wood-paneled basement bedroom. I was her homely sidekick. I was short and nondescript. Lacey, in contrast, had womanly breasts, a raspy voice, and shampoo-commercial-worthy hair. Confidence oozed from her.

One of our first bonding experiences revolved around taking pills. Caffeine tablets (357 Magnums) were readily available. I felt grown up with Lacey because together we had no parents watching us, and I was able to acquire my own drug stash. I downed several pills each day, frequently at school. Watching my hands shake from the high gave me a rush—a visible reminder of a secret. Jittery, I composed my class notes and completed assignments while buzzing on caffeine.

Speed, methamphetamine, followed.

That freshman year of high school in Topeka was dark. In addition to the pills, Lacey and I sailed on the alcohol ship whenever we had the chance. I vomited repeatedly in the bathroom of Lacey's oppressive basement dwelling, with its water-damaged walls, stained, industrial-grade maroon carpeting, low ceilings, and lack of windows. The stale air suffocated me.

As high school progressed, so did my bad habits. What had begun as a sip of liquor in that basement in seventh grade escalated into drinking shots of vodka until I threw up all over Lacey's kitchen table in front of a roomful of people. What had begun as taking a caffeine pill to feel peppy soon progressed into snorting cocaine in the restroom hidden away in the home economics classroom at school and taking hits of acid on the weekends in order to hallucinate.

Nearly every weekend we drove Lacey's car to the nearby town, mentioning to one or two people that we were (she was) throwing a party later in the evening. Her home would soon overflow with guests.

Our life together was one big orgy.

When drunk I lost my natural inhibition and was able to flirt and have a good time. By far the youngest person at these gatherings, I was a crude-talking little girl who swelled with pride when people mistook me for someone much older.

When Friday nights came around, I usually felt light and happy and ready to party. I imposed upon myself no restraint, no limits. All things were driven to excess. One morning I woke up sitting in a chair in a stranger's house. Freezing and thirsty, I searched for water. My pants were wet, my bra unfastened, my self-respect nil. I was a young girl in desperate need of help, pretending to have it all together.

Typically, by the end of a weekend, I hated both drinking and myself. My Friday carefree love of life invariably soured by Sunday. Every time I leaned over a toilet bowl with my head hanging above the water, heaving, I vowed to stop drinking.

I lied many times to my dad and stepmom. They were suspicious (rightly so) of Lacey. She was subversive and elusive, not to mention home alone way too much to be healthy. I chose Lacey over my *Better Homes and Gardens*-worthy home that didn't smell like rotten socks and spoiled milk. I could have had a warm bed, hot food, and no vomiting. Instead I chose exhaustion, hunger, and sickness.

Once, when I did sleep in my own warm bed, I awoke in a puddle of vomit. It stuck to my head and chunked into my pillow. Still drunk, I rinsed out my hair and wiped up most of the mess. A bottle of Love's Baby Soft body spray sat on my nightstand so I used it to douse the bed and pillow. They smelled like a mixture of sickness and body spray for weeks. I could never again inhale that fragrance without being overwhelmed by nausea.

A similar feeling arose when I noted the emptiness in my life. But my life wasn't empty, it was full. Of garbage. Of infection.

Vacant

I heard yelling. When I peered out through the saltwater-encrusted glass, a blood-covered man was running between the two buildings of the motel. His ribs nearly poked through his skin, he was so gaunt. His face streaked rivers of blood. Hiding in the alleyway, he must have outsmarted his attackers. I never learned who had attacked him or what became of him. This was the serene atmosphere of my Florida vacation.

It was December, and I was on vacation with Lacey and her dad. I had chosen to spend Christmas with her and her family, not necessarily because I preferred them, but because mine let me go.

In the tender place within my little girl soul, I wanted to stay home and have a Christmas with snow, a tree, my stepmom's decorations, and presents. I wanted to be told *no*, I wasn't allowed to travel on an eighteen-hour road trip with a sixteen-year-old friend I had known less than a year.

Without boundaries or limits, I was convinced that I was alone in the world. It felt as though no one would have cared if I had stepped blindfolded off life's manicured lawn onto its busy highway. Like the skinny man covered in blood at that motel alley, I wandered about, lost, injured, and groping for help.

Lacey's dad stocked us up with beer our first night in Florida, Christmas Eve. We turned on the music so loud that our neighbors complained. Their grumbling caused management to ask us to leave the hotel the next morning.

So, on Christmas Day, we downgraded to that smaller motel with smudges on the sheets and rusty water. We did have a view of the murky swimming pool in the courtyard, which we considered a nice perk.

Once we were settled into our new digs, we headed out for a day at the beach. White, crystal-clear sand under our feet made me forget for a while about our filthy motel room. With beach towels, magazines, baby oil to smear on our skin for a crisp golden tan, and a cooler of beer, we were set for the day.

While I was basking in the warm sunshine, a Frisbee landed on my towel. I looked up to see an attractive—very attractive—boy smiling down at me.

Interestingly, the boy, Danny, and his friend, Alan, were also from Indiana, from a small town very near our own. Right away Lacey knew the boys were Amish. Most Amish start dressing “English” (their word for non-Amish) in their teen years. The official term for this time in their life is Rumspringa. It's a time during which they can explore the secular world before officially becoming a member of the Amish church. A seasoned native can spot an Amish teen in Rumspringa anywhere. Their haircut, the style of clothes they choose, and their posture, all are subtle giveaways.

I was smitten with Danny, Amish or not, the minute I saw him. With his gold-streaked head and tanned skin, he looked as though the beach was his home.

We learned that our two new fascinating friends were staying at our motel. When I looked out the window past the dim pool, I could see their room. I took to spending hours at a time in Danny's room, getting to know him over endless drinks and drugs.

I carefully curled my hair down over my forehead to hide a giant zit, but it still showed up in a Polaroid snapshot someone took of us. After the vacation I took scissors and removed my face from the picture.

Christmas was sunny and warm, just as it should be in Florida. But it was wrong. Coming from a place of distinct seasons, I knew that December was supposed to be cold, yet cozy. The hot, empty atmosphere of Florida matched the condition of my soul. I was misery with a smile on. The beaches were beautiful, but there was something vacant about the inland, something desolate and sad.

When we returned to real life, leaving the Sunshine State behind, Danny and I stayed in touch by mail and in person at Lacey's weekly parties. Once, enfolding me in an embrace, he tenderly told me he loved me. "I Want to Know What Love Is" by the band Foreigner was blaring out from the record player in Lacey's bedroom, serenading us.

Though encircled in his arms, I didn't respond, didn't return his love. What did I know of love? I was numb and immature.

Danny was the cutest boy I knew, with thin hair hanging past his shoulders, smooth skin, and seawater eyes. Even when he was involved in an accident with a propane heater at his Amish home, which seared his eyebrows and mildly burned his face, he remained handsome. He was kind to me. But I did not, from my fourteen years of life experience, know enough to love him.

Fine

“*Boom boom* Ain’t it great to be crazy? *Boom boom* Ain’t it great to be crazy? Giddy and foolish all the day long. *Boom boom* Ain’t it great to be crazy?” So went the camp song.

But giddy and foolish weren’t my feelings at the summer camp sing-alongs. I averted eye contact as the counselors sang after lunch in the mess hall, fearing I would have to join in or would be called out for not participating.

Christy and I first went to the weeklong Lutheran camp the summer after sixth grade, just a month before my mom died. I slept in a cabin with six other campers and one counselor. The striped blue mattresses on the four bunk beds smelled wet and moldy. My first year I was on the bottom bunk, which I discovered to be a less-than-desirable place to sleep when gum was dropped (not accidentally, I’m sure) into my hair by the camper above me. In subsequent years I raced to grab a top bunk.

My first summer there I bonded with Stacey. We swam in the cool, spring-fed lake together, shared money for slushes at the snack bar, and discussed the relative merits of each boy at the camp. At summer’s end we became pen pals. We met up again each new camp season for another week of adventure, until we reached the maximum age of fifteen to attend camp.

Our last summer for camp was the one after my freshman year of high school, after my family had lived in the small town of Topeka for a year. My drinking, lying, and drug use had changed me. I stayed more to myself and was reluctant to join in the group activities. Basically, I avoided fun.

All the girls in my cabin posed for a mid-week “Camp is a blast, we’re having the time of our lives” photo. The others, all in shorts and bright t-shirts, draped their arms around each other’s necks. And then there was me, off to the side. I wore a black top and long pants. No one else wore stifling denim and heat-absorbing black at camp. In the picture I was the only girl not touching someone else, the only one not joining in the love fest. They were carefree and cool, while I was cloaked in heaviness, darkness, the outward manifestation of my inner reality.

During an ordinary meal in the mess hall, an adult summoned my cabin’s counselor over to the wall and spoke into her ear. When she returned to our table, the counselor told me I had a phone call. Telephone usage wasn’t allowed, save for emergencies, so I was wary.

It was Lacey who had first attempted to contact me at camp, but because she was a friend, not a family member, she wasn’t given permission to speak to me. Although she knew my parents weren’t her fans, when the camp wouldn’t let her talk to me, she called my house saying she had urgent news for me.

Danny and a friend had been drag racing on a state road, a two-lane highway with a speed limit of fifty-five. A commonly traveled road near my home, it was the same route I took whenever I went to my part-time job at a farm market.

Danny lost control of his car, and even though there were wide shoulders along the sides of the road, he careened into a tree and was killed instantly. The boy racing him was also killed. Two seventeen-year-old kids. Gone.

Cheryl was the one on the phone when I was called away from lunch. She told me what had happened and said I could leave camp to attend Danny's funeral if I wished.

Shocked, devastated, and weak, I murmured that I would stay at camp.

Slowly, I meandered back to my bunk and waited for my cabin mates. Judy, my counselor, must have already known what had happened because she asked me if I was going home. Dryly, I replied *no*. I wanted to cry but didn't. I couldn't.

When I awoke the next morning I stirred and untangled myself from my sleeping bag. I felt the cloud of dread hanging over me but couldn't place it at first. By the time my eyes opened to the single light bulb hanging uncovered from the ceiling, I remembered the crash. Death. Danny was dead.

I fought off the covers, rolled onto my stomach, wiped the sleep from my face, and pushed my hair out of my eyes. Judy approached and asked if I was okay. Because I was rubbing my eyes, she must have thought I was crying.

I didn't want Danny to be dead. He had said he loved me. I wanted to sob. I wanted to dump my guts onto Judy. I wanted her to hug me, to hold me. I whispered that I was fine, and she believed me.

Stage Lighting

David began making appearances on our front porch when my family first arrived in Topeka. His thick glasses and lazy eye made it hard for me to talk to him initially, but there was no need for eye contact while sitting on the porch swing. David joined Christy and me for many swinging conversations. Already balding at age seventeen, he had the look of someone much older. His unusual looks, together with his out-of-date, wide-collared polo shirts and Wrangler jeans, marked him as nonconforming, which appealed to me. A high school senior, he seemed wise and seasoned. He ostensibly knew everything about everything.

When my friendship with Lacey was in full bloom during my freshman year of high school, I remained distant from David. He had no affection for her, and the feeling was mutual. Lacey and I grew apart in my sophomore year after Danny's death, so David came back on the scene and began hanging around my house again. I latched right onto him in the same way I had been attached to Lacey.

He was out of high school by this time and had a job in one of the numerous trailer manufacturing factories in our area. He continued to live with his mom and dad in a ranch style house in our small town at the end of a dead-end street.

I began to lean on David in times I should have looked homeward to my family. We acted like a married couple. He was an adult, despite living in his childhood bedroom. And I thought I was an adult, motoring along finding my way without parental supervision. My guidance, discipline, and life skills were being doled out by David.

He eventually started controlling me. I bowed to him, looked up to him, and idolized his every movement, similar to the way I'd related to Lacey. David was right and I was wrong. If I ever intimated that it was any other way, his hostility surfaced. He disapproved of women who wore makeup and otherwise cared about beauty, so lo and behold, I quit my morning routine of applying blush and eye shadow and took to a wardrobe of flannel shirts and hiking boots. I pretended for his sake to be a survivalist, a hippie, a back-to-nature sort of person. This was laughable, as I was barely acquainted with fresh air or fresh food.

The flame of alcohol and drug abuse continued to burn. I drank whenever I had the chance. David and I, looking and acting unlike most teenagers, were served alcoholic drinks in many restaurants without question, no proof of age ever requested. I was too young to even have a driver's license, yet I was ordering whiskey and Coke like a full-fledged grown-up. I was pretending to be wise and weathered.

At David's brother's wedding I discovered an aesthetically pleasing and delicious mixed drink called a Tequila Sunrise. There were more than a few people at that ceremony who knew I was a child, yet the alcohol kept coming my way. A beloved teacher from my school was at the reception. As I drank, I flaunted it, hoping he would notice me. When we talked that night, I was unable to discern his impression of me. Later, when I sobered up, I figured my teacher had probably seen nothing more than a foolish little girl making big mistakes.

We would drive aimlessly on the back roads, drinking, smoking, or whatever. Partly because there wasn't much else for us to do in the form of fun. Partly because we got a rush from speeding cars and the freedom of being out on the road.

On one such directionless drive with David, I asked him to pull over so I could pee. When acquainted with rural living, one shakes off any qualms about urinating in a field or ditch. You gotta go, you gotta go. The nearest public bathroom could be a half hour or more away, so I had learned to be resourceful. I was wearing bright white, clean new sneakers. It had rained earlier that day, enough to soak the soil. When I stood up in the ditch from my squatting position and tried to walk back to David's car, my new shoe got sucked off my foot in the quicksand-like mud. In the darkness, I couldn't find it.

I entered my house that night to face my parents and their visiting friends from out of town with one mud-covered shoe on and the other missing. My socks were soggy and my pants covered in grime. It was no surprise, since I was drunk, that my explanation of how I had innocently lost my shoe made absolutely no sense to them. No yelling commenced; it never did. No discipline followed; it rarely did. Rather, the adults were exasperated and I went to bed. The incident was not mentioned in the morning, and I went back to wearing my worn out, too small shoes.

Several miles from our town was an old hospital that had been converted into apartments. Farmland surrounded the property. The mowed grass was full of weeds, and an enormous vegetable garden and well-used clothesline filled in most of the backyard.

Fire escape chutes, like slides, juttled out of the upper windows of the four-story brick building.

Almost every Saturday night David and I walked up the cracked cement steps of the immense building to a heavy, wooden double door. Upon arriving in the eerie entryway of the infirmary-turned-commune, we made our way to the top floor to visit friends—David’s friends. All of them were much older than we were. Some even had kids my age.

While David and his hippie friends drank and chatted about Harley-Davidson and BMW motorcycles, old rock music, and garden-fresh broccoli, I sat quietly sipping beer. When they brought out the cocaine I became friendlier. Cocaine numbed my insecurity.

I first tried cocaine when an Amish teenager in the throes of his Rumspringa had introduced me to it. A lot of Amish youth, at least the ones I knew, more than dabbled in the vices of the world.

I had been snorting my speed pills for a while (opening capsules and inhaling the powder from inside), so when at a party I was invited to a back bedroom to snort coke, I was ecstatic. In all fairness, the Amish boy most likely didn’t realize it was my first time with the drug. Immediately, I was converted. Whereas speed would burn going into my nose, coke slid in like silk and was cool and refreshing. Cocaine had earned a new fan.

Once the hippies and David were adequately buzzed, we migrated up more stairs to the attic, which housed a stage complete with drums and amps and all manner of guitars. It was massive enough to put on a concert for a crowd of fifty or sixty. But the audience was meager—just me and, from time to time, other stragglers.

All the guys had long hair except for the balding David. They played while I sat on a couch with my feet propped up on a water-stained coffee table. I drank, smoked, and snorted, all by myself, the music deafening and sounding to me quite good. I felt like one of them, like a grown-up, so mature, doing drugs. We were a snapshot from the seventies, with the pot smoking and Bohemian atmosphere combined with Foghat and Hendrix music.

Our lives became so entangled that I began driving David's pick-up truck (without a muffler, so the whole 800-person town probably heard me). At night I'd park in front of my house, and in the early morning I'd return to him before he left for work at the factory. We snuggled in his bed together for half an hour or so. Then he'd drop me off at home so I could shower and get ready for school.

At first David was an obsession of mine. I didn't want to be with anyone else. Because of my insecurities, I had a habit of latching onto strong individuals (like Lacey) and finding my place as their puppet. I was David's accessory—always at his disposal.

As we grew closer, David became more and more possessive of me, and slowly any life I had outside the boundaries of his became extinct. Any minute I wasn't at school or sleeping, I was with him. After about a year of togetherness though, his cloying presence began to wear on me. I longed to have other friends, desired rest or at least a day off from being his girlfriend.

Once we were having a conversation about breaking up while we sat in his parked truck at the end of his gravel road. We had just finished shopping at a store called Tractor Supply for clothes, something I figured not many teenage girls did. A disagreement sprang up, and before I knew what was happening I was in tears. Real tears were flowing from my eyes.

I was shocked, hormonal, and dramatic. I didn't know where the tears were coming from, since I had wanted unsuccessfully to cry so many times before. I expelled so much liquid I had to wipe my eyes on my sleeves and blow my nose on the bottom of my shirt. The pleasure I derived from this unchecked outburst trumped my anger, and eventually I calmed down. Soon the argument was forgotten.

Our relationship was unhealthy in many ways. In my insecurity I asked him every few minutes, "What are you thinking about?" His answer was never good enough for me. Once, while we drove through town in the obnoxiously loud, black 4x4 truck, he attempted to break up with me. With my female powers of manipulation I urged him through another bout of crying to remain by my side. The tears that had for so long been stuck inside me came now without a struggle when I felt mistreated or at risk of being left alone.

The next town down the road was a little Mexico of sorts. It seemed that *tiendas* outnumbered markets, and there were more taco stands than hamburger joints. David and I often ate at our favorite family-owned dive. My order was always the same: homemade tortilla chips with green salsa, three enchiladas, beans, rice, and a Coke. My trouble with this restaurant, though, was that, without fail, an hour after consuming the genuine Mexican fare I needed a bathroom.

My digestive system was too weak for this authentic ethnic food. But still I continued to eat there. The food always tasted good, and my memory was short. It was only when gripping abdominal pain blinded me that I would remember I should have avoided the south-of-the-border fare. Instead, I continued to eat the same combination week in and week out, despite my discomfort. In the same way, I stayed with David in the face of the angst and fright that bled from our weird relationship.

I began using my tears to steer him, while he kept manipulating me through his cruel control. We fought more and more about the many wrong things I did (all my horrid sins, like talking to the wrong person, wearing makeup, or answering a Trivial Pursuit question to which he didn't know the answer). He humiliated me, made fun of me, laughed at my friends, and scorned any attention I showed to anything beyond the scope of his interests. He knew everything about me and began to use it all against me, making me feel smaller and even less significant than I already did.

David showed up one afternoon while I was at my job at the farm market. I was washing cucumbers in a bucketful of water. In our usual soap opera way, we began to fight about something ridiculous. He was furious with me. He often became frustrated if I showed weakness, which was ironic because he belittled me continuously, systematically contributing to my insecurity. In his fury he yelled, "No wonder your mom killed herself," and with that smacked me hard on the back of the head.

