

After leaving

by

Krystal Leah Hering

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Program of Study Committee:
Stephen Pett, Major Professor
Debra Marquart
Kristin Pesola

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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After Leaving

It's 10:30am on a Sunday morning and it's nearly Thanksgiving, nearly Christmas. I put on some soft tune with a musical saw wailing in the background and sit on the couch with my hands wrapped around a hot mug. I close my eyes. The pressure builds in my gut and moves into my hands as I grip the mug tight. Taking a gulp, I force the coffee down my throat and feel myself slipping into a place I haven't been to in a long time. Going down a gravel road, I swerve until I slam the brake hard. The gravel is loose and I have no control. The tears come and I lean forward, elbows on my knees, and slide and slide and slide until I'm off the road in the middle of a field after harvest with no one in sight.

If I were in church today, I would be making a mental list of sins, repenting, and washing them down with communion. I would say a prayer, something like, *Dear heavenly Father, only you know the depths of my heart.*

I'm not praying this morning, though. Instead, I choose to worry, which makes my stomachache only worse. I've had a stomachache for a year now. I'm normally a peaceful person, but something came over me last Christmas Eve; my insides tightened, forcing every secret and everything I had purposefully kept to myself into a stream of screams at my family.

I never imagined that I would put the church behind me, ignore my baptism, and confess to my family that I no longer believed in what they had taught me. I never thought I would discover that my mom had been married twice before she met my dad, that my grandmother had undergone shock-therapy for depression, or that my sister is

actually my half-sister. I never imagined that I would start drinking, taste the difference between a lager and red ale, have a favorite bar and a favorite sexual position. And I never imagined that graduate school would keep me from the man I love or that my mentor would commit suicide.

I should be in church, but instead, I stare out my kitchen window at the fake crow my roommate put in the yard, trying to ignore the hangover pounding at the back of my head.

I can't go home.

July 9, 2001

He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. Psalm 103:9-11

I prayed: *God, thank you for not giving us what we deserve--death.*

1

I grew up on a blacktop road fifteen miles west of Mt. Carmel, Illinois.

Population: 8,000. The town was supported by the Snap-On factory that produced screwdrivers and hammers too expensive for the workers to buy, and the power plant across the Wabash River in Princeton, Indiana, that I'm sure caused three-fourths of the cancer cases in the area.

There used to be a sign between Mt. Carmel and Princeton that read, "No negroes after dark," until it was finally taken down in the 70s. Mt. Carmel was a town where the only blacks were on a basketball scholarship at Wabash Valley Community College and the only Chinese or Mexican people worked in restaurants like the China Buffet or Tequila's.

Every summer in late July and early August, half the town could be found at the county 4-H fair auctioning cattle and judging chickens or at Ag-Days on Main Street gulping lemon-shake-ups, chewing saltwater taffy, and screaming in the rickety cages of the spiraling Tempest ride.

Mt. Carmel was surrounded by fields, and in the fall, combines chewed through rows of corn and spit husk and stalks, leaving a cloud behind them. The fields were divided by gravel roads, blacktop roads if the locals were lucky, and lines of trees as an effort to prevent erosion. The roads were cratered with potholes and washboarded from the freezing and thawing of the seasons. Most of these roads were submerged when it rained, making them impassable for some and an adventure for young men in their fathers' pickup trucks; when it snowed the roads drifted shut.

I lived on Rural Route 1, fourteen miles from the nearest grocery store. Our gravel driveway stretched up a small hill to our house that sat diagonal to the road. Mom loved how the house faced the northeast, how it was different from the other homes lined up straight along the road. She was convinced the positioning kept the house from swallowing the dust when the grain trucks sped by during harvest season. She'd bought the house from the daughter of her neighbors up the road, who would soon become her parents-in-law.

Dad, after visiting Mom on his bicycle and taking her out for steak dinners at Ponderosa, married her on October sixteenth at six o'clock in the morning, a local preacher presiding, under the dusk light twenty feet from our house. Dad wore a blue western-style suit and Mom wore a brown sheath dress and jacket. My sister, Sheila, was ten years old and witnessed Mom getting married for a third time and studied Dad, who would soon adopt her. After the brief exchange of vows, Dad, Mom, Sheila, the preacher, and the witnesses had breakfast and then went their separate ways--Mom and Dad to work and Sheila to school.

Seven years later, Mom sat in her recliner, red-faced, tight-lipped, and holding Ashley on her lap. Dad stood in the doorway between the living room and kitchen with his hands folded and his head down. I watched Sheila pack boxes out of the house and out to her car. She had been late for curfew too many times.

Sheila stood in front of Mom with a box of sweatshirts and jeans resting on one hip. Her lips quivered and her faced puffed up. "Mom, please."

Mom looked at the box instead of at Sheila. “No, you have to live by our rules to live here and you haven’t.”

Sheila looked at Dad. He said nothing, but reached out and hugged her. I was six and all I knew to do was to sit on the couch and cry too, “Sissy.”

She blew me a kiss and was out the door. I heard the car pull out of the driveway and head down the blacktop road.

2

Growing up, I was the oldest and life was spent in or around our yellow modular home. Inside, Mom was in the kitchen, scrubbing Russet potatoes for supper, tired and cranky from working eight hours and then working more at home. Her ankles were swollen from carrying her weight all day and her face was red from talking to Grandma on the phone.

Ashley, my two-year-old sister, was in the living room, rattling the child's gate that kept her from tottering into the kitchen while Mom was cooking. Her cheeks were red and burning; she was tired of being the youngest one.

I played outside alone on the swing set in the backyard, pumping hard, trying to see over the roof of the house, across the fields, and into town. I knew my friends from school were at gymnastics or basketball practice. They lived closer to the school and their parents were younger and more energetic. Mom worked at the bank and Dad worked odd jobs with an electrician in town and then worked at home. There was always something to clean, hammer, weed, or stack.

One Saturday morning when the dusting was done, I sat on the couch and watched Mom vacuum. With one hand on her hip, Mom pushed the old Electrolux slow across the carpet. And when she was finished, she started wrapping up the vacuum cord. Dad barged in the back door. "Babes, you got something I can put these squirrels in?" He held out one side of his vest, exposing the dead.

She dropped the cord and stomped into the kitchen. “Well can’t you look for yourself? There are those Tupperware bowls in the cabinet.”

Dad opened and shut a couple of cabinet doors.

Mom stomped over, grabbed a bowl from the cabinet above the refrigerator. “Do I have to do everything around here?”

I ran into the kitchen sock-footed, almost slipping on the linoleum. “Daddy, can I help?”

“You need to help your Mom clean.”

“Oh, let her help you for once. She can watch at least.”

Dad’s face was reddening. He looked at my feet. My socks were half off. “Pull your socks up. You’re gonna stretch ‘em out.”

I sat on the floor and pulled a sock heel half way up my calf. I looked up at Dad, “Please.”

“Git your shoes on.”

Instead of waiting on me, he grabbed the bowl and went outside to the front yard. When I caught up with him, his truck was parked under the maple tree he’d planted for me when I was born. The squirrels lay in a row on his tailgate. I counted six bushy cinnamon-colored tails. “Dad, did you shoot all these?”

“Now, git back. Stand over there.” He pointed to the red well cover.

I stood on top of it and stretched my neck. Sitting on the tailgate next to the squirrels, he laid the whetstone on his left thigh, his right leg dangling. With a steady circular motion, he rubbed his knife blade and scraped the blade on the stone, a skill his

father taught him. When he was satisfied, he wiped the blade across his leg. He tested it with his cracked thumb and forced it back into the sheath.

“What now?”

“I’m gonna dress the squirrels.”

I laughed. “You’re gonna dress them?”

“Yep.”

I jumped off the well cover and walked towards the truck. He pointed his fat finger at the well and I shuffled back.

He took one of the smaller squirrels, slit its belly, cut around the back side, cut the fur around its ankles and head.

“Dad,” I squealed.

“Hush. I told you I was gonna dress ‘em.” Stepping on its tail, he held its back legs and tugged straight up, stretching it out of rigor mortis. With two more quick slits, he finished peeling the skin back, stopping when it looked like the squirrel had a red sweater on wrong-side out over its head. He had stripped the squirrel in the same amount of time it took me to get dressed in the morning. Dad made an incision down the squirrel’s middle and dug a handful of warm, red, vieny strings from its belly. He threw the squirrel into the bowl and started another.

I slumped down on the well cover, the cold metal chilling me, and watched him skin all six squirrels. I wondered what he thought about when he hunted, when he shot the squirrels out of tree tops, snapped their legs, gutted them, and left them hollow. Did he think about the squirrel? Or was he thinking about working overtime to help pay off

the debt we had accrued from farming? Was he disappointed he didn't have a son to take hunting? From the well, I could see the lines deep in his forehead and the gray hairs around his ears.

That evening for supper, I sat down to a plate of fried squirrel legs. Mom said, "They're really good. Now, come on. Eat them." I squirmed in my seat, trying not to think about the squirrels swimming in saltwater in Mom's aqua Tupperware bowl or how their tails dangled off the tailgate before Dad stripped them naked.

Dad slapped a pile of mashed potatoes down. "Eat up. You're not leaving the table until your plate's clean." I took little bites of a squirrel leg, shoved in spoonfuls of potatoes, and survived.

3

There weren't many kids my age around, but we had neighbors. Grandpa and Grandma Hering lived in the blue-roofed house less than a quarter of a mile to the south. And there were neighbors to the north, on the other side of a barbed wire fence covered in blackberry briars, but my little sister Ashley and I weren't allowed to play with the Welker kids.

The other side of the fence wasn't safe. The Welkers had horses, a baby deer, an orphaned raccoon, and a fire pit where they burned trash. The Welker kids weren't much older than me. Seth was a year ahead of me in school and Jessi was three years older. I saw them on the bus every morning and evening and waved to them when they got off, but never talked to them. They sat in separate seats across the aisle from each other and Ashley and I sat in the seat in front of Seth, staring out the dusty windows and feeling every bump in the road.

Their dad, Evan, worked the night shift at the power plant and their mom, Cheryl, well, I don't know what she did, but Mom said she wasn't home like a good mom should be.

One Friday evening, after Ashley and I had been home from school a couple of hours, Mom pulled into the driveway and rushed in the house. She'd gotten off work from the bank at four and gone grocery shopping with enough time to cook dinner before Dad returned from work. She let her purse fall onto the kitchen counter and picked up the phone. Looking up from my homework, I asked, "Who ya callin', Mom?"

“Welkers. Now be quiet.” I watched her finger spin the numbers. She held the receiver to her ear and then hung up. “Hmm.” She looked out the window above the kitchen sink. “Now you girls stay in here,” she said and she went back outside.

Ashley and I ran over to the counter and climbed up, nearly sitting in the sink in order to see out the window. Ashley pushed her nose against the glass, “Where is she going?”

Mom had stopped ten feet short of the fence, waving her arms over her head like she was standing in a lifeboat in a big wide ocean. Across the fence was a fire not far from Welker’s modular home, and Seth and Jessi were throwing newspaper and pop cans into the flames. The two stopped. Mom motioned again and they finally moved. They ran to the back of their yard to the end of the fence, across the edge of the field to where Mom met them. “What do you two think you’re doing, starting a fire by yourselves?” Mom’s voice got louder, “You trying to burn your house down?” Seth and Jessi didn’t say anything. “You get back over there and put that fire out, you hear?”

Mom stayed outside. Ashley and I watched as Seth and Jessi threw buckets of water on the fire. When they had put out the flames, they stirred it with a shovel, and then waved to Mom and went inside.

Mom kept an eye out that evening, waiting for Cheryl to get home and called when she saw her pull up in her red Pontiac. Mom clenched the receiver, “Do you know what your kids were doing this evening?”

The next time Mom called the Welkers was to tell Evan that she had seen another man at the house. Cheryl stopped talking to us from over the fence and we never did get to ride their horses.

4

Since I wasn't allowed to play at Welker's, I spent a lot of time at Grandma Stevens' house further north on the blacktop road. I stayed with Grandma weekends during the summer when I was in middle school. Mom dropped me off Friday evening and I stayed until Sunday after lunch. We watched the nightly news and when the weather came on, Grandma recorded the week's forecast in the margins of Friday's newspaper.

At eleven she said, "Turn that T.V. off. It's time for bed." I put my Mickey Mouse pajamas on and she gave me one of her pink, lacey nightcaps. "This will keep your curls from getting fuzzy."

We lay in her bed, Grandma with her top dentures out, our heads wrapped in lace on floral-print pillowcases, the blankets pulled up to our necks. I asked, "Grandma?"

"Yes?"

"Is this where Grandpa used to sleep," I patted my side of the bed. Grandpa Herman died in 1982, a year before I was born.

"Yes, he slept there and I always slept right here." She tugged at her satin pajamas, folded the blankets down just right and lay stiff with her hands at her side.

"Grandma, tell me a story."

"Oh, you've heard all of them."

"I want to hear the one about when Uncle Clarence gave you that guitar."

"Alright, but let's say our prayers." I sighed. "You first," she said.

I rolled over onto my stomach and propped myself on my elbows, folding my hands. “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

“Krystal, that’s a baby prayer. Don’t you think it’s time you say a grown up one?” She didn’t wait for me to answer. “Do you know the Lord’s Prayer?”

“A little.”

“Well, say it with me.” I could hear her swallow her spit and take a deep breath. “Our Father who art in Heaven...Krystal, are you praying?”

“I’m saying a silent prayer. I don’t like to say it out loud.”

