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Unless the Lord Build the House

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Alicia Maimone

Senior Honors Thesis

Spring 2020

Unless the Lord Builds the House

During the fall of my junior year of college, I cried every day.

The first time I realized that something was wrong, I was sitting on the couch in my dorm. It was the start of another school year after a summer of traveling--to South Africa, around New Hampshire--and I was excited. I felt fresh and strong coming into the semester, sure of myself, sure of the girl that taught English in South Africa, the girl who everyone was excited to see back on campus. I had just started dating my good friend Jack, I was catching up with friends, and I was thriving in my English education classes. Sophomore year had been so much fun that I knew junior year would be even better. That evening in September I was doing homework with some of my roommates and Jack. We were talking, laughing--but then, my entire body tensed. The lights were suddenly too bright, Jack's voice too loud. It felt like someone was screaming in my ear.

Jack put his hand on my arm. "Hey, are you okay?"

"I—" I was staring into space, shaking. "I—" My body felt compressed, like my lungs were collapsing, like gravity was pressing in on me from every angle. My eyes watered, blurring the room orange.

"Do you want to go outside for some fresh air?"

He helped me down the stairs and outside onto a bench. We sat there in the warm September darkness, bushes ruffling in the wind behind us. I gulped air. We were outlined in

gold from the streetlamps behind us and the air we breathed seemed purple from the lingering dusk.

My face was wet with tears.

—

A week later, my friend Suzanne and I sat on that same stained couch in my dorm living room, and she was just as confused as I was.

“Do you know why you’re sad?” she asked, the sunset coming in from the window and wrapping her face in warmth.

I was swathed in my knitted blanket, knees tucked up to my chin as I tried to hold myself still. “I still don’t know.” She was always so good at asking questions, drawing out the inner conflict in me, leading me to the truth neither of us knew. But these days, it truly seemed like there was no reason.

I was missing events, dinners with friends. There were days I would be studying in the student union building and then, in the middle of typing a sentence or sending an email or having a conversation, I would hold my breath because I felt it coming. It was a tightening of my face, a quick brimming in my eyes—my body being held hostage. My favorite bathroom to cry in was the one on the first floor around a corner, since it was usually empty. Sometimes people would come in and I would freeze in the far stall with rough toilet paper crumpled around my face, trying to hold it in.

My phone would click with a message: *Here!* and I would run outside to Jack’s car. He would drive me back to the dorm--I was sobbing too violently to walk all that way--and I would cry long into the night. Suzanne or Jack or one of the Kristens (both of my roommates were named Kristen) or Melanie would sit with me for a bit, bewildered but still comforting

me. There was no trigger, no meaning to my tears. I called it “timing out” because once I started crying, I knew my day was over.

There were things that I knew. I knew that I usually wasn’t sad about anything when I started crying. I knew that I *became* sad sometimes while I was crying. I knew that I would shake sometimes during these episodes. I knew it was getting more frequent, more intense. I knew that I should do something about it, but I just wanted it all to blow over.

Mostly, there were things I didn’t know. I didn’t know why this was happening. I didn’t know if it was my fault, but I suspected it was somehow. Why shouldn’t I be able to stop the crying? I didn’t know why I couldn’t pull it together. I didn’t know what people thought of me.

I knew what I thought of me, though—I didn’t like this version of Alicia, and I wanted her gone.

—

We will never be sure when I contracted Lyme disease. I might have been born with it, since the research suggests that it can be transferred from mother to child, and my mom had it during her pregnancy. It might have been a tick in my grandparents’ yawning yard or the hill of woods behind my house in rural New Hampshire. When a Lyme-carrying tick bites, it injects the *Borellia burgdorferi* into the skin. This bacteria is shaped like a spiral, called a spirochete (pronounced “spy-ro-keet”). “Frick the ‘chetes,” the Kristens would say. Once in your skin, the spirochetes can enter the bloodstream and spread, flowing up and down inside your body, in my veins and in my brain, pumping through me. They multiply.

My doctor told me I had had it for a long time before I was diagnosed at age 16. By then, the spirochetes had multiplied many times over. My symptoms then were exhaustion, joint pain and swelling, and brain fog (which affected my memory, ability to focus on anything, and the

tangling of my thoughts). Treatment began with antibiotics and I improved until it was manageable.

The summer before my junior year of college was spent in Mamelodi, South Africa teaching English. I had a series of shots before the trip at the campus clinic. Kristen came with me for moral support (I get faint and queasy and anxious with needles). I squeezed her hand until she thought it would go numb, and the nurse said something about us dating (she thought we were), and we giggled about it later. Those shots had antibiotics in them, and I was also on antibiotics for this disease, Lyme, and I couldn't have both. So I stopped the hydroxychloroquine and clarithromycin, the drugs that were killing the spirochetes that ran rampant through my blood.

“Just for a summer,” I told my doctor.

And they multiplied.

—

When I was four, I decided to love God and let Him love me. I knew I wasn't perfect, and that He is. I knew that He loved me, and that was good enough for me. I'm not sure how much more than that I understood then, but it made sense later--that Jesus' sacrifice makes us right with God, that my relationship with God is not based on me being a good person. Back then I just knew that I trusted Him, and that was enough.

On a September weekend in sixth grade, my middle school Bible study stayed at a summer camp in the lakes region of New Hampshire. We drove there on highways, then backroads, then camp roads, and on the road to the cabin, uphill and filled with roots and potholes, we almost bottomed out the minivan. We dragged our backpacks into the cabin, claiming top bunks, and making the dark wood interior bright with pink pillow cases. Caroline

unrolled her “Cat’s Meow” sleeping bag on the bunk underneath mine. Ashton arranged her stuffed horses on her bunk next to mine. We all giggled at the sharpied love notes and signatures and stories left behind from campers on the walls.

At bedtime I was swaddled in my sleeping bag, clutching my Kids’ Study Bible. The cover was illustrated with giraffes and birds and zebras, and I loved them. It was a drawing of the Garden of Eden, except half of the animals looked like they were drawn by a kid. I understood that it was a children’s Bible, but I wasn’t sure why the artist who drew things so perfectly would want to let a kid draw on his picture. Then again, maybe it made the Perfect Artist happy to draw with a littler, imperfect one. Maybe the Artist was the Father of the scribbly kid.