But still, I remained in the relationship. Once when things got especially heated and frightening, I darted out his front door and ran away from him. He sprinted to catch me and knocked me down in the elementary school yard next to his house. My escape had been short lived.

Probably the whole world (or at least the population of Topeka) figured I would end up pregnant and married to him. But the summer before I became a high school senior, an old friend visited from out of town.

Luckily for me, she wasn't afraid to give me an outsider's look at my odd and too adult relationship with David. She bluntly laid it all out for me, pretty much telling me that I was a fool for being with him. When I visualized my future with him—that he would beat me up more and more often and that my life could only be miserable—I wanted out for good.

Based on that one direct conversation I mustered the courage to break things off with David. He continued to demean me whenever possible, but thankfully our paths to the trailer factory and high school didn't often cross.

Blurred Vision

I stepped into the hush of the high school gym on a sticky June evening, the smartest kid in the school by my side because our last names were neighbors on the alphabetical list. A scant sixty-seven other students made the journey with us. My graduation cap was fastened to my big hair with no fewer than fifty bobby pins.

Once we found our seats, my classmate and I conspired to break tradition and transfer each other's tassels instead of our own from the right to the left side of the caps when the time came. A sweet gesture that gave us reason to remember and root for each other in life.

Before names were called to receive diplomas, the top students were asked to stand. It was when the robed teacher at the podium said my name that I realized I was seventh in my class. That's not too shabby, considering that homework rarely followed me home. Before that, I had no idea I was so "smart."

Taking in this information, I realized I should have been more diligent during my tenure at that lonely brick institution surrounded by cornfields. Education hadn't found a place on my priority list. I had no such list. Regretfully, college wasn't in my sights either. As things stood, my future concerned me very little. I didn't think past my nose as to how I would make a living or where I would live.

The school's lone guidance counselor, also the basketball coach, was a stranger. Basketball reigned supreme, trumping all other sports in my community. Players were only slightly lower than royalty. At our paltry rural school, the gymnasium was packed to the rafters for every home game. Families, couples, students, alumni, and non-alumni clamored for season tickets and wove basketball—as essential as brushing teeth—into

their everyday routines. If I had been a boy and a basketball player, I would've been able to find my way to the school office to receive advice and instruction on what to do with my life.

I had wandered without direction. Drinking was my ambition. My self-worth had been patched and stitched with the attention I received while drunk.

Back when I had been a freshman, Lacey and I shared one class together, Algebra. She was one of the few upperclassmen in that standard freshman class. We sat against the far wall, away from the door. She was in the front row, and I in the third. With such close proximity, we chose that class as our venue for inhaling a drug called rush. When sniffed, rush caused a headrush and an extreme high that lasted a minute or less. We were able to enter an adult bookstore to purchase the little brown bottles of this liquid drug, never meeting any resistance by the employees. When I sniffed rush, my vision blurred and my head throbbed in time with my pulse. We cockily flirted with calamity by not only doing this under the teacher's eyes, but also by passing the bottle back and forth during her instructions.

The recipient of the wrath of the seating chart gods, Nick, was placed in between me and Lacey so was recruited to pass things back and forth between us. My view of his neck gave me a closeup of the pimple picking that took place there. Sometimes he would scratch until blood trickled. Sometimes he smeared it. I had my own zits and felt a bit protective of him somehow—like I could see a part of him that even he couldn't.

Nick was in several of my classes. Third period Business was a favorite of mine because my seat was directly in front of Nick. I wonder if he gazed at my neck like I did his. Though I knew nothing about the mock stock market activity we did in class and

faked my way through checking the Dow in the daily paper, I did enjoy Nick's company when we had occasion to chat.

On Mondays after my drunk weekends with Lacey that year, I felt filthy and tired of being sick all the time. I told Nick about my escapades—every week I vowed to him and to myself that I would give up drinking. He was perplexed that I had a problem with alcohol already in life. When I spoke to him I felt, for the first time, honest. I wasn't bragging or lying—I was simply a mess and was explaining things to him. I wanted to tell him about my past, my mom, but I didn't and couldn't.

Clusters of royal blue lockers were situated at four locations throughout the school. Each grade, nine through twelve, had a home. Wooden benches lined the front of the locker area, making a stark, crashing environment more comfortable, sometimes even downright cozy. Students gathered at their locker hub and congregated on the benches for chats, fights, homework, and make-out sessions when the teachers weren't looking.

At my freshman lockers, I sat on the benches with four girls who were friends. They'd all been bosom buddies since elementary school. I had been chummy with them but hadn't yet broken through their stalwart bond to become one of them. I joined in their conversation—looking at Julie's notebook full of fantasies and dreams. Julie was the queen of our class—attractive, flawless, charming; everyone loved her and clamored to be by her side. She steered the discussion that day and brought it to the fantasy of suicide. She posed the question, "If you were going to commit suicide, how would you do it?"

The clique of girls gave their answers, discussing the merits of different ways to kill oneself. I betrayed my heart and joined in with their laughter. I smiled and nodded when appropriate. I gasped and rolled my eyes when necessary. All the while, holding on to my mom inside. I desperately wanted to share. Wanted to be rid of my burden. Wanted to be normal. Wanted to be free. But I hid behind what I thought was expected of me. I remained alone.

Throughout high school I had worked at the farm market until midway through my senior year when I abandoned the longtime, steady job and took a factory job with my friend Patty. The small machine shop was next door to my house. From my bedroom I could hear the intercom and the ringing phone all night long. For years I had listened to the bustle that I was now a part of. As teens, we worked an abbreviated second shift and clocked out at eight instead of midnight when the shift officially ended.

My task was to sit on a metal stool at a massive machine and grind carbide pieces with a diamond wheel all evening long.

After work on the night before the last day of school, armed with silver spray paint stolen from the factory, Patty and I traveled the country road to our school. We painted the parking lot with sentiments like “Class of 1988” and “Finally finished.” We also ransacked our town, plucking “For Sale” signs from front yards, which we used to decorate the school property.

In the morning, over celebratory cheese omelets and pancakes with a group of friends, Patty and I bragged. We couldn't keep our mouths shut, wanting accolades for our dirty deeds.

With bellies full and classmates sufficiently convinced that we were graffiti heroes, we made the journey to our high school for our last day of classes. Patty and I were stunned when we arrived to find the campus spotless. No signs. No silver graffiti. Nothing! The adults had outsmarted the kids. Our mess had been erased, and all bragging rights were stripped. With no remnant of our shenanigans left as proof, most classmates doubted our story of vandalism. Our big heads were popped by the time we entered our first class—deflated.

And just like that high school was history. As a teen, I wished away the years. My childish brain didn't comprehend how fast time moves or the degree to which life requires maturity. Some kids kept their eyes on the prize of graduation, with plans of college and career. They put thought into real life. Others, like me, exited the protective confines of high school with no plan. Graduation itself had always been the big payout I was reaching for, but as to what I would do with myself afterward, that hadn't crossed my mind.

When we small-town teenagers got bored, we created entertainment. In my seemingly insignificant place on the earth, more than once I piled with friends into a car and drove for twenty minutes to just stand on an overpass above train tracks. Obviously I was hard up to fill the creeping minutes of life.

Trips to the train tracks didn't come about unless a few people in our group were either drunk or stoned. I had just discovered the virtues of LSD, so on many of our "exciting" adventures to the overpass I was tripping on acid.

The trains zipped by infrequently, maybe at the rate of one or two per hour. Taking advantage of being in the middle of nowhere, we were able to sit on the road or in a car without being bothered. We would wait until the sound of a rushing locomotive could be heard and then stand as though at attention at the guardrail.

As the train approached, the best thing to do was close your eyes and let go of the rail, leaning slightly into it. Wind from the beast nearly knocked a person over. The sound entered my body and bounced around inside the hollow. For a brief moment there was a euphoric feeling, not unlike being on a roller coaster, especially to someone who was buzzed. The rush, though, lasted only as long as the passing train.

And then . . . I was again presented with my emptiness. *Well, what now?* I thought, as the train disappeared into the distance.

Patty got married soon after graduation. She and her husband were blessed with a baby boy early in their marriage, but he was soon diagnosed with a rare systemic immune disease.

After countless hospital stays and sleepless nights for his mommy and daddy, the boy's tiny body succumbed to his illness. At the tender age of two he died of a rare and

ravaging, unfair disease. I wasn't mature enough to comprehend the depth of the loss of a child. My life was still shrunken in, solely focused on myself.

Although the severity of this death didn't penetrate me, and I couldn't muster up any tears, I did realize that losing a baby was traumatic. Babies aren't supposed to die. A young husband and wife, each barely an adult, aren't supposed to choose a child-sized coffin and watch their firstborn return to the earth.

My head wanted my heart to empathize, to feel something. What I did was offer Patty that tiny heart-shaped box with two pennies that was given to me so many years before. I had held onto it, never forgetting the little girl who gave it to me after my mom died. I explained where and under what circumstances I had received it. She clenched it in her grief.

I had heard a Bible story about a widow who gave all she had: "Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were placed and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

"Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on'" (Mark 12:43-44).

I don't know what Patty did with my gift. She may have held tightly to it and appreciated its significance. Or she may have tossed it aside. Either way, I gave her what little I had to give.

Pressure

At times I convinced myself that a renewed spirit would come with new things. Inheritance money from my mom landed in my hands when I turned eighteen, money that had been held in trust for me until I reached adulthood. My dad released some to me about a week before my actual birthday.

I decided a brand new car would cheer me up and get me a good start in my post-high-school life. I sold my 1972 gray Vega that I had bought for \$200 when I got my license and went shopping for a grown-up vehicle. My single “choice” was a four-door sedan on the local showroom floor that I didn’t even test drive. I paid in full with a check.

The first weekend I owned my new toy, I drove two hours north into Michigan to visit my friend Cindy. Cindy and I had walked to school together in elementary school. She’s the one I lost to another state right after I lost my mom. Impressing Cindy was an objective of mine. She was a city girl and I a lowly country bumpkin.

Once I arrived we set out to find amusement. By the end of the night we had both consumed too much alcohol—which had been our goal to begin with. Her sophisticated city friends seemed impressed with my car, and in my desire to impress I allowed a stranger to drive; her inebriation didn’t faze me. I wanted to be known as Cindy’s carefree, fun-loving friend from Indiana.

My high rating on the hipness-meter bottomed out the next morning—my eighteenth birthday—when I spent hours in Cindy’s bathroom hung over the toilet throwing up.

I hadn't wanted my birthday weekend to end in illness. My new car was supposed to bring me esteem, to earn me friends and make me a grown-up. But whatever admiration I had gained partying the previous evening had been expelled into Cindy's porcelain throne. A new car didn't make me a new person.

Not long after that birthday I moved on from my factory job. As an official adult I filled out an application at a local RV and boat manufacturer, hoping for an office job of some kind. A few days later, as I stepped out of the shower, a phone call came in. I was invited in for an interview in the accounting department. I told the supervisor I would be there immediately for the interview, so I went with wet hair. Despite a soaked head and sopping shirt, I was hired.

My assignment was to take a paper invoice from a towering pile and check the computer to make sure each item had been marked as "received" and then to schedule payments. I stared at a computer screen all day long, performing the same task over and over again. It was the type of nitpicky work that I loved.

On my first day on the job, I arrived early in my new vehicle and was greeted by an older, eager coworker who knew it was my first day (we already knew each other, which is how things worked in Topeka). I hopped out of the car to walk inside with her, leaving an unopened can of Coke forgotten in the cup holder.

At five that afternoon I returned to my parking spot, unlocked my door, strapped on my seatbelt, and started the ignition, all without a thought. When I grabbed the knob

to roll down the windows, my hand stuck slightly to the handle. It took some time, but I began noticing dark splotches and splatters on the dash. The steering wheel too was sticky. I looked up and saw thunderous caramel-colored clouds on my once-clean, gray fabric ceiling.

The blazing July sun had proven too much for the cola to withstand. An explosion of pressurized carbon dioxide had ruined my car. The first layer of ick wiped right off, but the ceiling would always sport brown stains, and the vents never recovered.

My outer life displayed a perky, fresh young woman, an adult driving a sensible, family car and working an accounting job. However, like that can of soda my inner life was boiling, brewing, ready to burst with the building heat and pressure.

On New Year's Eve my first year after high school I had no plans for how I would celebrate. Since everyone knew everyone, it was easy enough to show up unannounced at someone's house and generate a party. That's what I had in mind when I went over to Nick's house that Saturday night.

I had a pocketful of cocaine and was looking for some people to socialize with. I wanted to ring in the New Year and then head home to bed. The next morning was Sunday, and my dad's out-of-town family members would be gathering for lunch at our house after church. Nick and I did a line of coke, and our conversation amped up. Our cocaine highs made us cordial and upbeat, so we talked and played cards for hours.

No New Year's Eve party ever formed. We didn't leave his house. It was just the two of us chatting like old ladies. My supply of drugs ran out, but he had some of his own to share. I didn't make it home to sleep.

At eight in the morning I crawled home and stumbled into the shower. My butt was in a church pew in the sparsely populated balcony of my Mennonite church by nine. I was a good girl some of the time. Living a double life was exhausting, though. It would've been healthier to choose one single road to walk instead of tripping back and forth between two that veered in opposite directions.

Somewhere between the hymns and the prayer requests for every other person's sick relatives, I began to sweat. I was dizzy. My arms tingled.

My preliminary assumption was that I needed sleep. After all, I'd been awake all night. From my vantage point there above the congregation where I looked down on people worshipping God, I felt as though I were being choked.

When my arm grew numb I knew I was going to die of a drug overdose. It was only appropriate that I was in church. Bad collided with good. Drugs: bad. Church: good. A devil sat on one shoulder, an angel on the other, both speaking at the same time.

It happened to be a communion Sunday. My church celebrated the Eucharist only twice a year. We would consume bread and wine (or rather grape juice for teetotalling Mennonites) in remembrance of Christ's body that was broken and His blood that was shed for us.

Because the celebration was infrequent and sacred, it was an important event for which one was expected to prepare ahead of time. Hearts needed to be in the right place. It was a time of reflection, a time to right any wrongs, to ask forgiveness. A well-known

Christian hymn proclaims “It is well with my soul.” In principle, everyone should’ve been able to assert that their soul was well before symbolically partaking of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, who gave up His life for our sins. It was an exercise in denying self, a mysterious ritual that gave sustenance to the Christian’s life.

With sweat moistening my face and trickling down my chest, I had to escape before the bread and juice were passed to me. I hurried down the stairs and headed toward the kitchen that was normally empty during the service. I wanted to cool off, drink some water, and be near the tawny push button phone if I needed it to call 911. Walking soothed me, and my anxiety subsided slightly by the time I arrived in the kitchen.

But I wasn’t alone after all. By the sink stood my friend Myra. I continued to calm down, welcoming the realization that I was recovering and probably wouldn’t die. As I kept forcing myself to breathe in and out, I listened as Myra explained that she had a hangover from too much celebratory drinking and as a result felt nauseated.

I rifled through the cabinets and found plastic cups, after which I treated Myra and myself to a swallow of tepid tap water before unwinding my own story for her. I needed her to be ready to rescue me if I dropped, or at least to provide accurate information to the coroner if I fell over dead. She wasn’t much better off than I, but thankfully neither of us required emergency medical treatment.

Within a few minutes I had composed myself to a point of recognition that most likely what I had suffered had been brought on by a combination of lack of sleep, overuse of a stimulant, and general paranoia about being in church. I was pretty sure I would live.

Even though I wasn't on the brink of actual death, the fear of dying did cause excessive distress for a good thirty minutes or so. Fright wasn't enough, though, to spur change. By Friday of that week I had a hundred dollars of cocaine in my pocket once again.

What was sturdily cemented into my mind that Sunday morning was an idea that had been percolating for a few months—that I needed to escape my life, to get away from my current state of affairs. Without my mom, without proper healing from her rejection, without any foreseeable way to stop partying, if I had once thought a new car could make a new me, I now thought a new home, a new city, and a new job would help do the trick.

Damaged

I wasn't sure yet where to move or how, so I visited my hometown to scope out options. I had kept in touch with some friends from middle school after I moved away. Through phone calls and letters, a couple of my friends stayed close. One of these was Janice.

I drove to her house after work on a Friday night, and it was there that I met Blake. He was hyper, a livewire. He twitched and talked fast, usually about the alcohol and drugs he was in the habit of consuming. He was older than me and his small frame—he was about five foot three—fit nicely with my petite body.

I didn't know where he'd come from or how he knew my friend. But we appeared to be a good match—both eager to talk about our dead moms. He had seen his killed as their car drove under a tractor-trailer truck. This unusual topic made for some remarkable “getting to know you” conversation.

Janice's mom, dad, and siblings were conveniently not at home that Friday. The air conditioner belied the stagnant summer air, and relaxation seemed to be the activity of choice for the small crowd of people splayed out on the couch and chairs of the living room. Blake and I drifted away from the tranquil gathering of friends and retreated to a bedroom down the hall. I told myself we were going there to talk.

Well, we did talk. For about five minutes.

Then he moved in toward me, scooting closer to me on the bed of a little girl, Janice's younger sister. His forceful kiss was dry and foul, rotten. I disliked the intimacy with him and pulled away. Yet he came at me with determination as I continued to reject his touch.

I guess he figured, why else would a girl enter a bedroom with a boy, if not to have sex? I wondered the same thing later, second-guessing my initial intentions. But no matter what I had hinted at earlier, I was clearly telling him to stop. Unresponsive, he used force to push me down on the Strawberry Shortcake sheets.

He yanked at my shirt until it was off and then used his teeth on me. Although he wasn't a large person, his strength trumped mine; no matter what I did I couldn't wriggle away from him.

He eventually got what he was after. I felt helpless. Hurt. Victimized. Guilty. A loser. Him and me both. Losers. Dirty. The stench of humanity. At last I'd gotten what I'd so long deserved. Pain and blood. Beaten up.

When it was over we stood up, straightened our clothes, and left the room. We walked down the hallway (he marched, while I slinked) and rejoined the party. The bed was left covered in blood, my blood.

I hastily departed from the party and drove back home, abandoning my plans. The word "rape" rebounded off the walls and reverberated in my head the entire drive. I had escaped the mess and man, but I carried with me the torment. I wondered whether anyone else in the house would know that I hadn't wanted him. That he'd hurt me. That he'd forced me. I also wondered who would have to clean up the little sister's room.

I bled for days. For an entire week the blood came. Along with pain and humiliation. I told no one.

The crushing reality is that although he inflicted upon me immense pain, both physical and mental, I had neither the guts nor the desire to shut him out of my life. Blake stalked me, found me at my home two hours away, and wooed me into dating him. It should have been easy to leave him behind.

I should have been terrified that he had followed me, but I was such a wounded person I gave it absolutely no second thought. Foolishly, I maintained contact with him.

The trouble with Blake was that mixed in with his lunacy were charm and tenacity. He showed up at my door a few weeks after our first encounter, smiling, and told me he had gotten a job at a local mobile home factory.