“But you’ll fall asleep before you get through it if you don’t say it aloud. Now, say it with me.” She licked her purple lips. “Hallowed...”

“Hallowed be thy name...” I stumbled through the prayer.

“Amen.”

“Amen.” I rolled on my side and shook her shoulder. “Now, can I hear a story?”

“Well I guess so.”

“The one about Clarence and when you lived in town when you went to school.”

“It sounds like you already know it.”

“Grandma,” I whined.

When Grandma was in high school she shared an apartment in Mt. Carmel with another student, so great-grandpa and great-grandma Higgins wouldn’t have to take her back and forth with their horse and buggy. At this point of the story I interrupted. “You were in high school that long ago?”

“It doesn’t seem that long ago to me.”

“A horse and buggy? Really, Grandma?”

“Yes, and sometimes your great-uncle Clarence would take me back on Sunday.”

Great-uncle Clarence. It was difficult to think of him as young – every memory I had of him showed him hunched over, wrinkled, with age spots on his face. “So when did he give you the guitar?”

“Oh, I think it was my fourteenth birthday.”

“I thought you said you were sixteen?”

“Well, I don’t remember exactly.” She adjusted her nightcap. “Anyways, he had just gotten a job working for Rodemacher’s--they used to have a farm over there where Strines is at now--and, well, he saved enough to buy me that guitar.” I propped my head up on my elbow. “When he gave me that guitar, oh did it make Wilma jealous.” I knew great-aunt Wilma to be a sour woman with a scabby nose and as wrinkled as Clarence. “Oh kid, she just went on and on about how he could have spent his money on something worthwhile.” She laughed and shook the bed. “It just burned her up, but oh, I loved my brother to bits after that.”

I pulled the sheet up to my neck, “I wish I had a brother.”

“Oh, they’re pesky sometimes.”

Not wanting to go to sleep, I sat up in bed and asked, “Grandma? What’s in here?” Grandma’s headboard had two sliding doors, one at each end. In between the doors was a shelf where she kept a flashlight and a kid’s plastic baseball bat, so she could

spot any intruders and then whack them over the head. Before she could answer, I slid back the door on her side.

“You’re awful nosey, little girl.”

Grandma kept her Bible and an extra hairnet behind the door; nothing interesting, really. But on the other side I found a pipe.

“Grandma, is this yours?”

She laughed, “Yes. One of the hired hands gave that to me years ago.”

I examined the teeth prints on the tip and the blackened bowl. “Did you smoke?”

“A few times.”

“Gross, Grandma.” I put it back in its place, not knowing what to think of the discovery.

In the morning, I woke up to the sound of Grandma gargling Listerine and brushing her false teeth in the bathroom. I rolled over and looked out the window, watching the Strines’ grain trucks buzz by. The clock in the living room tolled one, two, three...eight times. I got up and changed out of my pajamas and into my purple sweat suit. I snuck into the kitchen and saw that she had already eaten a bowl of Fiber-One with a banana and had downed a glass of Metamucil.

She stood at the sink, holding up the syringe and vial to the window so she could read the correct dosage. I watched the syringe fill, watched as she pulled the needle out of the vial and flicked it, like she flicked my ear when I wasn’t paying attention.

With one hand on the counter for support, she pulled her polyester pants and her nylon underwear off one hip, plunged the needle into her upper thigh like she was

checking the temperature of a roast, and pushed the plunger, forcing the liquid into her leg. She pulled the syringe out and I saw a spot of blood on her leg framed in fat purple veins. She wiped the blood off with a napkin, pulled her pants up, threw away the syringe, put the rest of the insulin in the refrigerator, and took out a package of mini sausage links. “You want some of these little fellers for breakfast?”

I smiled and nodded, but couldn't stop thinking about how she had just stuck the needle in her leg without even wincing. “Grandma, did that hurt?”

“Naw. Kid, I've been doing that every morning since before you were born. I don't even think about it anymore. Don't feel it.”

5

Steve was at the front door to welcome us. He patted me on the head. “And how are you this morning?”

I tugged at my skirt. “Good.”

“I’m glad you’re here.” He patted my head again. “Sing loud and pretty, now.”

As Lick Prairie Christian Church’s preacher, Steve was a well-liked man. He was kind, firm, and direct; just like the farmers who lined the pews. The church was an eighth of a mile from my home and took its name from the nearby saltlick where deer had congregated. It was an old church with a bell tower and dusty blue asbestos siding. Sitting at the crossroads of Wabash County Road and Rural Route 1, the church drew people from all four directions, mostly old farmers with white hairs in their ears and young families with screaming kids.

And there were small children, a child for nearly every pew and some families seemed to multiply, bringing a new screaming baby to church exactly nine months after the last. The Brooster kids never sat down. They ran around the altar and pulpit and back behind the dirty-yellow curtains where the baptistery was. No one bothered to return them to their seats. It was safe; there were boards across the vault of old, cold water. While the congregation sang hymns, three-year-old Brent sat on the edge of the baptistery, taking off his shoes and throwing them at the pulpit, and two-year-old Emily played peek-a-boo through the curtains with her little brother sitting in the pew with their mom and dad.

There were almost as many elderly as there were infants--women wearing polyester suits with gold brooches on their jackets and Aqua-net in their permed hair. The men, often the church elders, shuffled in cowboy boots to their usual pews and slowly lowered themselves to the moss green cushions, using the backs of the pews in front of them for support. Charlie was one such man. He was tall and wore dark western-cut slacks and a white shirt snapped shut right up to his neck. I was afraid of him.

During the Sunday morning service, there was a time for “special music” and on this particular Sunday, Sheila and her boyfriend performed a duet--Sheila on piano and Billy on drums. Wanting to share their talent, they set up between worship and the sermon, putting the drum kit right where the preacher would stand with Bible in hand.

The Broosters finally dragged their kids back to the pew and the congregation quieted down. All eyes were on them--the long-haired drummer and the girl at the piano with puffy bangs. There had never been a drum set at Lick Prairie. Sheila slid her fingers onto the keys and began to coax swells of notes with her left hand and the melody of Amy Grant’s “Thy Word” with her right. She played louder and Billy joined her, beating out a rhythm.

I couldn’t get enough of it. I slid off the cushion and stood with my chin on the pew in front of me. Mom watched me closely, making sure I didn’t take off down the aisle.

Billy struck his last beat and Sheila let the last note ring.

A few claps could be heard, mostly from the other three high school kids in the back of the church. I clapped not realizing anything was wrong until I saw Charlie stalk

up to the front, point to the drums, and then to the door. I walked to the end of the pew, near the aisle, and watched as he pointed again and a gold ring flashed on his hand. His face was stern and his eyes hard. No one objected and there wasn't a big scene. Sheila asked, "Why? What did we do?" but was silenced by Charlie's glare. Steve stood at the back of the church with his hands in his pockets. They stomped out, Sheila grasping her sheet music and Billy dragging his snare drum, letting the church doors slam behind them.

The congregation began to stir; they chatted and greeted each other, shaking hands and patting shoulders. The old men stood and stretched their legs before the sermon.

December 9, 2002

Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, and no envy of one another. Galatians 5:19-26

I Prayed: Lord God, please help me in my pursuit of the fruits of the Spirit so that I might be a vessel for you to use as is your will.

6

At eight years old, I asked my mom one night if I could be baptized. Mom sat on her bed, folding laundry. I plopped down next to her and folded some wash cloths.

Excited that I had finally made the decision, I asked Mom, “Sunday can I get baptized?”

She stopped folding. “You really think you want to?”

“Yes. I want to be a Christian.”

“Do you know what it means to get baptized?”

“The preacher puts you under water and you come out new.”

She asked no further questions and handed me the phone off her night stand. “If you think you really want to then you should call Steve and see if he’ll do it.” She paused. “Do you want Steve to baptize you?”

“Someone else can do it?”

“Anyone who is baptized themselves.” She listed the names of the elders, none of them women.

“I think I want Steve to do it.”

“Okay then, you better give him a call.”

I called Steve and we made arrangements to meet Sunday morning before church started to talk about my baptism.

That Sunday, I met him in the basement of the church at a table pushed against a concrete wall. He pointed to scripture verses on baptism and salvation, turning the frayed pages of his Bible carefully. He asked me questions to test my commitment. “Do you understand that Jesus is God’s Son and that he sacrificed himself for our sins?”

“Yes.”

“Do you understand that when you are baptized that all of your sins are washed away?”

“Yes. I do.”

He pushed his chair back and it screeched against the floor. “Now, some churches just sprinkle. Do you know why you’ll be totally immersed in water?”

I folded and unfolded my hands in my lap, took a deep breath and said, “Because we have to die into the water like Jesus died on the cross and then we have to come out like Jesus when he arose from the grave.”

When I had answered all of his questions he seemed satisfied. Steve said, “Well, let’s get you baptized then.” He smiled and shook my hand.

And I was baptized, standing in water up to my shoulders in my underwear and the angel costume Mom made for me to wear in the Christmas pageant. The water was cold and still; I wondered if it would work, if the dirty water would cleanse me of my sins.

I could see Mom, Dad, Ashley, and Grandma Stevens in the third pew watching me. Grandma and Mom had been baptized in the Wabash River, with the congregation standing on the riverbank, singing hymns and praying. Dad had never been baptized, though, and Ashley was too young.

Steve stood facing me and I repeated after him, “I, Krystal Hering, believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of the living God and I want Him as my Lord and Savior.”

He put one hand at the small of my back and the other over my mouth and nose and dunked me backwards into the water. I came up coughing, gasping, and soaked.

As was a Lick Prairie tradition, I received my first communion and was, then, welcomed by the congregation. Standing in my blue Easter dress, I shook hands with the old men and women and was given high fives by the high school kids. Charlie greeted me with a strong, long handshake, "Welcome to the family of God, young lady." I looked down at his hand and saw the ring as large as his knuckles. On the ring was a gold "G" framed by a compass. I stared at it until he let my hand drop.

7

When Ashley was five and still had her baby-fat cheeks I tried to baptize her. I was nearly nine, bossy and pudgy. We were in the backyard, shoulder high in our metal pool from JCPennys. She had on a pink swimsuit with glittery stars that I used to wear, and I wore a purple striped bikini with my belly sticking out.

Ashley stood in the pool with the water up to her shoulders. “Krickle, why did they put him in water?”

“What are you talking about?”

“At church this morning. Why did the preacher put him in water?” Steve had baptized a tall high school boy that morning.

“He baptized him. Don’t you remember when I was baptized?”

She was quiet for a while, crinkled her forehead. “What’s bapt-ized?”

“It’s when you love Jesus and God and you want them in your heart so they can help you be a good person. When you come out of the water Jesus is in your heart.”

Ashley turned a circle with her arms, making the water whoosh, and then slapped the water, sending it in her eyes. She rubbed them and squinted. “Krickle, will you put Jesus in my heart?”

“The preacher has to do that, Ashley.”

“You can do it, just try it. You’ll see; I’ll be good.”

I remembered Mom saying that anyone who was baptized could baptize others, so I knelt. My knees found their place on the vinyl floor of the pool, the hard packed sand giving little; the water came up to my earlobes and threatened to enter my nose. I put my

hand on the small of her back, just like the preacher did when I was baptized. “Ashley, do you love Jesus?” She nodded. “Do you love God?” She grinned and nodded again. “Do you want Jesus and God in your heart?”

“Yes, Krickle.”

“Okay. You have to hold your breath. Pinch your nose.” I put my hand over her nose and mouth, the way the preacher had done it, and began to count.

“One...two...three...” And I dunked her into the water, holding her under a little too long, and she came up coughing, caught her breath, and slugged me in the arm, crying in her nasally voice, “Krickle, I’m telling Mom.” She must have coughed Jesus and God out; she wasn’t good.

It didn’t take Ashley long to recover and soon she was asking more questions. “Sissy, can kitties swim?” One of our many cats had climbed up the ladder and sat on the top step. His gray coat shined as she licked and groomed herself.

“I don’t think so.”

“Do kitties like water?”

“They drink it.”

She thought for awhile, scrunching her nose and wiping the water out of her eyes. “Let’s see.” She started toward the cat. “Come, her kitty. Come and swim.” The cat dodged her grabbing hands. “Sissy, he won’t come here. Make him come here.”

Wanting to see for myself if cats could in fact swim and wanting Ashley to quit whining, I stood up out of the water and snatched the cat off the top step. The cat wiggled, but I held it tight against my chest, “It’s okay kitty. Don’t be afraid.”

Ashley smiled and squealed, “Oh, sissy, put him in the water. Baptize him.” I bent over quickly, still holding the cat, and let it sink into the water the way the preacher did people. It was only a moment, but long enough for the cat to claw my neck and for Mom to come running out of the house screaming, “Krystal get that cat out of the pool. Quit trying to baptize everything.”

8

Dad and Mom owned a few acres behind the house, acres they had bought from Grandpa Hering. It was three fields long, two wide, and in the middle was a maple grove, standing next to a pond and pump house. Not long after I was born, Mom and Dad declared bankruptcy and quit farming. They rented the land to the Boseckers.

I grew to love the maple grove and up until junior high school I spent summer evenings on the pond bank pretending I was a Plains Indian, weaving grasses into bracelets and watching the dragonflies dip their tails into the water. I often walked through and around the maple grove with Dad.

I followed him through the maple grove and up the pond bank. I unzipped my vest, and sat down in the sharp fescue, feeling the cold, damp earth beneath me. The leaves were beginning to turn and fall. I looked to the west, out past the tree line and saw the Bosecker's cornfields, half harvested and half standing still and damp.