I heard Lindsay ask, “Two *hours*?”

Mrs. Hawkins was giving us directions for the morning, for breakfast, and then for the day—we were supposed to sit in the woods for two hours and talk to God. Everyone was a little confused. *What* exactly were we supposed to do in the middle of the woods for *two hours*? “Spend time with God,” she told us. We weren’t sure we were going to need that long—I didn’t think I’d ever talked to God for fifteen minutes before.

The next morning after breakfast, armed with my Bible and journal and still very unconvinced, I marched into the woods and found a tall, flat rock at the base of the ropes course path. I clambered up onto the rock and splayed open my children’s Bible. The rock lay in a soft sea of pine needles, rippling with waves of sunlight and shadow. The pines stood straight and spaced and silent, besides the quick squirrels tossing themselves across the high branches. I breathed quietly and began, in my head, to say a few things to God. I don’t remember what I said; I only remember how I felt.

When we are small, we have trust relationships with people. Our parents, our siblings, our caretakers, our grandparents, our friends—all of those relationships are built on trust. When we are four years old, we are not building relationships on deep conversations; we trust our parents, and that is enough of a connection. As we grow older, our experiences with our parents become more dynamic—going through good and hard things, talking and sharing our lives. But at 11, I was thinking about my friendship with God the same way I had at four years old. I realized then that there was more, that my time with God was meant to be deeper even than any human relationship. I realized that He surrounds me. In those 120 minutes, we were listening intently to each other—Him to me, like He always was, and me to Him, like I never had before.

In the Bible, God appears to a few people in a physical way. Daniel, Ezekiel, and John all describe God with images of fire, a throne, bright colors, and human-like features. None of the writers can quite explain to other people what they've seen, though, and I think that is because our human brains cannot completely comprehend God. If God is infinite, and our brains are finite, how could we understand? Long before Jesus came, after God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, Moses asked God to show him His glory. God agreed, but put Moses in the cleft of a rock while He passed by, covered by His hand so Moses wouldn't see His face. *You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.*¹ His presence is so powerful that humans cannot handle it. Moses was up on Mount Sinai with God for forty days, and when he climbed back down, his face was so radiant from being in God's presence that the people were afraid to look at him.

I came out of those two hours with my face practically glowing, giddy and safe, because I discovered something new: the feeling of God's presence. I didn't see anything, but there was a

¹ Exodus 33:20, *New Living Translation*

simple peace, a new depth in my heart, and a full awareness that God was with me. I had never felt anything like that before. Even now, love for my parents or my friends or my boyfriend, talking with them in even the deepest of ways, does not feel the same. When I am listening to God, there is never an audible voice, but it is clear that it's Him. His voice is a feeling for me, the same one I felt in those woods, one that only comes when I am up On The Mountain with Him. And, like Biblical writers did not have the human words to describe the image of God, I don't have any to describe this. People cannot imagine colors they have never seen.

In the years after those two hours, I met with God every morning. It was hard for me to focus if I talked to Him in my head or out loud, so I wrote my prayers in a journal, and read my Bible with the giraffes on it. Those were building years. Now I curl up in bed at night with a different journal and pen, and a small mustard Bible. These are building years, too.

Before my junior year of college, there were few things that made me cry. I didn't cry when I watched *Les Misérables* in middle school, and my friend's dad told me that I was heartless. I laughed at the joke, but I saw it as a compliment. Spending my childhood in rural New Hampshire, making forts in the woods with neighborhood boys, gave me the impression that the tougher you were, the better you were. And certainly, it was safer that way—if I was in complete control of my emotions, I could control my reactions to things, and through that, people's perceptions of me. The happier I was, the more I could make other people happy. If I was sad, it got in the way.

Happiness seemed to be my natural disposition from the beginning. "You were the happiest baby," my mom told me. "You were the happiest toddler," my grandparents said. In college, I joined Cru, a Christian group on campus, and made friends there who all told me as

well, “Alicia, you’re always so happy!” I basked in it. But mostly, I held onto it for dear life. I needed to be happy so that people liked me, so that I was loved.

I had always had a good grip on my emotions. In high school, if I was sad, I could make myself snap out of it. If I liked a boy, I could make myself stop liking him. People scoffed at “emotional teenage girls” and I scoffed with them in silence, giving thanks that I was not one myself, so that people would not scoff at me as well. I held onto my emotional control like it was the thing that would save me.

My personality seemed to peak sophomore year of college. It was a fun year for me--I had all the friends, I was leading all kinds of things for Cru, and I loved it--I loved working with people, playing music, planning things, and most of all, making people feel welcome. The fuel for that was my incessant happiness. I was rarely stressed about anything. Again, the echoes: “Alicia, you are always so happy! Alicia, I love being around you—you are so bubbly!” I was high on the adoration of others, and though I still spent time with God and loved Him, I was blind to the fact that *I* was slowly becoming god in my own eyes. The thing about being god, though, is that you have to be perfect to keep it up.

In the bathroom at my family’s house, there is a little stool with my sister’s stack of *The Magnolia Journal* subscription, and the one on top caught my eye. The cover read, “In Pursuit of Happiness Wholeness: Leaning into every chapter of your story.” My sister buys the magazine because it is written by Joanna Gaines. We have spent many nights as a family watching the show *Fixer Upper*, which chronicles Joanna and her husband Chip renovating homes for people, ripping out walls and guts and painting and making it all shiny and chic, personalized to the

couple. Joanna has an eye for making old things beautiful and using pieces of the past to makeover the home so there's some old and some new, but all of it is much better.

In December, a few months after the crying started, I was wedged between Jack and Suzanne on the couch, tears falling into the threads of my blanket. Through the window, we watched slender snowflakes float through the deep night. We should have left thirty minutes before for the Cru Christmas party, and at this point I knew I wouldn't make it. This was the first year I had missed.