He was outrageous and dangerous. In one particular instance I was driving along a straight road, going about fifty miles an hour, with Blake in the passenger seat. We had both been drinking and snorting cocaine when he threatened to throw himself out of the car because I didn't love him. The maniac opened the door and put his leg so close to the pavement that the gravel burned his skin. Not thinking clearly, I didn't stop. I just kept cruising along, begging him not to jump. When I finally caved and told him I loved him, he pulled himself back onto the seat. He was crying.

Blake and I went to a rock concert to see Guns N' Roses perform. On the three-hour journey to the venue we did a hit of acid. I was still hallucinating by the time the show ended. Driving home Blake pulled up to a gas pump, filled up, and zoomed away without paying as though he was making a pit stop in a racecar. Nevertheless, I arrived home safely.

At six the next morning I dutifully inched my fatigued body from the bed to the shower to the car to my job. In my accounts payable role I was a responsible girl in my

matronly, floral-print dress and suntan pantyhose. Truthfully, though, I had no discernment, no identity. No security. No one knew the real me. Even I didn't know the real me.

I was a chameleon, always camouflaging. Blake knew the rock-music-loving, druggie me. Coworkers knew the prim accounting clerk me, the one who liked Randy Travis and Twinkies. My friends knew the fun loving, party girl me. My family knew a different me.

I fell asleep at my computer a few times that day, saying I didn't feel well, but was still tripping on LSD. Had I made this public, none of the other three women in my office would've believed it.

Blake and I shoplifted clothing from department stores and left restaurants without paying the bill. I had been strong-armed into saying "I love you" in my attempts to keep him from becoming road kill. I did not take a stand for myself and made horrible choices based on weakness.

I wanted to terminate any contact with Blake. He made me want to throw up—his buggy eyes, his musky scent, his greasy hair—the charming side of him wore off rapidly, considering that he had raped me and nearly killed me a few times.

The time came that I was finally scared enough of him to stand my ground. I delivered the news: we were breaking up.

After hearing that, he sat in the alley next my house on the cracking pavement for over an hour calling me dirty names while I hid inside, home alone. Blake had a hard time taking no for an answer. He threatened to harm me. But the damage had already happened when he had used my body for his pleasure and then manipulated me into

being with him. His resolve was weak, thankfully, because he left my house that afternoon, freeing me. I never heard from or saw him again.

Cracking

It was all too much, my disturbing life. So I did what any immature person would do: I ran away. I didn't exactly run; that would imply fleeing in haste. Though I had decided after my encounter on New Year's Day in church to leave, almost a year passed before I methodically and deliberately moved to a new city. A high school friend and I together found an apartment and enlisted the help of our families in the move. For someone without a long-term purpose or plan, I was good at the minutia of packing and unpacking, of setting up shop in a new locale.

I was jobless for our first few weeks so I amused myself with purchasing household necessities with more of my inheritance money. I explored the city and pored over help-wanted ads, looking for office work.

A notice for a "girl Friday" at an automobile auction was advertised in the classifieds at a location just a few miles from my apartment. Whatever a girl Friday was, I had no clue. Still, I mailed my twentieth or so resume to the address listed.

The ringing phone roused me from my slumber. A voice on the other end identified itself as Herschel. After I had answered a few of his questions, I was invited in for an interview later that afternoon. He clued me that I would recognize him by the purple University of Washington sweatshirt he was wearing.

Sure enough, he was there and wearing purple. When I saw the boss dressed in a sweatshirt, I knew I wanted to work in that casual environment. We talked about my previous work experience, and he hired me on the spot. Unlike the situation of my previous interview, this time my hair was dry.

Herschel told me he was convinced to hire me after talking to one of my job references prior to my interview. A contact at the large tourist hotel/restaurant where I had worked for a few months had said, "Sure, she will be a great employee. Of course, I'm biased. She's my daughter."

The reference had come from my dad, an executive at a company I had worked a few months as a cashier, a maid, and in the accounting department. He implored Herschel during the unusual reference check to take care of me while I tried to make it on my own in an unknown city. Herschel had no idea what he was agreeing to, but he did his best to live up to that challenge.

Performing office work at an auto auction required professionalism in dealing with the insurance adjusters who sent us wrecked cars. However, when relating to tow truck drivers who transported cars and junk dealers who purchased cars, street smarts were necessary. Being shorter and younger than any of my workplace counterparts, I had to clothe myself in a shell of toughness to fit in. I relished acceptance in the rough environment, where dirty jokes and sexual harassment were everyday occurrences.

Unfortunately for me and for my appointed caretaker, Herschel, during the first week on the job I hooked up with the wrong person. Laura was a drug addict who was more than happy to befriend me and share her wealth. She was about five years older than me and had been dating a married man for a while. He owned her apartment building and supplied her with an endless amount of cocaine. This was exactly the kind of friendship I didn't need . . . but greatly wanted. It didn't take me long to forget that I had moved to escape my old ways. Soon Laura and I were the best of buddies.

We had some wild experiences at bars, enjoying our fortune, the good life. But many lonely evenings were spent at her apartment playing cards and snorting coke. Those endeavors were not enough to sustain me. I began to notice that my childhood was ending and that I had precious little to show for my life. My apathy was beginning to sour.

I knew I was a being a wimp. I knew I had moved in an attempt to challenge myself to walk uprightly. I felt like I was chickening out on that challenge.

More than eight years had passed since my mom's suicide. Still, the tears and grief that invariably welled up below the surface remained reluctant to show their face.

Having pushed down the plethora of feelings for so long, stifling my true personality, the intricate "sorting myself out" process was extremely complicated. I didn't know myself. I had thrown away my high school opportunities, doing nothing and learning little. I had burned some bridges with my parents and pretty much rejected any offers of love they had extended. I was a liar, a thief, a drug user, and a drunk. I had no confidence. I was lonely and sad, defeated and broken.

In my bleak assessment of my situation, I had no one to turn to for help. Whether that sentiment was true or not, my perception was that no one cared for me. My mom's awkward departure had left me depleted and deeply wounded, unable to process much other than "I'm unloved, unlovely, unwanted, unworthy."

A boy I knew from a high school neighboring mine was attending university close by. Our reciprocal visits were frequent. He penned declarations of his love for me on sticky notes and scattered them around my apartment, but I didn't know love. He was kind, quite decent, and treated me well. I respected him but couldn't muster up real feelings for him with my adolescent level of maturity. My life was a sham. My focus was

always on myself; I had little thought or empathy for others, making a meaningful relationship impossible.

I often spent time at his college house, where he lived with three other long-haired Metallica fans, clones of himself. Many mornings I found myself on his bathroom floor with a headache from the garish thrash metal music and liquor, puking in a disgusting toilet, caressing my thoughts of self-loathing.

I knew I was in the wrong place. I felt like a middle-aged wash-up, despite still being a teenager. I desired to be a good girlfriend, to effectively seek happiness and joy. But I was ugly. Black. Full of the garbage of untapped grief and years of bad habits—a broken child who had grown into a ruined young woman.

Part of me assumed that it was already too late for me to change my circumstances. The other part wanted out and sensed a way. Something within me remained lucid and furiously sent Morse-code SOS messages, nearly undetectable, to my spirit: “Get out. You have time. Save yourself. Take no prisoners.” Living in perpetual, long-term defeat wasn’t appealing.

These warnings thwarted my party-girl tendencies, causing me to swerve off the “living it up, partying all night” road and dropping me into the ditch of depression. My tears finally flowed. My sadness overflowed. I realized that no matter what I did to numb the pain, my past was unchangeable. My mom was going to stay dead.

For a period of time I would arrive home at the end of the workday and bypass my roommate and my boyfriend (who had moved in with us during his summer break from school). I would head straight for my bed, where I would lie staring at the ceiling or

out the window through the sheer curtains, not exerting the energy to move them aside to see clearly.

My choking sobs were quiet. And I wondered then why it was I had ever longed for tears. Eventually my crying would subside, would exhaust itself into a desolate stillness in the dark. I remained on the bed, frozen.

Many evenings I spent glued to my bed listening to conversations and television shows through my closed door. Laugh tracks from sitcoms intruded my space, but I didn't join in. I couldn't, in fact, move my leaden body. I didn't know why I hid. My mind raced, but my physical energy level was low.

While the distraught tears didn't produce instant happiness, health, or wholeness, they did provide a measure of cleansing I had needed for years. I was finally escaping from the prison of myself and was able to let emotion seep out from time to time. Normally it came in waves at inappropriate times, but the tears provided a beginning. A step toward growth, backward as it seemed, had been taken.

War

When I was twenty, my fake driver's license gained my acceptance into a bar called The Peppermint Twist, where my coworkers and I partied each Wednesday at a "get out of the office" happy hour. My determination had convinced a friend to lend me her birth certificate, which enabled me to acquire a license that said I was twenty-four. Never doubted by bar keepers, I received the identity boost I had longed for, making me feel once again like a big girl—all grown up.

Usually I would eat the free pasta salad and chips, drink a few beers for a dollar each, and then head home. Thursday's workday would begin with me dragging in to work at eight in the morning. But I was young, and sleep wasn't a priority. On my hungover mornings I would stop at McDonald's before work and dine on a sausage biscuit and ice water. The salt and grease settled in the empty places of my heart and the water quenched, but not quite deep enough.

It was autumn, and my life was falling along with the leaves. As cool weather crept in and the days shortened, I stayed later and later on my midweek forays to the bar.

Halloween nearing, costumes were being paraded about, each clamoring for attention, but I wore my customary work clothes—jeans and a t-shirt. At my job at the auto auction, the beefy tow truck drivers with cigarettes hanging from their crusty lips would have belittled anyone wearing business attire.

As the night wore on a few brave singers, primed with drink, were ready to show off their karaoke talent. Feeling the effects of two or three beers on my hundred-pound body, I laughed at the uninhibited souls embarrassing themselves with the microphone.

When the wannabe rock stars' vocals began to thin the crowd, the DJ opened the floor with dance music. I joined my friends to bust a move.

Despite my frumpy clothes, I felt pretty. My long, permed hair with its big bangs was plastered back to my ears with hairspray, like wings. My skin was, for the time being, relatively clear of my normal acne. I danced freely in my deception.

I closed my eyes while I rocked the house and bumped smack into a man in a Civil War soldier costume. He smiled at me with a satisfied expression, as though we knew each other. His responsive eyes and mouth framed in wrinkles revealed that he was several years my senior, which appealed to me. I craved maturity as I balanced on the tightrope between my stunted childhood existence and my adult lifestyle.

Illogically, my instincts registered that this soldier was sensible and tender. His costume was blue, but I couldn't remember whether it was supposed to be blue or gray in order for me to root for the "right" side. Was he a good guy or a bad one?

After the dance I headed to the bathroom. Blinding fluorescent lights shocked my system after the comfortable darkness of the bar. My reflection was greenish, but more like the shriveled Wicked Witch than the Emerald City. I turned from myself, choosing not to see.

The black-tiled, shiny floor was like a mirror into the next stall. I opened my purse and pulled out a small bag and a razor blade. The toilet tank provided a smooth work surface for chopping white powder into a two-inch line. I rolled tightly a dollar bill to make a straw through which to snort the coke. I received a rush of bliss and a numbing nasal drip and savored the seeping relief in the back of my throat. After rubbing every

speck of white residue onto my gums for added numbness, I made my happy way back. Throbbing music enhanced my high as I found my soldier, Richard.

It didn't take long to fall for Richard. A week later I was driving his rich-person, clean white Thunderbird all over town, the smell of cinnamon air freshener overbearing but enjoyable in its strength, like him. I was pretending to be an adult; he was sixteen years older than me and had custody of his two kids.

My own childhood barely gone, I wandered far into dangerous territory, ever further into the murk of a relationship that was bound for failure. One of Richard's good friends had recently committed suicide, so we bonded over talk of death. I was always on the lookout for someone who had known pain.

By the time a month had passed, I was mothering his seven-year-old, whose own mom lived in another state. I poured cereal, looked over school papers, and read picture books aloud. This tender child was left in my care, but it was just a game to me. I obsessed about the father, always wondering whether he loved me.

I knew he was attracted to me but was frustrated at his playing hard to get. If he didn't invite me over or answer his phone when I called, I panicked. The neurotic woman in the movie *Fatal Attraction* didn't seem so crazy to me anymore. Whenever Richard blew me off or was busy with something else, his absence signaled abandonment and rejection. I wanted him to be by my side every second to assuage my fears. Anxiety coursed through my body. I scratched my head and picked my scalp, restless fingers moving through my thick hair. My soul was restless.

One Sunday evening I listened to the ringing through the receiver, as I had countless times before. Richard had been MIA since Friday. Tortured, I waited out the

weekend, knowing with complete certainty that he was done with me; he obviously didn't desire me in the way I hungered for him.

The needs of his children were beyond my consideration. I assumed that all his attention should have been focused on me. Crazy, I scratched my head until white flakes decorated my dark hair. Anger, infatuation, and an insane jealousy ruled me as my desire remained unfilled.

Finally, he nonchalantly answered my call and coolly invited me over for the night. I packed my clothes for Monday morning work and shook out my hair, not wasting time on a shower. Five miles of interstate driving led me to his exit, where I found my way in the darkness to his bachelor pad farmhouse.

It was a damp spring evening, and frogs littered the back roads, some hopping, some already dead, smashed by cars. I noted the insanity of the dumb frogs. Couldn't they understand? Just because there's water doesn't make it safe. "Get off the road!" I wanted to shout. "It's dangerous!"

Because he was in the shower when I arrived, I had time to snoop through the mail and other paperwork strewn on his kitchen counter. A picture of a young girl with a black eye came to life and screamed at me, "Your so-called boyfriend loves me too!" When I asked him about the photograph, he curtly replied, "It's Jenna. We have a history." The date in the corner of the picture was two weeks earlier, verifying that it had been taken when Richard and I had been together. My *Fatal Attraction* persona kicked in and fury filled me, but I squelched my anger. I scorned the truth and wished it away.

Regret

I knew the second it happened. Because I didn't want to disappoint and deal with his rebuff, I followed his lead and moved, unprotected. We had never before gone so far or acted so recklessly. My thoughts were along the line of: *Surely the odds are in our favor that we'll be untouched by our mistake.*

On Mother's Day weekend my sister, Christy, was in town to help me move to a new apartment. I mentioned to her that my period, expected for a week, was refusing to make an appearance. She remembered to check on me a few days later, and I assured her it had been a false alarm. I lied. A baby grew within me.

Despite my insatiable longing for love, I never considered my relationship with Richard to be sustainable for the long haul. But now there existed a thread conceivably stitching us together for life. I was terrified that, given the chance, Richard would take my baby. Years earlier he had won custody of his sons. He was a homeowner with two successful businesses; financial stability was his way of life. I, in contrast, was a mere secretary, bringing home a sliver more than minimum wage. My immediate goal became removing any likelihood of his claiming our child. "If I can't have it, no one can," was my immature and rash pronouncement.

Incidentally, he had fathered seven children, only two of them still living. That left five who had been aborted.

I signed up to be the next mother on his "girlfriends who've had abortions" list. The yellow pages actually had a heading for my task at hand; numbers were listed for a choice of two establishments. I called the first and discovered that no appointments were

available until the end of June. *Really? It's May, and they're booked through the next month?*

The horror of that realization seared my inmost being, but I pressed on and contacted the second clinic. I wanted this mess to be over with as soon as possible so I could start imagining it had never happened.

My boss, Herschel, and I had been comrades since that first day when we met at my job interview. We were kindred spirits. He had adopted me as a younger sister, caring for me while incessantly teasing me. When I entered his office to request a day off, he guessed within minutes my condition.

Herschel, granted insight at that moment from God, saw through me to a little girl lost. He begged me not to go through with an abortion, proclaiming, "JJ, you don't know how much I love you, because you don't know what I would do for you."

Those words knocked me into the frayed chair facing his desk. I pondered his pleas, all the while knowing I was going to forge ahead with my plans. *Why does he love me?* Besides my toil under his employ and my feeble attempts to reciprocate the friendship he offered, I had given him nothing.

Even so, I remained a ball of anxiety, failing to clearly understand the significance of this friendship. In my confusion I didn't recognize God's voice in Herschel's pleading tones, intoning over and over, "JJ, you don't know how much I love you, because you don't know what I would do for you."

On the morning I had scheduled for the killing of my baby, Richard drove me to an unmarked building in an office park a mile from my apartment. I wondered where they put all the fetuses. The hot cinnamon smell in the car made me want to vomit. I rolled

down my window slightly to draw in a fresh breath but was scolded because the air-conditioner was on. I was like a child being reprimanded by her father. As I continued to lose myself, I was allowing someone else to govern my actions. Apparently I was too insignificant to make decisions concerning my own window.

We arrived to find an overweight man on crutches barely keeping his balance while holding a sign that touted “Abortion Kills!” *No kidding?* I thought. *Thanks for pointing that out.* He chanted the same words as his sign. I wondered what had happened to his leg and why he was alone. Did he think screaming at women was going to change their minds? I felt that that his compassion, rather than his judgment, might have been a more useful tactic.

“Go fuck yourself!” is what I heard from the lips of the man whose hand I held.

I tasted the salt from my tears and snot as I bawled. Salt preserves. Salt enhances flavor. Salt of the earth. So much was pouring from my head that I could barely see the receptionist as she collected my information. “Are you okay?” she asked. My mind raced: *Seriously? Of course I’m not okay! Do you not see me crying? I’m at an abortion clinic with a man clearly too old for me who has an anger problem, as you may have heard when he yelled vulgarities at your lone protestor.*

But instead of voicing what was flying through my thoughts, I opted for the easier course: “I’m fine.”

Afterward. My militant soldier was happy we had made such good time so he could make it to his 10:45 class at the university. I wished him to have been less academic and more compassionate. Dropping me off, he drove to his lecture, leaving me to negotiate the stairs to my third floor apartment alone.

I was seething with anger at him, but self-loathing was my overriding emotion. It coursed through my marred body and pitiful, distressed soul. I tried to darken the apartment, but the sunlight proved too strong for sleep. Filth seemed not only to cover but to fill me. I determined that, after years of crumbling, my life was now officially annihilated.

Emptied of tears and unable to escape into sleep, I concocted the absurd idea to visit the pool. Physical reasons obviously restricted swimming, but there was no rule against sitting outside.

I carted with me a paperback book and a container of cherry yogurt and located an inviting chair. Calm enveloped me for a few minutes as I enjoyed the warm sun. The burning sun. The purifying heat.

But then I looked at my spoon and saw a piece of mushy fruit atop the pink yogurt. I gagged. I couldn't eat what appeared to be clotted blood, nor could I focus on the sappy romance novel, sure to have a happy ending. The glaring sun just made me squint.

I walked back to the apartment and considered killing myself, a recurring theme of my life. Everything would go away. The pain of living would be someone else's to deal with. But my thoughts of suicide remained simply thoughts.

A few days later I was still bleeding. This wasn't supposed to happen, so I called the clinic and rattled off my problems, braided with anxiety, fear, and embarrassment. The woman who answered let me talk until I ran out of words, not once interrupting.

As I took a recovery breath, she nervously informed me that she just worked for the answering service but would be happy to leave a message for a doctor. I was exasperated that she had allowed me to prattle on and on about my woes. In my humiliation, though, I meekly laughed through my disgrace and offered her my name and number.