I knew the place well; in two weeks the fields would be empty, except the few rows left for the deer to nibble during winter, the maples would be bare and the hickory trees would turn loose their last brown leaves. In two months snow would drift in between fields and level the ground, hide the pond, and leave the maple grove standing stark.

I stood, zipped my vest up to my neck and looked to see where Dad had gone. Running down the bank and into the field, I yelled ahead, "Dad, hold up," but my voice didn't carry. "Dad." He stopped to inspect the tree line and I finally caught up with him. "Dad." My breathing slowed. "I yelled for you back there."

He touched the trunk of a sycamore, examined the branches above, and still looking up said, "It must be fifty years old. It's pretty big." He pointed to a limb that had broken in a thunderstorm. "See that? It's rotting up there. It's probably infested." He patted the trunk, "I'll just have to cut it down before it falls and takes these others with it." I wondered why he couldn't just leave it be. He would cut it down and make room for the sassafras around it to fill in the tree line.

We walked further west and then north.

Dad looked out at the fields he used to till. "That corn won't amount to anything." He shook his head. "Nothin'. They'll make enough to pay back the loans they took out to buy the seed and the chemicals."

I looked across the fields too. "Maybe the farmers should pray about it."

He didn't say anything.

We walked back east, toward the maple grove. I asked, "Was all of this covered in trees? Like when the Indians lived here?"

"Most of it. Dad, Dale, and I, when we weren't farming, we cleared trees."

"You cut trees down in the winter?"

"Yep. Dad thought we had to be workin' all the time. He hasn't stopped working since."

"You cut all those trees down?"

We walked between the pond and the maple grove, back to the house. It was time for dinner and Mom would be waiting for us with the table set, the fried chicken keeping warm on the back burner, and the gravy bubbling in the skillet. Dad lengthened his stride,

feet and then yards in front of me. I kept my pace slow and watched the fescue bend under every step I took.

9

In high school, I wanted desperately to believe what I professed at church while singing hymns, but couldn't keep from being reminded that I didn't fit into the conversations that happened in the back pew where the high schoolers sat. Brittany and Amanda chatted about shopping at the mall and buying shoes for the Homecoming dance. And flipping through a car parts catalog, Josh and David discussed motors, mud flaps, and spoilers. I sat with my Bible laid open on my lap, trying to follow along with the sermon.

After church that Sunday, I brought my complaint to Mom. She was in the kitchen. "Krystal, get the plates out of the cabinet and set the table."

I took four plates down. "Mom, what should a person do if their frustrated with the way things go at church?"

"You should write a letter to Steve. It says in the Bible to confront those who wrong you, so you should do just that."

I set the table, placing the steak knife on the left side of the plate, then the fork and spoon. I knew better to say what I was thinking. Mom had never written a letter about Karen and how when she coughed up mucus it was so loud that Mom couldn't hear the sermon. And she never told Linda how much it irritated her that she was in charge of every church event and how Mom feel left out.

She handed me a bowl of microwaved vegetables to put on the table. "Write him a letter and tell him about it."

"Okay, but I'm not putting my name on it."

I mailed the letter Monday morning and next Sunday's sermon seemed to cover everything I'd written in that letter. Steve stood in front of the pulpit and announced, "Today's sermon is on the church. What is the purpose of the church?"

No one answered of course--member participation was only for worship time, communion, and offering.

"Is it to get together with friends? Is church a social event? No. No it's not." Steve began to sweat. "Is the church here to make us feel good about ourselves? No, certainly not."

My face grew hot and my hands got clammy. I attributed my sudden sickness to hypoglycemia. The communion juice was often too sweet for me. I dreaded taking the little plastic cup from the tray, knowing its contents would make me dizzy, especially if it was made from grape juice concentrate or the occasional Pepsi when someone forgot to buy juice.

Steve's voice got louder. "The church is not here to cater to our needs. We are here this Sunday morning to worship Jesus, Jesus Christ. He bled and died on the cross for us. The very least we can do is sing His praises." My stomach tightened as he turned his gaze on me. "We have no reason to complain about how we don't feel good in church, that's your own fault. It's not about you. It's about Him." I swallowed back the communion juice that started up my throat. He continued, but I didn't listen. I looked down and stared at the closed Bible on my lap.

The following Sunday I tried to sing louder and prayed harder, trying to forget about me and to focus on God, but I got that sick feeling again. I wondered if Mom was

sick too, if she had been sick so long she just stopped singing the hymns. She stood when we were supposed to stand, closed her eyes for prayer, folded her hands, turned to the correct Bible verses, she read along in the hymnal, and took communion like it was medicine. Mom did what she was supposed to do and I did the same.

I started looking outside of Lick Prairie Christian Church for a community of Christian peers and found one at Mt. Carmel High School. I remember standing before my classmates as they began to trickle into the cafeteria for our Wednesday morning prayer group that I co-led my junior and senior years. They grabbed donuts and cartons of orange juice and sat down with their friends from church--the Baptist kids at one table, those from the Church of Christ in the back, and the Catholic kids from St. Mary's filled in empty seats.

The Columbine school shooting had occurred not long before and I was afraid pressure from certain cliques in my high school would lead to someone taking their own life or taking the lives of others. I stood before the small group huddled around round lunch tables and read lyrics written by my favorite band at the time. Our Lady Peace wasn't a Christian rock band and I was sure one of our sponsors from the local Baptist church would accuse me of bringing filthy lyrics to prayer time, but I read anyways, imagining I was the girl in the song. "You're a little bit shy, a little too quiet. You're the mixed-up girl that everybody leaves behind..." And when I read the last lines, "You've had enough. They're too unkind. But did anyone consider what Annie might have in mind," there was still no response. I felt my face grow hot, but I knew I had to continue with my message. I put the lyrics back in the CD case and picked up my Bible. "You

know, I can't help but think that some of us might feel that way or that we know someone who does." Still quiet. "And that's why we need God in our lives." Heads nodded.

I began to pray aloud, "Dear God, we pray for those who feel alone. We ask that you'll give us courage to say the right things to them and to tell them how much your Son, Jesus, loves them. Amen." Everyone mumbled "Amen" and smiled at me on their way out, grabbing extra donuts.

I said a silent prayer for each person as they left, knowing that we all had issues in high school or at least we thought we did. We worried about so many things. Why don't I have a boyfriend? How can I get my parents off my back? Will I graduate with a high enough GPA to get into college? We were Christians, though, and had been told many times that God would guide and protect us. I still wasn't for sure, though, how He could help us as we tried to get through classes, first relationships, arguments with our parents, and as we made plans for college.

10

Grandma fell and broke her right leg where it joined the hip and stayed with us for three months of recovery. One night, Mom said, “She sleeps all the time. She won’t come to the kitchen to eat. She just stays back there in that stinking room.” Dad, Ashley, and I passed the cube steak and mashed potatoes, waiting for Mom to say more.

I wondered if Grandma could hear Mom say those things. I wondered if any kind words passed between them during the day.

“I just don’t understand her. She isn’t even trying.”

I knew it was best to keep quiet.

The next morning, I stayed home, since I didn’t have classes on Tuesdays at the community college, and helped Mom with Grandma.

Mom stuck to a schedule, like a hospital. Mom washed Grandma’s feet, legs, stomach, and back with a soapy washcloth while she was still in bed. Mom dipped the washcloth into the pan of warm, cloudy water, and scrubbed Grandma’s thin skin, leaving it wet--drops of water trailing down her raised, blue veins. She then gave the washcloth to Grandma and started to gather Grandma’s dirty laundry.

Grandma washed her face, neck, lifted her flat breasts, wiping under them. Slopping water on the bed, Grandma grumbled, “I don’t understand why we have to do this everyday. When I was at home I didn’t take a bath until Saturday.”

“We have to get the stink off you,” Mom replied sharply.

“I don’t do anything to stink. I just lay here.”

Mom picked a sock up off the floor and turned to me. “Make sure she washes her armpits and between her legs.” Mom left the room and half way down the hall yelled, “And her backside.”

I rinsed the washcloth and handed it to Grandma. She folded and unfolded the cloth, lifted her left arm, and patted slowly. And with some difficulty, she washed her inner thighs. “Okay, Grandma, we need to wash your back. Are you ready to stand up?”

“If I have to.”

I had watched Mom enough to know that it took several steps to get Grandma up on her feet. “Now, scoot towards the edge of the bed and swing your legs around.”

She looked up at me like she wanted to slap me for being bossy, but knew she needed my direction. She twisted and wriggled, making it to the side.

“Now your legs.”

She tried but moved very little.

“Let’s move one at a time.” I took her right arm and wrapped it around my neck. “Hold on.” And I carefully swung her legs, one after the other, to the side of the bed. “There. You okay?”

“Boy that was hard work.” She smiled, her lips stretching over her false teeth.

“Let’s rest.”

So she sat, taking deep breaths, and I stood in front of her witnessing the effects of gravity on the body. Her shoulders were bony and her clavicles showed through a thin layer of skin. At her middle section everything collected-- pregnancy stretch marks,

yellowed bruises, and love handles sliding down to wide hips. The muscles in her legs from shoveling limestone had turned soft.

Grandma looked up at me. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Hold on to my neck and try to push up with your good leg.” I slipped my arms under hers and lifted. Slowly I got her on her feet and positioned the walker so that she could support herself. I soaped the washcloth and washed my grandmother’s back, hips, and bottom. When I was finished, I patted her skin dry and rubbed lotion into her shoulders and back.

And with that, she straightened and said, “Oh, boy that felt good.”

“I’m glad. Let’s get you dressed.” I left Grandma sitting on the raised toilet we’d rented from the hospital, reading the Bible with her pants pulled down around her knees. That was the last time I saw Grandma’s legs bare and dry.

11

I lost Mom in the time that Grandma lived with us. Mom moved slowly and heavily. She hadn't been able to care for Grandpa Herman and so he had to be put in a nursing home until he died. She carried that guilt, packed it in her purse with her heart and diabetes medication and stuffed it down her throat along with mashed potatoes and cherry pie.

I had only seen pictures of Grandpa. Pressed between the black pages of Grandma's photo album there was a picture, yellowed, of a man in a blue casket, his hands folded nicely, his jacket unbuttoned, his hair in place, and his eyes shut. A cross pillow with blue flowers was pinned inside the lid. His lips were tight and his chest puffed out. The back of the picture read "Herman. July 24, 1982" in Grandma's handwriting. Mom always told me Grandpa had been a very sick man, that it was his heart. Sheila told me that he died more than likely because of his drinking habits.

And in another photograph, he looked as if he wanted a drink. He was sitting on the couch, squinting at the camera. An ugly green and orange afghan hung behind him. His face was hard, his skin was loose, his hair gray and dirty. It was Christmas 1980 and Grandpa looked annoyed. Grandma was complaining about the weather and her arthritis. Grandpa was thinking about how much Grandma complained, how much she bickered.

In the back of the album was a five-by-seven. It appeared posed. Grandma sat in a stuffed red chair with Mom on the arm, her legs swung to the side and her torso towards the camera. The camera's angle made Grandma's calves look as thick as a man's. One hand rested on her lap, the other, rigidly, on the small of Mom's back. Grandma's eyes

were holes, like those in a mask. Mom's face was plump with baby fat, her eyes bright, but not totally oblivious of Grandma's cold stare.

From the stories Sheila had told me, I realized I hadn't had a clue as to who Grandma really was. I hadn't known she underwent shock therapy for depression and a prescription drug addiction, that she might have driven Grandpa to drink heavily, or that she and Mom had never gotten along. I pieced these stories and photographs together, trying to create one narrative that would provide a truth about Mom and Grandma's relationship.

Sheila had been six years old and saw it all from Grandpa Herman's brown recliner with the cigar burns on the arms. The chair was positioned across the room from the arched entry-way between the living room and the kitchen; she sat with her hands folded in her lap, sometimes straightening the wrinkles out of her orange and green plaid skirt. Through the archway she saw Mom with her horn-rimmed glasses standing at the sink and Grandma with her clip-on earrings, gripping the back of a chair with white knuckles. Grandma clicked her tongue and pointed her finger at Mom. "He's always giving you money. Your Dad will buy you anything you ask for."

"We had to have a place to stay."

Grandma only furrowed her brow more, so that her eyes were dark slits behind her silver-rimmed frames.

"You're just mad that he can't buy you things now that he bought us the trailer."

Sheila watched from the living room, sitting on the edge of the chair, craning her neck. Grandma said, “Don’t you talk to me like that,” brought her hand back, and slapped Mom’s face. The sound was quick and made the same sound as when Grandma threw bread dough against the cold counter top.

Mom was quick to return the blow. Stunned and trying not to cry, they both stared at each other with nostrils flared and shoulders tight. Grandma went for a second slap, but Mom caught her wrist and pushed her back against the table. Sheila had never seen Mom treat Grandma that way.

Grandma managed to pin Mom up against the wall, pushing on her shoulders. “I’m your mother. You don’t talk to me like that. Ya hear?” Mom yanked Grandma’s hair until Grandma had no choice but to release her and to pry Mom’s finger’s loose. Mom’s birthstone ring got caught in Grandma’s hairnet, so when she pulled away, she took the hairnet and Grandma’s clip-on earrings with one short movement.

When Grandma bent over to pick up her earrings, Mom whispered under her breath, “Bitch.” Then, more loudly, “Sheila get your coat. We’re going home.”

Mom left Grandma standing in the kitchen, smoothing the pleats in her dress, adjusting her hairnet, and clipping pearls back on her earlobes. On the way out the door, Sheila turned around to wave to Grandma, not really knowing what had happened, but Grandma had turned her back and was looking out the window.