"You guys should leave soon." I blew my nose again. "I'm sorry I'm not fun when I'm crying."

Suzanne shook her head, her mousy brown hair brushing on the blanket. "Alicia," she spoke in her gentle, low voice, "it doesn't matter if you're crying. We just like spending time with you."

The tears stiffened, quickened. Did I believe that?

At the end of each *Fixer Upper* show, they show before and after photos. The couple walks into their new kitchen, gasps, and *swoosh*: the video of the old kitchen comes flashing across the screen so you can see just how drastically Joanna and Chip changed things. Living room now: a beautiful chandelier, hardwood floors, white fireplace, rustic art. *Swoosh*: ugly brown couch, dim lighting, shag carpet--and then back to the new. Alicia then: smiling, excited about life, making people laugh. *Swoosh*: crying, cancelling most lunches and Cru meetings and praise team practices, unable to be humorous in any way—but the camera did not pan back to the new house. There was no snapping out of this. Someone had torn down the walls of my old house, but it didn't look like they were back up the way I wanted them. I didn't want to lean into

this chapter of my story, like Joanna was telling me to. I understood that wholeness was good, but gosh, I just wanted to be happy again.

Those months found me grappling with identity. If I wasn't happy, had my personality changed? If I was crying all the time, would my friends still like me? Apparently, stopping the antibiotics "just for a summer" was not the move. The spirochetes that were in my blood were now burrowing into my brain, and that, coupled with a new co-infection from another tick bite, triggered an overwhelming wave of neurological symptoms. The crying was followed by anxiety, depression, shaking, hyperventilation, and feeling terrified. There were times when it all hit at once, and those nights I called them "Lyme attacks." This was a dual-natured suffering: I was crying and shaking on the couch instead of spending time with my friends, and I was losing my happiness and emotional control, the ideals I had built myself on.

I spent most of that year of my new reality carrying around a secret guilt. I was afraid to talk about it, in case it was true. My guilt was seeded in a single question: *What if this is all my fault?* It could be, after all. Maybe I was just too wimpy. Maybe I could snap out of it all, but I just wasn't trying hard enough.

My great-grandmother, Mommom, accepted Christ two months before her 90th birthday, when I was 9. We were all sitting in the living room--my mom, Gran, my sister Allie, Mommom, and I--reading about Heaven. The October wind bent the branches of the horse chestnut tree outside the long living room windows, and my mom turned pages delicately in the warm lamp light.

The four of us besides Mommom had already given our lives to Christ, and we thought she never would. My grandmother asked her quietly that evening, “Do you want to accept Jesus?”

My great-grandmother became my sister in Christ that day, earthly and heavenly family, and we were surprised. She was stubborn, self-sufficient, and so Type A that she organized her paperclips by size and never had an odd sock until she moved in with my grandparents at 80 years old. Her remarks were laced with snarkiness and superiority. She lived alone for years and worked as a bookkeeper before moving to New Hampshire with my grandparents. She folded laundry in perfect squares and yelled at my brother when he was a toddler for playing with kitchen utensils in the dirt. Every single night she rolled her short white hair into pink curlers and every morning she sat on the same cushion of the couch with her two prunes, a bowl of oatmeal, and a glass of orange juice. Being stubborn and self-sufficient, she wanted to organize her own life, but decided that Jesus would do it better. She couldn't be god of her own life anymore, but she realized that she was asking someone perfect, loving, and smarter to fill that role. I think that's why some people call it “trusting in Jesus,” because it is giving Him control.

Her first fall happened on a November night in slow motion, and suddenly she was on the ground right outside of the kitchen. I held one of her hands, my dad the other, while Grandpa called an ambulance. A few months later, she fell down a flight of stairs. Soon, she wasn't allowed to carry her dishes to the kitchen anymore.

“I'm perfectly capable, Allan,” she retorted. She stood in the middle of the living room, stopped on the way to the kitchen, holding her bowl and spoon. Her eyes glimmered, and I

thought it was defiance. She had run her household for so long, and now she was reduced to folding laundry on the couch.

“No, Mom,” Grandpa said, voice strained and louder than it should have been. His grey hair was slicked back tight, and his mustache bristled as he spoke. “You’re going to fall. You can’t get up from the couch by yourself.” He took the dishes from her hands.

She clenched her empty fists and thrust them down to her sides. She raised her voice at her son like he was in high school again. “Give me the dishes, Allan!”

“Sit down, Mom!” He pointed to the couch with the spoon and took her dishes to the kitchen. His verdict choked in Mommom’s throat and I realized the glimmer in her eyes was tears.

She started losing mental functions; my father had to ask her to stop eating cat treats and she couldn’t remember simple things.

One night when I was 11, I was staying with Mommom while my grandparents were out. It was dark in the family room where we stood, separated by the coffee table, when she began to tip backwards, eyes wide and arms reaching for me. I jumped over the table, but too late to catch her.

I bent down next to her on the gray carpet and held her hand. “I’m sorry, Mommom, are you okay?”

“I’m okay, sweetie.” She struggled to lift her head from the floor, and put it back down. “Just help me up.”

I think she was angry at herself, angry that she couldn’t do anything, not even keep herself upright. Her self-sufficiency was failing her.

In January of junior year, my friends Andrew and Haley were getting married, so Jack and I made a 15 hour playlist and drove to Washington, D.C. Classes had already started for the semester so we left on a Thursday evening and drove until 2 a.m.

I had never been to D.C., and we only had a few hours on Friday afternoon to see as much as possible. We ran around the city in the sunshine holding hands, accidentally walking through fields of goose poop, meeting couples from different states, and visiting monuments--and it was happy. I was happy. Or I was supposed to be.

We were walking down the pool to the Lincoln Memorial. The sunlight was making the water all glittery, and ducks were wiggling along the surface. I was quiet.

“How are you?” Jack asked me. He knew.

“I’m good, “ I told him, but the tears were already running down my face in simple little lines.

We sat on a bench next to the memorial as God, Lincoln, and a few random joggers watched me cry.

I looked up at Jack, and sobbed, “I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry--”

“Alicia, you don’t need to apologize.”