When my phone rang soon afterward, I expected it to be a doctor returning my call. But no, it was a married friend from home. She had great news to deliver personally, thwarting the grapevine. "I'm pregnant!" she squealed. Nausea overcame me as I blandly congratulated her and shoved my guilt and remorse to cavernous depths somewhere within. Like a dog hiding a bone, I buried my emotions, to dig them up for a later feast.

I was serious about getting my life cleaned up, but how could I do it living with the shame of an abortion? Yet somehow I soldiered on, cowering and lying, primarily to myself.

I had been using for a bookmark a scrap of paper on which I had scribbled a Bible verse a long time ago: "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy" (Psalm 126:5). Songs of joy were nowhere, but the tears were beginning to pool at my feet.

Broken

On a Saturday afternoon, while vacuuming my apartment's neutral beige standard-issue carpet, the cord wrapped around the four-foot tall statue of Abraham Lincoln that watched over my comings and goings from the corner of the room.

I knew no one with such an odd decoration. Abe had belonged to my parents but they allowed him to take up residence with me when I got my first apartment. He was a handsome decoration and a worthy conversation piece.

When I pushed the vacuum forward, the cord pulled him over. His stovepipe hat shattered. Chips of black speckled my floor like debris from a shooting scene.

I cried. Tears poured from my face, dripping onto what remained of busted up Mr. Lincoln. Completely overcome, I lost control of my emotions.

My despondency was totally out of proportion to Abe's injury. In my distressed, distorted way of doing life, my reaction grew into something altogether unrelated to a hunk of ceramic.

A few weeks later, my dad came to the rescue. He arrived armed with a bottle of superglue and black paint. Within an hour Abe was back to his old self. The tears need not have fallen; they'd been quite unnecessary. Just like Abe needed my dad to put him back together, I was in need of a Heavenly Father to glue back into place the shattered pieces of my life.

I knew I was a broken vessel. Cracked, like Abe. My heart had been pulverized as a child. What's a kid to do but absorb the abandonment? I was meant for brokenness.

To be broken, but also to break.

I had once given Richard a snow globe music box as a gift. A love song clinked out of the globe. I painstakingly tracked down the lyrics and typed them on my typewriter to include with the gift.

One late morning when I awoke next to Richard in his bed, deflated by the ever-present knowledge that he didn't want me in the same way I wanted him, I rolled over to grab my glasses from the nightstand. The snow inside the globe lay still. My tired arm bumped the music box, and after it teetered on the edge for a split second that was ten minutes in slow motion to me, it plummeted to the floor. Of course, it lay in pieces. A picture of my life.

I found my glasses and crept from the bed, exiting on the other side so as not to cut my feet on the glass. I retrieved a wastebasket from the bathroom and discarded the cursed music box with its sugary song. Richard lit a cigarette and remained in bed to watch me clean.

I nervously drove across town and found the address on the slip of paper on the seat between my legs. There were not many cars in the parking lot. I walked to the door, planning to enter with confidence. I was there to finally share with others who knew what I knew about suicide. My confidence concerning the Survivors of Suicide support group was born from an anticipated liberation of sorts.

My hand tugged on the door. Locked. Another door. Locked. And another. All around the building I walked, furiously pulling on handles. I couldn't get into the church that supposedly loaned its basement to the support group. No one was there.

I was all alone. *Can I be any smaller?* All the rejection I'd internalized took hold, inducing bitter moans. I couldn't swallow this enormous mouthful—even the kindred spirit suicide people had abandoned me.

I sat in my car for several minutes, crying and ruminating on all the things in my life that were against me, beating me down. Eventually I realized my error. The group met monthly on the fourth Tuesday. When given instructions, I had heard “the last Tuesday of the month.” It was indeed the last Tuesday; but it was also the fifth Tuesday, not the fourth. I was a week late.

My self-beating mind process was insanely illogical. No one was expecting me; no one even knew me. Therefore it was impossible that anyone was rejecting me. But still, I hurt.

A month passed and I returned. On the correct night. I found a room full of miserable, grieving folks. The parents and siblings of suicide victims. Yet I was the one in the group who received the most pity. Surprisingly, the attention I had always wanted was disgusting and painful. “Oh, to lose a mother at such a young age. Is there anything harder?” a woman whose son had hung himself pitied me.

For so long I had thought, *If someone else just knew the pain I know, the pain of suicide, then I could move on in validation. Then I could get past the aloneness.* But when I was faced with the circle of pitying eyes from the hurting individuals settled on

gray folding chairs in a “welcoming” circle in a stark church basement, I absolutely knew there was no human help for me.

Thirst

When some friends invited me on a skydiving venture, I quickly accepted. What an excellent way to shed the burden of my abortion and drop all the other weights I carried. I was ever on the alert for an easy fix, the shining star that would lead to satisfaction. I figured this to be a way to get a rush and move on.

On a bright and still Saturday morning, four of us gathered at a rural airport for instructions on the appropriate way to throw oneself from an airplane. Come to find out, this feat wasn't as easy as simply jumping out the door. The first order of business was handing over a hundred dollars and then signing away legal rights to sue if we were injured or killed.

Next we congregated in a makeshift classroom in a converted single-wide mobile home and learned how to jump, steer, land, and, if necessary, use the backup chute—as well as a good deal about physics (how a body would obliterate upon impact if the parachute and backup chute were to refuse to behave—completely reasonable stuff like that).

I had eaten no breakfast that morning and was ravenous when the class broke for lunch. Our gang drove to a nearby fast food restaurant for burgers and then returned with full bellies to the airport for additional training before our jumps.

I was relieved and pumped full of adrenaline when it was finally my turn to take off in the small plane with no door, ascend to 3,500 feet, and then plunge myself toward the ground and hope the static line attached to the plane worked to open my parachute.

My dive was textbook perfect. I landed in the small white square near the runway on my feet!

By the time our whole class had jumped, several hours had passed. Exhaustion was setting in from the long day in the sun and the emotional ups and downs from the fear, excitement, and relief that accompany skydiving. My mouth was dry and my legs wobbly. My head hurt. I had had nothing to eat or drink since my cheeseburger at lunchtime, and it was approaching evening. I didn't feel hunger but was overwhelmed by thirst.

We were in the middle of Indiana farmland, at a small airport with a grass runway that offered no commercial air service. There was no running water that I could find and no bathroom, just a porta-potty. My thirst accelerated to the point that I became lightheaded. Surely other factors from the day attributed to my malaise. At any rate, I was beyond miserable by the time we gathered in the trailer to debrief.

My thirst was so distracting I couldn't concentrate on what the instructor was saying. But then I spied on the windowsill a paper cup with a straw poking out. I had no idea where it had come from, whose it was, or how long it had been there.

I sneaked over to the window and grasped the cup as though it were a gilded chalice containing healing elixir and eagerly sucked down the melted ice water mixed with a remnant of cola through the straw. The cloudy, room temperature beverage slid into my body and revived me for the time being.

I swallowed the only liquid I could find to nourish my body. In my thirst, my only goal was to find water for sustenance. And yet there remained my soul and spirit, just as parched. I desperately needed something to soothe and sustain me, to quench the thirst

inside. Jesus Christ offered me clean ice water, pure and clear. I knew about Jesus from my years in church. I knew His water flowed endlessly from a life-giving waterfall. But I continued to choose the dirty, diluted dregs of a paper cup that had been abandoned on a dusty windowsill in the middle of a cornfield.

Conflicted

I showered before work one morning and flipped on my gigantic boom box while I dried off. Bob and Tom, local disc jockeys, chattered away on the morning radio show.

I brushed my teeth, untangled the hair dryer cord, and began the process of taming my massive, heavy hair. I sported bouncy, thick permed locks. The drying process took a good twenty minutes, followed by specific placement of hairspray while teasing my bangs with a comb.

In the mirror's reflection, past my poodle head, I could see my bulletin board. It was decorated with inspirational messages, one of which was a clipping of a newspaper editorial, a tirade against abortion. It was extremely right-wing, Christian blathering at its best—or worst? I had chosen this stance of supporting life before deciding to let my child die. It's easy to rant against something if it doesn't touch you directly.

After my abortion, I left in place the yellow thumbtack that held those malevolent words to my bulletin board. I punished myself with the daily reminder. I believed that killing an unborn child was wrong and saw my own action as repugnant. But I no longer appreciated the dogmatic opinion expressed by that self-righteous author. Funny, how attitudes can change with experience.

Sharing space on the bulletin board were quotations and photographs that had sparked enough interest to merit being cut out and tacked to my wall. One picture was from a fitness magazine I had stumbled across at some point. In the clipping a woman stood lifting barbells over her head, demonstrating an exercise. She wore a sports bra and black spandex shorts. Her dark skin shone as defined muscles displayed her strength. Her

rock-hard body was the body I wanted; she was all muscle and no fat. Pure beauty. The ultimate vision of health and balance.

My boyfriends seemed to change as frequently as the seasons. With each new catch I morphed into the perfect girlfriend. When I had been with Richard, I learned to scuba dive and help with second-grade homework. With another, I became a guitar player. With each man I dated I took upon myself his interests. I tried to demonstrate for him the woman he wanted me to be. With my current lucky guy I became a Detroit sports fan, rooting for the Tigers and the Lions. I also started jogging and registered for a martial arts class.

I considered it within my reach to become the woman from the magazine tacked to my wall. I began this quest by signing up for classes in Taekwondo, a Korean martial art form. It didn't take long for me to discover that I wasn't awful at it. I enjoyed both the adrenaline high and the release that came with sweating through my uniform of white pants and a long-sleeved white shirt. I had never before participated in a sport that caused me to sweat, and I relished the outlet for my angst, as well as the physical challenge.

In Taekwondo everyone starts out as a white belt. Tests of knowledge and ability are required to graduate to the next belt color. The classes at my studio were open to everyone, at all ages and levels. At the start of the lesson the students lined up by belt color. Depending upon who showed up on a particular evening, I could end up behind an eight-year-old or a sixty-year old with a belt rank higher than mine, but that didn't matter

to me. My endorphins were on fire and thanking me. The rush of exercise was exhilarating.

I quickly progressed through belt levels and participated in competitions, even earning trophies for my performance in “forms,” a prescribed set of movements that are done with precise poise and focus.

Somehow, through all my newfound athleticism, I continued to abuse alcohol and drugs. I kept one foot in each life—health and destruction. I was conflicted in my thought processes, my heart and brain yanking me from side to side. I stood as though on a teeter-totter, in the middle with one foot on either side, rocking, balancing. I felt stuck but knew that all I needed to do was decide, to choose one or the other direction to tip the scale.

My rational mind, though shrouded in fog, made appearances from time to time. At such times, my lucid self knew the only logical choice was to go the way of sobriety and toward God. Otherwise, I would die like my mom, killed from the overflowing emptiness. I was, after all, in the gutter—in the sewer, in fact, drowning in waste. I was going through the motions of a wasted life filled with misery and regret.

When my hair was dry and big enough for the day, I turned to flip off the radio—to silence Bob and Tom—and to leave for work. I paused. On the bathroom counter I saw red dots. They stood out against the mud-colored swirls in the porcelain like lightning in a black sky.

I grabbed a washcloth and held it to my face as the blood ran. *This can't be happening—this isn't real* raced through my head. But I knew why my nose was bleeding.

My snorting habit was eating me alive. I could keep up appearances, sell cars to tough guys at my job, break boards with back kicks at Taekwondo class, and style my hair like a pop star, but I could not lie to my soul. My body and life were being literally destroyed.

How could I become the woman I desired to be, the woman in the picture on my bulletin board, muscular and healthy, and be devoted to alcohol and drugs at the same time? Clearly the two were incompatible. If I listened closely, I could hear God calling from beneath my many layers of pain, madness, and poor choices, “JJ, you may not shoot or hang yourself, but you will die. You are indeed killing yourself.”

Suicide as a way out was always lurking in my thoughts. Sometimes I took comfort in the idea that I had an escape plan and accordingly skipped through the days with a jovial and carefree face. What could happen to me that I couldn't do to myself? Nothing.

More often, however, I was consumed by the fear that I *would* take my own life someday. I wore many faces—spunky secretary, perky girlfriend, athlete, football fan, party girl, funny, motivated, smart, driven . . . depressed. I never knew who or what was going to emerge victorious.

My mom was dead by her own choice. Danny was dead by his bad decision to drink and drive. A friend I had known in high school had recently used his belt to hang himself. My brother too was on the road to ruin; I never saw him anymore without a

mustard-colored Tupperware cup holding a whiskey and Coke. His drug use clouded his mind so much that once he forgot who I was and thought he had a potential love interest, instead of his little sister, sitting on his couch. All this depravity consumed my thoughts with sick fascination.

Ironically, I was always on the lookout for self-help or religious books. The first thing I did when opening a book was to go to the back and check the index. I scanned for the letter *S*. I wanted to read about suicide to find my experience explained. I wanted answers, but most of all I wanted to find something that would eradicate the pain. I wanted what had happened to me to go away. I searched for others who had experienced death. I wanted to talk about death, maybe even to feel it.

I knew that dying wouldn't actually be a glamorous enterprise. Some people romanticize suicide. In music and literature it can come across as beautiful and even desirable. Those girls in my high school had dreamed of ways to carry out the deed, like it was an adventure. But I knew the truth: You die. You leave. Others live. Life goes on for those who remain. They continue to eat, sleep, relate. They try to heal and form bonds with others who endure. The memory of you will fade. Who could really want that? Those who take their own lives are searching for something—rest, sleep, peace, escape from a current situation, attention. I wanted all those, but because I had the luxury of experiencing my mom's death, I continued on with living.

Somewhere from within the shards of brokenness crystalized the thought that I was headed for sure destruction. I realized deep down that it was time to move on.

My move from small town to city had been an escape originally birthed by yearning for freshness, by desiring to leave behind my stifling life. But three years in, I

needed to run away again. Too much was happening—pregnancy, bloody noses, boyfriend after boyfriend, addictions. It was as though I knew what I needed but wasn't strong enough to control myself, to quit my bad behaviors or adopt good ones.

My apartment was outfitted with hand-me-down furniture. In the middle of the living room was a wooden coffee table my dad had crafted long ago. My parents had gladly passed it on to me along with the Abe Lincoln statue when I set up housekeeping. A piece of glass sat atop the artsy construction of painted lumber. One of the objects I kept on it, next to a plant and a few knickknacks, was a Bible.

One evening some friends gathered at my apartment. Bodies reclined on the couch and floor while drinks were enjoyed. To add some spice to the night, someone offered to cut lines of cocaine on my table. The glass top provided the ideal surface to chop up the fine powder and form it into inhalable-sized lines.

When I saw the Bible next to the drugs, my conscience ignited. I moved it before the debauchery progressed too far. It was as though I had an inkling that God was there and that He wouldn't be pleased with my behavior.

Impelled by my confusion about God and life, my thirst, and my longing to run, I quit my job. Packed up my stuff. Bid farewell to my roommate, who was happy enough to settle in with her boyfriend. And did an about face, headed three hours north and moved back in with my parents.

One problem. They had not invited me to return.

The Dam Breaks

Before I decided to move, a friend from my job at the auto auction asked around in search of someone who might welcome a stray kitten she had found in a parking lot. Frankie was already caring for three other pets at home; otherwise she herself would have claimed the precious newborn. I agreed to adopt the gorgeous animal, which Frankie delivered to my apartment that evening.

For at least two weeks I didn't sleep a whole night through. The dastardly kitten, which I named Shelby after Julia Roberts's character in the movie *Steel Magnolias*, was manic, borderline psychotic. If I closed my bedroom door she would scratch incessantly until I reopened it. When I allowed her to enter she'd walk on me, swat at me, purr in my ear, and lick my face until I fell out of bed and booted her infuriating, fur-covered body back out into the hallway.

The stinker soon figured out how to squish her scrawny self under my door, through the one-inch gap between the wood and the carpet, and crawled right back into our now shared bed to drive me mad.

Despite the ceaseless drama, I became attached to Shelby Kitty. With age she fattened up and calmed down. We came to be friends rather than nighttime enemies.

When I made plans to move back home, I neglected to consider whether a feline should join me. It was awkward enough that I hadn't been invited, but on top of the nuisance that was me, I added a fat cat to the mix.

My parents had owned a few cats and dogs over the years, but they ran a pristine household. Dust bunnies didn't have a fighting chance to form under the furniture, and

there were no drips of milk in the fridge or fingerprints on the windows. Messy pets were not their forte.

By the third or fourth day back in my old space, after mingling with my sister and her children who lived nearby and unpacking and settling in, my decision to move back home began to weigh on me. I knew I had not been invited and assumed in all likelihood that I was unwanted.

I felt like an intruder. I *was* an intruder. I hadn't asked permission; I just expected I could impose myself upon them and set up shop.

My deep, crushing guilt was back in full force. This was a repeat performance of what had happened when I was twelve. I moved in even though I was unwanted. No one had ever verbalized or even insinuated that this was the case. My remorse was based on my own perception, and it lay right under the surface so I was aware of it but unable to identify or articulate the weight I was hauling around.

Shelby Kitty was a rich, deep-colored calico cat. Her beauty was undeniable. But my sweet Shelby, magnificent as she was, made some less than wise decisions. One error was peeing all over the bathroom floor, the same floor that was covered with charcoal Berber carpet that soaked up cat pee like a dry sponge. Cat urine odor didn't fit the theme of my parents' immaculate house.

The front porch on which Christy and I had swung when we began our small-town life had since been enclosed into a sunroom. Comfortable furniture lined the perimeter and houseplants were interspersed throughout the room. My preferred location to do the homework for my college classes was a loveseat with firm, pale azure cushions.

As it went, my handsome but unwise cat also must have liked those blue pillows, choosing them as she did over her litter box. When I noticed the dampness and odor one morning as I sat to drink my coffee, panic shot through me. I was terrified of upsetting my parents. I feared letting anyone down. I dreaded conflict.

Instead of telling about my discovery, I sopped up the pee as best I could. Then I flipped over the fouled cushions. I was a twenty-two-year-old adult, yet childish in that I was unable to take responsibility for my actions. Better to cower and hide than be found.

My empty heart didn't want to disappoint anyone. I lacked the tools to honorably face mistakes. I avoided war at all cost. I knew that handling the issue of a pee-saturated sofa was going to take confrontation, but instead I made a Hail Mary attempt to cover my error.

I was keenly aware of my stunted emotional growth when I dodged blame. I tiptoed around in that house scared of skirmish and accountability. The truth was unimportant as long as I remained unscathed.

No one ever said a word about what had happened.

People were only allowed to see an edited, retouched version of me. I commuted to classes at a nearby university. I held down multiple jobs, including housecleaning and office work. I visited the gym to exercise and continued with my martial arts training. I lived in a cutesy, upstairs bedroom where I had stenciled country mauve flowers on the

walls. It would have taken some sleuthing to discover the drug user who lived balled up within herself, afraid of people—especially her parents.

The fragments of my fractured life were piling up around me. The blackness of feeling unwelcome, along with my futile attempts to avoid my own lies and evasive tendencies, was forcing me into a bottomless well, in which the water had run dry. I had moved home in yet another attempt to revive myself, to re-orchestrate my life, to grow up. But I was continuing to fall apart.