Mom buckled Sheila into the backseat of her turquoise ’73 Lincoln Continental, trying to answer Sheila’s questions. “I don’t know why Grandma did that. She’s just upset. Yes, you can still see Grandma on Sunday.”

Grandpa Herman was out in the shed behind the house repairing the grader he used to drag the gravel roads with, when he heard Mom's car door shut. He ran up to the car and with one hand in his overalls pocket, knocked on the driver's side window.

"What's the matter now?"

Mom rolled down the window, blinking back the tears, her heart pounding.

"Aww Peggy, she'll get over it."

Stevens women don't get over things; instead, they swallow the tension, store away the hurt feelings, stack up the list of insults, and hide them under dresses, aprons, and purple-violet lipstick, and in handbags heavy enough to weigh a body down.

July 10, 2003

I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief. Mark 9:24

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Hebrews 11:6

I prayed: Abba, make me see that You will work through me wherever I am. Father, draw me near--I tend to wander. Take me in and show me peace, Abba, peace, peace...

12

I graduated from Wabash Valley College in one year and then in 2002 attended Eastern Illinois University at Charleston, a two hour drive north of Mt. Carmel. Away from home and my home church, I made it a priority to find a church and friends to help me settle into undergraduate life.

The first Sunday morning of the semester I walked from my dorm room across campus to the Education Building. There, I was greeted by a pair of bubbly brunettes. “Hi,” one said, “Welcome to Christian Campus House. I’m Yvette.” She extended her hand, bending towards me and surprising me with her cleavage.

“And I’m Megan.” The other smiled, pushing her chestnut curls out of her eyes. “What’s your name?”

Yvette wrote my name on a nametag, drawing a heart above the “i” in Hering. “Hope to see you later and, oh, here’s the program.”

“Thanks.” I snatched the program and headed past the table of glazed donuts and down the hallway for the nearest bathroom.

Not wanting to stand in the lobby alone, I used the bathroom and washed my hands a couple of times. Smiling at the other girls who came in, I stood in front of the full-length mirror, straightened my skirt, and pulled my shirt back so the v-neck didn’t plunge too low. I smoothed my hair and headed to the auditorium.

I chose a seat in the middle section and hoped that someone would sit next to me. Looking around, I felt overdressed and wished I had worn pants instead. I read through the program, adjusted my skirt and shirt again, and waited for the service to begin. I had

never been to church alone, but knew that I needed to go to keep from sin, since I had been told by many youth group leaders that college life was full of temptation.

The music on the speakers began to fade and the auditorium filled. A projector screen dropped down and an image of Jesus with a crown of thorns pressed into his skull appeared. On the stage stood a man with a guitar, and a handsome young man my age sat behind the drum set. They began to play and sing, the chatter quieted and a hundred voices joined them, "You are holy, holy." After the first verse I joined in too.

Three months later I volunteered at the welcome table, writing up nametags and passing out programs. "Hi." I was enthusiastic, warm, friendly, an involved Christian. As people came to the table and introduced themselves, I wondered which ones had been to church before and who was new. I tried to pick out the potential converts. The newcomers walked in behind their friends, shy and taking it all in. Some had barely used copies of the *New International Version* Bible, others came empty handed. They smiled when spoken to, shook hands, and made small-talk before the service, much like I had done.

And in six months, I began to notice how people worshiped--some with their eyes closed, their hands raised, looking sincere. Others stared at the screen and mouthed words. One Sunday, after a sermon on grace, there were women who dropped to their knees with their faces in their hands, and men who fell prostrate, their noses on the floor, mumbling a prayer, a lamentation, "I'm not worthy of your grace, God. Forgive me for my sins." I wondered where I fit in, if I could one day fall to the floor, forget those around me, and talk only to God. And I wondered if they were ever as holy as they wanted to be; I knew I

wasn't. I took a deep breath and exhaled, lifting my hands above my head, and sang louder.

13

Joanna came into the living room carrying a large tray of chocolate chip cookies. “They’re still warm.” Her sons toddled in waving the napkins and giving one to each woman. Joanna’s role at Christian Campus House was to lead the women’s study groups and to support her husband who was the worship leader. We met at their home every Thursday night at eight.

Yvette sat with her legs crossed on the couch, squished up against the armrest. “I’m so glad to be taking a break from homework. There’s nothing like hanging out with the girls.” I smiled and knelt on the floor in front of her, finding a small space to sit. “Krystal, what classes are you taking this semester?” She folded her hands on her knees and looked down at me.

“The Renaissance Lit. course with Abella and...”

“I hear that’s a tough one.”

“Yeah. We’re reading Milton and Donne.”

“Didn’t one of them write about Adam and Eve?”

“Yep. Milton. *Paradise Lost*.”

“Sounds great. I’ll have to sign up for it.”

I looked around me and saw that the room had filled. Twenty-six college women--some wearing pajama pants, others in neatly layered ensembles--sat around chatting about class projects that were due the next day and plans for meeting at the coffeehouse on Saturday night. Megan sat in an overstuffed Lazy Boy next to the fireplace, reviewing the night’s discussion topic in our study books. In the time I had been at Christian

Campus House, Megan had become increasingly involved in the ministry, becoming a group leader, volunteering to organize events for women's night, and speaking out about how Christ had changed her life. She turned the pages and paused to review passages. For ten weeks we had read and responded to Beth Moore's study series, *Breaking Free: Making Liberty in Christ a Reality in Life* that had been chosen by the Christian Campus House ministers.

I took my Bible and workbook out of my bag and flipped through the pages too.

"Megan." She hadn't heard me. "Umm, Megan?"

"Oh, hi." She put her pencil in between the pages to keep her place.

"How are you?"

"Good. Glad I'm finished with student teaching today. I'm graduating soon." She folded one arm across the other, making sure I could see the glistening stone on her finger. "I got engaged over the weekend. Isn't it fabulous?"

Megan's engagement was a surprise, as I had never seen her boyfriend with her at church. She was only two years older than me and marriage should have been years away. I smiled anyways and congratulated her.

"I'm so excited. It's all I can think about. Joe and how blessed I am. God has given me so much."

By this time the other women around had overheard Megan and chimed in with squeals, "Congratulations. When's the big day?"

Joanna clapped and said, "Ladies let's bow our heads in prayer before we break into small groups." She held her hands, one on each knee and bowed her head. "Our most

awesome Savior and Lord, we pray tonight for intimacy with You and Your Word. We pray for open hearts and minds that we might receive you wholly. Lord God, I pray that you'll shine your light and goodness on us tonight so that we may be a light to others. All this we pray in your Son's name. Amen." "Amen" echoed from woman to woman, nodding our heads and saying, "Yes, Lord, open our hearts."

Megan was considered a "spiritually mature woman" and was chosen to lead the discussion and prayer for my small group. Sitting in a circle on the floor in Joanna's bedroom, the four of us exchanged pleasantries. Lindsay asked, "So, you're getting married?"

Meagan tried to remain composed. "Yes. Joe was so romantic. He gave me flowers and..."

Lindsay yelled, "I'm so excited for you."

"I know, I know..."

They finally quieted down and Megan continued. "It's so hard, you know. We're so attracted to each other that it makes sitting on the couch together difficult. So, we've started praying when we first see each other." She looked at the ceiling and then the turquoise carpet. "We ask God to stay near and keep us from temptation." She blushed and tucked her brown curly hair behind one ear. "We hold hands, but we put a pillow between us to remind us – like the pillow is God."

Jenn sat cross-legged in her flannel pajamas. "Like it's a stronghold? To want to touch him?"

Beth Moore termed these “strongholds” or sins that we found ourselves repeatedly committing and that kept us from fully committing to God. Lindsay’s stronghold was gossip and Jenn’s stronghold was low self-esteem. I, on the other hand, had a whole list of strongholds that kept me from living the model Christian life. From Beth Moore’s list of strongholds (Idolatry, Unbelief, Pride, Deception, Insecurity of feeling unloved, Feelings of rejection, Addiction, Food related strongholds, Ongoing feelings of guilt, Despair from loss, Unforgiveness, Depression, and Sexual temptation), provided in the *Breaking Free* workbook, I wrote my list of evil strongholds in my prayer journal. *Lord God, help me to overcome my strongholds of: idolatry, unbelief, insecurity, unforgiveness, sexual sin, depression, and guilt.*

Idolatry was defined as anything that took time away from God. So, I was guilty of studying, watching TV, and spending time with friends instead of reading the Bible and praying. Unbelief. I didn’t believe fully. Insecurity and unforgiveness, the belief that you cannot be forgiven for your sins, went along with the unbelief. Depression and guilt, I found resulted from unbelief, insecurity, and unforgiveness. Sexual sin. I, at the time of the Bible study, was still a virgin, but I had been “exercising” since before I hit puberty and thought it a grave sin.

I remember lying in my twin-size bed, worrying about school the next day. I practiced writing the alphabet in cursive on my stomach. I could never remember how to make a capital “Q” and that usually kept me up at night. I don’t know when I discovered the sleep-exercise, but it must have been one of those nights. I thought that if I turned on my stomach and scooted back and forth with my arms that I would eventually get tired

enough to fall asleep. I was right, but to my surprise something felt alive in a place I didn't know had feelings. The faster I rubbed against the sheets, the more it tingled. Sometimes the headboard would bang against the wall. I stopped, listening for Mom or Dad to come down the hall. They never said anything, so I exercised every night to help me sleep.

When I was in the eighth grade, Mom and Dad let me move into a room in the basement. I exercised there too. A lot. I didn't learn until my freshman year of high school that my exercising was a sin and was as bad as sex. The guys in the back of the bus called it something else. Across the aisles, they talked about jerking off. "Yeah, I hear he was jerkin' off in the bathroom at school," one said.

"Oh, dude. Chris saw him touching his dick and beating off," the other replied.

Jerking off? Beating off? Touching himself? Was this what I was doing when I exercised? That night at home I slept with my hands folded across my stomach and prayed to God to help me stop.

By the end of high school, though, I had convinced myself that exercising was okay and that as long as I wasn't having sex I was still a good Christian. But, since I joined Christian Campus House in college, I had become disgusted with myself again and tried not to touch. I usually failed.

When I shared my strongholds with the group, they nodded in agreement. "Yes, these strongholds are keeping you from living in God's light and love."

I skipped over the sexual sin stronghold and tried to explain how difficult it was for me to believe. “I can’t believe that the Bible is absolute truth. What if it was changed along the way? What if the gospel story was changed?”

Megan would shake her head and sigh. “Yes, yes, believing is a struggle sometimes, but when you do you can have a relationship with God.” She looked to the group. “Let’s join hands in prayer and each pray for Krystal’s stronghold of unbelief.”

Lindsay began, “Lord, I pray for Krystal’s guilt. Whatever it is, I pray that she finds forgiveness in You and that she accepts your grace.”

“And Lord,” Jenn joined in, “Comfort her and let her realize the joys in life.”

I was mortified. My faults were there in the open. They knew I was going to church, taking communion, and not believing any of it. I prayed for my strongholds when I was alone. *Father I pray that my heart’s “eyes” may be open to all You have to offer me. God use your strength to help me overcome my disbelief.* If I kept praying like the rest, using words like them, I thought I would have peace.

14

I started looking outside of Christian Campus House for answers and signed up to volunteer during spring break with the Newman Catholic Center on campus. I spent a week in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, at the St. Francis Inn--a soup kitchen. There, I met a man who went by the name of Rambo, sometimes Optimus Prime, and sometimes Security. "See this badge here?" He pointed to his black wool coat.

"Yeah, I do. That's pretty nice," I replied. The badge was made of thin metal and spray painted gold – probably from a Halloween costume.

"Sister Maria gave it to me." He smiled, showing teeth that weren't completely rotten. "You know," he said, "You know, I'm Security. I watch out for everyone here. I walk around the block all day, you know."

He did. Sometimes I would see him shuffle by the yards where they served breakfast. I could hear his heavy boots as he approached. He'd stop and hold on to the chain link fence and push his face against it. "Hey, you're doing a real good job sweeping the concrete. I'll watch out for you. I'm going to keep walking the perimeters." The wind caught his long black coat, making it flutter like the crows back home.

"Thanks, Rambo."

"Anything for you nice people."

Rambo also told me that if anyone ever tried to hurt one of the Franciscans or a volunteer he would "turn into Optimus Prime and get rid of those bad guys because, you know, Optimus Prime will keep you safe." He nodded and scrunched his eyebrows to let me know he was serious.

He had been coming to the Inn for years and the volunteers there had made close friendships with him. Joe, one of the Franciscans, told me that Rambo was schizophrenic and had been living at the mental hospital until funding was cut and he was pushed out. He lived with his elderly mother who was barely getting by.

Like any other day, he stopped for lunch. He took off his sock cap and put on his bandanna. Then he waved his hand above his head. "Hey, lady. Come over here."

"Hold on." I was refilling glasses at the table across from him. I took my time and walked over to his table. "Rambo."

He ate his spaghetti while he was talking. "You know, you're a pretty girl."

"Thanks."

"I'm thirty-three, you know. How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Well, if you were older, I'd, well you know...I'd..." Joe, the volunteer supervisor, overheard our conversation and looked sternly at Rambo. "Well, I'd kiss you. You know." I didn't quite know what to say. "I'd kiss you if you were older, but I'd make a prettier woman than you." Joe was laughing now, but Rambo was serious. "Look at me." His hair was dark and shoulder length. "I have a real nice baby face. I'm from Iowa, you know. If I shaved, it'd be soft." He held the last vowel and touched his face. "Yeah, I think Rambo would be a prettier lady than you," he said. Rambo then jerked around in his chair and pointed at Joe and yelled, "He'd make a scary woman." Everyone laughed.