I was disgusted with myself. This kept happening at the worst times. The day was perfect--all of the days this happened were, really. But everything could be absolutely golden, and still the silver tears would come ripping through everything and take me under. Today we were limited on time, and Jack was freezing on the bench, and the memories I was making involved a lot of tears, and I was so worried that I wasn’t doing enough to make this trip perfect.

I had suffered something similar for a few weeks in high school, with emotional symptoms that were much less intense. When I felt overwhelmed I would tuck in bed with my Bible, crack it open to Psalms, and cover myself in God's comfort. *Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God*² ... And God, who felt very near to me, would take the overwhelmed feeling away. This time around four years later, I still felt God's presence, still felt His comfort, but the feeling didn't leave. Was I doing something wrong? Was I *praying* wrong?

I am a firm believer that no one needs to guess and grovel and pat their head while rubbing their stomach trying to make God happy, so I knew this wasn't a case of some picky Being in the sky withholding something from me until I said just the right words on my knees or became a better person. No—God doesn't relate to me, or anyone else, that way. He's not passive-aggressive. He is kind, He is in control, and He is wise. And because this is true, I can trust Him. If He heals me, He is good to me. If He doesn't, He is good to me.

This time around, He wasn't taking the pain away. But I could still go to God for His presence, to be with Him.

I was still saying "I'm sorry" when Jack took my face in his hands, looked into my swelling eyes, and thumbed my tears away. I was beating myself up because I couldn't be happy, but instead of being mad at me, Jack took care of me. The world and the joggers and the ducks and the wind and my tears stopped for a moment in one long inhale, one long exhale. In Jack's care, I saw Jesus.

I started talking to God about the sunshine and the ducks, about how I wanted the day to be perfect but here I was crying, about how I wanted Him to fix it but if He didn't that was

² Psalm 43:5, *English Standard Version*

alright too. I was still crying, but God was present with me and He was giving me Jack for an arm around me.

After the episode, Jack and I held hands up the steps to Lincoln in the warm sunset, into the tropics of the Botanical gardens, through the Library of Congress. We laughed with family we were visiting and ate cake at the wedding. It was happy, and I was happy.

That weekend, there were things I knew. I knew that I still felt guilty, that I still felt like I should be able to control my emotions, and that I was angry at myself. But I knew that God was in control and that whatever was happening, I was glad that He was still with me.

There were still things I didn't know, though. I didn't know when the Lyme attacks would come. I didn't know that the episode in D.C. happened because I hadn't gotten enough sleep the night before, driving until 2 a.m. I didn't know that lack of sleep and lack of food put my body at a disadvantage against the spirochetes, that I needed energy in some form or another to fight them. I didn't know that I was slowly making myself worse by trying to "toughen up" and pretend like nothing was happening.

Back at school, I walked around with the mindset that this was still going to blow over. It blew over in high school, after all. So I stayed up late writing papers and woke up early to walk to class. I took on more responsibilities for Cru. I didn't rest. I didn't want to rest. I just wanted to be normal.

—

I woke up crying on a mattress on the floor. There were thirty sleeping bodies around me, some rustling in their sleeping bags on the far end of the room. It was March of junior year, six months after the crying had started, and we were in Philadelphia for a service project over spring break. I had talked to Edward, the Cru staff member leading the trip, about this before I

signed up, and he said it didn't matter—come, and if I needed to leave, Jack and I could drive home. We were optimistic.

I lay still, cocooned in my sleeping bag and staring at the pile of tissues on the floor from the night before. They were stained with snot and blood from blowing too hard. The carpeted basement room had long windows at the top of the walls that let in grey light. It was soft and easy for my eyes to take in, not like the harsh fluorescent lights that pounded in my head and made me dizzy, not like the light from TV screens that tripped my heart until I cried. I was crying now, but softly, tears sliding into the fiber of my pillowcase. I listened to my breathing, full and quiet. The stillness calmed me.

I brushed my teeth and scrubbed my face with cold water in the concrete bathroom. My eyes were red in the mirror. I hadn't gotten enough sleep the night before.

I was sitting at breakfast with Melanie when I felt the tightening again. I whispered to her, "I'll be back," which is always what I said, even when I knew it was a lie. I slipped into the bathroom and closed the lid of the toilet for a seat. She came and found me shortly and hugged me, pressing my wet face into her sweatshirt.

"Weesha," she murmured--she always called me that. She held me as I sobbed.

Edward was texting Melanie, asking when I would be ready to leave, when I would stop crying. I choked on a laugh, because I too wanted to know when the tears would end.

Melanie opened a new roll of toilet paper to use as tissues; the trash can overflowed.

I brought the roll with me into the car, and cried all the way to the worksite. I cried in the car while they worked. After a couple hours, Edward came to knock on the window. "Jack is coming to pick you up." I thought Edward had never spoken sweeter words.

The next morning, we left for home. Jack drove me the eight hours back while I cried in the car and he fed me Cheez-its and Panera. The rest of the week I lay on the couch, in a bed, crying, shaking, despairing. I was half-alive, sometimes immobilized by depression. My brain was hijacked, unusable. *This is not Alicia*, I thought. *This is some stranger. This is Lyme disease.* Where did I go?

—

After spring break I moved for the rest of the semester to my grandmother's house, the house that Mommom died in eight years before. Like Mommom, I spent most of my time on the couch in the living room. Like her, I was angry at myself, losing my self-sufficiency. I would travel twenty minutes to campus for my first class, nap in the room I still technically shared with the Kristens between classes, go to my afternoon classes, and return home. Jack faithfully drove me back and forth.

Suzanne came to spend the night sometimes. We would lie in the dark, talking about our lives—there was never much to say about mine. I only knew how to talk about how Lyme was. It was dismal, and I felt guilty that I couldn't bring anything richer to Suzanne, who brought such richness to me.

Spring felt more like death than winter, the crabapple tree exploding like white popcorn every morning like the inside of my head exploded with anxiety every night. Jack and my mom and my sister picked my pieces up off the bathroom floor and carried them into my room, they tucked them into my bed, they drove them home from Philly, they nursed them back to health, these pieces that could not possibly be me but had the same face and the same voice, the same eyes that used to be so dry but now drowned me.