After the peeing-on-the-front-porch incident, I recognized that Shelby Kitty had to vacate the scene. This decision was mine alone. Discussing it with someone else didn't even enter my mind. My folks hadn't asked me to get rid of the cat, although I knew some tension would be lessened if the furball that used the entire house as her litter box were gone.

I opted not to seek a replacement home for Shelby in consideration of her “the world is my toilet” attitude. Instead, I hugged her chubby body and carted her to the backseat of my car, where a borrowed pet carrier was waiting. Once she was snugly inside, with no idea what was coming, I closed and latched the entry.

We set off, the two of us, traveling a few miles along the sparsely populated rural roads before arriving at the county animal shelter, “shelter” being a euphemism for “holding cell prior to euthanization.”

The woman at the front desk peppered me with questions as I attempted to surrender my Shelby Kitty to her mercy. She wanted to know whether I had tried to locate a new home for my animal. This robust cat was the picture of feline health—not their typical inmate. I supposed they were probably more accustomed to mangy strays

and fleabags found living in neglected households under the less than watchful eyes of old ladies who owned eighty cats.

As calmly as I could, I explained that a cat didn't fit into my current living situation and that my only option was to give her up. The woman slid the paperwork across the counter with a pencil that needed sharpening and a condescending sigh, much louder than necessary. As I signed, she walked around the counter, removed my kitty from the carrier, and placed her in a cage.

I finished filling out the forms and turned to go. A little bell hanging from the handle of the slimy, fingerprinted glass door jingled as I exited. The gravel crunched under my feet on my walk across the parking lot to my car. I got in and drove away. That was that.

She was just a cat. And she did tend to get on my nerves. People took animals to shelters all the time.

But still I cried. Tears literally blinded me as I attempted to keep the car on the road. My dam had broken.

Remorse, thick and crusty from years of buildup, reared in all its ugliness. I had forsaken my Shelby Kitty because I was afraid to properly take care of her. I was a coward. I lacked the courage to confront my parents. About my cat. About me. *Was I welcome in their home?*

I feared the truth. Feared confirmation that I was, indeed, extra baggage. Instead of taking responsibility for my pet, I'd opted for the easy way out, discarding the problem.

I steered the sedan to the narrow, pebbly shoulder until the tears subsided and I regained my sight. While I was resting there, reality hit me. I had given away the cat I had rescued as a kitten, just as I had aborted my pregnancy. In just the same way my mom had abandoned me. When things got hard, dumping was an easy way out. I felt as though I were being chopped and mangled by a dull knife.

I wanted my mom. I wanted her to want me.

I had been overwhelmed by feeling rejected. But hideously settling in was the realization of who and what I myself had rejected—my cat . . . and my baby.

All my pent up grief, guilt, shame, and fear about my abortion was flowing out, manifesting itself through the relinquishment of my kitty.

This was no longer about my cat.

What have I done? What have I done? I let someone enter inside of me and remove a life were my thoughts. A life had been created, and with my actions it had been extinguished. No horrible accident or freak of nature had caused a death. *I* had caused a death. In my cowardice.

Is there redemption?

Awakening in the Dark

As I mentioned before, we were fascinated with basketball in northern Indiana. Life revolved around it for some folks. True, high schools in our area had other teams—volleyball, soccer, tennis—but they often went unnoticed.

The movie *Hoosiers*, set in Indiana, debuted in 1986 while I was in high school and intensified the enthusiasm for the sport in our community. Also fueling the basketball fire was Indiana University's NCAA championship in 1987, with a famous shot by Keith Smart that won the game by a point.

Bradley was a basketball god. I had a crush on him that began soon after I arrived in Topeka when I was fourteen and lingered for years—at the drop of a hat I would have turned my back on any other boy to be with him. My infatuation for him wove itself into all my other relationships. Bradley was always my top pick. If he had just said the word, I would've robbed a bank, moved to Antarctica, sawed off my finger . . .

Truth be told, we would have been a horrible match. He was taller than average; I was shorter. I would have cuddled into his armpit. He was popular (of course, he *was* a basketball star) and good looking. He surrounded himself with the healthy and the fresh. The perky and the pretty. I hung with the lesser than. My pitiful heart continued nonetheless to yearn for Bradley. We never clicked. He never figured out that I was destined to be the one true love of his life.

At my reemergence into life in Topeka, although I had in the interim been battered and broken, my fire for Bradley still flickered.

It was a Friday night and I found myself alone. I was between lives. When I originally moved away from home, I left friends and social life behind. When I returned, I again left people behind. Limbo was my state, so social activity was nil.

My loneliness provoked me to call Bradley, who was by this time living at a nearby college, playing basketball (shocker). He was cordial and happy to hear from me. After our niceties, he said, “Hey! Wanna go out to a bar with me, my girlfriend, and Jeremy?” *Girlfriend?*

Jeremy was Bradley’s roommate, also a basketball star. They were both riding on a full scholarship, getting their education paid for by their incredible athleticism. Since my first choice apparently already had a girlfriend, I accepted the invitation to hang out with Jeremy. Any attention from a boy filled up my leaky tank for the short term.

At a bar full of rich-looking, trendy, college-age kids anticipating excitement, we drank and danced to the live band, barely able to carry on a conversation above the din. Bradley’s girlfriend was insanely beautiful and just the right height for him. Oh, and she was friendly toward me. Tall, blond, personable. Ugh. Perfect.

My inelegance and clumsiness were magnified in that bar full of jocks and pretty people. As I grew drunker and drunker, in my blurry world I became more and more of an idiot. Stupid. Awkward. Ugly. I was far beneath the sport gods and the supermodel.

Reaching the climax of uneasiness, I could no longer handle myself and took my leave. It was near midnight. Jeremy, my man for the evening, walked me to my car. He knew my loyalties lay with Bradley—had known my desires for years. In that light, his walk to ensure my safety seemed sweet, though I should never have been behind the

wheel. He shut the door and bid through my cracked window, “Call me when you’re home.”

He’s not so bad, I thought as I embarked on the hour-long drive home to my bed so I could sleep off my ugliness and regain my balance. At one stoplight I nodded off. When I opened my eyes and lifted my chin, the light was green, so I continued to drive.

The straight country roads were rarely heavy with traffic in the middle of the night. My journey was aided by this scarcity of activity around me. I made it to about five miles from my home without incident. Then on the same road where my best friend’s brother had died a few years earlier (while driving drunk—a common theme in my world), I fell asleep.

It may have been the speed of the car that awakened me—I was going too fast. Suddenly acutely aware of what was happening, I slammed on the brakes. The vehicle skidded to a stop only after spinning 180 degrees and running over a small tree in the ditch.

I didn’t hit a mature tree, didn’t take out a telephone pole, didn’t hit a horse and buggy, didn’t hit another car, didn’t even significantly damage my own vehicle. I plowed over a sapling. I should have died.

But what should have happened didn’t. I didn’t reap what I had sowed. I was alive. This reality seemed completely unfair. Unjust. In my favor. But God, I argued with myself, doesn’t do fair.

I motored my undamaged car out of the ditch and slinked home the last few miles at forty or so miles an hour. When I made it up the creaky stairs to my bed, I dialed

Jeremy's apartment number on my too white and sweet vintage Snoopy telephone that rested next to my head.

My call awakened him, which angered me. I had assumed he was concerned enough to wait up until he knew I'd made it home safely. He got the abridged version of my drive home. His response was unsympathetic, which served to further fuel my anger. Why had I been with him, anyway?

I was dirty and dead inside. I should've been dead outside. The fact that I was alive and hadn't killed another person was only a minor consolation.

The next morning I awoke with a standard-issue hangover. Headache, dry mouth, wanting to puke. When I walked from my room to the bathroom to find water and toothpaste to clear my cottonmouth, I passed my dad in the hallway. He was painting trim, "changing" it from white to a cleaner white. I almost spilled the story but opted instead to keep my pain inside. I wanted the near-death fiery crash (the one that, in actuality, came nowhere near death and involved no fire) to be my dramatic life turnaround, but I was afraid to speak. Besides Jeremy, who didn't care, I told no one else what had happened.

My tire marks from skidding remained visible for months on the oft-traveled path to civilization from rural Topeka. Anyone wanting to get to a mall, McDonald's, a movie theater, or Walmart had to drive that road.

The sapling that had sacrificed its life for mine lay on its side, subjected to gradual decay.

I Once Was Blind

Willingly handing over my Shelby Kitty and then almost crashing my car brought me to the end of myself.

I wasn't living on the streets shooting up heroin. I wasn't selling my body for drug money. I didn't typically neglect work and friendships. This rock bottom I had landed on was invisible, internal—which was perversely unfortunate because no one else witnessed my deterioration. My external face wasn't broken, and I didn't need to ask for physical help.

I was good at keeping to myself and hiding every clue that I was one step away from physical death, emotional death, spiritual death—any and all of these—ready to lie down on the ground as a lump of a person and give up.

I was so nauseatingly sick of myself I felt I couldn't move another inch the way I was.

I knew who God was. I knew about Jesus. Church had been part of my life since I was ten. From the first Sunday I attended and learned that “gospel” meant “good news,” the Bible had been on my radar. Although I'd blasphemed God, spat in His face, and laughed at His followers, deep down I knew the Truth. That He is a living God who loved me and wanted me. That Jesus once lived as a man on this earth and died to take on the sins of humanity.

When I was in high school and attended the youth group at a Mennonite church, my soul was probably harmed more than healed. Every Wednesday night we would

gather for games, snacks, and Bible study. On weekends though, I drank with the girls and dated the boys.

The Bible studies were taught by the small church's pastor. We learned the evils of rock music and about the end of the world. I feared the Rapture, when all Christians are supposedly going to be transported to heaven. More than once our pastor would mention that it had been reported in the media that the world would end on such and such a date. He wouldn't go as far as to say he believed this, but he gave us enough information to be expectant or terrified, depending upon where we were in our relationship with God.

On one such day when the world was supposedly ending, even though I had my doubts, I confessed all the sins I could come up with to a God I feared, hoping to be included in the trip to heaven.

After the prayer, I kept telling myself that I wasn't going to sin anymore that night, not going to sin, not going to. But sure enough, when friends began to gather and the beer to flow, I drank too much, as usual.

Later in my spinning bed, I looked up at my ceiling, trying to get my bearings. I was horrified to acknowledge that I'd messed up, perhaps irrevocably, and that this very night I might be in hell. Forever. Or, if not in hell, left behind on earth with no chance ever again of gaining entrance into heaven. No more opportunities to be cleansed from my sin.

We had watched a fear-mongering movie at youth group that portrayed a married couple—the Rapture had taken place while the man was shaving. He had just disappeared, while his electric razor continued to run. The wife was in bed and was left

behind. I couldn't shake her terror and hopelessness. I didn't want to be so hopeless. But yet I was in a bedroom, one breath away from vomiting up my evening's entertainment, with no hope of anything good to come.

I would be left behind. My nightmares stopped being about my mom. I stopped seeing her. Instead I dreamt about hell. I feared the devil. I feared God. I feared being separated from God. Despite all my Sunday school classes and youth group meetings, I had no idea how to be with God in the first place.

When we weren't learning that the devil inhabited all our teenage music and hobbies, or that the world would end next week and we would spend eternity burning, we learned mostly shame and fear: "You lead a good life . . . or else."

"Shame on you!" was voiced, in essence if not in precise words, at least once in every Sunday morning sermon and every youth group meeting. My church's theme: shame! And I had a lot to be ashamed of.

I woke up in the morning still alive. Thankfully, it seemed no Rapture had happened. Crisis averted. But I was not better. Still broken, I knew I needed God. But with all the lessons I had learned about shame, I wasn't sure God wanted me. I had always understood that you cleaned yourself up and THEN approached God, free of shame.

Fixing myself seemed impossible. I kept trying to not be a mess but continued to wallow in the mud. When I finally acknowledged that my soul was destitute and I was incapable of cleaning myself, I came to the decision that I had no other choice but God.

From a church pew surrounded by others who may have had their minds set on the chicken and noodles they would eat for Sunday dinner, I slinked down the side aisle and to the altar.

I became a Protestant cliché: “Kneel at the altar and ask Jesus to live in your heart.” But that’s what I needed to do. “Jesus, I have sinned, and I’m tired of trying to repair myself. I’m sorry for all I’ve done wrong and just really want You to be a part of my life. Please come into my heart and wash me clean. Please let me know Your love. Amen.”

Invisible

After a dinner at a local buffet with the single Christian friends who had filled in the holes in my leisure time in the year since I had stopped going to bars and doing drugs, I took my full belly home to bed. Sober and contented, I snuggled in my favorite quilt, a patchwork given to me by Herschel and his wife, Brenda.

I closed my eyes to pray but I thought back to a few years earlier when life was bleak and I was cemented to my bed, hidden away in depression. I had used the same quilt as a cocoon then too.

A vivid picture developed in my mind's eye. Jesus was there, sitting next to me on the side of my bed where I hid from the others in my apartment. He held my head, wiped my brow, and dried my tears as a parent might do for a sick child. The realization sunk in that He had been with me and had wanted me all along—just the way I was, broken and damaged.

Like my quilt was made with scraps of discarded fabric sewn together into something beautiful, so was my life. New life had come from the tatters. The quilt was worn now; some edges torn from too many washings. But rather than fold it and put it away for safe-keeping to preserve the pieces of cloth Brenda's mother had assembled, I wanted to let it serve its purpose, warming me, protecting me.

Life for me had changed since kneeling at the altar. Reading the Bible and praying to God and submitting my will to Him had helped me shake off some of my chains. Alcohol, drugs, the need to numb were not so important anymore.

My life gained more purpose and direction once I began following Jesus. I had been given a framework, the Bible. A rulebook. Some directions on how to live a life based on how Jesus lived His.

Though I saw myself as greater than the loser I had once thought I was, to some degree I was still a speck, cowering in fear before the greatness of God. I had the goals to get myself through the college classes I commuted to at a nearby university and to live a Christian life. Besides that, I could not clearly discern a reason for living.

The patch of faith I had acquired, chosen, was enough to sustain my day-to-day lifestyle. I was doing okay. Yet I knew I was motherless, different. Moms are supposed to be the ones who stick by you no matter what. Moms are supposed to be there to fight with, get advice from, talk to. I longed for the ideal mother, one upon whose shoulder to cry when all was not right with the world. I held onto my scrap of faith but knew I did not grasp wholeness.

Though I felt small and by myself, God was not unkind. He had not asked me to strip away my old garments of rejection and sin and heartache and trust Him to clothe me in white only to leave me naked. No. When I disrobed, threw off my sinful ways, and relied on Him for wholeness, He redeemed me. I was covered. The Bible says, “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see” (Revelation 3:18).

So my task was trust Him to undress me—to remove my drinking, my drugs, my sexual promiscuity. Remove the feelings of inadequacy; unleash my demons of fear and shame. The tangible sins were easier to hand over to God than the invisible, inner ones.

My insides were hurt, immature, stunted in their growth. My foundation was one block thick. My whole life was teetering on the cornerstone of Jesus—which was good. But because the rest of the base wasn't there yet, the structure of my life, though solidly supported by Jesus, was still lacking those other foundational bricks.

Once when playing outside as a child, I smashed some kind of seed the size of a walnut on a stump. Out crawled hundreds of little bugs. I screamed in horror and backed away. Beneath the shell that looked like every other shell was a thriving colony of insects eating away at the meat.

Though sturdy and healthy in looks, I was actually full of unseen deterioration. I was free in many areas but bound as a slave in others. I was living for Jesus. I was no longer a drug user, a party girl. I knew Christ was with me wiping my tears and offering joy. But the insects gobbled at my victory and continued to make me believe I was on my own. I wanted answers to why my mom chose to die.

It was as though I trod a path in the darkness, holding a flashlight trained on my own two feet. I could see as far as my next step, but no further.

With each tentative step though, I began to trust the Lord more. I started, slowly, to see that God was at my side now. My steps were in faith that He would direct me to the future He had for me.

Answers were not guaranteed. That frustrated me. I thought if I could find someone who had experienced a life like mine, he or she would have answers for me. When I chose to be a Christ follower, I chose to follow Him and believe in God's plan for me, even when I had no clue as to the whats and whys and hows.

My faithful steps continued. But I felt invisible to God sometimes. I deeply craved a comrade. I needed a way to feel belonging and security. I knew in my head He walked with me or held me, but in my heart, I was doubtful, still empty, still wobbly.

Stretching

I had been living my outwardly clean, upright Christian life since I knelt at the altar, yet my wounded spirit ached from emptiness of the past. The bruises were still tender. I vacillated between overwhelming joy at my new life and confusion about my old life. I continued to struggle with my place at home and not knowing my purpose in the world. The ups and downs led me to resort to my trusty old habit of moving away to escape pain.

Jetting off to another country would provide a smokescreen to cover my aimless life.

A friend from my church had returned from a several-month-long mission trip to Honduras full of Jesus and new ideas. Her Indiana Mennonite worldview had been shattered, and she seemed to be better off. Wanting wholeness like she apparently had, I followed her lead and signed up for a volunteer service mission trip overseas. I was assigned to Hong Kong for eight months.

Inside a house with no air conditioning and a rickety fan gasping for breath in the corner of the dining room converted to a classroom, I sat listening to a gray-haired man teaching about urban ministry while I swatted at the flies that probably flew inside looking for good things to eat like sweaty flesh.

Before I was able to travel to Hong Kong with the mission organization, I needed to complete the program's assigned three months of Bible teaching and missionary training.

The cult-like living conditions in a stately, stone house in Philadelphia with more than thirty people squished together in a pressure cooker of faith were challenging for me. I was twenty-four while most of the other participants were just out of high school. I had skipped out on the dorm experience of college, so this was my first chance to become familiar with communal living.

We had sessions in a hot classroom and heard from visiting speakers who taught about radical faith. About learning to share Jesus' love. Learning to witness to strangers on the street. Learning to get along with others. We studied the Bible in depth.

In that incubator of training, I was stretched and inspired to live a life sold out to God. But I was confused. Most of the participants had grown up attending church and Sunday school and were breaking free from something. But I was on the other end of the spectrum. I was trying to rein myself in. I was on the lookout for discipline and rules, while most of the others there were striving to escape from dogmatic religion that had been spoon-fed to them since they were babies learning to sing "Jesus Loves Me."

In essence, I was looking for love. Surely, missionaries are completely healthy people, I reasoned. Surely, someone would understand me and accept me and fix me.

All the houses in that Philadelphia neighborhood stood proudly on large lawns. There was a surprising amount of breathing space for a city home. During some free time, I relaxed at a picnic table in the backyard. Finally, the heat had moved out and an autumn chill bit the air. Leaves were crispy on the grass. Sweatshirt weather was my favorite—the perfect temperature to be cozy but not too cold.

Sitting under a tree on the other side of the lawn was a cute boy on a team that was heading to Peru for mission outreach. He was fingerpicking a song on his guitar, which I recognized as “Is There Anybody Out There?” by Pink Floyd. And I knew then that I liked him. He didn’t fit the mold of the typical person in our house, and neither did I.