I decided that week that no matter how much I prayed, Rambo and the other guests were always going to be hungry for food and for friendship. I think the Franciscans knew this too. They were a Catholic mission group, but they weren't dragging people to mass in the morning and they didn't make the guest pray before they got their food. The Franciscans' primary mission was to feed and comfort. My zealous heart began to cool.

After spring break, I continued with the women's study group a second semester. Day 2 of Beth Moore's *Living Free*, the next workbook in her series, discussed the spiritual "battlefield" between Satan's and God's control in our lives. Sitting at my desk in my dorm room, I laid open the work book, pulled my Bible down from the shelf and began reading. "When the enemy wages war against us, the primary battlefield is the mind." I was sure that Satan had taken control of my mind through my literature classes.

The myths of *Gilgamesh*, no matter how similar they seemed to the Bible's flood and creation stories, were wrong. But, if such similarities existed, then, was the Bible myth? This introduced more questions. In week four of the second Moore study, I underlined, "We need to fill our minds with Scripture acknowledging the Godship of God as part of renewing our minds." In the margins I wrote, *Is this brainwashing?*

After week four, I didn't go back to the women's study. That Sunday I drove out to the local state park and walked the trails. I looked up and saw the sun radiating from one leaf to the next and casting shadows on the mulch path. I stared through the trees with the sun warming me and thought being outside would give me some sense of peace; I thought I could commune with nature, but I kept wondering what everyone was doing at

church. I imagined they were singing and I could see them swaying back and forth, some with their hands raised and others with their heads down; the communion was passed around and I wasn't there to take of the bread of life or to swallow the juice that was supposed to remind me that I was forgiven.

I stopped praying for God to “plant seeds of belief” in others and to “break through the hard hearts” of friends who didn't go to church. I stopped asking God for clarity and peace. I stopped trying to understand scripture. I stopped trying to have faith, trying to believe because trying to believe for me was like trying to love someone who you knew couldn't love you back.

15

I was not supposed to be content in this world, but I wasn't content at church either. My doubts about Christianity – the believability of the Bible, Jesus as God's son, creation, salvation, Heaven and Hell, basically all crucial parts of Christianity – had broken me. I no longer cared how people saw me at church. I had struggled with doubt for the past two years I was at Christian Campus House and was tired of pretending that I too had an intimate relationship with God like the excited college Christians I had met.

I decided to try going to church again, but found I couldn't sing the words anymore, so I stood with my eyes closed while everyone around me sang. This Sunday when the communion came around, first the bread, a symbol of the body of Christ, then, the juice, Jesus' blood that he shed on the cross, I saw a girl a couple of rows in front of me watching the tray moving towards her. I studied her face for some glimpse into her thoughts.

She was probably asking herself the same things I asked myself when I took communion, questions I had never told anyone about. *I didn't read my Bible this week and didn't pray. Do I deserve to take this? If I drink this juice it means that I believe fully, but I have a lot of questions. I can't even pray anymore. If I take this sacrament now, it's only juice; it isn't Christ's blood.*

The person next to her was holding the bread tray and then passed it to her. The young woman looked around wondering what she should do. She took a piece of bread, passed the tray, took a cup of juice, and sat with her bread in one hand and the juice in the other. She held them, staring at her hands. Everyone around her had already taken their

communion and was praying. She quickly put the bread in her mouth and washed it down with the grape juice. I hoped she found answers to her questions, but when the tray made its way to me, I refused it and passed it down the row.

I refused the body of Christ who was supposed to have been my Savior. I bent over in my seat and with my face in my hands, I cried. I was defeated. I couldn't do it anymore. The strumming of the acoustic guitar on the stage kept steady, everyone around me kept praying, some with hands raised, and I felt I was sinking into this place where I did not belong and where I would disappear.

Yvette was sitting next to me. She put her hand on my shoulder and said, "It's okay. He forgives." She kept her hand on me and prayed silently. The whole time I could feel her hand getting hotter; hot like the pits of Hell she wanted me to be safe from.

I never talked to Yvette about that day in church and I never went to Christian Campus House again.

September 13, 2004

Thus I was sick at heart and in torment, accusing myself with a new intensity of bitterness, twisting and turning in my chain in the hope that it might be utterly broken, for what held me was so small a thing! But it still held me....For I kept saying within myself: "Let it be now, let it be now," and by the mere words I had begun to move toward the resolution....The nearer the point of time came in which I was to become different, the more it struck me with horror; but it did not force me utterly back nor turn me utterly away, but held me there between the two. --Augustine

16

Andrew leaned against the glass doors of Coleman Hall smoking a cigarette and talking with a friend when I came out of the building through the door next to him. He stopped and I smiled at him and nodded to his friend. I made some comment about class – we had British Romantic Literature together – and he smiled again through his red beard.

I couldn't help but notice how nice he looked with his cigarette in hand, his cheeks red from the cold, his sock cap pulled down over his ears, and a grey scarf wrapped around his neck and into his coat. So I said, "I like your coat. Corduroy is great."

"Ah, thanks. It's kind of big."

"It's a good color too." It was the color of goldenrod and, as I later found, wheat beers.

He grinned and took a drag on his cigarette.

"Well, I'll see you later."

And we did see each other again.

I walked towards the reference desk and saw Andrew hunched over a book. He turned the page, scratched his beard, and adjusted his glasses. Since the literature course we had taken together, I had made a point to do all of my studying at the library on the floor where he worked. Sometimes he walked by me, pushing the book trolley, and smiling, saying, "Hi," or, "Whatcha working on?" I fell for everything about him--his

beard, glasses, broad shoulders, long fingers, the holes in his t-shirts under the arms, the huge earphones he wore while reshelving books in the stacks, and the way he smiled when we talked, a sort of half smile with kind eyes and an occasional touch on the arm.

As I approached the desk, he looked up and watched me walk towards him. I made sure to straighten my shoulders and to swing my hips. “Are you ready for dinner?”

“Uh, yeah. Hold on.” He made short conversation with his supervisor and, then came around the counter. “Hi. You look nice.”

At the food court we both got soup and when he asked what kind I had gotten, I replied, “Minestroan,” not knowing it was pronounced mi-ne-’stro-ne.

He laughed. “Minstrone?”

“Oh.” I was mortified.

“It’s okay. I was just messing with you.”

“I know.” I gave him a partial grin.

Sitting in silence outside at a picnic table, we crumbled crackers into our bowls and fought to keep our napkins from blowing away. Andrew kept looking at me, but I didn’t know how to start the conversation, so he began. “I’m sorry I bug you so much at the library.”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind, really.”

“It’s just that I like talking with you. It’s so easy for me to tell you things.”

I took another bite of my soup. “Well, I like listening to you.”

He scraped the bottom of his bowl. “Hey, just out of curiosity, what’s your theory on relationships?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think that relationships are to change people? Do you get into relationships to change the other person?”

“Well I haven’t been in any serious relationships. I wouldn’t set out to change the person, though. I think in good relationships people challenge each other to become better people. I would expect the same out of my partner, that he would challenge me.”

A smile came across his face.

We finished eating and headed back to the library. He adjusted his canvas bag on his shoulder. “So, today was my last day of counseling.”

“Good. So you’ve made some progress?” I didn’t really know why he was going to counseling; it didn’t seem like a topic up for discussion.

“I have. The counselor asked me if I had some one to talk to keep me from slipping back and I told her I did.” He nearly stopped on the sidewalk. I looked at him and realized that someone was me.

While I was finishing my homework that evening all I could think about was this responsibility he had put on me--to make sure he continued to progress and to listen to him when he needed me. I decided that listening and supporting each other was what people did in relationships, that I was going to be there for him during whatever it was he was going through.

As I was stuffing books in my backpack, Andrew came and asked, “So, can I have your number?”

I wrote it down on the back of a receipt.

“Well, do you want mine?”

“Oh, yeah.” I opened my journal. “Here, you can write it on the inside of the cover.”

He wrote quickly, using his Pilot Precise, extra fine point pen. “There. If we ever miss each other at the library we can call one another.”

I smiled, feeling as giddy as I did in high school when Mr. Popular smiled at me in the hallway.

“I better leave you alone and get back to work. They’ve been wondering why I take so long to reshelve books these days.”

I swung on my backpack and, touching his arm, said, “Bye and thanks for the soup,” leaving him grinning and nodding.

17

It was in my nonfiction writing course that I learned to spill all my anger, frustration, and guilt on to the page. I met with my instructor, Dr. Martin Scott, to discuss the essay I was working on, “Anti-Confessions.” I found him at his desk, looking out the window across campus, wearing his usual jeans, plaid button-up shirt, and corduroy blazer.

“Dr. Scott?”

“Marty, Krystal. Call me Marty.” He motioned to a chair in the corner.

“So, I read your essay and it’s very ambitious.”

“Thanks.”

He took two long gulps of coffee. “I think using Augustine’s *Confessions* helped you organize your thoughts, but I tell you what, I think you’re still sorting through all this.”

“Yeah.” I shifted in my chair, trying to avoid his eyes.

“I had to go through that with my family too.” He started laughing from deep in his belly. “Hell, my brother, after he got out of drug rehab, he started preaching to everybody. So, yeah, I know what you mean.”

I smiled, but didn’t say anything. Marty knew, somehow.

“You have to find a way out of the essay and that’s going to take some time.” He took my manuscript off the top of the stack on his desk and flipped through it. Pausing, he looked up at me. “Now, here,” he handed over my manuscript marked with stars and shorthand, “I’ve made some notes. The revision is due Tuesday.”

“Thanks.”

“You going to Friends tonight? I’m playing dobro.”

“If I get my revisions done.”

He waved me out, smiling .

That night I went to Friends and Company, a local dirty and poorly lit bar, where Andrew and his junk band, Rumbleshack Orchestra, played a half-hour set. I sat in one of the booths, drinking a cranberry juice and vodka, and watched him on stage. He banged on a garbage can and clanged some pot lids together to keep the banjo, typewriter, and washtub-base on beat. The crowd yelled with every thump and clash and I scooted back into the corner of the booth and wondered what I was doing in a bar.

After his set, Andrew slid into the booth next to me. “So, you came.”

“Yep.”

“I thought you’d be too nervous to come alone.”

“Oh. No,” I lied.

“Hold on, I’ll be right back.”

I watched as he went up to the bar, slapped the backs of a couple of friends, and came back with two pints. “Sierra Nevada?”

“I’ll try it.” And so I had my first beer. I let the ale slide down my throat, tasting the hops. “Not bad.”

He smiled and took a drink of his own. “So, what did you think of the set?”

“I liked it. It sounded like old songs my grandma used to play in the cassette player, but without the preaching Jesus and salvation.”

He laughed and I could tell he was warming up to me or to the beer; I wasn't for sure. He finished his beer and let it slam down on the table and then motioned with one hand. “Marty. Hey, Marty.”

Marty strutted over with a bottle in each hand. “So, you made it?” he asked me.

“Yep. Hey, what are you doing with two drinks?”

“Oh, one's for the stage.” He patted Andrew on the shoulder. “How are things?” He smiled, looking at Andrew then at me.

Andrew's face turned red, “Good. We played a shitty set, though.”

“No, I meant you two. You enjoying yourselves?” He pointed at us and took a gulp. I nodded and must have turned just as red as Andrew because Marty laughed so hard he nearly choked on his beer. “I'm just messing with you two. I gotta play. Talk to you later.”

Andrew and I spent another hour and another round of drinks in the booth listening to Marty moan and pull pitches out of his dobro.

Marty's set was cut short. “Folks, I'm losing my voice. Sorry.” Marty's bronchitis seemed to never go away. “Thanks guys.” He waved to the audience and turned off the microphone.

Andrew and I walked past the stage. “See you in class, Marty,” I waved.

“Bye, dear.”

Marty and Andrew shook hands and then decided to hug each other. “Good set, Marty.”

We were walking to Andrew’s car when he began his late-night pleading. “It’s late. Why don’t you just stay at my place, so you don’t wake up your roommate?” I was told that men who didn’t go to church were fast and would try to sweet-talk me into bed. “There’s no harm in just sleeping over. I’ll take you home in the morning after breakfast.”

I looked at the sidewalk. “Well, I guess I could sleep on the couch.”

“No you can’t...ah, it isn’t very comfortable. I have a full-size bed; there’s room for you and me.”

Blushing at the thought and from the alcohol, I made another excuse for avoiding the bed. “Umm, I don’t have my pajamas with me.”

“You can wear one of my T-shirts.”

We had reached the car. I thought, “A T-shirt would be okay, it would cover me, and I could sleep on one side of the bed, he on the other, and we would just sleep.” I looked up at him, all six foot seven inches. “Well, if you let me wear one of your t-shirts, I’ll sleep over and...we’ll just sleep. Okay?”

He smiled and squeezed my hand, then opened the car door.

Standing in his kitchen, Andrew handed me a glass of water. “Here. Make sure you drink a lot, so you don’t have a hangover in the morning.” I drank the glass down and refilled it. “Ready for bed?”

I shook my head and smiled. “I’m ready to go to sleep. Where’s that T-shirt?”

“I’ll lay it on the bed.” He motioned to the bathroom. “There’s a new toothbrush under the sink you can use.”