Jack sat next to me on Gran's long, tan couch, one arm around me. The dim, warm lamp light in Gran's living room reflected in the long windows. Jack was scrolling through Twitter, the screen reflecting in his square Clark Kent glasses. I was huddled under his other arm, typing, cozy in my Red Sox t-shirt and slowly pulling strands of my long gold-brown hair out of my ponytail. I had been reading the Bible this spring, listening to it in the shower, as I fell asleep, and anytime I could, clinging to it: *The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in Spirit³ ... The God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God⁴ ... Cast all your anxiety on Him, for He cares for you⁵ ... Cast your cares on the Lord, for He will sustain you⁶ ...*

Junior year was not looking at all like I had thought it would. I wasn't sure of myself anymore--that girl who everybody loved--but I was sure of God's love, and I was sure this wasn't going to blow over like I'd hoped unless I was serious about taking care of myself. The depression had been almost constant for weeks, but I was fighting the spirochetes--giving my body energy to battle with rest and nutrition, sleeping twelve hours a night and eating whenever I was hungry. I quit all of my responsibilities for Cru, sending a text through tears, letting go of that world for a time so that I could be serious about resting. I stopped giving out of myself.

And it would be so long until I could give again, until I would feel like myself, until I could go a day without crying. Sometimes I was even too tired for God, praying a few sentences as I fell asleep at night. But I didn't need to count sentences and pray until it was enough. He loved my little sentences anyway.

³ Psalm 34:18, *New International Version*

⁴ 2 Corinthians 1:3b-4, *English Standard Version*

⁵ 1 Peter 5:7, *New International Version*

⁶ Psalm 55:22, *New International Version*

“The Scream” by Edvard Munch depicts a man on a bridge, holding his ears, the sky and water swirls of orange and blue, the world around him twisting into loudness, bright and blurry, engulfing, distorted--*screaming*. Apparently this painting is based off of a walk Munch was taking when he heard a scream. It looks like the world is screaming at him.

Jack and I developed a few favorite restaurants, trying flatbread pizza and gourmet burgers. But as time went on, there were fewer and fewer restaurants we could go to. We would be sitting in the middle of the restaurant when the room would tilt, loud and blurry, engulfing me. I was in the ocean, waves dashing my head under as soon as I came up for air, drowning. The lights were too bright, the people too loud, every movement around me a slap. It was mocking. Everything felt mocking, shocking. Standing in the middle of the grocery store, the fluorescent lights flickering, the buzz in my ears growing louder and louder, tearing me down, tearing up, full eyes darting to the floor, closing, holding my hands over my ears, the world around me swirling orange and blue, the world screaming at me, bludgeoning me, an almost physical pain, my head heavy and my body hot, hotter, burning, swirling slapping screaming screaming screaming screaming—

Until I was outside, leaning against a wall in the cool evening breeze, screaming silently, breathing slower. Slower. Listening to the car horns in distant parking lots. Looking at the dark brick under my feet. Pressing my back into the cold brick behind me. The world untwisted.

So Jack and I only went to simple, quiet cafes. I couldn't watch movies, one of the things that brought Jack and I together in the first place, because of the music and the stimulation of my brain. I stopped listening to music in the car, or music when I studied, or music anytime at all. We rode in silence, ate in silent diners, this silence a cocoon for my brain.

This was called “sensory hyperarousal,” and I swallowed hard, knowing this meant the spirochetes were burying deeper into my brain tissue. *How do you get them out? How do I get out of my head?*

Most days I felt like my brain was not my own. I had gotten in the habit of taking pictures of things—my foot on the floor, a chair in the corner of the room, a bench in the library, in hopes that it might jog my memory when I wanted to remember. I forgot days. A year after Jack drove me home from Philly I asked him, “How did I get back and forth to campus last spring?” He tilted his head. “Me,” he said hesitantly, unsure how I could forget how almost every morning for months I buckled into his blue Honda Accord with a plain bagel and we whipped down the dirt road, rutted and potholed by the spring mud. But it was gone, just for a moment, washed away in my spirochete-laced blood, until he led me back to the memory.

“Remember when I was normal?” I asked.

He looked at me, his eyes saying, *You know you shouldn't be talking like that.*

There was a night I told him, “I wish you could date pre-Lyme Alicia.”

“I don't actually think I do. You're a different, more mature person,” he said, and I was glad that he valued wisdom over ease.

Seventy-five staff and students from four different colleges packed into the one-room chapel, an A-frame building. Thick wood beams spanned the width of the room, snug in place. Back in September of my junior year of college, before the tears, I was at Camp Sentinel again, the same camp I went to with my Bible study group when I was 11. Cru held their fall retreat there every year.

It was evening, cool like fall but still humid and thick like summer, and you could have heard the rush of crickets in the woods if we weren't singing. I was on the wooden platform with the worship team, leaning into the keyboard, drawing out harmonies under the strum of the guitar and milky blend of voices. The chapel was well lit inside, and the warm light gave the room a low, gold glow. The wood walls were warm, faces radiant as people sang, the strong sound filling the room and spilling out the door, echoing into the night. We sang, "I will build my life upon Your love; it is a firm foundation."⁷ We sang it loud, like we believed it.

The pastor that spoke that weekend talked about building. I marked a Psalm in my mustard Bible from that weekend, in small purple letters. *Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.*⁸ If God isn't designing it, it's not going to work.

When Jesus came to earth, before he began teaching and healing people, he worked as a carpenter. I don't know what he made, but I bet it was quality.

As junior year went on, it was hard to feel like I was still myself. I felt like myself when I was leading worship at the fall retreat. I did not feel like myself when I was shaking on a couch at my grandmother's house. But that was the part where we were gutting the house, so of course it looked awful. I couldn't see the new cabinets yet, or the finished hardwood floor, or the fresh paint. My personality wasn't gone; I had just attached it to the old flooring, the old way that I lived. God pays attention to detail, and He brings out the best in me, brings out my character, because he is caring.