Besides our musical tastes, Lee and I had other vital things in common. For one, we both read the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip every day in the newspaper. As though that weren’t enough to bind us together forever, he and I were also older than the average participant in the program, which was geared toward kids just out of high school. Our ages, mixed with *Calvin and Hobbes* and Pink Floyd, cooked up the perfect scenario for mutual attraction.

I felt a kinship with this guy who didn’t accept the status quo but searched for truth. He’d grown up on a farm milking cows twice a day. He had two brothers and no television. His driveway was a mile long, so the world was a faraway place. Church and school were the main reasons he’d ever traveled off the farm. His family rarely went to movies and restaurants and took infrequent vacations. He very well could have turned out to be a hermit, never seeing the light of day beyond his family’s property.

Something within him, though, prodded him to want more. To explore. To make up his own mind about what he believed. He was brave. He broke his poor momma's heart when he moved out to attend school and work at various corporate internships. He never ventured too far away, though, until he enrolled in the mission program and agreed to serve in South America.

Similarly, Lee was attracted to me because I didn't fit the norm. I wasn't like most other girls he knew—Mennonite, submissive, from farming backgrounds. We talked a lot during the training, slowly revealing parts of ourselves to each other. The program had a strict "no dating" policy but no restrictions on friendship.

Friendship

We were lounging on the weathered cement front porch steps under a ginkgo tree. He had invited me outside the stone house that had been our home for the last three months. Tomorrow we would go home to celebrate Christmas before embarking upon our adventures in foreign lands.

As I used a stick to carefully flip away the stinky fruit that had dropped from the tree and littered the walkway, Lee said that even though he knew dating was prohibited, he wanted me to be aware of his interest in pursuing our friendship. His businesslike demeanor was charming.

At home while celebrating Christmas and packing my enormous suitcase with enough to sustain me for the next eight months, I missed him. Our mutual interests and worldviews, despite vastly different upbringings, gave me shivers of optimism. At the desk in the corner of my bedroom I looked out the window to the street where Blake had once sat yelling profanities, holding me hostage. I shook off the negative memory. I penned a letter bound for Pennsylvania telling Lee that he was free to pursue me if he so wished.

After three months of being cooked alive, I had some doubts about leaving the sequestered atmosphere of the gigantic old house of Bible learning. I wondered if I would

make it in the world, be a worthy enough missionary. If I would represent Jesus in a respectable way. But there was no turning back.

Lush green hills and skyscrapers greeted me from my window seat on our approach. *This is real*, I told myself. I am going to live in Asia. After an eighteen-hour flight and about the same amount of time dragging ourselves through airports, my team arrived at the tiny flat that was our new home.

Though the bedroom shared by me and my eighteen-year-old roommate was only eight floors off the ground, when I looked out the window I saw countless high-rise apartment buildings. I spent many evenings wondering about the flickers of light I saw through the windows. In most of those buildings lived more people than resided in my entire town. Within each yellow square in the sky was a family of some kind. In all likelihood I would never know them, never know their hurts, triumphs, struggles, love, laughs, or tears.

Something in me was softening. My eyes were fixing upon something outside of myself. My heart was opening to a world beyond the one in my mind; I saw others and I wanted them to know the God who created them and loved them as His own children. A teensy part of me wanted to be a part of the loving.

The absolute vastness of God's world and universe was beyond anything I could ever grasp. Still, He knew each person by name. Never having lived in such a crowded city before, I was captivated by the sheer mass of humanity. So many souls, so many people in need of value and love.

Despite my affection for the millions of unknown souls behind those windows, I was less compassionate toward those I knew. I was repeatedly mean and bitingly

sarcastic to the twenty-one-year-old leader of our team. He was a noodle of emotion, pliable and soft.

He sensitively vetted others' opinions before making decisions. I unfairly interpreted his openness and flexibility as weakness, and weakness irritated me. I wanted someone strong. Someone capable of leading me; something I had never experienced.

The seed of rebellion had sprouted in my heart when I had made up my mind at age twelve that I was going to take care of myself. I would've terrorized anyone in leadership. My childish rebellion and selfishness needed a smack down.

Lee and I wrote letters that traveled the route between South America and Asia. The mail wasn't speedy between Peru and Hong Kong, so conversation proceeded slowly.

I hadn't been in Hong Kong more than a month when I saw a mysterious letter for me in the mail. I sorted the letters into piles for each team member and then escaped to my bed to see what treasures lay within my stack of envelopes. A friend from home was the secret letter writer. I knew him from church. He was chatty in his writing. His letter was full of vim and vigor and made me laugh. I replied. And thus another friendship began.

Joseph and I shared similarities. We had both been reared in broken homes, had both been adults when we became Christians, were both skeptical of mainstream religion, and both were in love with being in love with Jesus. Our talking points were vast.

Lee's letters tended to be informative as to what was going on in his life. The day-to-day of Peruvian life. The relationships on his team. He shared what he was learning about the world.

As the mail trickled in, I developed ties to both guys. Their letters couldn't arrive fast enough. I craved free time to respond. I shared with Joseph my spiritual journey, the emotions wrapped up inside me as I dealt with my team, and the cultural aspects of the Hong Kong Mennonite church.

I shared with Lee how I had learned enough Chinese to take a taxi and my experiences with unusual foods. I told him about my plans to return to college after my term's end.

I shared with Joseph my feelings. I shared with Lee my facts.

Now I Squint

I pedaled along the dusty roads around mountains that jutted straight up out of the landscape. In Yangzhou, China, the mountains poked up like goose bumps on the earth. Among the villages sprinkled around the surreal countryside, every person we rode past yelled “hello,” practicing an English word they knew.

Halfway through our eight-month term, my team of four was allowed a weeklong trip away from our work with the Mennonite churches in Hong Kong. We chose to visit rural Chinese villages and breathtaking scenery.

The air was stifling, temperatures nearing ninety degrees. Perspiration trickled down my cleavage and soaked my bra. My eyes burned from sweat dripping into them.

The heat and physical exertion began taking my mind away from the pure amazement of the fact that I was in the heart of China; all I wanted was to return to the hotel to strip out of my drenched clothing and guzzle a drink of cold water.

To call our lodging a hotel was a stretch. That term conjures up images of showers and toilets. Our tourist accommodations provided authentic Chinese squatty potties—the bathroom featured a mere hole in the ground serving the purpose of a toilet. The bathroom walls and ceiling were completely covered with black tile because the shower was nothing more than a hose hooked to the sink, with a drain in the middle of the floor.

Our room was equipped with mosquito nets over the beds, despite which I still had more red bites than I could count. Vacationing in rustic China was hard enough

physically for a weak foreigner like myself, but to be obsessively scratching bug bites all day and night through a layer of perspiration seemed almost too much.

When our bike ride brought us back to our hotel, I leaned my rented two-wheeler, one of thousands in the small city, against a crowded bike rack without bothering to lock it up. I entered the small lobby and grabbed a bottle of water from the cooler. I dropped a handful of coins into the clerk's extended hand because, though I understood Hong Kong dollars, Chinese money confused me still. Before she handed me any change, I gulped almost the entire contents of the twenty-ounce plastic bottle.

Warm or tepid water is preferred over cold in China, so the refrigerated drinks were for the benefit of Western travelers. The icy drink quenched my thirst and helped with my cool-down process. The building wasn't air-conditioned, but just rehydrating worked wonders.

It was after my recovery chug, when I removed the bottle from my lips, that I saw them. Brown, floating particles. Not just particles, more like a viscous substance. In my healing water.

After my initial recoil, I decided that dirty water was better than no water at all and shrugged it off. I was in China, after all. I was so hot and thirsty at that point I just didn't care. I was happy for hydration, just as I had been after skydiving.

We had ridden our bikes to a market where I purchased fragile antique sunglasses for next to nothing. I didn't know their history, but they intrigued me. I wondered who

had worn them, a man or a woman. I wondered how old they were. *Did peasants use sunglasses, or just the wealthy?* It would have been useful to have some modern-day glasses on the bike ride; the sun was running on full power and my eyes were sore from squinting.

My defeatist attitude toward my capacity for wholeness still shaded my heart from the healing light of Jesus. Much as those antique glasses were made to obstruct the sun, my bitterness and sarcasm and fear blocked Jesus' brilliance and love. I continued to squint, shield, and fight, succeeding in barring some of His overwhelming goodness from my line of sight. But there was one thing about Jesus: He had a hold of me.

When I asked Him to become the Lord of my life, He took me seriously. He wouldn't stand by as I turned away from Him. His overpowering brightness was too much for any reticence on my part. He loved me. His light would win out over the darkness.

Drawn into Hope

I gestured to the driver of the approaching double-decker bus so he would know to stop. After depositing my clinking fare, I meandered upstairs to my favorite seat, the front of the top deck. It was more dangerous than anywhere else on the bus, but the view from the front windows was worth it.

I traveled alone. An “I’m a big girl in a big city” rush blew over me when I successfully navigated the bus ride and three-block trek through an unsavory neighborhood and up the erratic elevator to floor five. I used the keys entrusted to me to let myself in.

I arrived early to the Friday night youth group meeting so I could pray. A bonus was that I got time alone, which was hard to come by when living and working with the same three people seven days a week.

My habit of prayer was typically to ask for my own protection, health, forgiveness, and direction. Once in a while I would throw in a bid for a friend or family member to be safe and well, but for the most part I tended to focus my shallow prayers on myself. Today was different.

The Chinese pastor of Hope Church directed five or six teenagers each week through games and Bible study. And they repeatedly came back for more even though their parents weren’t part of the congregation. They had stumbled into Hope somehow through word of mouth.

On any given Sunday, no more than twenty worshippers would attend Hope Church to fellowship with others. Many weeks, I positioned myself behind the others and

nodded and smiled my way through the Chinese songs and sermon. I caught about every tenth Cantonese word. *Jesus. Eternal. Sin. Forgive.*

That the parishioners came at all touched me, because Hope Church was clearly not a social club—not a venue to show off kids, chat up friends, or brag about work. Nothing about Hope was comfortable—paint peeling from walls and a floor in perpetual need of mopping weren't enticing. If not there for God, I don't know why the ragtag collection of men and women bothered.

That evening, I spent the half hour or so I had alone going from black vinyl stacking chair to black vinyl stacking chair, touching them all. As my hand rested on each well-worn seat, I prayed.

I prayed for the church to breathe. To blossom. I prayed for the growth and well-being of those who already attended. I prayed that they would truly know Jesus and would without any doubt accept His love for them. I prayed for hearts to be cared for and for God's love to be believed as truth as it was carried out into the city.

Those prayers that night, in the company of no one besides God, were liberating. No one else was there to see my show; I didn't pretend to care just because someone was watching. In a few months, I was going to leave Hong Kong, so what happened to the church wouldn't affect my life. But I cared, unselfishly.

Though I heard the bustle on the street several floors down—vendors preparing for evening business, taxis zipping around carrying swarms of people here and there, diesel-fueled buses starting and stopping, and families chatting over their noodle dinners at flimsy tables on the sidewalk—I experienced holy silence in that grungy apartment turned church.

Selfishness and fear chipped away. Many of the youth and church members I prayed for had been through difficult situations. I was drawn to Hope over the other two churches we worked with—Grace and Agape—because of the grit.

I heard keys in the lock and sprang over to let in the missionary who helped pastor Hope Church. After salutations, I went about other preparations for youth group. The missionary placed his bag on the piano and walked to the bathroom and filled a red bucket with hot water. Before I realized what was happening, I saw him pushing a rag mop over the dingy, scratched floor tiles.

He was the leader. He was at the top of the church's hierarchy. Surely he could have delegated the mopping to someone else (me, for instance, as I served on a team there specifically to aid the missionaries). But he quietly served those who chose Hope as their home by doing the lowliest of jobs. And had I not been there early, I wouldn't have known he cleaned. He demonstrated humility.

Hope Church was breaking me. And fixing me.

Going Deep

When my eight months of volunteer service concluded in August, I continued to correspond with Lee. His service term had been shorter than mine, and by the time I returned from Hong Kong he was already living in yet another location, Mexico, working as an intern at an international company. The pen and paper mail continued to travel between us.

Joseph and I, however, were virtually neighbors; no borders separated us. The awkwardness of “What’s going on with this friendship?” ensued once I was settled back into life in the United States. Our letters had indicated that we were buddies. But there was some unspoken attraction and flirting happening between the lines. One of our topics of conversation in writing had been music and my recent discovery of Christian rock artists such as Steve Taylor and The Lost Dogs. Joseph made me cassette tapes of some of his favorite music.

Joseph was the sort who thought outside of the box of small-town Mennonite Indiana and genuinely wanted to share Jesus with people. He was spontaneous. Hyper. Bouncy. Loud. Fun. As we headed into the setting sun one evening on a date, I lowered the car’s sun visor and a flower fell onto my lap. Joseph had cunningly lodged a red rose behind the visor. He was so smug after the tumbling flower landed on me, like I was supposed to applaud him for his romantic gesture.

I considered neither Lee nor Joseph my boyfriend, but I suspected I was going deep with both and to be fair should decide which boy would be the focus of my interest. With the falling rose stunt, it was clear that Joseph saw our friendship as romantic. Lee

was a steady, level-headed guy who, I suspected, wouldn't commit so much letter-writing time to just any girl who came along. He seemed like someone who was deliberate with his actions, not the type to move from girl to girl. Not the type to waste time on someone he didn't want to invest more into. Together, I thought, the two would make an ideal man. Spiritual and emotional, yet steady and deep. Exciting, yet loyal.

My dad and I had been driving for about three hours chatting about not much of anything. We rode in Dad's pick-up truck and pulled a camper that he was transporting from a factory to a dealer. He'd had many professions in life that required varied interests and talents. This recent job of truck driver allowed others to join him while he was working. He could be assigned to deliver campers as far as Texas or California, but on this day he had to follow the straight-as-a-stick Indiana highway east into Ohio for several hours until he arrived at an RV dealer about a mile off the highway. After unhooking the delivery, he was to turn around and drive the same straight highway back home. I had no school or work that day so I joined him on the mundane journey.

We ventured onto the topic at the forefront of my mind. I explained to Dad the dilemma I faced with Lee and Joseph. Staring at white lines for hours made it easy to talk, so I launched into a detailed description of each personality.

Some silence passed and then, "Picture yourself on a game show. You've won a prize," Dad began. "You're offered a choice between whatever's behind Door Number One and Door Number Two. You select, and then the prizes are revealed.

He continued with a scenario that seemed rehearsed. “When Door Number One is opened you discover a one-week, all-expenses paid vacation on a cruise ship to a tropical paradise. You’ll travel to the exotic locale and enjoy plentiful food and drink until you’re completely gratified. You’ll be pampered with massages and have the opportunity to lounge all day by the pool. You’ll be able to snorkel and dive in the warm, turquoise water. At night you’ll see shows, be entertained, gaze into the vast sky.

“Behind Door Number Two is an oak bedroom suite. It equals the cruise in price, although at first glance it seems like a lesser prize. It’s kind of boring. You won’t get many bragging rights with bedroom furniture. You won’t be able to show off pictures, and no one will care about a bed and dresser. With this prize, you won’t get a suntan.

“But what happens a year after selecting your prize?”

“The cruise will be history—over. Only memories will remain of the whirlwind. On the other hand, the bedroom suite will last a lifetime or more. Sure, it may be boring at first, but it’ll be so dependable. Sturdy. It’ll be there for you always.

“Whatever you chose, One or Two, will you be satisfied?”

I chose well. So very well.

Fairy Tale

Enough clothes and accessories for a four-day weekend fit into my college book bag. I also added four water bottles, one for each day, in case there was no water there clean enough to drink. I'm not sure how I thought Lee survived in Mexico. Surely there was clean water somewhere. But even so, not wanting to be caught unawares, I carried my own hydration. I didn't want to risk losing my luggage, so I shoved all I needed into a backpack I could carry with me on the plane.

When my flight landed at the Mexico City airport, my only concern was finding Lee. I knew no Spanish and had never before traveled in Latin America. I was irrationally nervous, imagining that my boyfriend might forget me, oversleep, get run over by a bus on the way to the airport, or be stabbed by marauders and abandoned alongside the roadway. I'd be left all alone to perish in the Mexican heat (after, of course, surviving for a few days on my water) all because I hadn't paid attention in high school freshman Spanish class.

Nevertheless, Lee was waiting for me, with a smile on his bearded face and open arms (no stab wounds or tread marks). Once I knew I was safe with him, I had no other agenda for my trip. I would take his lead, trusting him as the expert. He spoke fluent Spanish and was on his second stint of living in Mexico. He was there this time for eight months, leading a team of five on a volunteer service project working with a small church.

On our way out of the airport, we jumped onto a crowded bus. Lee impressed me with his knowledge as he acted as my personal tour guide of the city. Several minutes

later we were able to leave behind the stifling bus to walk the rest of the way to the North American missionaries' house where I would be staying.

An open-air market was spread out along our path. Vendors were hawking vegetables and various meats. Jewelry was displayed on blankets on the dirt, and handicrafts were abundant. Locals shopped there, not tourists. In addition, there were some antiques and a few articles of clothing. Lee strolled slowly through the maze of vendors, and I obediently followed, deafened by the din of rapid-fire Spanish swirling around me everywhere I turned.

The vibrant, luminous day added to my giddiness and relief at actually being in Mexico City with Lee. Our ongoing long-distance relationship had been exhausting. Once I returned home from the Ohio road trip with my father, I considered his advice and chose Door Number Two. When Mr. Cruise Ship responded in anger, I became more confident of my choice.

Lee stopped at a stall. On the ground were displayed items you might see in any flea market: old jars, cloth napkins, trinket boxes, kitchen utensils. In the midst of the junk, though, sat a wooden box. When I didn't notice it quickly enough, Lee picked it up. He showed me the slick brown box as he admired the handiwork. The word *Mexico* was inlaid on its top under a layer of lacquer.

Thinking the detailed craftsmanship made it a handsome item, I nodded absentmindedly, not giving the object its due consideration. Already other goodies vied for my attention in the visually crowded and stimulating marketplace.

Lee didn't give up on that box, though. He insisted I take it in my hands, which I did, but without giving his action much thought. In my defense, I'd been on a plane all

day, was in a foreign country where I didn't understand the language, and was next to the hunky man I loved. I had other things on my mind.

Now, holding it, I inspected the container nonchalantly. It's embarrassing how dumb I was. He wanted me to *OPEN* the hinged lid. Oops. Instead, I leaned over to return it to its place among a hundred other trinkets.

Lee finally took control of the situation. He retrieved the intricately decorated piece and opened it. Then, with no advance warning, he dropped to his knee on the dusty road in front of me and the world. The self-contained, microcosmic world of that marketplace, anyway.

Surrounded by the commotion of the grimy and raucous city, my focus at last reeled itself in. I heard the tink-tink-tinkling of a music box and blinked the dust from my eyes.

When my sight had refocused, I realized that there before me was Lee Landis, on one knee. In his trembling hand, a ring. His words, simply: "Will you marry me?"

I didn't clasp my hands over my face in joy, my giggles intermixed with my joyful sobbing while I tearfully intoned "Yes. *Oh yes!*" as I propelled myself into his arms. I didn't let him swing me around with my legs in the air, as camera flashes centered us in the spotlight of bliss. Startled by the proposal, all I could utter was, "Uh huh." But that was enough affirmation to get my point across to Lee.