I brushed my teeth and put the toothbrush in the cup next to his. When I opened the bedroom door he was standing there in his boxers. Still smiling, he held up two T-shirts, “Which one?” I grabbed the blue one and he went to the bathroom.

Lying in his bed, as close as I could get to the wall, I pulled the sheet and the quilt up to my neck, making sure that nothing but my head could be seen. I could hear him peeing, and then the toilet flushed and I heard the water running in the sink. Before I had time to think about how I shouldn’t have been in his bed, how this was wrong somehow, he slipped in under the covers, putting his hand on my shoulder, and rolled me to my back. “Are you okay?”

“Mmm huh.”

“How’s the T-shirt fit?”

“Oh, it’s fine. Thanks.”

He kissed my cheek and then my neck. “Are you comfortable?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. You?”

He looked at me for the longest time. I could see his eyes and how they studied mine. He kissed my lips. I rolled on my side to face him and kissed him back. He held my face, kissing me hard and long. His hands followed the outline of my body and then went under the t-shirt, over my stomach and breasts. He slipped the t-shirt up over my head, “You’re going to get hot with that on.” He propped himself up on one arm and kissed me

from my lips to my navel, “You’re so beautiful. Your curves... You’re so soft... Oh, God, you’re beautiful.”

I turned on my side and he held me in the scoop of his long body, but I couldn’t sink into him, couldn’t come, because his voice and my breath were not the only sounds in the room. I heard my youth group leader saying, “Sex before marriage will only lead to heartache and pain because it is not sanctified by God.” Andrew slid his hand from my shoulder to my knee and kissed my neck. I got chills and wrapped his arms around my chest, holding them tight. The Bible says, “You are Christ’s bride.” His warmth felt comfortable and I turned into him, kissing him to keep from crying. I kissed him and bit his lower lip and the preacher yelled, “Fornication is not of God.” Andrew touched my breasts and all inside me sang. He slipped his hand between my warm thighs. “Is it okay?” I wanted to say, “Yes, yes, yes,” but I shut my eyes tight, wishing, and saw my mother’s face drop. I took his hand, kissed it, and turned to face the wall.

18

For my twenty-first birthday Andrew suggested that I have friends over to his house, a drafty two-story farmhouse just out of town. After leaving the church, my list of friends shortened. I called up my friends from home, Erik and Teresa, and a friend that had moved home after her sophomore year at Eastern, Sarah. I invited Marty, a couple of other professor friends, and friends from my classes, but everyone had moved home for the summer and weren't moving back until the week after my birthday. I feared spending my birthday with Andrew's drinking friends. I had drunk with them before, underage, but I'd never felt comfortable enough to have extended conversations with them.

To my surprise, Erik, Teresa, and Sarah made the trip two-hour trip to Charleston. Sarah showed up first. I greeted her in the driveway holding a K Hard Cider Andrew had bought for me.

Sarah smiled and shook her head, "Starting already?"

It was seven in the evening. "Sure am. I'll take it slow."

Sarah knew I wasn't going to church anymore and she didn't seem too surprised to see me drinking. She was one of the more tolerant people I'd met at Christian Campus House. She had her own doubts. She said once, "Krystal, I don't know what I'm doing either. I don't know what God wants me to do. But you know, I've always had my faith. I don't know anything else." She'd had a drink on her twenty-first birthday too, but was afraid of getting drunk; after all, drunkenness did lead to more serious sins.

Erik and Teresa, brother and sister, came not long after, but could only stay a couple of hours. I showed them inside and we all sat down in the living room. I

introduced Sarah and then Andrew. Being nervous around strangers, Andrew took the role of host.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” He looked at Erik first.

“No, man, I’m alright. I have to drive back.”

Teresa added, “Yeah, and he already drives like a maniac.”

Sarah shook her head before Andrew asked. “No thanks. Do you have Sprite?”

“Yep. And for you, Teresa?”

“Oh, just some water. I promised my friend at home that I would have my first drink with her.”

I looked at Andrew and smiled. *Yes, these are my Christian friends, the ones who dare to be near alcohol and not drink it.*

Andrew brought us our drinks--another hard cider for me. Everyone talked about their jobs and school. Andrew sat quiet, laughing occasionally and downing a couple of Amstel Lights.

After an hour, Sarah got up to leave. “I have to go. I told my grandma I would go with her to Bible study. Have fun and be good tonight.”

I smiled and hugged her.

Erik and Andrew started talking about music and about the band Andrew was in. They went into the back room to browse Andrew’s music collection. Teresa and I sat on the couch.

She looked at my beer and then at me. “I would drink with you, you know, but I told my friend I would drink with her first. Maybe some other time.”

“That’s alright.” I finished my second bottle of K. “So, how do you like Vincennes?” She had started her internship at the hospital.

“It’s going real well. Oh, I just got back from visiting Jeremiah,” a friend from her church. “He’s going to a Bible college to become a youth minister.”

“Good for him.” I couldn’t think of a better response and didn’t want to go into details about how I wasn’t going to church anymore. No one at home knew, not even my parents.

“Yeah I’m just so excited that he’s letting God guide him.”

“Well, if that’s what Jeremiah wants to do, then, yeah, that’s great.”

“He prayed about it a lot before deciding on a school and he felt that it was God’s will.”

Erik and Teresa left around nine thirty. We hugged and wished each other well. Erik looked me square in the eyes. “You have a good time tonight, but take care of yourself.” Erik had just started going to church again, after a four-year absence. During his time off he had a good time.

“Yeah, I know. You take care too.”

They pulled out of the driveway and I headed for the fridge and pulled out a bottle of Andrew’s family’s home-brewed red wine. I flipped the swingback cap on the old Grolsch bottle and took a big glug. I worked on the same bottle through dinner until we left for Friends.

Already tipsy, Andrew held my hand and walked me up to the bar. I situated myself on the stool in front of shelves of whiskey and vodka. Andrew stood next to me and yelled out, “Hey, it’s K’s birthday. We need some Jäger.” I clinked my shot glass with Andrew and the bartender.

My drunken debauchery had begun and I thought there was no way I could go back to the church after choosing to get drunk. Drinking that night wasn’t an accident. I’d made a decision to go against the promise I had made to God in high school.

At Christian leadership camp my junior year, I sat on my bunk after meeting with my prayer group and read over the card.

“Faith...that I will be forgiven, receive wisdom to make good decisions and have the strength to carry out those decisions. Commitment...to say no to alcohol and drugs, as well as to help others keep their commitments. Accountability...to my friends, group leaders, and family in keeping my pledge.”

I said a silent prayer and signed the card and on the last night of camp everyone filed up to the front of the sanctuary. At sixteen years old, I took a hammer and nailed my card to a wooden cross that stood at the front for all to see. Instead of crying for the glasses of wine I would never drink and the whiskey I would never feel slide down my throat, I cried at the thought of putting nails into my Savior.

Shoving the memory back, I straightened and squared myself on the stool. Andrew toasted, “To K,” and I drank to not going back to prayer groups and Bible studies. He bent over and kissed me sloppy and long.

Marty came to Friends later that night and sat down on the stool next to me. He turned towards me, but continued staring at his pint. “Krystal, I’m sorry I didn’t get to your party. I really wanted to, but I was working on this song and I couldn’t stop because for some reason it just kept coming out.”

“That’s fine.” I was drunk and couldn’t stop smiling. “Inspiration doesn’t come often, so you got to take advantage of it, Marty.”

He laughed and bought me another shot and a third one. “Since I missed your party, I named the song after you.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. Slide for Krystal.”

“What’s it sound like?” I slurred, leaning into him.

“It’s really beautiful and mellow. A slow, sad slide.”

“Will you play it for me some time?”

“Sure.”

He put his arm around my shoulders and ordered us slices of the bar’s famous cafeteria style pizza to go with the beers that had appeared in front of us.

I never got to hear “Slide for Krystal,” but Andrew said I would have liked it, that it was beautiful.

Andrew and I left the bar at closing time and waved bye to Marty who was still on the stool, gulping down another. At Andrew’s house I leaned against the kitchen counter drinking glasses of water as he handed them to me. When I couldn’t drink anymore I

went to the bathroom to brush my teeth. Spitting Crest into the sink, the wine and shots of Jägermeister hit me, forcing me over the toilet. After I had nothing left to lose, I slid over in front of the door and passed out.

I woke to Andrew banging on the door. “K, are you okay? Let me in.” I shifted my weight from the door and leaned against the toilet bowl. He pushed the door open enough to slide in and help me up. “Come on let’s get you out of these clothes and into bed.” We walked across the hall and into the bedroom. He let me fall onto the bed. “Let me get you a T-shirt.”

“I’m okay, I’m okay.” I crawled under the sheets, fully dressed.

19

I sat on my bed in my dorm room reading submissions for a journal I was helping a professor edit, when there was a loud knock at the door. I opened it to find Andrew in a sort of shock--his eyes wide and voice urgent. "K, sit down I have to tell you something." He sat down on the bed facing me and grabbed my hands. "K, Marty's dead. We found him this evening."

I looked Andrew in the eyes. "No, he can't be. I got an email from him yesterday. I was going to--"

"K, he's dead. I saw him."

I stared at our clenched hands and cried. Andrew pulled me into his chest and we wept. I pushed back. "How did it happen? You found him? When, Andrew?"

Andrew wiped his nose on his jacket sleeve. "When he didn't show up for class this evening, an instructor and I went to his apartment. He wouldn't come to the door, so we went in." He stopped to wipe away new tears, but broke, sobbing, "He was just laying there on the floor like he was leaving the bathroom and was going to bed. Oh, God, K, he was face down, just face down in the hallway, nothing but his boxers on. I checked his neck for a pulse, but he was cold."

"No, no, no," I yelled.

"We called the police. It could have been his heart. He was on medicine for it. But K, they found an empty bottle of sleeping pills in the trash. He might have-- They think he might have committed suicide."

I had no words to respond. Andrew held me until I stopped crying and, then, in a daze, we left for Friends. Walking down Jackson Avenue, he held my hand in public for the first time.

At Friends, we found a table of professors and a couple of students drinking and talking quietly. I pulled up a chair, Andrew brought me a drink, and I sat there listening and drinking. They talked as though they had known for days, as though we were meeting for drinks after the funeral. Dr. Beebe leaned back in his chair. “He was a real good man, but he was going through a lot of shit. I mean divorce is enough to do anybody in.” Beebe was separated from his wife and spent a lot of his time at Friends talking with his colleagues, but most often with long-haired, young women. He continued, “He was tired of it all, I imagine.”

“So, it could have been his heart,” a brunette across the table from me asked. I didn’t know her, but assumed she had taken a class with Marty. “Cuz he was on medicine for his heart, right?”

No one answered. It wasn’t such a far fetched idea that he could have taken a bottle of pills, gone to take a piss, and fallen flat before he made it to the bed. But I wasn’t ready to admit it; I couldn’t understand why he would do something like that when so many people cared about him.

Andrew left his stool at the bar every now and then to check up on me and to bring me a drink. He never stayed at the table, though. Beebe started in about how he met Marty. “When he came to interview for the position wearing jeans, I knew I would like that guy.”

Andrew turned to me, “I’m gonna talk to Kevin. He’s pretty shook up.” Kevin and Andrew had been friends for five years of college and played with Marty in a thrown together ensemble--guitar, drums, and saxophone. And it was just like Andrew to make sure his friends were okay. I watched them nurse their drinks at the bar for two hours, while I drank enough to drown out the conversation around me.

It must have been midnight when Andrew made his way back to the table. “K, do you want to go home.” I nodded.

I don’t remember us talking much on the way home, just the blurry sidewalk and him telling me, “Be careful. It’s uneven here.” Back in my dorm room, he helped me into bed and tucked the covers in around me.

“Luv,” I looked up at him from my pillow, “will you stay here with me?”

“I told Kevin I would talk with him so more.” I started crying. He bent over and kissed my forehead. “K, I’ll come back here after the bar closes. You get some rest.”

“You’ll come back?”

“Yes, I promise, K.”

“I love you, Andrew.” I pulled him to me and kissed his cheek, his neck. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too. I’ll be back.” He pulled the door behind him.

I couldn’t sleep because I couldn’t stop crying. I tried to calm myself by praying, something I hadn’t done in a year, but instead, I wrote in my journal:

Marty is dead and I don't see any point in praying; there's no comfort in talking to air, in talking to myself. I'll say it aloud, though; I'll admit it to myself: It hurts so bad and I'm so tired of crying alone, wondering when Andrew will come back.

I exhausted myself enough to sleep and when I woke I turned to find the other side of the bed untouched and empty.

20

The weekend after Marty died, Andrew invited several people over to his house, for a bonfire. Marty's friends, students, and drinking buddies met at the farm, no one wanting to be alone. Cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon sat next to the back steps. Andrew grilled hot dogs and others brought sides of chips, salsa, cookies, and whiskey. Some drank Grey Goose Vodka, Marty's favorite drink he couldn't afford. I served Andrew's family's home-brewed red wine to those who came empty handed, and helped myself to a couple of bottles.

I drank enough to slow time down. I sat crossed-legged on a rotting tree stump a few feet from the circle of friends sitting in lawn chairs and watched the fire burn. I held Andrew's cat, Benway, under one arm and my second bottle of wine between my legs. I petted Benway on the top of his head and scratched behind his ears, whispering, "Look at them. Aren't they great?" The fire's glow illuminated and warmed the crowd around the fire. Andrew leaned back into his chair and set his beer on the ground. He looked up and then into the fire, watching the beer cases we'd thrown in turn to red ashes. And in that moment I felt calm. Maybe it was the alcohol, but I saw why Marty loved us and felt that he was there.