If God knows everything, if He knows more about me than I do, He *knows* the best thing for me.

If God is more loving than I could imagine, He *wants* the best thing for me.

⁷ "Build My Life," Pat Barret, Matt Redman, Brett Younker, Kirby Kaple, and Karl Martin, 2016.

⁸ Psalm 127:1a, *English Standard Version*

If God is completely powerful, He *can* do the best thing for me.

Because I believe all three of these, I know that God *will* do the best thing for me.

But in the moment, I could not see God doing that thing, and because I didn't doubt God, I doubted myself instead.

—

On a pale blue August morning, hot and stark and right before my senior year of college, Jack drove me home from church with the windows down. I was holding onto the roof, letting the air curl over my fingers. That morning, our pastor had talked about suffering. I don't remember the topic of the sermon or even what his point was. I just remember sitting in my pew, writing in my journal a question to God: *Am I wasting my suffering? Can you waste your suffering?* I did not feel very spiritual at all. I had no energy to do anything, and I felt like a burden on Jack, on my friends, on my family. I said I believed that I did not have to *do* or *be* anything specific for God to love me, but maybe I did not believe it fully; maybe God was using that year to teach it to me firsthand.

In August, I was untethered, unsure of anything. The wind raced through my fingers as my brain raced, and I tripped over the *what ifs* over and over until after a long time, I turned to Jack and asked, "Am I wasting my suffering?"

I held my breath, breathless as the day, searching his face.

He looked over from the driver's seat. "No." He was sure, eyes unflickering. He began listing all of the things God was teaching me. "This is building your empathy for other people who struggle with mental health, and letting you experience it like you hadn't before, and you're going to work with students who will go through anxiety and depression." Now I wouldn't scoff silently at "emotional teenage girls" when I taught and mentored them. He continued, "He's

teaching you to let go of your pride around your personality, and let Him be God in your life. He's using this to draw you closer to Him. He is using this to bring you freedom—you're realizing you can't be enough, and you don't have to be. He is teaching you to let go of control." He kept talking, and I don't remember the whole list, but I nodded—there was more than I could see myself. God cared deeply about my suffering, but He cared more about my relationship with Him. This broken body was not for eternity, and so we were building the things of eternity, laying up treasure in Heaven, experiencing Heaven on earth by being close to God.

People asked me things like, "Do you really think it's good that God lets you go through something this bad so that you can be a better person?" Yes. Being a "better person" isn't what it's about, per se, but yes—God is using this for my good and His glory.

Whenever I am with Him—whenever I truly put Him first in my life and live for Him, when I am close to Him—my face is radiant. I have a satisfaction in life that is unparalleled by anything else I have ever tried to make myself happy with. When I am not living for God, I am trying to fill myself up with other things: the approval of people, a "fun" life, my relationship with Jack. It might be satisfying in the moment, but it doesn't last, and I crash like an addict. God designed our hearts to be filled up by Him, because He is perfect and steady. God created all good things. They all come from Him. He wants us to enjoy them fully, but not ask them to be the source of our wholeness. Only He can fill that role. God is the best thing.

So when I was trying to fill myself up with being enough, God graciously used my suffering to show me how I didn't need to be sufficient, because He is. God did not give me Lyme as a punishment—I had Lyme because the world is not perfect and bad things happen—but he used Lyme, turning it into good for me. *Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is*

*the one who takes refuge in Him*⁹ ... *But as for me, it is good to be near God*¹⁰ ... I still listened to these words in the shower at home, in the car, pouring out of my phone speakers.

The end of August found me moving back into school, with a new adult-looking comforter for my bed, an arm chair to read my Bible and journal in, and a table lamp. I was trying to create a homey atmosphere, a space to rest. The Kristens had graduated and moved, and I was well enough to live on campus again. My new roommate's name was Laura, and she was so lovely and kind, nodding in understanding as I explained what Lyme might look like while we lived together.

Whenever Laura walked into our room to find me crying, she would sit on her bed and talk to me simply, telling me about her day, making me laugh through the tissues I held up to my nose. There I was crying, and it was alright—the deficit didn't affect our relationship.

But my heart was still in the car after church, holding its breath.

—

Not until the end of November in my senior year did I begin to understand my neurological symptoms, understand that I wasn't really to blame. I was sitting in a rolling chair in the basement of Morrill Hall, spinning a few inches right, then left, tapping my feet, tapping my fingers, reapplying lotion to my hands, all things I did to keep myself focused on my teaching methods class instead of the underlying anxiety that buzzed through my body. I had to leave the classroom whenever my professor played a video—he understood graciously, of course, since he taught best practices for special education in the classroom. On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, he lectured on executive function, and my chest untwisted for the first time in a year.

⁹ Psalm 34:8, *New International Version*

¹⁰ Psalm 73:28, *New International Version*

Executive function is in charge of a lot of things in your brain. It controls how you organize, pay attention, self-monitor, remember, and self-control. It helps you *control your emotions*. “Air traffic control for your brain” was the analogy my professor used to explain it that afternoon. Picture Pixar’s *Inside Out*. Picture the spirochetes attacking the control room. Picture everyone inside the control room freaking out. Picture the spirochetes slowly taking over... We were talking about how some of our students would have trouble with this if they are affected by things like ADHD, schizophrenia, autism, *Lyme*... I blinked.

My memory of that day is not all there. I don’t remember exactly how I told Jack, but I know I ran up to him, screaming internally with joy because I could finally stop blaming myself.

I knew I felt like guilt had been shifted. I know that now, I still sometimes believe that I am the one to blame, that I am slowly going crazy, that if I tried hard enough I could have stopped it all, that I can still stop it all, and that it’s all in my head. But it’s not—they’re actually *in my head*, the spirochetes. I think. I think it’s not all my fault. I think I’m getting better because of lots of sleep, because of the antibiotics, because of strategies to cope with this newfound anxiety and depression that I still kind of have no idea what to do with, and not because I’m “snapping out of it.” But I’m not sure, still, and that plagues me.