Lee had removed the musical mechanism from the only music box he could find in Mexico City and placed it within a wooden box he'd built by hand. He was fond enough of me, the broken, empty little girl who went through life feeling unwanted, that he took the time to sit on his bed inside the house of a Mexican family and create a

masterpiece for me. He carved the letters of “Mexico” in a blonde wood to affix to the lid. And somewhere he’d found a small, tin Virgin of Guadalupe charm for the front.

Once put together, he had shellacked the entire piece of art. Inscribed on the bottom were my name and the date. I held tight.

I felt secure and loved.

Darkness Lurks

It was a Thursday morning. I went to work for my first day at a temporary job in an extremely unorganized office. File folders littered the floor and were stacked on top of desks and cabinets.

I was stashed in a room with three desks. Two were taken by a man and a woman who had seemingly, judging from all their gossip and inside jokes, worked together for years in that stifling office. They gave me a three-minute tutorial on how to manually enter the information hidden inside the innumerable files into their new computer database. Easy enough. Repetitive and brainless—my kind of job.

On my break I went alone to eat my sack lunch at the local park in my new and temporary home of Paducah, Kentucky. Lee, now my husband of five months, and I spent a lot of Sundays reading the paper on the banks of the park's pond. I chose a bench overlooking the water, devoured my food, and then sat, killing time. I was happy the job would likely last a few weeks so I could develop a bit of a routine. Peace came with predictability.

Later, at home after dinner, Lee called one of his friends and went into the bedroom to chat. I was more than content to hang out on our borrowed, overstuffed couch to view *Seinfeld* and other sitcoms.

After his hour-long conversation, he had barely hung up the phone when it rang again. Almost as though the caller had been dialing and dialing, just waiting to get through.

Lee answered the cordless phone. I heard him groan and walk out to me. Darn. I was enjoying TV and didn't want to talk.

He said, "I better let you talk to JJ."

Christy was on the line. She told me that my brother was dead. Maybe from a heart attack. *A heart attack?* He was thirty-four years old.

Immediately, we prepared for the unthinkable. The TV was switched off. The suitcases were packed. I called and left a message with my new employer. Lee let his boss know he'd be out a few days.

Within an hour we were on the highway driving all night to Indiana to say good-bye a final time.

I had last seen Jeff at my wedding. He had smiled a lot as he celebrated with us at our warm, outdoor reception by a pond. His kids soaked their wedding clothes as they steered the paddle boat through the sprinkling fountain in the pond's center.

He did not in fact have a heart attack. It was eventually confirmed he drank rubbing alcohol. When his girlfriend couldn't reach him at his second shift job, she stopped by his house to make sure all was well. He was there on a chair by the refrigerator. With no more life left in him.

Viewing. Funeral. Saying good-bye. Packing up his life. Watching his kids begin their new reality without their daddy. Realizing I no longer had a big brother. Letting go. Wrestling the demons that told me I too was destined for desolation as they reemerged from the depths where they had been entombed.

Fear

In the months following my brother's death in October, we weathered the dark fall and holiday season in our small Kentucky apartment. We had never planned to stay put there. In January, we bid adieu to our first home and moved with Lee's job transfer to Pensacola, Florida. New beginnings held promise, especially when you get to live on a road named Scenic Highway.

We settled into our jobs and community and quickly became comfortable with our amazing new opportunity to live just a few minutes away from the Gulf of Mexico. One spring Sunday, we visited the nearby beach with pure white sand for a day of lounging, walking, swimming, and fishing in the surf. As we gazed upon the clear water, the sun bright, we saw a sandbar about a hundred yards out. It looked like dolphins were swimming just beyond it.

At sight of a challenge, Lee jumped up from his beach towel, took off his sunglasses, and threw down his book, declaring, "I'm going to swim out to the dolphins." His childhood on a farm shaped him to be a strong and determined individual. Also, growing up as a middle brother being beaten from both sides turned him fearless.

He waded in and swam away. Lethargic from the sun and salt and bleary-eyed from reading, I squinted toward the sea and idly watched him shrink into the distance. The sandbar looked close enough—not once did I doubt Lee's ability to make it. I even expected him to touch a dolphin.

I was no stranger to water. I knew how to water ski and scuba dive. But I had never learned any proper swimming strokes. I used the doggy paddle to get from Point A to Point B. Treading water was easy, but that got me nowhere.

At the beach I typically went no further than knee-deep into the water. That was enough. But with my fluttery desire to impress this new husband of mine, I impulsively followed him.

I didn't put much thought into my journey to the sandbar; I wanted only to be with Lee and let him know his wife was a dolphin-touching, sandbar-standing rock star.

It didn't look that far. Until I started to swim.

The ocean is a wild animal. Whatever buoyancy offered by the salt in the water is negated by the undertow. About halfway there, I panicked, and made the fear-driven decision to turn around and find my way back to solid ground. Terror grew as I faced the shore. The harder I swam, the further away the sandcastles, umbrellas, hotels, and sunbathers appeared.

Lee, by this time, had reached his destination and didn't know I was struggling. I regarded the people on shore while I paddled and gasped. They all had the nerve to continue on with their happy business. A blissful, lazy afternoon at the beach. No one noticed that I was about to drown, mere yards from their own idyllic existence.

Then. I gave up. Lost my strength. My body surrendered to the sea. I relaxed, ready to face death. Tears mixed with ocean water. I wondered how long it would take for Lee to figure out I was missing. I was going to be a headline.

With that capitulation, when my arms and legs ceased their flailing, something soft grazed the bottom of my foot. The ocean floor.

What? Are you kidding me? I thought.

The vast ocean floor had been right there below me all along, within my reach, ready to hold me, to be a steady foothold, to save me from my fear. I wondered how long I had fought to stay afloat in the shallows when I could've stood firmly rooted all along.

Back on my hot pink beach towel, watching the out-of-reach clouds perform miracles in the sky, I realized that I surrendered but was held and saved by something greater than me, stronger. No matter what, I was not going to give up on life like my mom did. Like Jeff did.

A verse from the Bible that was buried in my gray matter pushed its way to my consciousness as the clouds drifted above: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

Balancing

I awoke at four in the morning with jetlag and went to the living room. I stretched while looking outside the window. My view from the twenty-sixth-floor flat was of countless high rise buildings and green mountains beyond. Looking straight down I saw throngs of yellow and red double-decker buses chugging in and out of the maze of streets. Red taxis sped around the buses and pedestrians rushed with purpose.

Lee and I, after our stints in Kentucky and Florida, packed up our lives and moved to Hong Kong to teach at an international school. We had talked all along during our relationship about living in a foreign land. We met on the mission field, so this seemed a fitting step.

My first morning in our 800-square-foot apartment was exhilarating. Other than being without clean clothes to change into because our suitcases had been misrouted (later deposited on our doorstep), I felt fresh and awake. An adventure awaited me. I stretched yoga-like while looking off into the distance, preparing my mind and body for the vitality of my new city.

Lee and I had both secured jobs as teachers at a school with an American curriculum. Lee would teach computer science to the high school students and maintain the school's computer network. I would christen my elementary education degree by taking on the single third grade class at the school.

We hit the ground running by reporting to faculty meetings the day after we had traveled thirty-plus hours from familiar North America to foreign Asia. The weather was so humid my already dirty clothes stuck to me like plastic wrap.

Over the next few days, while being bombarded with meeting coworkers, cutting letters for bulletin boards, and planning lessons, I also had to learn simple things like how to survive in another country—where in my neighborhood to buy groceries, how to prepare dinner without an oven, and how to navigate the subways and buses. Sleep was hard to come by.

Soon, that jetlag-induced bliss I experienced metamorphosed into stress. By the second month of the school year, teaching was adding up to a lot of trouble for me. Though my principal gave glowing reviews of my lesson plans and rapport with the children, I dreaded walking by the potted palms in the courtyard each morning and climbing the whitewashed steps that led to my classroom.

My personality lacked the flexibility and ability (willingness) to handle the chaos that accompanies groups of antsy eight-year-olds. I existed with a figurative watermelon rotting in the pit of my gut all day long. Lumps of angst and stress were my clingy companions.

I was failing. I felt as if I was on the tip of a mammoth rock at the ocean's edge balancing with only my big toe. The waves splashed me, pelting seawater at my tender skin. Though beneath me was an immovable, secure boulder capable of holding me, I trusted only what I could see, the tip that jutted up above the surface. I teetered and wobbled needlessly. If I would have just surrendered my fighting will and firmly planted both feet, I would have been even stronger for the strength of the rock. I had the rock of Jesus but I was too stupid sometimes to relax and let Him keep me safe.

In addition to teaching, we were also members of a team of missionaries. Missionaries in my mind were typically church leaders who raised support money from their contacts in the United States, which they used to start churches or serve existing local churches in other countries. We didn't fit the missionary profile because we had paying jobs. But we were welcomed by the mission team in Hong Kong and spent time with the three other couples whenever possible.

Once a month on a Saturday the mission team had a time of worship and prayer. I was intimidated by the missionaries who spent their entire working lives with the Hong Kong churches, immersed in the structure, the relationships, the language, and the culture. They seemed to have so much more time to serve God than I did. I saw them as more spiritual, more musical, more prayerful, more powerful. My world consisted of tedious lesson planning and bulletin board designing. I worked twelve-hour days at best and spent my weekends buried in more schoolwork.

My sense of inferiority before the missionaries wasn't helped by the fact that teaching was turning out not to be my passion. I had hoped it would all come together and I would be a natural, that I'd fall in love with the children and somehow start embracing the commotion that comes with the world of childhood. Yet my feelings of insufficiency were as abundant in my school environment as they were in my mission/church environment.

We were singing a song with the mission team, gathered as we did monthly in the home of a family who had been there several years. Eight of us crammed ourselves into the living room while four little kids scattered away to bedrooms to play. Keyboard

music accompanied our voices. One song expressed a desire to know God more. We sang about pressing onward and pushing aside whatever hindered us from knowing Him on a deeper level.

I so wanted to know God. I wanted Him. *Did He want me? I was unworthy.* I still felt that whatever I did was not good enough for God to accept me. I desperately wanted to let go of the barriers that kept me from experiencing the emotions I saw in others when they bathed in the peace that comes from knowing they were children of God.

One of the missionaries (to my irritation) would yell, not sing, during the line of the song: "Pushing every hindrance aside, OUT OF MY WAY." It seemed so forceful and easy for others to push aside difficulties and know God, accept His love, and rest giddily in the life they had. Yet when I demanded hindrances to get out of my way, they stayed. It seemed so easy for everyone else to have solid faith in God.

I was hard, closed off, unable to grow or learn. During those relentless sessions with God and the missionaries, with the repeated prayer and incessant singing and worship, I recognized that I was still wounded. A soldier wounded in life's war. I still had unplugged holes. But maybe, just maybe, those empty recesses could be filled.

Through my doubts, when my heart didn't believe, I (sometimes reluctantly but I knew not how else to proceed) wrapped my childlike fingers around the giant hand of God and held on. My head told me that God was the best for me. I assumed the love center in my brain had been severed. When my mom left, she took acceptance, love, security, and freedom with her. God wanted to bring all that back to me.

Fragile

It was a Saturday morning. I had papers to grade and lesson plans to prepare, but instead I rode a bus that wound around the dizzying mountain roads in the Hong Kong countryside and deposited me and some friends at a pottery factory. The other women, all with families and more substantial housekeeping set up, bought bowls and practical items for everyday use. I purchased a two-inch-tall brown glazed penguin.

I had wanted something little. A large piece of terra cotta wouldn't fit nicely in a suitcase for transportation to the United States. The penguin intrigued me; I appreciated the obscure lines and colors of the petite guy. He was smooth and shiny with no sharp edges. The black and brown paint blended together. The penguin, though not as grand and impressive as the other wares, was a work of art—to me, anyway.

Winding back down the mountain, I held my purchase, wrapped in a Chinese language newspaper, close. Though he hadn't cost much and was small, I didn't want to break him. I knew most people wouldn't have given this knickknack a second look, but I illogically became attached to him.

When I returned to my apartment, I placed him at a seat of honor on my window ledge. I admired his beauty while he was most likely unnoticed by everyone else.

I worried that he would be broken. I wanted to shield my ceramic friend from harm, but yet I didn't want to pack him away in foam peanuts. I want to expose him to the world so he could fulfill his grand destiny of being a decoration.

I left him exposed. Exposed to life, the chance of brokenness. To put him in a box would have been a travesty because the loveliness and vulnerability would have been hidden from notice. He would have been guaranteed to remain intact, but at what cost?

Raising kids seemed like the next step in our marriage. I had always assumed children were in my future. I witnessed others parent and had a collection of opinions on how I would do things when I was a mom. When the nebulous concept became real with my positive pregnancy test, though extremely grateful and thankful to God for the gift, when I considered mothering as a reality, the image wasn't so glossy.

My good friend had just given birth to a boy. I proclaimed to Lee that I too wanted a boy, saying that girls scared me and I had no idea how to be a mom to a girl. I talked a lot about this, not quite believing myself. Adorable as my friend's baby was, he wasn't a girl. I realized that deep down, I wanted my baby to be a pink-wearing, froofy, frilly daughter.

The hesitancy to become a mom grew and compounded as my belly expanded. I had aborted my first pregnancy and felt intense fear and guilt to be carrying a child. Lists were written in my thoughts as to all the ways I could possibly harm my baby. Physically, the ways were endless. The parenting books I read had no shortage of horror stories about suffocation, sickness, and accidental falls. Believing what I read could have paralyzed even the most levelheaded woman. Dangers lurked in the food, the toys, the medicines, the air.

But worse were the vast number of ways I could emotionally damage my child. I was unhealthy—how could I raise a healthy child? There were so many ways to screw up.

Once again, the opportunity presented itself to me to either trust God or not trust God. Even when rationality was missing, God was there to be my reason and strength.

And eventually it happened. Water broke. Went to hospital. Writhed in wicked pain for several hours. Was whisked to the delivery room. Two Chinese women held my legs and encouraged me with the accented words, “Push Jen-eee-fah (Jennifer)! Great job Jen-eee-fah!”

Then, the most perfect, pure little person emerged from my body. God had used me to aid in His creation. He put a daughter inside my womb and then trusted me to be her mother.

My irrational fears did not leave me. I was infinitely aware of the damage I could do to her. But as I loved her completely, giving her life through my breast, understanding that I did this though she offered nothing in return, some of my doubts dripped to the ground. When I realized I loved her more than life, that I would die for her, that I would suffer for her, I began to see how God was my parent—my father, my mother. He knit me together in my mother’s womb, just as he knit Esther together in mine. He creates life and wants good for His children.

Digging

When Esther was just six months old, we moved to be near Lee's family. As a couple, we had no mutual roots. We wanted a home, a home base. We wanted a church family to dig into, somewhere that could be a retreat for us wherever life would happen to take us.

When my son Alex was born two and a half years later, I heard over and over how much he looked like a Landis. Alex's muddy eyes and dark hair did resemble the features from my husband's family. One too many times I heard someone who had known Lee's family say, "He sure does have those Landis eyes." My jealousy spurred me to climb the creaky steps to retrieve my baby pictures from the attic.

A green Rubbermaid tub held my history.

When my parents packed up their lives and moved to a smaller house a few years prior, they relinquished many belongings, one of which was the bin full of artifacts from my life. The innocent-looking tub held pieces of my past. Apprehension about the contents of the mysterious box caused me to have Lee make it disappear when it first came into my possession. If I peeked inside and found an unpleasant hidden memory, my scabs might fall off and I'd bleed again.

Memories weren't discussed after my mom's death. Stories weren't told. Pictures weren't looked at. Elementary school artwork and gold-star worksheets were concealed. Tucked away. Childhood moments vanished.

The pull to prove Alex looked like me was stronger than my fear of what lurked within the dreaded container. Or maybe I was just ready.

I cracked the seal on the tub and did not collapse into a pile of agony. Rather, I saw birthday party pictures. A seven-year-old, happy me with several friends posing in front of our brown and orange, floral-patterned sofa.

I saw pictures of Christmas. My big brother as a baby dressed in a Santa costume.

I saw myself on a recliner wearing ankle-high leather boots and denim overalls, my thick hair feathered in a sorry attempt at a Farrah Fawcett hairstyle.

There were pictures of my house, the one I had lived in from birth until my mom's death. It was bigger in my mind. The pea green shutters were there in all their glory from the 1970s.

And there was the pine tree I had planted after I celebrated Keep America Beautiful Day with the Girl Scouts. When I moved the moist earth to position the roots in the dirt more than two decades before, I knew nothing about growth and stability. That tree in its infancy took hold and became rooted.

In another picture, my mom sat at a picnic table with the baby me. She looked surprised, like maybe the photographer took her off guard, and something resembling melancholy whispered in her eyes. Maybe the person behind the camera snapped the shot before my mother had a chance to smile or maybe she was already desperate. I studied the intricate details from the perspective of one who knew the future.

A few more photos slipped through my hands before I realized what I was doing. I was seeing everything through my filter of the black cloud I knew would come. Looming in almost every photograph was a woman who would decide to breathe carbon monoxide fumes and die rather than continue on with the life portrayed in these snapshots.

Tears were missing as I perused through the memories. My heart was steel, a hardness acquired by repetitive workouts, in just the way one earns toned muscles. Holding in my tears for so many years had made me an expert at not crying.

I found myself the slightest bit disgusted sifting through that stuff. My overall impression was that it served only as a reminder of emptiness and waste. I wasn't despondent. Sickened may better describe how I felt.

My four-year-old Esther bounced into the living room where the once-ominous Rubbermaid tub now sat as I picked through papers and pictures. She wanted to play with the container. "Hey, Momma, can I get in this and pretend it's a boat?"

I looked at her. My children were miniature, angelic versions of Lee and myself. I decided I was fine no matter who Alex resembled. He was perfect.

I dumped the past onto the floor and let my sweet Esther sail down an imaginary river in her plastic boat. My kids were chipping away the hard heart and were opening wide a tap for love to flow.

Forgiveness was needed. For me to continue on as a mother, I needed to forgive my mother. For me to heal, I had to release the pain. Forgiving is not forgetting; I knew I wouldn't forget the hurts caused by the suicide, the abandonment issues, and the brokenness. But to live a life of freedom, one that I proclaimed to live by faith, it was time to give the bitterness and resentment to God to handle for me.

Stained Glass

After the birth of our son, I had planned to stop growing our family, even though Lee could've had twenty kids. Then our family of four visited my sister-in-law in the hospital after the birth of her second child, and a photo was snapped of me holding the newborn. Later, when I saw that picture of my husband, son, and daughter surrounding me while I cradled an infant, I knew I wanted another child.

About a year later, Baby Emma joined us! I was thankful for a third opportunity to mother someone. Scales of insecurity continued to fall away. My mommy heart was continually being transformed and reborn.

A few years later, guitar music drifted in through our front screen door, entertaining me as I loaded the dishwasher with dinner dishes. Chicken and rice casserole. A hot and hearty meal. The kids tried to complain but ate because they knew the rule: be grateful for food.