The fire burned till the first hours of morning and the alcohol began to lose its appeal. Those who could drive left and those who shouldn't have driven did. I followed Andrew inside, drank four glasses of water, stretched blankets across Andrew's friends who were sleeping on couches in the living room, and went to bed.

Andrew and I lay under a quilt, stinking of smoke and alcohol. He turned on his side and laid his hand on my stomach. “K, it’s been a while since we--”

“I know it has.”

“I’ve just been so tired and I couldn’t--” He stopped.

I turned into him and slipped my arm under his.

He continued, “But I think Marty wouldn’t mind.”

“Yeah, he’d wonder why it took us so long.” I pulled Andrew close. And in the morning, I woke when the sun shone through the sheers, squinting and feeling the first effects of a wine-induced headache. I rolled over and found that Andrew was already awake and smiling.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Mmm huh,” I hummed an answer.

“I must have exhausted you.” He kissed my cheek.

“What?” I sat up so I could study his face for signs of sarcasm.

He stopped smiling. “You don’t remember?”

All I could remember was that in two days we would be saying goodbye to a friend.

21

I followed the line up to the row of flowers, then to the foot of the casket to where Marty lay. His wife, nearly ex-wife, had sold all of his clothes before the funeral, so his mom had bought a blue suit and matching tie for the occasion. I had never seen him in anything but blue jeans and a plaid button-up shirt. His face was rubber and immovable. I rested my hand on his cold hands and felt nothing in them. I bent over the casket and kissed his cheek, tasting make up.

I followed the line to the back of the funeral parlor and watched through double doors as my professors read poems and essays to say farewell to Marty, feeling a knot form in my gut. Dr. Loudon pulled a crumpled sheet of notebook paper out of his back jean pocket, unfolded it, and placed it on the podium. He took his reading glasses out of his flannel shirt and looked at the crowd. “Blues for Marty.” He began to sing, almost moan, the first lines of the poem he had written, “Beauty Roan Horse, Roan Horse, come home to me.” The knot broke and I burst into tears. Clutching the poem I had written, I tried to compose myself.

When my turn came, I quickly walked up to the podium, smoothed the poem flat, and adjusted the light. Pastor Russell stood to my right, smiled clutching his Bible, and nodded for me to begin. I looked out in front of me and saw kind eyes waiting to hear what a student would say about Dr. Martin Scott.

I began, “My dear Marty, you left so soon.” I listed the reasons why he should have stayed, how I would miss him and how I found it difficult to be angry at him. “I know you won’t be back and it would be a waste to be angry with your leaving, so

instead I'll be glad in having known you, having talked with you, exchanged smiles and glances with you, and having been taught by you to always look beyond the apparent story." My voice began to crack. I kept swallowing, tried to take deep breaths, but I couldn't keep my hands from shaking or my eyes from filling. The pastor nudged me with a Kleenex box, but I ignored him and finished, mumbling the last lines. I rushed out while the audience clapped. I went through the double doors, past Andrew's open arms and into the bathroom.

Standing in front of the mirror, I choked back my tears and stared hard at myself. I knew I couldn't talk to anyone about how much I hurt because I couldn't explain the tightness in my neck and my gut. I knew I couldn't pray about it because at that point I had doubted my way out of religion. I knew I was on my own. I blew my nose, dried my eyes, and straightened my skirt. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

June 26, 2005

I decided: *The only story I believe is my own.*

22

I told my parents the summer before I left for graduate school why I wouldn't go to church with them and why I wouldn't go to church when I got to Iowa. It was a Sunday morning. Dad had gone to church by himself, Ashley had to work, and Mom and I stayed at home. Mom was too sore from shopping at Wal-Mart the day before to move out of the living room recliner and I was planning on going to see Grandma Hering at the nursing home.

Mom's arthritis made it difficult for her to do what was considered normal physical activity. If she went up any stairs or walked around for too long, she got stiff and was sore the next day. When she's sore, she's grumpy and unmotivated to do anything before one in the afternoon, let alone get up and go to church on Sundays. There were months at a time that she would stay at home from church and just watch Billy Graham on television talk about spreading the gospel and "salvation in our Lord and Savior." She sat in her rust-colored recliner, across the room from Dad's glider and footstool, with remote in hand, a heating pad at her back, and the dog sleeping on her large belly. Her defense was, "My Dad never went to church. He didn't have to. He could worship God whenever and wherever he wanted." But, her soreness never kept her from telling us that we should go to church.

I was getting ready to leave when Mom caught me at the door. She turned the volume down on the television. "You could have gone to church with your Dad. You can see Grandma later today." She always did this, always caught me right as I was leaving.

I held onto the doorknob. "I'd rather see her this morning."

She looked at me hard and didn't say anything for a while. She adjusted the heating pad that hung on the back of the recliner so it would warm her stiff shoulder muscles. "Are you sure that's why you're going to see her?"

"Yes. I won't see her much when I move to Iowa." I turned the knob and opened the door.

"So, it doesn't have anything to do with not going to church, then?"

Everything seemed to have something to do with whether or not a person went to church. "I think my time is better spent with Grandma."

"I know you want to spend time with Grandma, but you need to go to church." She looked at me a little longer, her face getting red. "Why aren't you going to church anymore, Krystal?"

I shut the door and turned to face her. "I can't take communion anymore when I disagree with everything the preacher says. I'm tired of trying to convince myself that I believe." I told her how I couldn't stand Lick Prairie's and Christian Campus Houses' inability to accept any variation from what was in the Bible.

Her face was red, but she wasn't going to cry; Mom very rarely cried. "Well, you need to talk to your Dad about it."

Dad came home from church shortly after, before I could try to leave again. I didn't say anything at first; I waited until after dinner. Mom and I cleaned off the table and loaded the dishwasher without saying anything.

Dad was sitting in the living room watching *This Old House* – his usual Sunday afternoon routine. "Daddy, I need to talk to you and Mom about something. Can you

come out to the table?” We sat down – Dad across from me and Mom at the head of the table. He did not look concerned, excited, or nervous; he just sat with his hands folded on the table looking at his thumbs.

I took a deep breath and let it out. “I’m not going to church anymore and I won’t be going when I get to Iowa.” Dad had been baptized only eight years before; he was a new Christian--firm in his faith. He rubbed his cracked thumbs together and kept his head down. I continued, “Dad, I can’t do it anymore; I can’t pretend like I agree with them anymore.”

He stared at his thumbs and I knew he was thinking about the day he got baptized and how it took many years of coaxing from Mom and talking to the preacher to get him into the water. Dad was afraid of water, of being put under the water and not being able to breathe. My not believing, however, was a different kind of fear for him. He finally spoke. “Well, I don’t always agree with them either, but you can’t find a church where you’ll agree with everyone.”

For the next hour, I explained that it wasn’t just Lick Prairie Christian Church that I didn’t agree with, but the whole idea behind Christianity.

Dad put his head down into his hands like he was praying and Mom’s eyes began to fill. She looked at me and my heart stopped at her words, “So, you’re turning from everything we taught you?”

“No, I still hold those morals. I’m not a bad person because I don’t believe.”

“But you don’t believe in God.” I could barely make out what she was saying in between the sobs. “Nothing we’ve taught you has stuck. You could have stabbed me in the chest with a butcher knife and it wouldn’t have hurt this bad.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you. Would you rather I hadn’t told you?”

“Yes.” She said it just like that, matter-of-factly. And then she shot out, “Are you gay too? Do you like women?”

“No, Mom, but I’m pregnant. Christ! No, I’m not a lesbian. What if I were?”

“You’re pregnant?”

“No.”

“Well, I just can’t tell with you anymore.”

I wasn’t pregnant, but I felt like that would have gone over better than not believing. Being pregnant would have meant a grandbaby. And a grandbaby would have meant lots of pictures, little booties, home videos at holiday dinners, and a glow coming from Mom that only showed when she was around infants. I tried to tell them that they had no control over what I believed, but the words didn’t console, they only stirred the pot more.

It got quiet, so quiet. I had no more to say and they did not want to hear anymore, couldn’t hear more. I had said too much. Mom scooted back her chair, swallowed hard, wiped her eyes, and said as calmly as she could, “Well, all we can do is pray for you, pray that a miracle will happen to make you believe.” Dad stood up and they both left – Mom to the bathroom, slamming the door, and Dad back to his recliner. I took a couple

deep breaths and left to see Grandma who knew nothing and wouldn't ever know about my fallen state.

23

Home for winter break from Iowa State University, I stood in the living room crying and screaming, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I don’t know.” That night, stress from graduate school, living alone in a new place, my breakup with Andrew, my grandmother’s failing health, and my mentor’s suicide built up until all I could do was sob.

Sheila stood with her arms crossed, demanding an answer. “What do you mean you don’t know? You just told me I was a bad parent and called my husband and my dad a racist. And you don’t have an explanation for that?”

It would have taken too long to explain what was making me hurt so much, so I pulled excuses from my mind’s closet of things never to tell my sister and told her all of them. “I don’t like how you’re always putting Alex down, talking about her weight and calling her ‘stupid’ or ‘retard’. I know you’re joking, but all of that has to get to her. And Dad and Bill, yes, I think they’re racist. The jokes, the stares at restaurants...”

Sheila was fuming. “Krystal, it is none of your business how Bill and I raise Alex. And my husband and my dad are not racist.” She set her eyes on me, boring holes on my forehead, making me cry harder. “Unless there is something that can be done, you keep your thoughts to yourself.” She opened the front door and turned to me with a final comment. “If this is what happens when people go off to the big cities and the big colleges, then Alex is never going to college.”

Two days after I had broken down in front of my family, Dad sat in the recliner in the living room and Mom and I were at the kitchen table. She was showing me how to make curtains for my new apartment.

“Now, make sure you sew straight.”

I fed the material past the needle, taking out the pins as I went. She watched very closely. She stood, opened her mouth, about to say something, and then just took a deep breath. I took my foot off the pedal. “Yes?”

“Well, it’s just that at the rate you’re going,” she paused, “you could go a little faster. That’s all.”

I continued feeding the heavy, red cloth through, pausing to fidget with the pins. Finished with one panel, I snipped the thread and handed the material to Mom for inspection.

“Looks pretty good.” She stretched the panel and held it at eye level. “Oh, this is a little crooked, but it won’t hurt anything.”

The dogs started barking and ran to the front door. Mom didn’t move from the table, but yelled, “Girls, quit that. It’s just Sheila and Bill.”

The dogs kept barking and Sheila and her husband came in, addressing the dogs. “Hello there. Now, settle down.” The small, round dog, Brownie, peed on the floor. Dad got up from the recliner and stormed off, grumbling, to get paper towels. “Oh, are you excited to see me? Look Bill, Brownie’s so excited.” They took their coats off and came into the kitchen. I smiled, wanting to seem okay, wanting to be better than Christmas Eve night, wanting them to not say anything.

Dad and Bill went outside to talk about the weather, gas grills versus charcoal grills, Ford versus Dodge pickups, or maybe to exchange boob and blonde-girl jokes. It was just Mom, Sheila, and I; Ashley was working at 2-Go's, a service station in town. The back door shut and Sheila turned to me. "So, are we going to talk about whatever's going on with you?"

Being the oldest daughter, Sheila felt it her responsibility to fix my "problem." Since she left home when she was seventeen, she felt the need to make up for lost time and become involved in all aspects of my life. She was not going away this time.

Mom didn't say anything and I didn't want to answer, but Sheila was giving me one of her "Come on. Spit it out." looks. I responded, "No, I'd rather not."

"Oh. Well, we're going to. I have some things I want to ask you, some things I want to say." Her eyes were puffy and looked like they would burst with tears at any point. She took deep breaths and set her eyes on me. "I want to understand what's going on with you, Krystal." Understanding my "problem" meant getting to the root, which my family believed was my not going to church.

I got up from the table. "I have to go to the bathroom."

I didn't want to have this conversation again. I knew the outcome – more confusion, hurt feelings, more guilt and crying.

Sheila had waited two days after I had yelled accusations at her to come to the house and "sort things out." We were now five hours into the intervention. Sheila wanted to know what my "problem" was, so I listed the things that kept my stomach sour, my neck tight, and kept me up at night. She pushed herself back from the table and put her

hands on her knees, “Krystal, you need to stop being the victim here. Self-pity isn’t going to get you anywhere. You need to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. That’s what I had to do when I dropped out of high school.” She cleared her throat. “I know how tough it is, but you need to get it together.”

Sheila had never been to college and had never moved more than thirty miles from home. After dropping out, she got her GED and years later got a job writing grants for a family counseling center. She moved up in rank at the center to counseling, so she felt qualified to give me advice. “Krystal, you just have to put it all in God’s hands.” God. For my family it all came down to god; after all, he controlled everything.

“It’s a little difficult to do that when you don’t believe God is going to take care of things.”

“Well, you need to get back to church, then.” Everyone around the table nodded in agreement. It was then I knew they would never let it go, would never accept that I was different from them.

“Do you remember when I was going through my divorce?” Sheila was determined to say all she wanted. “You told me, ‘Sissy, just pray about it.’” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “You don’t know how much your words changed me that day.”

I was ten years old when she got the divorce. “Sheila, I said what they taught me to say, what they taught to me think.”

She fired back, “So, you didn’t believe what you were saying then?”

I didn’t reply.

“But how can you not believe? I looked up to you for so long. Your niece looks up to you.” Sheila was nearly crying.