“Alicia, it is *not your fault*,” Jack said as I sobbed.

“Yes it *is*.” I stomped my foot on the floor like a child, so angry at myself for letting this happen.

And *this very thing* is what God is drawing out of me.

People told me I was a patient person, and I agreed. That I extended grace, and I thought so too. As long as it was someone else that hurt me, and not me that hurt someone else. It was a

protective measure—not wanting anyone to be angry with me, not wanting to make anyone upset. I wanted to be loved, and I believed that I had to earn it. Truly, though, I just wanted to be God. I wanted to be perfect and save myself and not need to be forgiven. I wanted to be in control, to be enough, so that I could make people love me.

One night when Jack was dropping me off, we were parked in the loading zone with his flashers on, the brick side of my dorm building looming on our left. I was crying again, and scolding myself in my head. *Just stop. Snap out of it. I hate this. You are stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.* “STUPID,” I gasped aloud, “I am STUPID.” Jack turned and seared his eyes into mine, gripped my hand, and in the darkness asked me earnestly, “Alicia, who died for your sins?” I was breathless for a moment, still.

He was right, of course. This Lyme attack wasn’t even wrong, but there was grace for it too, and all its collateral damage of a year of borrowing people’s tissues and not being able to give them my time or myself, of Jack sacrificing everything, dropping everything, picking me up off the tile floor and carrying me into my room to Kristen when I couldn’t walk, driving home from Philly, spending hours sitting with me while I cried. And even if everything was somehow my fault, there was grace for that as well.

Things were getting better, a slow upward trend my whole senior year. I bought Jack Celtics tickets for Christmas and the night before the game, we sat in his car in the dark, debating whether or not I should go. I was crying.

“There will be loud intro music,” he told me.

“I’ll wear ear plugs,” I said.

We had sold off our concert tickets just a few months before, but I was more fragile then, and by now I was fed up with all of this. I didn't want to miss one more thing.

We walked to TD Garden, cold, running, happy. Streetlights and jaywalking and holding hands, and then I held my breath—"Do you have the earplugs?" Because I didn't.

"No..."

My insides tightened.

We were in the top row of seats—I pressed my back against the black cement. We bought overpriced beer and looked at memes and laughed. When the introductions started for the players, the Dropkick Murphys screamed "I'm Shipping Up To Boston" through the stadium, louder than anything I had heard in a long time--the speakers shaking, my heart shaking, my head shaking, Jack holding my ears with his strong, square hands as I sobbed. I cried all the way through the intros. I was worried that it would keep going, that I would cry and cry and we would have to leave. But as soon as the music stopped, the tears did too. I opened my eyes. "Thanks." He put his arm around me, and we watched the rest of the game, loud as it was.

That day was triumphant, a litmus test that proved I *was* getting better, even if it was slow. We decided to try watching a movie—we had done that several times before, and most times we needed to stop at some point, the music and the intensity making me shake. We were at his parents' house, and his dad loves Pixar, so we watched thirty minutes of *Monster's University*. It was a children's movie, and I almost cried because my brain couldn't handle it.

I texted Suzanne that evening: *Can you pray that I will be content with where I'm at? I'm just really frustrated that I CAN'T watch most movies yet because I WANT to watch movies with people and I don't like being limited. I had kind of gotten over that, but now that I'm doing better I want to do MORE stuff, but I'm not there yet. God has me here for good*

reasons and I can wait patiently and trust Him that even if I can never go to a movie theatre again, there are FAR better things in life--and movie watching pales in comparison to God's plan for my life.

But still, I cried. Not because of Lyme, but because of my disappointment. You can believe things and have trouble feeling them.

I wanted to be able to watch a movie with Jack, sit with his arm around me, ride the waves of emotion that the plot brought, turn up the volume. I wanted to talk about it when it was over like we did on a dorm room floor sophomore year with our friends, debating character motives and soundtracks. I wanted to go to restaurants like we used to, sit in the middle of the busy, dark room, swimming in the cacophony of humanity's loudness, leaning across the table in the darkness. I wanted to wake up early on summer mornings to go kayaking in the mist that still clung to the lake, and I wanted to stay up late on summer nights in my grandparents' screen house playing card games.

I didn't want to drop to my knees on the kitchen floor when my brain shut off my legs. I didn't want to give this disease to the children I want to have, but might miscarry. Lyme touches everything.

This was a capacity issue. I felt that I was half a human, half a life. Would my days be cut in half forever? "I don't want to live half a life," I said one day, but even as I said that, I knew I wouldn't. God didn't dole out fullness of life based on hours in a day or the things I did—it came in my closeness to Him.

I could live a thousand days without Lyme disease, I could accomplish lots in my future classroom, I could run lots of Bible studies, I could have all the time for rich relationships with people—but if I was not close to God in that time, it would feel a little empty. I knew, because

I'd lived that way sometimes, getting all As and going to all the Cru events, and being so busy that I was only thinking about me. Only thinking about me did not turn my thoughts to things above, to things that would always be meaningful, to the hope that I had.

—

My blood is defective. There is a controversial treatment that strains the spirochetes out of the blood, but it is expensive and not well researched and in Germany, so I do my battle with antibiotics. My bad blood is what makes me cry, makes me shiver and shake when the lights are too bright. My bad blood is what put me on the couch for weeks in a shell of depression. My blood is not enough, makes me not enough. It gives me life, but its quality impacts my quality of life. It's saturated with impurity, little spirals that bring me so much death.

The Old Testament is riddled with analogies about blood. Before Jesus' sacrifice, people sacrificed animals when they sinned as a stand-in. The blood of animals covered the doorposts of the Israelites in Egypt on the night of the last plague to protect them from harm.¹¹ Blood is a covering.

Jesus giving His blood was a relational reconciliation: the world walked out on God, but He propped the door open. Because God is perfect, imperfection—sin—cannot be near Him. Jesus died on a cross and raised Himself as a way to take on all of the guilt and shame of the world so that we can be with Him. Now, anyone who takes the offer to follow Jesus is seen as though they are like Him, perfect in every way, because He covers them—not because of anything we have done, but because of what He has. And we can be with God.