After cleanup I joined Lee in the front lawn and listened to him play his guitar—"Danny Boy," one of his favorites. Such a sad song. We looked like simpletons in our weedy yard with no chairs to support us. I plunged into the grass and leaned back to take in the full expanse of sky. We talked about our day.

Neighborhood kids converged in our driveway, eating popsicles and decorating our white garage doors with sidewalk chalk. We looked the picture of family. Scooters and bikes lay in the lawn, forgotten for a time. Chalk flowers, pink and orange, were displayed beside a princess and horse and several tic-tac-toe games. Kids enjoyed the unique backdrop of the door, inspiration after a long summer.

Marshmallow clouds spotted the sky. The green of the grass and blue of the heavens looked fake. Too bright and lavish to be real. The physical world—living nature, vibrant children—through my lens was spectacular.

August daylight stuck around late. Even though school had begun we couldn't bring ourselves to put the kids to bed by eight o'clock, needing to savor late summer.

After the music and chat we strolled around the block, a ritual. The two-story houses in our upper-middle-class subdivision had different floor plans and landscaping, yet all were similar.

My existence seemed charmed. A good, good life. And therein was a problem. Things on my inside didn't always match the outer shell. I once saw a magazine article with ideas for Halloween pranks, one of which was covering onions in caramel. A victim would take a bite, expecting the tartness of an apple under sweet caramel, and be rudely awakened by the bitterness of onion. My inner life was the onion sometimes, even though it was camouflaged by the most decadent caramel.

The next morning, in spite of my candy coating, I was in tears, desperate. My onion self a mess. The phone rang. I saw on the caller ID that it was my friend Jill from Illinois. I ignored the chiming and instead flopped on the couch, sobbing. *What's wrong with me?* played over and over again in my head. *I'm an idiot. I should be happy. Why am I such a mess?*

Two kids had been delivered to the bus stop and one to preschool for the day, so I was alone with myself. Heaviness pushed on my heart, quite literally on my chest. Sometimes that weight caused such despair that I considered death more appealing than life.

But nothing, I reasoned logically, was wrong. My picture-perfect American Dream was the same as it had been on the previous night when the world looked photo retouched, when my kids, husband, and neighborhood appeared as delicacies, fragile and rich. Nothing had happened to cause a change in my outlook.

The truth was that my world becoming so enjoyable scared me. I wasn't just going through the motions; I truly was exuberant. Sometimes more than I could stand. The energy would build up inside me and I would wonder: *How did I get here and when is this all going to implode? This isn't where I should be. Certainly not where I deserve to be.*

Despite my drama-free marriage, healthy children, and middle-class lifestyle—everything short of an actual white picket fence—I still feared for my life, still waited for the hammer to drop. My mental health wavered and fluctuated. I was certain I'd end up miserable and suicidal.

Logic and emotion were uncivil next-door neighbors in my brain. They clashed, fighting for territory. The emotional side of my thought process reared, unbidden, and then logic tied itself up into knots of reason until self-bashing took over. My rational self knew I didn't want to die, that I wasn't going to hang myself that day. Or ever. I knew that what I had was enviable. Much of the world longed for a life like mine.

This thought cycle brought condemnation. Again and again. *Suck it up, already!* I would chide myself. *How dare I not appreciate my blessings! Shame on me,* a false message I had collected along the way pummeled my thoughts. *How dare I feel sad! Depression is for the overfed and weak. Most people in the world don't have the luxury to feel blue. It's expensive and time-consuming—tears, doctors, treatments. Only the rich can afford mental anguish.*

Guilt. Shame. Self-loathing. These steamed within my pressure-cooker soul, leading to more distress.

My blessings were apparent to me. Hadn't I spent the previous evening ruminating on my abundance? So why was I sad? Why couldn't I stop crying? What was wrong with me?

I called Jill back. Sobbing stifled my words. She listened while I snorted and sniffed and snotted all over the phone, alarming her. I quickly conveyed as best I could that there was no emergency. The kids were fine. Lee was fine. I was fine. All was well.

My emotional battle wasn't unknown to her. She encouraged me yet again to see a doctor. Three times I had made an appointment to talk to my family doctor about the funk I often experienced, and three times I had cancelled because I was embarrassed and scared. Why couldn't I just snap out of my funk? Get over it. Count my blessings.

Depression is a misunderstood monster. It's sneaky and heavy and sometimes hits for no apparent reason.

Beating myself up for being depressed when I had no valid reason to be upset caused me additional anxiety and exhaustion, which in turn spurred depression. Self-condemnation makes everything worse.

Exercise was my current antidepressant and stress reliever. Not understanding my actions, I didn't recognize that my stint in Taekwondo was probably so appealing because of the balancing effect it had on my emotions. I also jogged off and on over the years, typically when I felt my brain was going to explode or my skin wouldn't stop crawling.

And here's the rub. Carrying with me all the "suck it up" self-condemnation residue that was calcifying my ideals, replaying the internal dialogue that had begun when I was the little girl who, at least in her own eyes, wasn't enough, I convinced myself that exercise and discipline could cure any ailment.

I had looked down on those who were sad or sick, or those who talked about chaos in their lives. I had doubted that most self-proclaimed depressed people really were. Weaklings, I wanted to call them. I figured they just needed to get up earlier, pray more, eat more healthily, and start putting some hard effort into getting well. All that I believed was such a lie.

So what was going on? Why was my avoidance no longer working? I was moody, touchy, hypersensitive. Mean to my husband. Short with my kids. Any little thing could set off my downward spiral of self-beating. During all of this I thought it was ridiculous that I could be such a wretch at times or feel so sad when my life was enchanted and relatively free from stress.

Cracks

On a routine drive to Costco I heard a song on our local Christian radio station about Jesus knowing what we need. Pain pierced with the simple words and I cried. I wondered whether other people broke down in their minivans as they drove in rain to warehouse stores to buy juice boxes and rotisserie chickens.

My sadness was an open wound that I kept picking, not allowing it to heal. Maybe I kept it sore so I wouldn't forget my basic identity: The Wounded One. When people came into my life I hid behind humor or sarcasm to keep my distance. If that didn't work, I would crawl into my "I'm an introvert" hole. Eventually, because people had a way of being in my life still, I picked open my scab and let myself get hurt. I was perpetually being reinjured.

My injury of rejection was the main source of my aching. It had been inflicted on me way back when my mom had chosen to die rather than live. Whispers of rejection had made me shiver even before her death.

My mom's death still burned. It had happened so long ago it seemed laughable that I was still bleeding there in the parking lot of Costco. Jesus loved me. And I Him. My scars should long since have faded. But there I was, in such a state of mind that a sappy song could push me over the edge. I was still wallowing in the muck and mire of my felt rejection.

For years I had carried it with me, letting it cloud everything I did. It was so heavy and so tiring, yet I chose to put it on and keep it with me daily. It brought me to my knees. Sometimes in despair. At other times in humility, crying out to God.

Inside the store I saw a friend. When she asked “How are you?” I broke into tears and told her the truth, right there in between the bagels and the chickens. We chatted, and I felt better. Darkness had crept close but hadn’t devoured me.

I considered that I could be useful in this world if I would rid myself of the cloak I wore daily. Perhaps God wanted to use me, but I was buried beneath the choking heaviness. I wanted to carry my candle into the darkness and shine Jesus’ light for all the world. Really, I did. But when I hung out with my longtime “friends” —depression, rejection, and self-pity—the flame grew dim. My hands held the candle while my breath extinguished the flame.

My meltdowns were becoming more frequent and I finally made an appointment with my doctor at the urging of Jill. When I told the receptionist my reason for wanting to see the doctor, he made the appointment for that same day. I could have hugged him.

Don’t cancel. Don’t cancel, I repeated to myself, because my pattern was to make a doctor appointment when I was sure I was depressed. Then I would talk myself out of the depression and cancel the appointment. I didn’t cancel this time.

At a stoplight on the way to the doctor’s, something caught my eye. I turned my head and saw in the lane next to me a friend in her SUV. I smiled and waved at her, though I had tears in my eyes and knots in my gut. That’s how life was—up and down. My smiles didn’t show the desperation. No one saw the times I pulled into the garage and considered lowering the door and breathing in the exhaust from my idling vehicle.

The doctor took one look at me and prescribed an antidepressant. I thank God for a doctor liberal with her prescription writing. She ordered blood work to check for other ailments but got me on medication right away. I was scared of the horror stories of

medications actually causing suicidal thoughts. She talked me through how the chemicals work and assured me that most antidepressants are safe, though of course there is risk involved with any drug.

One hugely important nugget of information I gleaned from my first visit with the doctor: depression and stress aren't the same things. I guess I'd always thought someone had to have a reason for being depressed—had to be able to pinpoint a stressor of some kind to set it off. But though the two are cousins, and stress can indeed lead to depression, that isn't always the case. Trauma can cause depression, but not always.

Sometimes depression is just that. I'd been searching for a reason for my sadness and paranoia, and when I found none, I invariably figured I was a failure and had to fix myself. It can be true that the chemicals in the brain simply aren't distributed properly.

My doctor assured me that I was doing the right thing by seeing her. For someone who had a history of depression and suicide in the family, medication was neither out of line nor unexpected. She pointed out that if I had a history of heart issues, I would think nothing of seeing a doctor and accepting medication for my heart. She was correct.

Reaching

When Esther was three, I took her shopping at a Christian bookstore one cheerful spring day. Easter was approaching. We took our books to the counter to pay, and there sat a herd of plush lambs wearing colorful mittens and socks. My daughter waited patiently while I paid but as I collected my shopping bag from the clerk, she reached up and took hold of a lamb.

My dear child thought the animals were there for her to take. When I told her “no,” she bawled. My heart broke. I was not easily swayed by dramatics of children, but the pure innocence of the moment struck me. She didn’t understand why she couldn’t have the cuddly toy. Stuffed animals can be irresistible even to adults sometimes.

I thanked the cashier and shepherded Esther past the bargain bins and out the door. She was in complete sobs. I had no reasonable explanation for her as to why the little lamb wasn’t with us. She was too young to understand boundaries and money.

Once when my niece was about the same age, she turned her sweet, chubby face upward to gaze at a gift on the kitchen table. Pink tissue paper billowed out the top of a sparkly purple bag. It was a birthday present for someone else, but she didn’t know that. Jessi didn’t hesitate in reaching for the bag. Her child’s mind told her it was for her. Her rosy lower lip quivered slightly before full-blown wailing set in when she was told to surrender the gift. That it wasn’t for her.

That untainted naiveté of my child brought me pause in the parking lot of the bookstore. *What have I reached for? Unconditional love. Security. Sparkles and happiness. Innocence. Childhood.*

When I reached and had my hand smacked away, timidity and insecurity formed. That's how hearts become bound in layers of bubble wrap for protection.

When I reached for God, I was skeptical: *He won't give me anything because I'm unworthy* I reasoned. I've tried before to grasp goodness, only to get knocked down. But when I swallowed my fear and mustered the courage to reach for the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, He gave Himself freely to me. I had to be like my tender, vulnerable, blue-eyed princess and be confident the beauty, love, softness, friendship was possible.

I went back to the store the next chance I had and bought a lamb, which I placed in Esther's Easter basket a few weeks later.

Easter is resurrection, restoration.

Now I See

Something motivated me to register for a marathon when my body was in between the births of my second and third babies. Nervous energy dissipated when I ran. Training for the race, adding a mile or two to my distance each week, gave me a welcome break from changing diapers, wiping snot, and dealing with tantrums.

During my long training runs, I fixated on receiving a finishers' medal at the end. Anyone who crossed the finish line in fewer than six hours got the participation prize. For seasoned, serious runners, that time is laughable, but for newbies like myself six hours was a questionable goal.

As my feet slapped the roads in sun, rain, wind, and heat for miles and miles while training along the hilly, isolated back roads where I forever feared being attacked by a dog, I visualized the finish line. I saw the medal being placed over my head. That kept me going.

The fact that everyone would receive a medal did not diminish my dream of being awarded the honor.

A song on my MP3 player to which I listened while my soles beat the pavement was "Finish Line" by Steve Taylor. He sang of a man falling into Jesus' arms at the end of life, after fighting bloody battles to resist the idols that tried to pull him away from God. He finished the race bloodied but wise.

Barring an injury or unforeseen obstacle, the choice was mine whether or not I'd cross the line at the marathon. Victory or defeat was my decision. My goal was never to

win the race, never to be fast or spectacular. My goal was just to do it. To keep running, no matter what I faced.

At the race, I ran and walked for more than five hours. My leg muscles progressed from burning to numb and then they turned into pure jelly, barely able to hold me up. And though I moved from the back of a crowd of eager athletes in the first few miles to being alone, occasionally coming upon other pained runners over the final few miles, I kept moving forward. I held onto my vision of finishing; and I did cross that line. And received my prize.

“I brought you something from South Africa,” said my friend, “but I’m afraid it’s broken.” She had been in her native country for three weeks and returned home bearing gifts. Candy for the kids, exotic European and African. For me a statue of a family of five. Of all the gifts for friends she transported, only mine was cracked. Her husband had expertly pieced it together with glue. The black edges were matched up almost seamlessly. Upon close inspection though, the fracture was visible.

After I thanked her profusely for thinking of me while she visited another hemisphere, I placed the small family in my living room. The family members in the souvenir were melded together in a circle. In no place did the edges start or stop. The parents rose over the children, but all the people were important to the structural integrity of the piece.

The fierce symbolism of the brokenness of that six-inch-tall family became clear to me almost right away. We are all broken people. My family remains intact, though, held together with the glue of God. All of us will run, walk, crawl, or fly each day, moving forward. Reaching the finish line depends not upon the broken pieces but upon the pieces we've given to God to restore and strengthen.

Can we know wholeness if we have not been broken?

We suffer in life. But suffering isn't the whole of our lives. Joy, splendid joy, inhabits our earthly existence as well. But sometimes the joy has to be unearthed from beneath the rubble of disaster and heartache.

So far, my children have faced no real problems. For that I'm thankful. But how will they mature without pain? That's a conundrum. I want them to live shrink-wrapped for security, but I also want depth for them. I offer up prayers without words on this topic. Because I just don't know.

It would be selfish to squander what God has done in my life. To spend the currency of suffering on myself. Or to hoard it, keeping it bottled up.

In significant ways, I turn my head to what's behind and see the muck and leeches. Though at times, darkness, loneliness, and emptiness caused nausea and nearly consumed me, purging did come. Sometimes bits at a time exited my psyche, and other times gushing rivers of sickness spewed. Following the purges, instead of putrid poison falling to ruin whatever it landed on, vibrant and colorful flowers sprang forth. If I had swallowed back the bitter taste of bile and gritted my teeth, staying strong and holding in the toxin—the pain—the flowers wouldn't have grown. Beauty came from letting go.

Spring sunlight beamed through oversized windows and splashed into my open front door. I sat comfortably on a loveseat, faded blue, alone in the room. My husband's guitar leaned against the nicked wall where my South African family was displayed. Esther's violin was there too. Scattered around the room were also a mandolin, a bass, some drums, and a few harmonicas. Our carpet, stained muddy, was littered with homework and several once-appreciated but long-forgotten newspaper comics. Hand-me-down furniture and curtains. Smudged windows. Worn and well-used—my things. Nothing Pinterest-worthy for sure.

But looking around I saw a daddy's love. He had labored teaching the kids to play music and encouraged (the kids would say "forced") them to practice every day as a group. He built them up. Loved them. Educated them. Adored them. Stayed by their side even when they faltered.

I gazed from within the cocoon of my life, a world I could never have imagined would be mine. I examined artwork created by the hands of my children, those children birthed from my womb and entrusted to my care by God. My home, white with black shutters, very noble, sheltered me and my family.

As I watched, dust floated in the air and piles of cat hair and other manifestations of fuzz collected on the hardwood floor in the hallway. I could see fingerprints decorating the glass storm door, a child's attempt at writing a message in the morning dew, though every day I asked her to desist from this practice. My coffee cup sat amidst a buildup of household ick on the bookshelf next to me. Afternoon light revealed this dirt, quite

invisible otherwise. I considered shutting the door and pulling the shades to avoid seeing the grime. But I would know it was there.

Picking up my coffee, I meditated on God's light. He illuminated my current state of warmth and contentment despite my sins and regrets, now solidly cast away from me as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). Basking in Him reminded me that my spiritual mess had been redeemed and transformed into something beautiful through His pure grace.

I didn't close the door, didn't shut out the light. I drank my brew, hot and black, and soaked in the gift of remembrance that had come with the sunlight. My marred soul was healing. Just because I don't enjoy seeing my brokenness doesn't mean that I can wish it away. Choosing to live blindly in the dark doesn't make anything clean. The filth remains. But dealing with its reality, as juxtaposed against God's power and grace, reveals it for what it is, transforming even me into something beautiful in His time.

I thumped a pillow and watched the dust fly. Floating and settling, the specks drifted, as though in sync, from one place to another. The mistakes, the aching, the discomforts, the shame were on display for all to see—present there in some kind of incongruous harmony among the blessings. Years of sin, mistakes, pain (both received and inflicted). All of it—all of this, I reflected, was me.

The seemingly idyllic life I now inhabit is hygienic and it would be easy to hide behind it. Many people are only too satisfied to bask in what they have. They move forward, never looking back. Forgetting. Or trying to. But I haul with me not a hoard of possessions but still the load of my past.

If we choose to follow God and soak up His light, there really is no need to attempt to hide the dust balls and specks of rubbish. God in His beauty doesn't just bring into focus our ugliness, He cleans up both us and it. He wants us to shuck off the old, but He doesn't intend to leave us there, naked, exposed, and shivering. He beautifies us, clothing us regally in His love and splendor.

Mary Beth Chapman in her book *Choosing to See* explained her healing process following the tragic death of her daughter. When she asked God how to go on in life, she felt God tell her that even though life is hard, she should not squander her gifts. So I take what I have and accept it, all of it, as abundance. My blessings and lessons—I do not want to misuse them.

Jesus says in Luke 12:48, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." I have indeed been entrusted with much—in the form of blessings and pain, experiences and talents.

We've all suffered; we've all rejoiced. Every one of us has been on a pilgrimage, and we are all still hiking.

Growth comes from letting go of past and pain and stepping forward each day. And with growth, the wisdom to know what to hold close and what to keep. And what to let go.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the following people:

Herschel Harris for adoring me when I was broken.

Cindy Bultema for lifelong friendship.

Jill Winslow for not giving up on me.

Sherry Paich for texting, calling, and making me smile.

Deb Meck for thinking I am smarter than I am.

Jon Dunkle for motivating me to start writing.

Ann Weaver for the initial insights.

Stacey Wilson for all the reminders to keep going.

DG for getting it.

Inge Koenig for encouraging and editing.

SueBee, AB, JuDa, CD, AnHa, and LizMa.

Lynne Dempsey and Shawn Smucker for inspiration to self-publish.

My sweet prayer partners for enduring my long emails and for all the prayers and words of encouragement along this journey.

LM for letting my story keep her from jumping.

My kids for staying out of the bedroom while I wrote and for giving me their Twizzlers.

My husband for his facial hair and banjo serenades.

JJ Landis is a writer and librarian. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband and three children. Keep in touch at www.jjlandis.com.