Mom sat at my left, listening to the same explanation I gave her and Dad that summer. Her face was red--her blood-sugar getting higher. She added just as desperately, “You were the strong one, Krystal. We never thought you would struggle, because you put things in God’s hands.”

No one spoke; there wasn’t anything left to be said. Sheila got up from the table and yelled out the front door, “Bill, it’s time to go.” Sheila gave Mom and Dad hugs, and then turned to me and said, “I’m letting it go, Krystal. I’m putting it in God’s hands now, but I have one favor to ask of you. Don’t tell Grandma about this. It would kill her.”

I knew Sheila was right. I couldn’t tell Grandma Stevens what I’d been pondering the last few months. She didn’t know I’d started drinking, quit religion, didn’t believe Jesus was going to save me, and didn’t believe the Bible was absolute truth. She didn’t know I was questioning it all and slowly backing away.

Grandma would have thought I was going to Hell and that would have been too much for her. It would have caused her too much stress, made her blood sugar level increase rapidly, and knocked years off her life. I didn’t want that kind of responsibility. I felt guilty enough as it was.

That night, Dad found me in my room in the basement crying. Sitting next to me on the bed, he put his arm around me, like he had times before when I had cried about the unfair restrictions of curfew and how Mom just didn’t understand. He reached for his

back pocket and pulled out a red handkerchief he had already used and handed it to me. Blowing my nose, I mumbled, “Daddy, I’m so sorry. I just don’t know what I think anymore.”

Dad spoke seldom, showed affection only by smiling sometimes, and was rarely open with his emotions. I looked up at him and saw that his eyes were full of tears. He pulled me close and I rested my head under his chin, feeling like his little girl again. “Now, I know your Mom and I don’t ever say it to you girls, your Mom can’t say it, but we love you very much.” I felt a tremendous weight leave me and I sunk into his chest and cried harder. He repeated, “We love you and I want you to know that.” And for a moment I felt what I had needed to feel for a long time.

Before I returned to Iowa to finish my first year of graduate school, Dad inquired one last time about my loss of faith. “Do you believe in miracles?”

“No.”

“So you think that my cancer just left?” Dad had prostate cancer and went through radiation treatments and then surgery.

“No, I think that your treatments got rid of the cancer.”

He was quiet.

I continued, “That wasn’t a miracle that your treatments worked. You went once a week for two months. The doctors kept an eye on everything.”

“But you don’t believe in miracles at all?”

“I don’t know. If a miracle happened to me, then, maybe I would believe.”

I had just shot down any renewed faith my dad had. It was probably the worst thing I could have said – that his health was solely reliant on science and that God had nothing to do with it.

24

Back in Iowa, I talked with Sheila on the phone, pacing my apartment floor. The conversation drifted from a weekly report of busy schedules and things to do. “Well, how are you,” she asked me?

“I’m doing okay.”

“No, I mean, how *are* you?”

The more I told her, the more advice and words of wisdom I got. I only wanted her to listen, but she stood strong and gave me the only advice she knew. “Krystal, just put it in God’s hands.”

When weeks passed without a phone call between us, she sent emails. Most of the emails were forwards of someone’s story of recovery from a surgery was an example of God’s mercy and goodness. What I saw was a successful surgical operation. One in particular read like this:

HE is the only one that can save this country from the liberals that want him removed from the government. Our great nation will not stand if we delete HIM from all aspects of our government as the atheists want.

Jesus Test: This is an easy test, you score 100 or zero. It's your choice. If you aren't ashamed to do this, please follow the directions. Jesus said, "If you are ashamed of me, I will be ashamed of you before my Father." Not ashamed Pass this on . . . only if you mean it. Yes, I do Love God. He is my source of existence and Savior. He keeps me functioning each and everyday. Without Him, I will be

nothing. Without Him, I am nothing, but with Him I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me. Phil 4:13

This is the simplest test . . . If you Love God, and are not ashamed of all the marvelous things He has done for you, send this to ten people and the person who sent it to you.

I don't know if she thought sending emails like this would turn me back to the church or if it was a personal jab at what she thought I believed or didn't believe. But I hope emails and miraculous stories gave Sheila comfort and reassurance, as she was trying and witnessing God's word to me.

Sheila waited until the end of the phone conversation to approach the matter she really called about. I heard her take a deep breath. "Well, what about when you die? Where do you think you go then?"

"I don't know. You just die."

"And that's it? So, you're telling me that you're not going to be with your family when you die? That we're all going to be together, but you're just gonna be in the ground? What about your soul? What about Heaven and Hell? I suppose, you don't believe that there's such a thing."

I didn't reply. I was tired. I didn't see the point in explaining.

"Well, you better decide on something because when Grandma dies, and she's gonna die, you're going to have to pull it together enough to drive yourself back to Illinois."

I couldn't answer because I was crying. Not believing that Grandma would go to Heaven when she died was the worst thing I could do to my family and I hated myself for it. Grandma carried our family's beliefs and lived them out rigidly. Those beliefs of Heaven and Hell, salvation, forgiveness, the Ten Commandments, and the Second Coming had never been questioned in my family, until now.

I have thought about it – the day Grandma dies. I can see myself during the funeral, my family around me and silent, trying not to cry. There are people in all the pews from Lancaster Christian Church, Lick Prairie Christian Church, Albion, West Salem...and they're all talking to each other and hugging one another and some say things like, "Well, Vernon it seems like the only time we see each other is when we're at funerals. Ain't that a goin' some," and, "Praise the Lord she's in a better place." There are flower arrangements all around – purple irises she would have loved – and a framed picture of her and Grandpa on an easel next to the casket taken at a church dinner. And I'm crying and I'm staring at the casket that holds Grandma and I can see her face and how it's caked with make-up. She never wore make-up, only rouge and mauve lipstick. Her glasses are crooked and the curls in her hair are too tight.

We're asked to stand and sing, "Because He Lives," and I'm crying and trying to sing, but I don't believe the words and my family knows it. But I want to sing for Grandma because she believed the words. *Because He lives I can face tomorrow; because He lives all fear is gone...* She believed them so strongly that for the last twenty years of her life she was ready to die and I think she wanted to. The preacher says she's in heaven, a place that doesn't exist, the place where all my family, except for me, will go

when they die. He says, "She's much happier now. Pearl's probably playing up a storm on God's piano." Sheila laughs at this and then cries.

The funeral is over and the people file past, shaking our hands and giving us sympathetic pats on the back and saying things like, "Your Grandmother was a wonderful lady. She used to talk about you all the time," and, "I remember when you and your little sister sang a duet at church. How'd that song go again?"

We're finally left alone to say our goodbyes before they close the casket. I walk up and see that Grandma's wearing that pink dress suit she always said she wanted to be buried in and I hear her ask me, as she did at great-uncle Clarence's funeral, "Have you ever touched a dead person?" I put my hand on hers and kiss her forehead.

25

It's a new year and Easter week. My freshmen composition students talk about going home to see their families and going to church on Sunday. As they leave, they say, "Have a good Easter, Miss Hering." I want to say, "Not everyone celebrates Easter," or, "I don't believe in that anymore." Instead, I smile, "Have a good weekend."

It's the weekend and I need to run some errands, so I call some businesses to see what their weekend hours are.

"We're open till 6:00 today," the man on the phone answers.

"What about Sunday?"

Sounding appalled at my forgetfulness or lack of recognition, "Sunday is Easter, mamma. We'll be closed."

He's right, how could I forget?

It's Easter morning. I'm in Iowa at my laptop, drinking coffee. The sun isn't shining like it did yesterday morning and for as long as I can remember, Easter was always a rainy, gray day.

Back home in small-town Illinois, my family is getting ready for Easter services at church. They don't go to sunrise services anymore, but get up early and take their time with showers, breakfast, and getting dressed. It's 9:00 and church starts at 9:30. Mom is probably still in the living room chair with a heating pad at her back and the blanket I got her for Christmas draped on her knees. Dad is ready to go, having been up since six. He is pacing the kitchen floor, looking at his watch and grumbling to himself. In the only

bathroom in the house, Ashley is at the sink scrunching product in her short hair and smearing pink on her cheeks and lips.

Two small towns southwest of home, my sister Sheila and her family are scurrying around, trying not to miss another Easter service at their family-friendly Christian church. They arrive a little late, but they're not the only family still buttoning their shirts, straightening their skirts, and smoothing their hair at the door.

At Lick Prairie Christian Church, Dad and Mom sit in the same pew they've occupied since I was born, when we first attended. They don't talk to each other and only speak to those who greet them. They sit and wait for church to begin. Dad picks at the calluses on his hands and Mom balances her check book. They're angry and hurt because they're alone at church today. Ashley, at the last minute, decided to go to a Lutheran church with her boyfriend, Sheila has her family now, and I'm in Iowa "doing Lord knows what."

The preacher's wife walks up to the piano and sits down on the bench. At this point, no one is paying any attention to her, until she places her fingers on the keys and forces out an elaborate swelling of tones and pitches, making "How Great Thou Art" unrecognizable. Church has begun and she has everyone's attention.

The service follows the same order every Sunday: A warm greeting by whoever is leading worship that morning, usually a woman from the congregation; hymn number one; announcements; prayer requests, mostly people requesting prayers for others; prayer, usually led by an elder man of the congregation; more singing from the hymnals; a possible "special," a song sang by the preacher's daughter who imagined she has the

greatest voice God ever heard; one more hymn; the parents take their little ones downstairs for nursery time; and then the sermon begins and continues for forty minutes; prayer; hymn; Sunday school for everyone; then, the bell in the tower is rung; more announcements and Christian jokes made by our former preacher; more prayer; and “Jesus Loves Me” is sung for the closing hymn.

Mom and Dad file out of the church and head home for dinner. They change out of their Easter clothes--a nice shirt for Mom and Dad's old, blue Western suit with his cowboy boots--and sit down for dinner. Since no one is home this Easter, they don't prepare a ham; instead, they have fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and deviled eggs Mom made the night before. They sit down at the table and Dad bows his head, praying aloud, “Lord, we ask a blessing on this food and the hands that prepared it. We pray that everyone made it home safely from church and pray for those who were not in your house of worship this morning. We pray that you'll continue to guide, guard, and direct us. All this in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.”

Going Home

It's eight in the morning, December 21st. I step into the shower and let the hot water fall on my shoulders. It's quiet except for my cat pawing at the bathroom door and I stand and stand, not wanting to make the move out of the shower and into the cold house.

The water is starting to go cold. I step out onto the linoleum and towel off. I work cream into my skin--my shoulders, arms, stomach, my thighs, buttocks, and feet--moving slowly, talking myself into movement. I tell myself that the visit home will be fine, that the awkwardness and tension is only something I've created, that my family is nervous too, and that I'm only responsible for the words that came out of my mouth last Christmas, not the way they chose to interpret them.

I wipe the steam off the mirror and imagine what it will be like at home on Christmas Day.

Mom is in the kitchen groaning about how sore she is, but never asking for help with the scrubbing, chopping, and stirring. Dad spends the eight hours it takes to smoke the ham in the garage sitting in a lawn chair and reading the newspaper. Ashley takes the dishes out of the china cabinet, choosing the right bowls for the noodles, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, and green beans. She sets the table, asks Mom which side the knives go on and doesn't ask me to help her. Sheila insists on helping Mom take a tray of rolls out of the oven. And I traipse from the kitchen to the dining table, wondering how I

can help and what needs to be done next. I make multiple trips to the bathroom, and when it is time to eat, I sit at my place on Dad's left side.

He bows his head and everyone follows. "Dear Lord, thank you for this food and for the hands that prepared it. We ask for your watch 'n' care over the soldiers overseas and we thank you for the safe travels of our loved ones." He pauses and finishes, "Amen." Sheila echoes him and I only nod.

The food is passed around and after a few bites, conversation begins. I answer questions, but am quiet otherwise. When we're finished with our second helpings and slices of pecan and raisin pies, I clear the table, gathering the silverware and plates with scraps clinging to the white china.

My job is the clean up--scraping plates, scrubbing pots, and dividing leftovers. Sheila stands on the other side of the counter, saying, "Leave it, sis. Let's open the presents." I scrub the sauce pan harder. Mom reaches for the towel to dry the plates in the strainer. Without looking up, I say, "It's okay. I got it."

I am left alone in the kitchen, listening to the chatter in the living room. I move slowly, purposefully, washing, drying, and stacking. I look out the window and see the maple grove, sparse after the last gusty night. The fields are bare, grey, jagged, and flags stand where trees will leaf out in the spring. And there, next to the shed, is my swing set. The paint is faded and the oak seat has rotted.

What I imagine isn't drastically different from any other Christmas. The silences, though, are longer, deeper, and more cautious. The questions my family asks seem

rehearsed, well thought-out, as not to offend. Now, when I'm on the phone with Sheila, she prefaces her advice with, "I know you're not going to like what I've got to say, but if you would just pray about it..."

And I pray about it in my own way. I ask myself to forgive and to let all of this go. I remember what Grandma taught me and recite the Lord's Prayer, a chant, a distraction that keeps me from worrying, for a while. I pray when reading poetry and writing. I pray when I'm shuffling and stomping to banjos and mandolins singing, "Brother when your soul is thirsty you can always drink." I pray when I'm walking on grass among trees, when I'm sipping dark lager in a corner booth, and when I'm in bed warmed by the one next to me. I pray while driving home, wanting it all back, wanting to be the good one, and desperately trying to be the one who can love her family from a distance.

I leave four bowls of cat food and two bowls of water out, slip on my coat, and pull the door behind me.