—

Jesus of Nazareth was born to die.

¹¹ Exodus 12

Luke, a doctor who lived at that time, detailed Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in writing. He wrote of the brutal torture of Jesus before the crucifixion and showed Him nailed to the cross, naked and so beaten that He was unrecognizable. He understood pain—my God knows what it is like to suffer. But in the middle of the murder, Luke pauses to include an interaction between Jesus and the two other men being crucified.

One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!”

But the other criminal protested, “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.¹²”

The criminal didn’t have any time to serve at church or “be a good Christian”—he died right there. He simply acknowledged that Jesus was enough. Nothing more.

Jesus gave His perfect blood, the life that ran through Him, to bring me home to God. And three days later, Jesus raised Himself from the grave, with more than enough power for that criminal, and the men who hated Him, and Mommom, and for me. And that’s the point. I can’t be enough, whether that is morally or emotionally, but I don’t have to be. And the Person who is most important to please? He is already pleased with me. When God looks at me, He sees Jesus’ perfection. He will *never* stop loving me.

—

Laura was asleep in the bed across from me, breathing peacefully. The low light from my lamp made my mustard Bible glow, the gold edged pages shiny as I flicked them back and

¹² Luke 23: 39–43, *New Living Translation*

forth. I was in the Psalms: *Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain*¹³ ...
*Those who look to Him are radiant*¹⁴ ...

Writer and theologian C. S. Lewis said, “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of--throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

So I will talk to God as I hurt (*casting my cares on Him, because He cares for me*¹⁵) when I curl up in bed, walk to classes, wash dishes, while we are tearing out walls and I am breathing in sawdust, my banisters and windows shiny—my face radiant, reflecting Him.

—

I was walking through the woods, getting sticks stuck in my sandals, my mustard Bible and navy blue journal folded against my chest with my arm. The trees were still green in September of my senior year. When I found out freshman year of college that Cru’s fall retreat was held at Camp Sentinel, I pieced together fragmented memories to find the same rock I sat on when I was 11--and I did, at the base of the ropes course trail. I cling to significant details, so every year at the retreat, during the hour slotted for personal time with God, I ran through the

¹³ Psalm 127:1a, *English Standard Version*

¹⁴ Psalm 34:5a, *New International Version*

¹⁵ 1 Peter 5:7, paraphrased

woods and climbed up on that rock, into the lap of God, coming with 11-year old-like wonder to meet with my Creator.

My fourth and last year of the retreat was not like the previous ones. This year, I hadn't gotten there early to set up. I wasn't playing piano for worship. This rift was jarring, a reminder of the life taken from me. Even so, I was grateful for the time to rest. I was grateful that I wasn't having Lyme attacks this weekend, that I could be here, that I wasn't at home on my couch shaking, that this was a new, green September instead of the dregs of March.

I neared the rock, looking forward to a sweet closure of my college years in a meaningful place, ready for a deep time with God. However, as I came up to the trail, I stopped and looked through the trees. Was there someone on the rock? This was a tucked away spot--no one knew about it. It was just mine and God's.

But one of the freshman guys had found it and was perched, up above the sea of pine needles, reading his Bible. I reeled. I hadn't planned on someone else being there and didn't have a plan B, and I felt that the one thing I had left was taken from me.

I had never explored the ropes course trail, so I turned down it. I walked over roots on the path cut through strong dark trunks. Birds whistled somewhere further in, and high branches fell back and forth in a collective hush. I was going much deeper into the woods. After a few minutes of walking I saw a wooden platform built low to the ground. I was hoping to find another rock but had already walked a long way, so I sat on the weathered planks and looked around me, inhaling. It was light in the woods, the sun turning the trees and pine needles gold.

Hi, God. He was here, in the quietness.

This was my first time back to these woods since the beginning of all of this, after a year of crying and asking why and learning to actually believe God, believe that He was enough and

it's okay that I wasn't. I still wanted to hang onto the old Alicia, the emotional control and incessant happiness. I wanted to be done with this. I wanted control back. And goodness, I wanted to sit on my rock!

The similarities between that day and the whole year were striking. I wanted the retreat to be like it always was, right down to where I spent time with God, and it was taken away from me. I wanted my life and my personality to be like they always were, but that was taken as well. Here I was, grumbling about a single rock. God made so many rocks I could probably have a lot of special rocks if I really wanted. I needed to know that it wasn't the rock that was important; it was being with God on the rock.

And in my life, it wasn't making everyone happy all the time, being the old bubbly Alicia, or even being able to do everything I wanted that was important. What was best was just being with God. I trusted God that He was busy building me and loving me. The fresh paint was coming, and the new floors were already installed. I was sure of God, and I was learning to be sure of myself again because I didn't have to be god anymore.

I read Psalm 84: *Blessed are those whose strength is in You... a day in Your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere*¹⁶... I thanked God that I could be with Him, and that being with Him was better than anything else. I read Revelation 21, a chapter that paints a picture of life when Jesus returns, when all the world is perfect again: *He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever. And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!"*¹⁷ I thanked God that this suffering was not forever.

¹⁶ Psalm 84:5a, 10a, *English Standard Version*

¹⁷ Revelation 21:4–5a, *New Living Translation*

I want to be clear that this experience in the woods did not feel magical. It felt typical--I gave God my thoughts and feelings on things, and He led me to parts of His Word that spoke to that. For months after this, I struggled with believing what is true, being angry at myself, and feeling inferior.

Yes, I wanted to go back, to sit on my rock with God and feel like I was enough. It was better, though, to go forward. I could let it go--my old life, my self-sufficiency. God was taking me past the rock I sat on as a child, deeper into the woods. He was taking me past the faith of my childhood, deeper into a relationship with Him.

It was nearing noon, so I closed my journal and stood up. I took a picture of the place so my brain could remember. I liked the thought that in this new place, my time with God felt new. He was making me new. I walked out of the mossy woods onto the dirt road back toward the camp, ponytail glinting gold in the sun, cheeks still bronzed from the summer--my face radiant.